

Soft Skills at Work: Showing appreciation is greatly appreciated

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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One of my favorite soft skills is the ability to say thank you.

I love to hear how business people show appreciation to customers and employees.

Claire Hodgkin, an associate broker with Prudential Carruthers in Crofton, mentioned the "attitude of gratitude" one day when we were talking, and I was intrigued by the concept. I asked her what it meant.

"It's really something that starts deep within yourself," she said. "It's the ability to give and accept meaningful praise."

Claire first heard the idea when she attended the Mastermind Summit hosted by Brian Buffini of Buffini & Co. in San Diego, who shares lead-generation strategies to real estate, lending and service industry professionals. The event drew more than 6,000 professionals.

The summit talked about setting goals and examining what success looks like. But it came down to the importance of relationship-building and telling individuals how much you appreciate them.

"It's the way to treat people and putting yourself in someone else's shoes," Claire said. "For example, they talked about staying in touch by sending thank-you notes. Part of my day now is writing notes. It pays you back in ways you never saw before."

Claire mentioned that many people don't think about developing relationships, which then makes receiving referrals and new business more difficult.

"My customers will not buy from me every year," Claire said. "So it's important to keep in touch so that I stay top in their minds when they need my services or have referrals."

Claire told me she lets people know that doing business with her is meaningful. She accomplishes that by contacting them monthly and occasionally dropping by with a gift.

"I want to be a trusted adviser," Claire said.

She holds a client party each year to express her appreciation. This summer she has scheduled dinner and a Bowie Baysox game. Claire solicits \$25 door prizes from her business partners to add to the fun. Another benefit is that the party connects clients with one another.

"I look forward to it," she said. "It solidifies our relationship."

Our conversation also turned to how gratitude is demonstrated to employees in different workplace settings. Claire's background includes 30 years working in corporations.

She said she believes being appreciated is highly desired by everyone in a company.

"Praise them," Claire said. "Employees may not express feelings outwardly, but inwardly it makes them feel good. It is not something that you should get to later. The most valuable asset is the employees. Without them, there are no clients."

Employers may believe a big bonus is the thank you and that employees don't have to receive praise, but "you do need to give it," she said.

"Without appreciation, people think they are being taken for granted," she said. "People talk about those who never say thank you."

But it is a two-way street.

"Employees need to thank the boss, too," Claire said. "Not a lot of environments encourage that."

We also talked about some innovative ways Claire has heard for showing appreciation to staff:

Every Friday bring in lunch for employees from different restaurants or caterers.

Once a quarter cook breakfast for employees.

Surprise your staff. Say, "It's been a great week so go home early on Friday," especially in the summertime.

Awards are fine but simple things are more heartfelt, she said.

In these lean times, showing appreciation is a way to "pay with gratitude" rather than dollars. It is also an essential soft skill that needs to be demonstrated in order to be successful in one's personal and professional life.

CONNECT! Coalition

The Program and Curriculum Subcommittee is currently reviewing results of last month's employer survey to find out what workplace skills should be included in trainings for current and future workers. In addition to readers of this column, members of several chambers of commerce and Leadership Anne Arundel provided input. The survey findings will be discussed next month.

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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