

Soft Skills at Work: Ability to help others is a valuable attribute

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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Last year I heard a story on the radio that made a big impression on me.

The narrator described a Super Bowl weekend when several people were stranded in Chicago. Flights to Rochester, Minnesota, where the Mayo Clinic is located, had been cancelled.

The narrator spoke to four fellow passengers who had appointments at the clinic the next morning, some with life-threatening illnesses. He happened to work there and was so touched by their stories that he figured out a way to get them to Rochester.

The narrator arranged for five seats on a flight to Des Moines, Iowa, and then rented a van to drive the patients to Rochester. They arrived at 4:30 a.m.

As he dropped them off, one of these passengers said to him, "I will never forget you."

The narrator said it was a rewarding experience for him. He saw a need and acted on it, demonstrating a very important soft skill - the ability to help others.

On the job, helping others is essential, as well. It could be assisting a co-worker under a deadline, working with teammates on a project, or volunteering in the community. Pitching in when other people need assistance - without being asked - is an important attribute to possess.

Locally, I had an enjoyable conversation last month with two people who exemplify this quality. Bob and Suzanne Henig with Bob's BMW Motorcycles in Jessup explained why helping others is so important to them and their business.

Bob, who described himself as "owner, rider and enthusiast," stressed that it is a team effort at Bob's and everyone is dedicated to helping customers and each other. He hears wonderful stories about his workers in passing. It is not uncommon for a customer to tell Bob after a repair, "One of your guys dropped off my motorcycle at my house."

"No one boasts about what they do," Bob said. "We just want to do everything we can to help our customers. They (the customers) are part of our family."

All of the Henig's employees are part of the "family," too. One of the most rewarding ongoing relationships started when Bob and co-owner Suzanne hired a custodian with Down syndrome several years ago.

"When we hired him initially, we saw a disability," Bob told me. "But he could not be doing a better job. We've grown as people, too."

Bob and Suzanne's desire to help extends into the community where they support many causes. Bob is the creator of the Ultimate Bike Raffle whose net proceeds support the Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation. The raffle features items like a new BMW S1000RR or an Edelweiss Ultimate Alps Tour. Last year, \$82,000 was raised.

What caused Bob and Suzanne to operate their company based on the belief that helping others is essential? For the Henig's, business is an extension of their life.

"You spend a lot of time at work," Bob said. "Helping others builds a bond, trust and growth. There is not always a specific pay-off. It's just rewarding. Some people do the minimum for a paycheck. I don't like that myself."

We talked about employees who do not help and how that affects their careers.

"People who isolate themselves are avoided by co-workers, miss opportunities for themselves, and are tagged as not part of the team," Bob said. "Customers avoid them, too."

For the company, poor service translates to reduced sales.

"You cannot have long-term customers without long-term employees," Bob said. "It's the employees that customers come to see."

Helping others can be anything from giving a few words of encouragement to presenting a bike to a little boy who needs one or supporting the domestic violence center, as the Henig's have done.

It is an admirable attribute and one every employer values.

CONNECT! Coalition

In July, the Program and Curriculum Subcommittee conducted a survey to find out what workplace skills should be included in trainings for current and future workers. The results confirmed what the coalition had believed to be priorities for employers.

Survey participants included business owners/employers, supervisors, HR professionals, parents, educators, and representatives from nonprofits and government agencies.

The top ten results in order of priority were:

- Attitude.
- Communication skills.
- Work ethic.
- Integrity.
- Great customer service.
- Respect and follow through.
- Proactive thinking.
- Listening.
- Punctuality.
- Continuous learning.

Other skills frequently mentioned were the ability to exceed expectations, willingness to admit mistakes, dressing appropriately, and helping others.

In addition to selecting specific skills, survey participants were given the opportunity to make comments about what they look for in their employees. Next month, I'll talk about some of their responses.

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