

Soft Skills in 2019: Getting Beyond The Current Confusion



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Soft Skills: Getting Beyond the Endless Confusion

Reading this piece

This piece is 3800 plus words long, longer than the recommended length for blog posts. How can you approach it to get the best value from it?

This piece has two objectives.

1. Create clarity around the confused dialogue about workplace soft skills that makes it hard for people to figure out how to act to increase their own.
2. Provide guidance on how to go about acquiring or deepening soft skills that is based on years of practical success with many people.

If you are interested in the first, read the front part. It presents an approach which defines soft skills in a way that will clarify your understanding.

If you just want to get on with improving your soft skills, skip ahead to Part II, which starts at the follow heading.

Acquiring A New Soft Skill – The Value-Capability Dance

about half the way through.

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Part I: What Is A Soft Skill?

The Challenge Created By the Current Confusion about Soft Skills

The [Simple Programmer](#), a web site focusing on the art and craft of programming, recently published a post titled. [“Top 7 Soft Skills for Developers in 2019”](#). In it, Zachary Paruch, the author. listed the following 7 things he labelled soft skills.

1. **Work Ethic:** Your ability to buckle down
2. **Adaptability:** Your willingness to adjust
3. **Team Work:** How well you work with others
4. **Ability to Take Criticism:** Your willingness to grow
5. **Empathy:** How well you put yourself in others’ shoes
6. **Approachability:** Your level of accessibility
7. **Perseverance:** Your patience through obstacles

Looking at this list, I realized that the Internet dialogue about soft skills is a confusing one.

Zachary’s list includes things that might more familiarly be called.

1. personality characteristics or attributes or traits,
2. personal values,
3. motivations,
4. abilities or capabilities.

No wonder it is hard for a person to take a list like Zachary’s and put together a personal, practical approach to becoming more “soft skilled”. After all, what steps can some one take to become “more empathic”, for example?

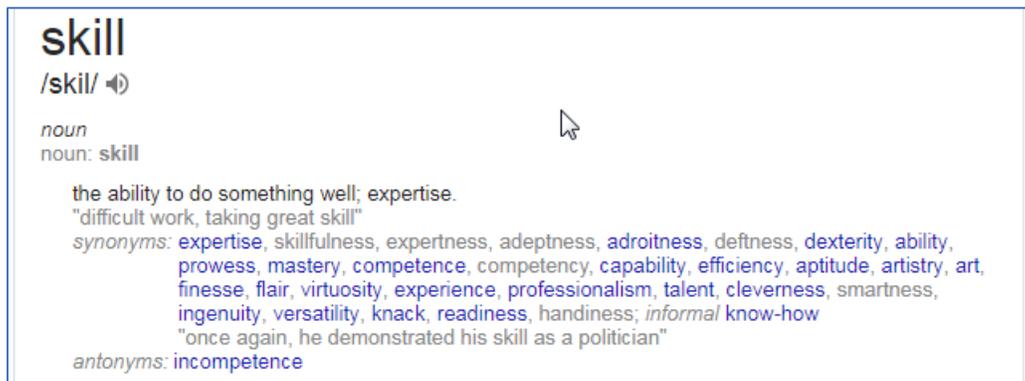
[“How to Be Empathetic” in Psychology Today](#) has some suggestions, but once again the steps suggested are extremely high level, and sound more like behavioral prescriptions than practical steps you can implement readily on-your-job.

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How can we move from such general prescriptive statements about soft skills to a more specific, concrete ones? Can we frame our understanding of a soft skill in a way that provides us with specific insight on how to acquire or deepen our work place soft skills?

Let's start by asking "What is a skill?"

[Dictionary.Com](https://www.dictionary.com). is a good starting place. How does it define skill?



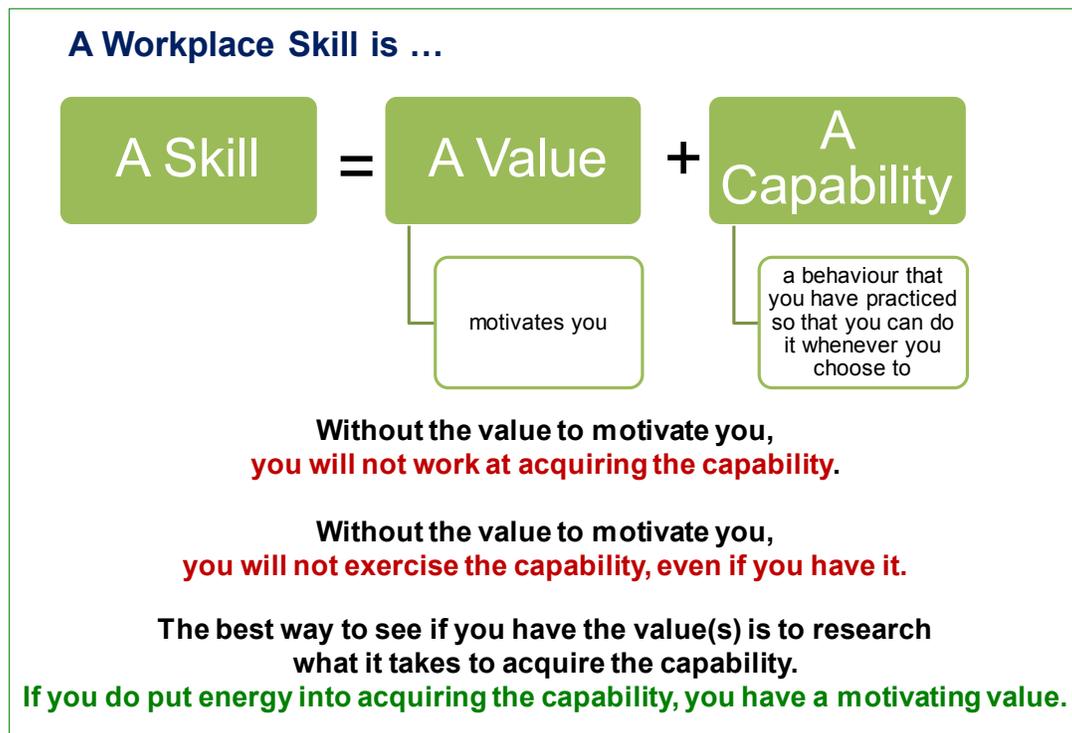
skill
/skil/ ◀▶
noun
noun: skill

the ability to do something well; expertise.
"difficult work, taking great skill"

synonyms: expertise, skillfulness, expertness, adeptness, adroitness, deftness, dexterity, ability, prowess, mastery, competence, competency, capability, efficiency, aptitude, artistry, art, finesse, flair, virtuosity, experience, professionalism, talent, cleverness, smartness, ingenuity, versatility, knack, readiness, handiness; *informal know-how*
"once again, he demonstrated his skill as a politician"

antonyms: incompetence

Look at the long list of synonyms. We can see that the idea of skill is a very broad one. Let's narrow this down to make the more useful, focusing specifically on work place skills.



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So, when we say that a person has a work place skill, we are really saying 2 things at once.

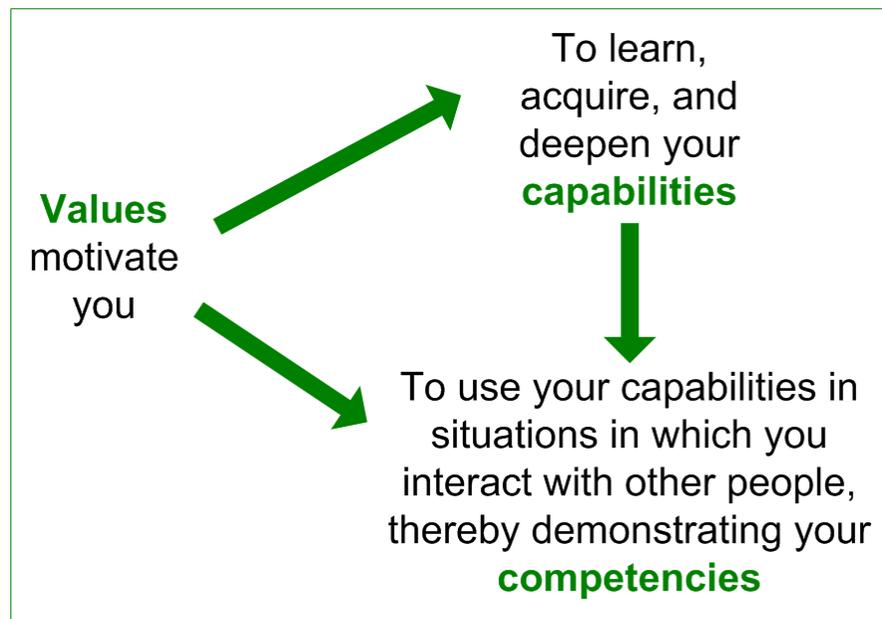
1. **The person has an ability**, a capability to behave in a certain way.

When the person repeatedly behaves in this way, in similar situations, we say that the person is **demonstrating a competency**.

And

2. **The person has a value or values** which:
 - a. First, motivates the person to become more capable at doing this,
 - b. Second, motivates the person to use this capability in appropriate work place situations.

We now have a clear understanding of a work place. It results from the dynamic interaction of the following 3 elements.



What are personal values? why are they so important?

Myrko Thum has this great definition of a personal value. Values motivate you to do things because they define what is important to you as a person.

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Personal values are the general expression of what is most important for you. A **value** expresses the **worth** of something, and in this case what you categorically like and dislike. So they are like categories for all your preferences in life. Feb 22, 2013



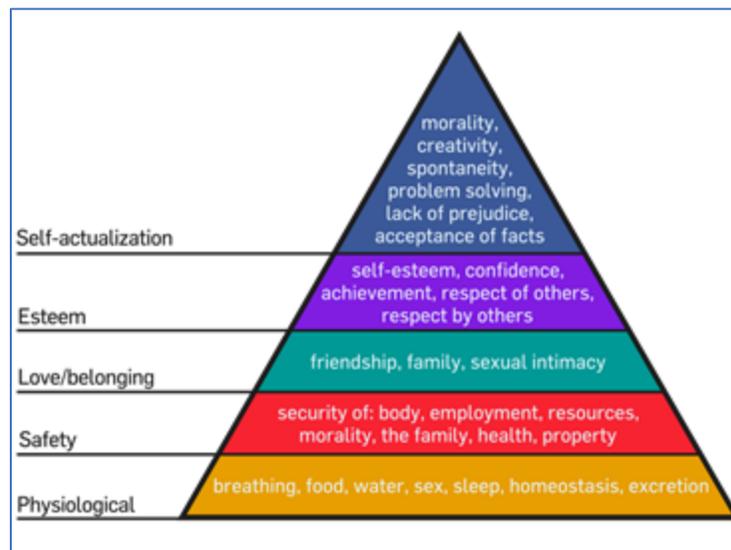
Do You Know Your Personal Values? - Myrko Thum
<https://www.myrkothum.com/personal-values/>

About this result Feedback

You can find a great deal of material on “personal values” on the Internet. For example, [James Clear as a list of more than 50 personal values](#) on his website.

Other writers suggest that personal values can be organized in a personal hierarchy, with some clearly being more important to a particular person than others.

Personal values are often also related to [Maslow's famous hierarchy of human needs](#). The idea is that the more things in the needs in the lower levels of the triangle must be satisfied first, before the higher ones can be addressed. Soft skills at work fall into the Esteem / Self Actualization level. Individuals will not have energy to address them unless they feel secure around their level of satisfaction of the lower level needs.



Personal Values and Interpersonal Skills

“If you don’t value other people,

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you won't be motivated to first acquire and then use the capabilities you need to interact effectively with other people at work."

The relationship between personal values and the capability to interact with other people is not a simple one. Talk to people who demonstrate interpersonal competencies at work. Ask them about what values drive their work place behavior. You will hear them talk about a variety of different values. People who are interpersonally competent will includes ones that indicate they think the people they work with are important – of worth (e.g. respect for others, valuing what other people can do, kindness, ...).

By comparison, when you talk to people who do not demonstrate interpersonal competencies at work, they will mention things other than people (e.g. money, material goods, social standing) as being most important to them.

Morality and Skills

The values people about other have about other people are seen as negative or positive by the others around them. In the past, some people were very capable at interacting with and managing slaves. At those points in history, people with this competency were positively regarded in the other people in their society. Today, very few people see this interpersonal skill as being a positive one.

A value defines what is important to a person. Values motivate people to acquire capabilities and demonstrate them in competencies. Socially defined morality and ethics define whether those values, capabilities, and competencies are regarded as positive or negative by the other people in that society.

Work Place Soft Skills

The current emphasis on soft skills reflects the way in which we work – in groups organized into organizations. Today, employers value the soft or interpersonal skills that allow individuals to achieve results valued by those employers.

Can Your Soft Skills Change Over Time?

There is no simple correlation or cause and effect relationship between a personal value and a capability. Different personal values can motivate you to acquire the same or differing capabilities.

"The extent to which you value other people at work TODAY is directly related to the degree to which you put personal energy into acquiring and developing your work place people skills."

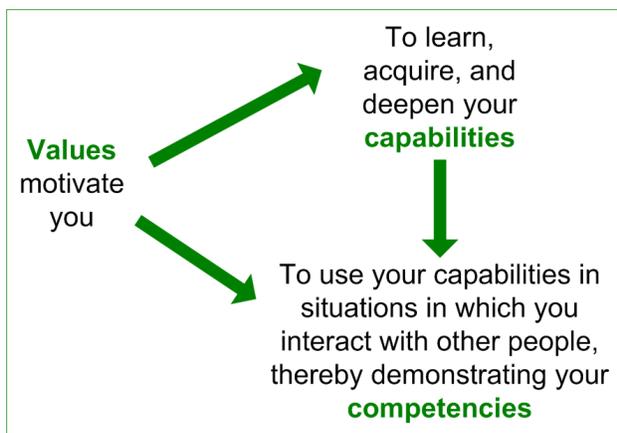
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The way that personal values relate to capabilities and competencies is a very individual thing. All we can say from the outside looking in, trying to understand a person, is that when we ask a person why they work at increasing a soft skill capability or demonstrate a competency, their answer is highly likely to include some personal value about people.

As a result, we cannot say “having value X is necessary for acquiring or developing capability X1 and demonstrating competency X2”. Human beings are more complex than this. We are flexible social beings.

Soft Skills and Personal Growth

You can have capabilities that you do not use – do not express in your current competencies. Your values can change over time. You can come to value things that you did not value in the past. You can stop valuing things that you did value in the past.



A past personal value could have resulted in you acquiring a capability that you no longer use because you no longer value what those behaviors lead to.

A new or changed personal value can motivate you to acquire a new capability. You add that new capability to your repertoire of capabilities. You could use it in place of an older capability.

This rich set of dynamic possibilities is precisely what makes human beings so fascinating as social creatures. We can change on all 3 levels, concurrently or subsequently. As a result, we can change the relationships between our personal values, our capabilities, and our competencies in many varying ways. We are flexible social beings who can learn to behave in new ways.

So What Is A Soft Skill? – A Context Specific Definition

Having a relevant personal value and a pertinent capability is not what makes you skilled. A capability is simply a potential to behave in a certain way. Using your capability because your values motivate you to do so results in competent behavior on your part. You must do – behave – in order to be skilled. This is so for all skills, technical ones as well as interpersonal ones.

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When a person

- **repeatably demonstrates a pattern of behavior**
- **when interacting with other people in a work place**
- **which leads to results valued or desired by the employer who establishes that work place,**

that person is demonstrating that he or she has a soft skill.

When a person does this at a level that is above the level demonstrated by the largest proportion of the people in a work place, we consider that person to be highly skilled in that soft skill when compared to the others in that work place.

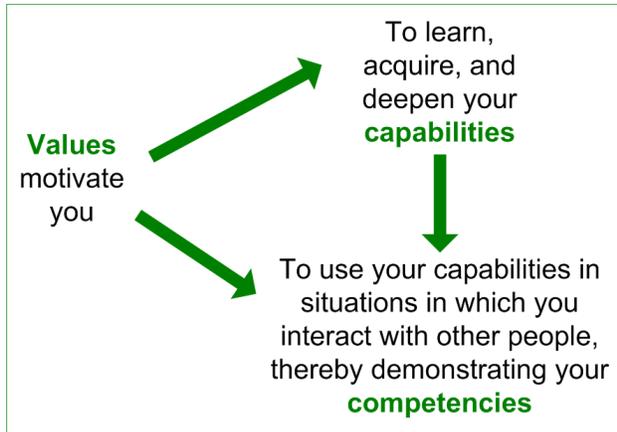
Generalizing Across Multiple Work Places

Human beings generalize ideas. We look at and compare various work places. We see that the same soft skills are valued in a number of work places. We then say that this soft skill is important in a more general way. But underneath it all, having a soft skill always come down to working with other people in a way which produces results valued in a particular workplace.

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Part II: Acquiring / Deepening Your Soft Skills

Acquiring A New Soft Skill – The Value-Capability Dance



Which comes first, the personal value or the capability? The schematic to the left suggests that the value must come first. But humans are more flexible than that. The arrows in this diagram could should really be double headed.

As in so many human situations, the real answer to the which comes first question is that it depends. The specifics of the person and the situation that person finds

her or his self in will define which comes first in that particular situation.

Our internal psycho-dynamics are marvellously complex and flexible. Much of our brain's cognitive processing occurs on the pre-conscious level and is only accessible to our conscious mind through guided self-reflection. Human behavior is much more complex and dynamic than the verbal models we use to talk about it. What we label values and

motives really correspond to complex bio-cognitive processes that involve concurrent physical in our body and conscious and pre-conscious activity in our brains.

If you are interested enough to take the time to research a new soft skill, that is probably a good sign that you have the personal values which will motivate you to learn the capabilities involved.

But suppose you think that you need to develop the skill, but don't really seem to have the energy to do the research needed to find an e-learning course about it, or a face-to-face workshop that will help you acquire? What can you do?

Surprisingly, the answer is "behave like you do".



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If you think you need to learn a soft skill, and don't find yourself taking steps to acquire it, use self-talk and self-discipline to do move yourself forward. Talk to your work peers about taking steps to acquire the soft skill. Spend some time on the Internet looking for:

- relevant e-learning programs,
- or professional development workshops,
- or courses your can take at a local educational institution.

Often, the process of doing this will jump start the motivation to continue down this learning path. The behavior leads to an increase in the power of your values. Your values will change to align with your behavior. Your further soft skill capability acquisition process acts to re-enforce the increasing strength of this value.

People develop interests during their formal high school or university education precisely because of this dynamic. You are required to take a course. You take it because you think that education in general is important and because your values include respect for education authority.

You start the process of learning its content in the course. You become interested in the content itself and begin to value it in its own right. You see what you can achieve given this new capability. Your values are changing. This content become increasingly important to you. You now contain on this learning journey because you value what you can achieve exercising these capabilities. In some cases, this change shapes your entire future work career. You, as a human being, have demonstrated just that you are are a social being who changes through learning

A Framework for Smart Soft Skill Capability Acquisition

Those of us who went to high school, college or university already know a great way to engage in soft skill development. Most of us spent some time in physical education classes or participating in a sport. While doing so, we learned how to acquire and develop sport skills.

Soft skill capability development follows a very similar process. In the following schematic, the process you use to acquire a sport skill is shown in the inside of the pentagon. The process you use to acquire or develop a soft skill is on its outside.

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Because of this parallelism, you can evaluate any soft skill development program easily. Just ask yourself the following questions about it.

1. Does the program break complex interpersonal skills (e.g. delegating or coaching), into a **set of sub-skills** that you can learn sequentially, one at a time?
2. Does the program include lots of **practice opportunities** for each of the sub-skills, including video-based **feedback** whenever possible?
3. Does the program periodically have role plays or simulations or exercises that are very close to the conditions under which you will apply the sub-skills on-the-job?

These give the opportunities to **integrate your new sub-skills into smart integrated mind-body habits** – capabilities you can use in-the-moment back on-the-job

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4. Does the program include the activities needed to **plan for and to work through how you will use the integrated new skill** back on-the-job?
5. Does the program address what **kinds of support** you might need as you start to use your new integrated skill back-on-the-job?
6. Does the program ask you to consider about how **your new behavior will impact the other people you work with**, and how it might ask or require them to change?

Effective soft skill training programs address these issues. If you find programs that do, you will have a great chance at acquiring the soft skill capability and actually using it as a competency. Unless the program does, it does not meet the conditions required for you to become competent in this soft skill in the work place.

The Reality of the Work Place Skill Extinction Effect

When you start to use a new skill back-on-the-job, you will have an impact on the people with whom you have been working. Your behavior is changing. As a result, their regular patterns of interacting with you will also need to change. **THAT MEANS THEY HAVE TO CHANGE TOO.** These people may not always be open to such change. When they are not, they will put social pressure on you to revert to your old ways of interacting with them. **This is known as the Skill Extinction Effect.** It is very real.

If you acquire a new soft skill and want to use it back-on-the-job, you will have to deal with this. Here are some things you can do to deal with this.

1. **Address this head on.**

Talk to the folks with whom you work. Tell them about your new skills and how you are starting to use them. Explain that this may have an impact on the way you interact with them in future. Explain why you think this new way of behaving will make things more effective for all of you.

2. **Focus your use of the new skill to “new” situations.**

Sometimes the best way to behave in new ways is to find new new situations, where other folks experience your and your behaviors for the first time. You might be able to arrange for this in your current job, by taking on new jobs responsibilities or joining a different team. Or you may find an opportunity to change jobs. The research on why people change jobs suggests one of the important reasons is that the new job allows them to use new skills.

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3. Create a “new skill” implementation support system

Acquire the new skill at the same time as one or more of your team mates. That way you will be able to talk to one another about using the new soft skill. You will be able to problem solve together and support one another as you become more and capable in it. Doing so can provide the level of support you need to get through the period it takes for the people with whom you work to change their responses to your new skills.

Soft Skills and Recruiting Success

Just because the person has a capability does not mean that this individual will use it on-the-job. Recruiters and hiring managers need to take steps to determine if a final candidate also has the values needed to motivate that person’s to actually use the capability on the new job.

Some people are great at being interviewed. They may talk as if they have the skill, particularly if they have read about it or worked with people who have demonstrated it. However, without also personally having the relevant motivating value or values, these individuals will not demonstrate this competence on-the-job.

The best evidence that a person has such motivating values is past behavior. Past on-the-job behaviour is the single best predictor of a person’s likely future behavior on a new job. [Behavioural interviewing](#) for recruiting has developed as one way of trying to assess and to predict this.

Even better recruiting processes put final candidates into situations which are as close to real as possible to their future working environments. Role plays, simulations, trial periods, presentations, and time spent with future working peers all require final candidates to demonstrate their technical and soft skills. Using these processes, recruiters and hiring managers get the best insights in the way in which each final candidate will demonstrate her or his competences on the new job.

Soft Skills and ROI from Training Investments

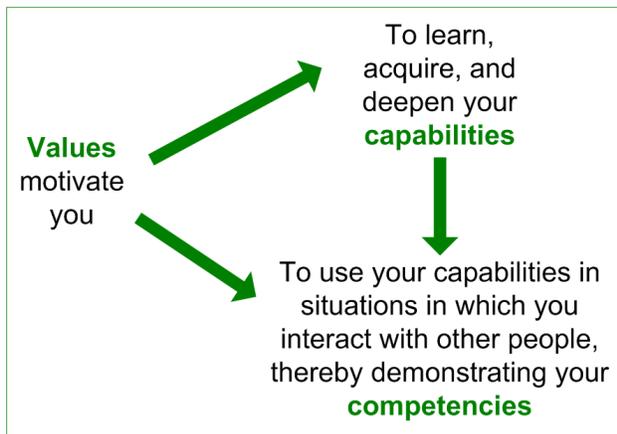
Unless a person being trained has the motivating values, the individual is unlikely to put in the energy and the effort needed to acquire a new capability. As well, the person may not be motivated take the risks involved in using the new capability on-the-job – of moving from capability to demonstrated competency. The individual may however be prepared to participate in the training program, especially if it is sponsored and paid for by the employing organization.

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Self-selection into a training program is the single best sign that a person has the values required to motivate that individual to benefit from a soft skill development program. Managers and trainers who pay close attention to when people self-select themselves into training programs get the best ROI from supporting / investing in such training programs.

If You Do Only One Thing

There are many, many articles, written by self-nominated soft skill experts, particularly on the Internet. They prescribe what you should do about soft skills, almost as if soft skill development occurs in a way that is analogous to the way medicine works. They urge you to take actions without basing their advice on the basic foundations of the soft skill development process.



If you take only 1 thing away from reading this piece, focus on the schematic on the left. Spend time reflecting on its implications for your acquisition and your use of soft skills on-your-job.

Focus on growing the capabilities you need to work effectively with others in your work place. Start with base or foundation soft skill capabilities.

For example, we all think that we know how to ask effective questions. After all, we all ask questions all the time at work. But watching and researching expert questioners show us that this skill is not a simple one. When work place situations involve:

- stress,
- tension.
- greater than every day delivery pressures,
- open or hidden conflict between people,
- open or hidden competition among individuals,
- or less than positive motivations on the part of some of the individuals involved,

every day asking questions skills fall apart and are no longer enough. Acquiring the ability to ask effective questions under these work place conditions is a core or foundation soft skill that contributes to many other soft skills. Finding and completing an effective soft skill development program such core or foundation soft skills will have payoff over the entire course of your career.

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Call to Action

Advice is something you should only pay attention to if and when it makes sense to you. Treat advice as a 'call to action', something that you can consider doing.

1. Start your soft skill development journey with a core skill like asking effective questions. Add more complex soft skills, such as delegating work and managing performance, in time. They will take advantage of, build on, and expand your foundation soft skills.
2. Don't start with complex soft skills like team work. Don't focus on complex personality traits like perseverance.
3. When considering a soft skill development program, always ask "How can I learn to behave, step by step, in order to demonstrate that I have this soft skill on-the-job?" Soft skill development programs that answer this question are the right ones in which to invest your energy.

Treat your soft skill acquisition adventure as a career long journey during which you become more and more effective at work. Doing so will have great payoff for your career advancement and work satisfaction.