

Soft Skills at Work: Make sure colleagues know they can count on you

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital

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When I think of people who have a good work ethic and keep their word, Pappu Khera comes to mind.

Pappu is a CPA with Khera & Associates Ltd. in Odenton. I've known Pappu since 1989 when I became the executive director of the West County Chamber of Commerce. Pappu's office was on the third floor in the building and the chamber was on the second.

We got to know each other when he became the accountant for the chamber. But it was after Pappu assumed the position of newsletter editor that I observed his work ethic and his commitment to do what he said he would do. For 11 years, Pappu worked tirelessly to get the newsletter out on time, even during tax season.

Unfortunately, many people do not always display these admirable traits. Too often they'll say, "Sure, I'd be happy to do that," but then the task doesn't get done. These people give excuses and think, "My boss, co-workers or fellow volunteers will understand."

What they don't comprehend is that trust in them erodes with every broken promise.

How about you? Do any of the following actions describe your behavior?

You have been asked to let a colleague know if you will be attending a meeting and you fail to respond.

You promise to send materials to a client by an agreed date, and you forget.

You forgo attending a board meeting because you are busy and besides, other people will be there to make up a quorum.

Following a networking event, you do not send an article you promised to e-mail to a new contact.

You miss an appointment because it was not written in your calendar.

You may believe that an occasional slipup doesn't hurt, but just one of these actions can create doubt about you in other people's minds.

Pappu and I recently talked about work ethic and keeping your commitments. I asked him how he learned that these qualities are essential in business.

"I learned from my parents and teachers that if you take on a responsibility, you just do it," he said. "People need to know they can count on you. You will recall when I volunteered to edit the chamber newsletter, I was working on my master's in taxation. Even during my graduating semester when I was going the equivalent of full-time, I did not miss a single deadline because you were counting on me."

Pappu gave me other examples that illustrate his philosophy.

"If something is important to my clients, it is important to me," he said. "I set up all my business clients on QuickBooks and train them. After one session, a client told me she would feel better if I could observe her when she did the first payroll.

"Because of her commitments, only the Sunday evening before the next day's payroll was convenient for her. Using a remote access software from my office, I connected to her computer to watch over her as she did the first payroll."

Pappu had some advice for people who have difficulty with these soft skills:

Know your strengths and capabilities.

Understand whatever is worth doing has a time cost. To keep a commitment, you might have to give up something. What will it be?

Find out how dedicated the people are who are helping you. Do they share your priorities?

If you run into situations that might delay, or worse, derail your commitment, keep clients and co-workers informed so that you don't risk damaging the trust they have in you.

"To me, people's trust is priceless," Pappu said.

Are you doing the same for your customers or co-workers? If people aren't returning your calls, or colleagues don't seem happy with you, honestly assess if you have let them down in some way.

CONNECT! Coalition

Over the next several months, coalition member the Anne Arundel County Public Libraries will be compiling lists of books for all ages related to workplace skills. West County Area Library branch manager and CONNECT! Coalition Steering Committee member Cathy Butler told me there are several books in the library about these skills.

"For young children who have trouble getting to school on time, there is 'The Secret Shortcut' by Mark Teague," Cathy said. "Try 'Thanks a Million' by Nikki Grimes to talk about gratitude. 'Albert's Impossible Toothache' by Barbara Williams covers the art of listening."

Parents can read the books with their children and discuss why workplace skills are important. Additional titles for children, and books for teens and adults, will be identified in the coming months. These lists will be available in library branches later this year.

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 a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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