

Soft Skills: A Difference Maker in AEC Industry

Industry consultant says that less-tangible skills like interpersonal communication and empathy must play a bigger role in our professional lives **By Dennis D. Doran**



TEACHING TOOLS

Training programs that include soft-skills development can be key to improving a company's return on investment.

These days, we are talking more and more about how much is changing in the architecture, engineering and construction industry and how much harder it is to get the job done. Although the use of technology supports the building process from beginning to end, we still must do everything we can to improve how we procure and complete work. The key is to remember that it's people who build these projects, and success is the result of those people building relationships at the same time.

It also means using every tool available to make that happen, including some we don't often talk about. That's why soft skills must become a bigger part of our professional dialogue. They are essential to building happy, productive relationships, both professionally and personally. And yes, it's OK to talk about happiness in the construction industry.

Soft skills aren't really skills at all. They are the qualities, attributes and behaviors that make you someone people want to do business with. Soft skills emphasize how we are, as opposed to the more technical, or hard, skills that define what we do. The how is mostly about the expression on your face, your body language, your tone of voice.

The words you speak are also important, of course, because visual cues and gestures can be misinterpreted. And being described as a good communicator means you have the ability to help others understand additional skills you possess. Valuing this quality will add to your success in starting, building and maintaining good relationships.

All of this is simple and, at the same time, hard to understand. That's because

to succeed in our industry and in your personal life, you must first understand yourself. This isn't about what you know. It's about knowing yourself. What are your qualities? Your strengths and weaknesses? What are you feeling?

The last question is the one we are often the least tuned into, because it means talking about emotions. But our brains are wired to give emotion the upper hand over rational thinking. There's a lot of research that says many of us are controlled by our emotions. Therefore, we must grow our ability to recognize what we are feeling throughout the day and, more importantly, how we manage those feelings.

A History of Using Different Tools

Historically, the construction industry hasn't valued soft skills. We haven't recognized the significant role they play in individual success or in our roles as own-

ers, contractors, subcontractors, architects, engineers, suppliers, trade unions and others. We need to start doing that.

If you're in the trades, you probably won't forget your tools when you go to work. If you're an engineer, you wouldn't overlook your laptop or tablet. So why routinely overlook your soft skills? Probably because you haven't been taught how to value them as key tools in your personal toolbox.

Soft skills directly affect the bottom line of any business. It's a widely accepted view that poor communication causes a range of problems—delayed project schedules, shattered budgets and lower profitability—and affects how we work together to serve customers.

You may be a first-year apprentice just learning a trade, a student learning about job-cost estimating, or the CEO of a global construction firm. It doesn't really matter. You will benefit greatly from learning more about soft skills, and that means incorporating them as a key part of training and development. These programs offer measurable ROI in terms of stronger performance, improved customer service and retention of employees at all levels.

Consider the hundreds of people who cross paths on a jobsite every day. These people need to interact

well with each other for better safety and productivity, and that means building communication, team problem-solving skills and trust among them. It's the softer qualities, not the hard skills, that create those levels of trust over time. It also means recognizing that the intuitive qualities of a person are more important than ever before.

To begin your improvement of soft skills, focus on a core competency: communication. Talk with people who know you well. Ask them for their help as part of a coaching or mentoring process. Try employing self-assessments that will help you understand your personality, your communication strengths and weaknesses, your level of emotional intelligence and your time-management skills. Your purpose is simple: get to know yourself and your soft skills and understand their importance in your work and your personal life.

Soft skills are the difference maker. ■

Dennis D. Doran, a leading people and service expert, has more than 30 years of experience in the construction industry. He is the author of the newly released book, "Soft as Steel," written to equip readers with the tools they need to be successful, not just in business, but in life and relationships. He can be reached at dennisdorandoran@gmail.com or by visiting www.dennisdoranspeaking.com



“SOFT SKILLS DIRECTLY AFFECT THE BOTTOM LINE OF ANY BUSINESS.”
—DENNIS D. DORAN



WANZEK

a MasTec company

RENEWABLE ENERGY | POWER | OIL & GAS
INFRASTRUCTURE | AGRICULTURE

BE THE BEST... DELIVER EXCELLENCE.

Copyright of ENR: Engineering News-Record is the property of BNP Media and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.