

Soft Skills at Work: Will your workplace behavior keep customers coming back?

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In November, I went to Ace Hardware in Severna Park to buy some nails. A store employee showed me the selection, and said I would need to purchase a large package to get the size I wanted.

But then he paused and said, "Let's see what we have in the back."

In the back room, another employee opened up drawers of nails and found the right size. He put a small handful in a bag and asked if they would be enough. I opened my wallet to pay for them, and he said to not worry about it.

"We want to bring back service that people used to experience," he said.

This is exactly the type of customer service that attracts and keeps people coming back. This employee's quick thinking meant I could avoid buying more nails than I needed.

Here was an example of a worker demonstrating the "soft skills" employers want. He took the initiative to solve a customer's problem in a friendly way. It was a small action, but it is often those simple acts that matter the most and cause people to form favorable impressions about businesses.

Will I go back? Of course.

In the same way, it is your simple, everyday behaviors that create perceptions about you. Do you do what you say you will do? Are you friendly? Your actions determine how people view you.

As an employee, you can make a good impression by displaying desired soft skills. As an employer, modeling the behaviors you want your workers to practice shows employees just how important these skills are.

Are you demonstrating behaviors that can help you move ahead in your career? To find out, take this quiz:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being something you do all the time, rate yourself on the following soft skills:

- Do you smile when you greet people?
- Do you dress appropriately for work?
- Do you complete work on or before the deadline?
- Are you always on time for appointments?
- Do you produce your best work every time?
- Do you return non-sales phone calls and e-mails no more than 12 to 24 hours later?
- Do you admit your mistakes?
- Do you say thank you when someone does something for you?
- Do you help co-workers?
- Do you avoid complaining or passing on gossip?
- Do you make the commitment to learn new skills?
- Do you stop yourself from interrupting other people while they are speaking?

If you answered fours and fives, you understand how important these behaviors are to establishing the type of reputation that will move your career and business forward.

CONNECT!

CONNECT! partner, the South Anne Arundel Rotary Club, is sponsoring a semester-long pilot program called Career First Steps at 2008 Maryland Blue Ribbon School winner Southern High School. I've had the pleasure of being involved with this program where business students have been learning about the workplace behaviors employers expect.

Each session, guest speakers from the Rotary and business community have explained why soft skills such as smiling and being positive, exceeding expectations and admitting mistakes matter to employers. Students also participate in activities to learn the specific behaviors.

During the discussion about saying thank you, students wrote notes of appreciation to teachers who have helped them. The notes were placed in the teachers' mailboxes, and they were delighted to discover them. Several responded with, "The notes made my day."

"Our goal is to help students understand that employers expect certain behaviors in the workplace and we, as businesspeople, can identify the specific skills that are important to demonstrate," Rotary Club President Cort Vitty said.

The speakers also "mirror" back to students the behaviors they notice during the sessions, and tell them if they would be hired or not. This helps students understand that even small things such as the way a person sits in a chair can have an impact on an employer.

Southern High School's Signature Program facilitator and on-site coordinator, Marilyn Harmon, has observed the attention students are paying to the speakers and topics.

"It is important for students to hear about these skills directly from employers," she said. "Mastering the behaviors can give them a competitive advantage throughout their careers."

Career First Steps has been conducted in Kandi Ford's Principles of Business class, where students are given self assessments to monitor their own progress. The pilot concludes Wednesday with an evaluation of the entire program.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is the initial contact for CONNECT!, the Anne Arundel County coalition dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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