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For Immediate Release

Peter de Jager To Present Keynote Address at Virtual Tech Fair April 25 ...

Superficial Skill Sets

By Peter de Jager

Definition: *Superficial - of or relating to the surface or appearance only; not thorough; shallow. We could add: of no value; useless; not important.*

Over the years I've had many a discussion with prospective clients about the usefulness of training, specifically training in the change management skills area. Often in those discussions the client challenges the value of this type of training. The claim is that because you cannot measure the impact of the training, it is a waste of time to make this type of investment. According to the client, "soft skills" are superficial skills and therefore not worth their time.

The notion that you cannot measure the value of soft skills training is a bit of a Red Herring. The truth is more along the lines that it takes time, sometimes a long time, to see the results of soft skills training. This position is aggravated by the sad truth that we no longer seem to have the time, or at least the patience, to let training take effect.

And of course, there's the valid issue that this type of training does NOT come in pill form. It's not really possible to take a single dose and expect to see results. For soft skills to take hold they need constant practice and positive re-enforcement by the current manager in order for the behavior to become habitual. Training can only lay the foundation upon which to build a skill set, it cannot, because of its nature, be expected to provide an immediate cure.

An example of measurement is called for ... years ago, when I was a novice manager, I suffered under some serious misconceptions. I believed all a manager had to do was tell an employee to do something and they'd go off and do it. Not only that, but they would do it on time and without error. Naturally, my department did not run as smoothly as I would have liked. Not surprising really, when you consider I didn't understand what the word "managing" meant. I certainly was not managing my staff by any stretch of the imagination.

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So ... I sent myself to some training. I read some books. I emulated other managers who were good at what I wanted to become. I paid attention to my behavior, and with a lot of painful trial and error I put what I learned into practice. A year later, yes it took that long; my department was more efficient, more effective. Fewer tasks were left undone, more were delivered on time.

Have I measured the value of "delegation training" in this example? If you insist that measurement is presented in the form of numbers, then the answer is no. I cannot say that the training increased my delegation prowess by 107.2 percent. I could tally up the number of failed and successful tasks a year ago and compare them to similar numerations a year later, but that lacks honesty. Different people were involved in the tasks; the tasks were not the same; the clients were different as were the deadlines etc. etc. And I cannot state with any certainty, that my success in this area was directly due to a specific component of all the things I did to become a better delegator.

All I know is, because I focused and paid attention to the issues of delegation, I became a better delegator, and my organization benefited from that improvement.

Just in case someone is asking what this has to do with "Managing Change and Technology", it's right on topic from two totally different aspects:

- 1) Training is an integral part of any and all Change Management processes. That training includes as much "soft" as "hard" skills.
- 2) "Change Management" skills are seen as "soft skills" and therefore unfortunately fall into the category of "superficial".

Fact ... drawn from a thousand anecdotes, personal experiences, conversations, studies, surveys and observations... most large changes, be they mergers, acquisitions, brand name changes, technology rollouts, application implementations etc. etc. Fail.

They fail, not because of any technical problem, but by our inability to manage the change process.

Exactly how do we fail in these endeavors? By violating what we really know to be true about the change process;

- We spring change upon people without explanation ... and expect them to nod their heads in submissive agreement.
- We communicate the change via announcement ... rather than by open dialogue.
- We perceive resistance as a negative response ... and ignore that it is an attempt to protect what got us to where we are.
- We expect people to buy into our solutions ... rather than enlist them to solve their problems.
- We believe that the role of management is to make all the decisions ... rather than to manage people towards solutions whenever possible.

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- We demand that change occurs immediately ...
when we know that real, deep, permanent change takes time.
- We see people who won't change as the enemy...
rather than as proof that we haven't made the case for change.
- We insist that change can occur without error ...
when we know that learning any new skill involves initial failure.
- We believe that people resist change ...
when we know for a fact that people embrace huge personal change
and only really resist change forced upon them.

And then there's the one which wins the "Grand Irony" award.

- Even though our change projects fail,
we resist changing how we implement change,
finding it easier to blame those who resist how we implement change ...

All of the above mini-lessons relate to those superficial soft skills. None of them are that difficult to understand and are only a teeny bit controversial.

Yet these mini-lessons pose a problem, as does every "soft" skill. The best way to understand the problem with "soft" skills is to examine why "hard" skills are so much more in vogue in the corporate world.

"Hard" skills, by definition, are those skills which produce an immediate visible result. If I teach you to operate a tractor, then I can see, very quickly, if you've acquired the skill. The same is true if I teach you welding, programming, glass blowing or how to enter an invoice into an accounting system. The result is well defined, visible, and immediately obvious and usually involves a human being gaining mastery over an inanimate object.

Those superficial soft skills don't have it so easy. Soft skills usually involve interaction with other human beings. Human beings who have a will of their own; who suffer from short attention spans; are prone to personal trials and tribulations; and possess agendas not always perfectly in synch with organizational goals. In short? Soft skills are difficult! Hard skills are easy in comparison.

There's another aspect to "hard skills" seldom included in the definition. In each of the cited examples, a manager can send a staff member to a course and when they return, the training "problem" is fixed. Management input, aside from the cost of the course and making the time available to attend it, is zero.

That's not true of soft skills. The acquisition of a soft skill involves a behavior modification. It requires constant management feedback, involvement, encouragement and attention. Acquiring a soft skill imposes a management burden. In a world where time is at a premium and management wants effortless solutions to pressing problems, those superficial "soft skills" are a poor fit.

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A final argument for paying more attention to soft skills is simply an observation. The difference between good and poor managers has nothing to do with their ability to deal with inanimate objects, and everything to do with their ability to manage interactions between subtle and fickle human beings.

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About Peter de Jager

Peter is speaker/writer/consultant focusing on how organizations, and hence, how individuals respond to, resist and embrace Change. You can contact him, and read more of his work at www.technobility.com © 2007 Peter de Jager

SIDEBAR

Peter de Jager will present the keynote address at the **Spring Virtual Tech Fair™ April 25**. For more information visit www.virtualtechfair.com.

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For two days only, April 25 and 26, attendees can meet with leading technology companies and industry experts from the comfort of their office -- live, online, interactive and 100 percent free – at the Distribution Virtual Tech Fair.

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