

Life Skills As A Contemporary Tool for Gaining Competitive Advantage: An OD Intervention



Tulika Saxena

Principal and Associate Professor,
Deptt.of Management,
STEP-HBTI,
Kanpur

Sarvar Ali Khan

Research Scholar,
Deptt.of Management,
STEP-HBTI,
Kanpur

Saurabh Tripathi

Research Scholar,
Deptt.of Management,
STEP-HBTI,
Kanpur

Abstract

Life Skills/ SoftSkills deals with social transactions between persons .It is determined by personality traits, social elegance, communication, dependability , conscientiousness , interpersonal skills, problem solving, team building, time management, motivating skills, stress management, conflict resolution, leadership qualities, culture management, decision making, personality development, role management , personal habits, friendliness, and optimism etc. A person's soft skill is an important part of his/her individual contribution to the success of an organization and to self as it also complements hard skills which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities. Particularly those organizations dealing with customers face-to-face are generally more successful if they train their workforce to use these skills. Also, today Indian companies are facing intense competition from MNCs who are offering identical services in their own backyard, so the organizations, that endeavor to be on the path of continuous learning and success, will often find that upgrading the ' skills' of their workforce is a necessary part of business. Training and development plays a vital role in strengthening the existing skills and in instilling and nurturing new competencies. Raised skill levels contribute to the versatility and the adaptability of employees which by themselves have now become a critical need in the globalized business scenario. The intervention is based on study of soft skills among officers from a sample of 52 senior manager/ officers; participated in the HRD workshop belonging to public sector, Indian organization of repute. Data was generated through standard questionnaire method and various phases of observation, conversation, formal and informal sessions, role – play activity etc to yield qualitative and quantitative information, that has been statistically treated and complemented by rank –order and percentage –analysis in order to explore the priorities assigned to various components of soft skill by the officers. The paper attempts to identify dormant, dominant and backup dimensions for the same as a part of their managerial efficacy The paper argues that competitive success in today's global market is determined not solely by a company' s tangible assets but revolves largely round the accumulation, cultivation and utilization of the Knowledge driven intangible resources. This paper explores soft skills management and its link to both organizational and individual performance. Support given by Postal Department of India for Soft Skill Development in preparation of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

Keywords:Life Skills, Contemporary Tool, Gaining Competitive Advantage, OD Intervention, Time Management, Personality Development, Stress Management , Role Efficacy etc.

Introduction

Challenges for managers/ leaders/ officers in the new millennium will succeed by leveraging rapid change, globalization of business, developing a multi- culture society, managing interconnectedness, creating learning organizations, promoting retraining for knowledge- based work, recording practical experiences, effective decision making, time-management, maintaining interpersonal relations, team- building, effective and transparent communication , conflict management, environmental stewardship, sustaining hope and vision in the midst of turmoil. In this context developing soft skills is one of the critical factors for corporate leaders to succeed in 21st century. The upcoming organizations will be flatter, decentralized, loosely structured and globally dispersed. In addition they will be knowledge corporations. Grappling with the accelerating rate of

change and complexity, innovation, experimentation and maintaining cordial interpersonal relations would be the way of life. Niche expertise around customers, markets, technology, products, services and employees would play a significant role in providing the winning edge to organizations. Given such a plethora of upheavals, proper training in various areas and thereby transformation becomes a major challenge.

Statement of the Problem

Indian corporate is engaging in a diversity of strategic responses, faced with competition from financially, technologically, strategically and interpersonally strong multinational companies. These initiatives range from unrelated diversification to portfolio restructuring, from increasing the equity base to entering into strategic alliances, from downsizing/ rightsizing to acquisitions and expansion of operations, from TQM to BPR, and so on. Underlying these hectic activities there is a felt need of various skills development and their execution to generate a trusting and unique corporate image among employees and customers.

Main Objectives of the Studythrough Training-Workshop

1. To develop self awareness and to make participants identify their self strengths and self weaknesses through introspection test ,story writing technique and test on self- awareness
2. To train and sensitize workers for practicing soft skills in order to bring about individual as well as organizational effectiveness and efficiency.
3. To make best use of strengths in playing roles and methods of its audit.
4. To develop coherent sets of perception and positive attitude towards life and job and bring about betterment in performance.
5. To enable them to develop successful Team Management.
6. To bring them abreast of Stress – Management and Motivating through Role- Efficacy.
7. To acquaint them with various techniques and process of Time Management and Personality development.
8. To introduce the participants with moderators /mediators of interpersonal and communication skills.

Schedule of the Training /Workshop

1 Full day from 10.00 hrs to 13.00 hrs and 15.00 to 18.00 hrs with lunch for one hour, ½ day for 3.00 hrs.

Design of the Workshop/Study

As workshop was designed for one day in two sessions of three hours each .The first session focused on - Personal introduction of the participants, Introspection, Story writing technique, Identification of Self Strength, Self Weaknesses, Achievement and Failures. The session acquainted and equipped the participants with the concept and contents of soft skills (including explanations, methods, process, contemporary models and their application in their work setups supplemented by case-discussions, encouraging interactions and participation) and techniques to develop them i.e. learning by

experiencing. It was subsequently followed by filling up of various sets of questionnaires on Role- Efficacy, Time Management, Personality development, Team Effectiveness, Stress Management, Interpersonal and Communication Skills and its scoring by the participants themselves.

In the second session, the participants gave their reactions about the relevance of the items in the tools with their day-to-day functions and difficulties in filling in the questionnaires etc. It was followed by a Role –Play- technique of developing through gaming. It was followed by the presentation of results of the group on different tools used. The session included a brief Brainstorming session on search of reasons behind deficiencies in the participants. They were also asked to suggest appropriate strategies to alleviate it. In this session the results of the responses to the questionnaire were correlated and discussed to arrive at conclusions and suggestions.

Participants/Sample

The study has covered 52 officers serving in a public sector organization as respondents; composed of executives, i.e. upper middle and middle management cadre responsible for the execution of operating policies and practices.They ranged in age from 30 to 58 years. In academic and technical qualifications all were postgraduates. 5 % were technically qualified. 11% of the participants were professionally qualified. Their experience ranged from 14 to 35 years.

Tools Used

For the purpose of data collection following test, structured questionnaire and unstructured spontaneous informal sessions were conducted:

1. Introspection Test
2. Story Writing Technique,
3. Test on Self- Awareness
4. Role- Efficacy Test
5. Communication Checklist
6. Interpersonal Transactional Analysis Test
7. Personality Development Assessment Technique
8. Personality Quiz
9. Team Dynamics Score
10. Time Management Test and Methods Stress Management Score
11. Role- Play Activity

Data Analysis and Results

The data collected through various tools and techniques was analyzed in reference to objectives of the training session. Suitable statistical techniques were used for results and treatment of the data on need basis. It has been intellectually exciting and rewarding, since the workshop offered opportunities to make participants understand and develop soft skills dynamics from very close quarters.

Introspection Test, Story Writing Technique & Test on Self- Awareness

Analysis of the exercise conducted for identifying strengths and weaknesses through writing of stories /critical incidents of success and failure by the participants revealed:

For success-

1. 49% of the participants attributed success to their self efforts

2. 12% of the participants attributed success to others
3. 39% of the participants attributed success to their luck
 - a. For failure on the contrary-
4. 10% of the participants attributed failure to themselves
5. 18% of the participants attributed failure to others
6. 72% of the participants attributed failure to their luck

The analysis revealed that participants do not have the tendency to shirk responsibility and throw on others; rather, they have courage to come forward to shoulder their responsibility. For the failures also majority of them attribute to luck and not to others.

Communication Checklist with Interpersonal Transactional Analysis Test

The exercise was conducted on communication checklist. Importance of communication in day to day customer/organizational/ interpersonal interaction was emphasized through various examples quoted by the participants and faculty. During the session, the concept of ego states and interpersonal social transactions were clarified. The exercise revealed:

1. 12% of the participants had out standing listening skill
2. 51% of the participants had satisfactory listening skill
3. 29% of the participants had above average listening skill
4. 8% of the participants had poor listening skill

Role- Efficacy Test

The other exercise was on assessment of Role- Efficacy of the participants. The scale has 10 dimensions and has sufficient psychometric property. The ranks accorded by the participants are as under:

Confrontation was given the I Highest Rank

Confrontation (Vs. Avoidance)

This dimension measures the perception about the capacity of the individual to face the problems to attempt their relevant solution. In general, if people in an organization avoid problems or shift those on to others, their role efficacy will be low. The tendency to confront problems contributes to high efficacy.

Helping Relations was given II Highest Rank

Helping Relationship (Vs. Hostility)

This dimension measures the perception/feeling of a person with regard to helping other and taking help from others. If person performing a particular role feels that he can get help from some source in the organization whenever the need arises, he is likely to have higher role efficacy.

Interrole linkage was given the III Highest Rank

Inter -Role Linkage (Vs. Isolation)

This dimension measures the perception of inter dependence with others role i.e. linkage of one's roles with other's role. Linking one's role with others in the organization increases efficacy.

Self Role Integration was given the IV Highest Rank

Self-Role Integration (Vs. Role Distance)

The dimension measures the perception of the integration between self and role. A person who occupies a role responds to the various expectations that people in the organization have from that role, while this certainly gives him satisfaction; it also satisfies others in the organization. However, if he is also expected to take the initiative in starting some activity, the efficacy will be higher. When his role provides him with greater opportunity for using such special strengths and skills, his effectiveness is likely to be higher.

Growth was given the V Highest Rank

Growth (Vs. Stagnation)

This dimension measures the perception about on occupying a role the level of opportunities to learn new things for personal growth and development. If a person feels that his role is stagnant without any opportunity to grow, he is likely to have low role efficacy.

Influence was given the VI Highest Rank

Influence (Vs. Powerlessness)

A relative concept is that of influence or power. This dimension measures the perception of the individuals towards one's own capacity in making an impact on others. The more influence a person is able to exercise in his role, the higher his efficacy is likely to be.

Creativity was given the VII Highest Rank

Creativity (Vs. Rountinity)

This dimension measures the perception that something new or innovative is being done by the individual i.e. experimenting and trying new ideas and strategies. If a person perceives that he has to perform only routine tasks, it becomes detrimental for high role efficacy. If he feels that the role does not allow any time or opportunity to be creative and to try out new and unconventional ways of solving problems, efficacy is bound to be low.

Centrality was given the VIII Highest Rank

Centrality (Vs. Peripherality)

This dimension measures the perception of importance of the role i.e. if a person is feeling his role is important or central in a system his role efficacy is likely to be high. If people feel that their roles are peripheral i.e. not very important, their potential effectiveness will be low as higher motivation is directly proportional to the importance of the roles.

Super ordination was given the IX Highest Rank

Superordination (Vs. Deprivation)

This dimension measures the perception that something beyond the regular call of duty is being contributed to larger society and the nation i.e. linkage of one's role with larger entity/cause.

Proactivity was given the X Highest Rank

Proactivity (Vs Reactivity)

Reactive behavior (responding to the expectations of others) helps a person to be effective to some extent, but proactivity (taking the initiative rather than only responding to other's expectations) contributes much more to efficacy.

Time Management Test and Methods No. 1

The next exercise on Time Management was conducted. The results were as under:

5% of the participants were found to be Pessimistic

They talk to their past, dislike present and do not of future

32% of the participants were found to be Futuristic

Do not repent on past mistakes; live in present with smile paying more attention to future. Assets to the organizations

15% of the participants were found to be Existential

Interested in people not in things

29% of the participants were found to be Tansus

Involved in things not in people, tendency to treat people in mechanical way, successful in running office, very optimistic about their future, very intelligent, motivated and decisive

0% of the participants were found to be Random

No sense time, no direction, no career orientation, absent mindedness, forgetfulness

12% of the participants were found to be Tidal

Give equal attention on past, present and future. Take lessons from the past mistakes, applies to the present and plans to follow the same for future and very satisfied workers.

7% of the participants were found to be Affiliative

Mix up with anyone, no care for position and post no aspiration or high ambition

0% of the participants were found to be Explosive

Full of energy, constantly in motion; do not listen to others, things themselves to be important and others to be unimportant.

Time Management Test and Methods No. 2

The next exercise on Time- Management revealed:

1. Time Wasters- 0%
2. Time sensitive- 20%
3. Time Testers- 80%

Stress Management Score

The subsequent exercise was conducted on creating awareness among the participants about stress, its preventive techniques and methods to make it a source of performance excellence.

Personality Development Assessment Technique & Team Dynamics

Personal Effectiveness Profile was developed to provide insight into critical areas which would strengthen and enhance once potentials and capabilities. The seven critical areas included in this profile are:

Initiative

Excellent- 14%, Good- 41%, Needs Improvement- 45%

Accountability

Excellent- 65%, Good- 18%, Needs Improvement- 17%

Teamwork

Excellent- 31%, Good- 46%, Needs Improvement- 23%

Communication

Excellent- 34%, Good- 51%, Needs Improvement- 15%

Time Management

Excellent- 18%, Good- 74%, Needs Improvement- 8%

Learning

Excellent- 36%, Good- 54%, Needs Improvement-10%

Functional Excellence

Excellent- 45%, Good- 50%, Needs Improvement- 5%

Personality Quiz

Other exercise on Personality was conducted to work out different types of requirement for developing different personalities. The results came to our notice were:

Thinkers - 17%

Feelers - 29%

Doers - 54%

Role- Play Activity

The next exercise was Role- Play. The participants were divided into 3 groups comprised of 17, 17 and 18 participants representing customers, employees and observer's group respectively. The groups were interchanged thrice so that every participant can get an opportunity to play all the three roles. Analysis of the exercise revealed following in respect to 6 dimensions:

1. Participants accorded 1st highest rank to Perfection
2. 2nd highest rank was assigned to Interpersonal Relations and Team Effectiveness.
3. 3rd highest rank was given to Communication Skills.
4. 4th highest rank was assigned to Personality Development.
5. 5th highest rank was assigned to Time-Management
6. Last priority was given to Stress- Management dimension.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The results of the exercise, based on a small sample, are to be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, for bringing about organizational excellence, the results are sufficient to draw the attention of the organization to think about undertaking an audit of soft skill development frequently at different hierarchical level.

On the basis of the above it can be concluded that workers have sufficient potential to grow and develop and have a learning attitude, they are visionary, honest, hardworking, help each other, sincere, respect people and service.

Training and skill sharpening is fruit bearing when it is taken seriously and sincerely. Assessing post training performance and estimating Return on Investment is important to judge the efficacy of the training and its execution in day to day activities.

The world is flat and we are constantly interacting with people who come from different cultures and countries. Hence it is vital to understand the customer and employees, not only in terms of the project delivery and welfare schemes but also with reference to their perspective, in this context, soft skills is now recognized as key to making businesses more profitable and better places to work.

In the most progressive companies, management is looking for people's ability to communicate clearly and openly, and to listen and respond empathetically. Good soft skills include the ability of people to balance the commercial needs of their company with the individual needs of the workforce. The ability to deal with differences, competition and diversity is needed more than ever. Everyone already has some form of soft skills probably a lot more than they realize. They just need to look at areas in their personal life where they get on with others. Not only that, the best news of all is that soft skills can be developed and possessed on an on-going basis through proper training, insightful reading, observation and of course, practice,

Organizations today recognize that the **professional development** of their employees play an important part in maintaining relationships with their customers , suppliers , competitors , shareholders and other outside entities of the organization in developing a successful business .It not only helps improve service but also shows the interest that an organization has in the **professional development** of their employees, which in turn leads to higher employee retention, motivation, job satisfaction and productivity.

Limitations of the Study

The participants showed profound interest in

study program. An insight into our organizational systems and culture will help us evolve styles and management systems, which are best suited to corporate functioning. The time duration allotted to the intervention was too short. Scarcity of resources limits the horizon of any study, as researches have to restrict the size of the sample due to practical limitations. Soft Skill is multidimensional and each dimension is full unit in it self. Future studies dealing with the single dimensions are desirous. To further validate the findings a large number and varied organizations needed to be included into the sample. Other most obvious limitation of the research is that, the results will depend on how truly subjects respond to the questionnaires.

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