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Professional and Career Development: Part of the Larger Global Picture

by Eli Amdur

Career coach and adjunct professor of executive communication and leadership, Eli Amdur addresses the need for developing high-level soft skills: communication skills—including speaking, presenting, writing and listening—interpersonal skills, leadership, team building, innovativeness and inductive thinking. Your long-term focus should be on building higher, broader skills that are transferable in a changing business world. Leadership will be assumed by those individuals and companies who understand this concept.

Henry Luce, legendary founder of *Time* magazine, said, “Business, more than any other endeavor, is a continual dealing with the future, a continual calculation, an instinctive exercise in foresight.”

With great foresight, Luce issued that proclamation in 1960, and it remains as pertinent and useful today—almost a half century later—as ever. But even the visionary Luce probably would have watched in wonder at the way business changes today—at the nature, scope, speed and rate of change, all of which have a profound impact not only on business strategy and decisions, but also on the way individuals will have to adapt to these changes.

Unlike days not too far past, each one of us must think of ourselves and our careers as being inextricably tied to the sweeping, seismic global changes that have occurred—and continue to occur—at warp speed at all levels of every occupation in every industry in all places business is and will be done.

Today’s paradigms are tomorrow’s prisons

The changes we have already seen are not the ones that challenge us: the staggering advances in technology, genomics, space, telecommunications, computing, the Internet; the globalization and “24/7-ization” of business, outsourcing, and migrations of entire industries; demo-

graphic changes and the ease with which they now take place, multiculturalism, the aging of some populations while others rejuvenate. No, those are no longer the new challenges; the challenges will be how we will handle the changes we know and the changes that will follow. In short, the skills we already have, no longer suffice; today’s paradigms are tomorrow’s prisons.

Citizens of the world

Dr. David Steele, the forward-thinking dean of Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Silberman College of Business offered some straightforward advice in a recent round of addresses to executive MBA and other graduate candidates. “My simple message to you is that we must become citizens of the world in order to excel in this ultra-competitive marketplace,” he proposed.

“I believe that, more than ever, advanced education is essential,” he continued. “More importantly, we must go through a major rethinking of the concept of knowledge, a change in emphasis from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’ knowledge.”

These are the words not of a career-long ivory tower academic, but of a business leader who has had corporate responsibility for 25 countries, most recently as president of Chevron Latin America, and—in the process—has lived and worked in eight countries. With that perspective, Steele is leading FDU’s business school in emphasizing what “will differentiate us as individuals and as a nation.” He’s talking about communication skills, knowledge of self, multicultural perspective, core values, ethics, team building, innovativeness and creativity. In essence, he says, the focus is on developing “outstanding interpersonal skills.”



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A growing premium on communication skills

Top executives and corporate recruiters agree unanimously that their success depends directly on finding and keeping employees who can do much more than just perform the technical aspects of their jobs, and at the top of virtually everyone's list is communication skills.

Executives concur; they can get all the highly skilled computer programmers, sales managers, operations experts or any other specifically trained professionals they want. But what keeps them up at night is the glaring inability to communicate effectively at virtually every level of the organization. Fittingly, they place a growing premium on communication skills, not the least of which is the ability to listen.

A 2002 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Interactive survey showed that the attribute considered most important by the most corporate recruiters is communication and interpersonal skills, the number one choice of an overwhelming 90 percent, with the ability to work well within a team coming in a close second at 87 percent. Even the traditional strengths like strategic thinking and work experience—65 percent and 32 percent respectively—have been overshadowed in this new light. Startling!

Just as interesting is the list of business schools that received the highest ratings from those same corporate recruiters on these attributes—not necessarily all the schools you'd expect: schools like University of Maryland, SUNY Buffalo, Brigham Young, Instituto de Empresa and Michigan State have joined Yale and Dartmouth on this list. Those who see a need and act upon it are the ones who excel and lead. Schools, individuals: it's the same.

In my practice as a Career Coach, in teaching Executive Communication and Leadership, an MBA course at FDU, and through the continuing research and writing I do regarding career development, one thing has become abundantly clear: David Steele is right.

I have coached hundreds of clients, have delivered workshops and seminars to thousands, and write a weekly employment-related column for major newspapers. My clients fall into five broad categories: technical—IT, finance, en-

gineering, actuarial, health sciences; business development—sales, marketing, international trade; development—human resources, training, project management; communications—public relations, journalism; and humanities and education—teaching, social services, non-profit. I have coached a corporate CEO and other C-level officers, VPs, education leaders, senior actuaries, grant writers, project managers, other coaches, you name it.

From all of this, one conclusion is unassailable: contrary to widely held belief, there is no general field or occupation that boasts superiority in these vital "soft skills." It is the most glaring deficiency within any and every organization, openly acknowledged by those who run those organizations. And I see it in my classes in which I teach professionals at all stages in their careers: entry level to C-level. That's why FDU has not only created an entire course in communication and leadership, they have made it mandatory; you don't get an MBA without it.

"I have to grow"

What's the message here, then? It's "what got you to the dance will not necessarily keep the music playing." Clay Peters, a senior actuarial consultant for a large Midwestern benefits consulting firm, recently told me, "I can't be just an actuary anymore. I have to be a global businessman, a team leader, a problem solver and an innovator, and I have to learn how to communicate across language and cultural boundaries. I have to grow."

So, Clay intends to pursue an MBA in management with a concentration in communication to complement his BS in economics and mathematics. Further, he is looking at courses and workshops in leadership and cross-cultural issues.

His decision is parallel with professionals in every field. For example, MDs are getting MBAs because they have to lead clinical research facilities; they're no longer just doctors, but team leaders. Nurses no longer stand pat with their BSNs, but go on to earn MSNs and MBAs. Virtually every advanced degree program I have investigated—be it MBA, MAT,

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MAS, MPA or others—have leadership and communication components with global and cross-cultural underpinnings.

Not only are these skills emphasized, students in these programs function in smaller teams, whether they change classes from course to course or go through the entire program as a cohort, and they are expected to understand the workings of a team. To that end, I have designed, delivered and facilitated various seminars, workshops and exercises for these programs that focus on team building, synergistic decision making, group dynamics and inductive thinking. Significant time is devoted to this skill set.

Companies are flatter, more decentralized and more team-oriented

This brings us to another big point. In case you haven't been watching lately, your workplace has changed dramatically and irrevocably.

Organizational structures are very different from what they were just a decade ago; responsibility, authority and leadership are shared.

The organization chart no longer looks like one huge pyramid; it's flatter, more decentralized and team-oriented. Along with this, innovation and initiative are expected from many, not just a select few. Communication is more varied—one-on-one, group, large audiences—and more variegated due to the ability to connect with so many people in so many ways and at any time.

These changes are daunting challenges, and we meet these challenges in new ways. Albert Einstein prodded, "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." Clearly, this points to the need to develop a wide array of skills through which leadership can be shared, solutions developed and opportunities seized.

Aggregating several studies and surveys, these skills can be categorized as follows: communication, human relations and interpersonal, information and management, design and planning, research and investigative skills, critical and inductive thinking, administrative, value setting, and leadership.

These, then, become the high-level skills that are transferable. Universally, experts in career

planning agree that transferable soft skills are no longer in the "nice-to-have" column, but are firmly in the "gotta-have" column. Greg Hammill, director of intern, co-op and other student programs in Fairleigh Dickinson University's Silberman College of Business points out, "Employers assume a candidate has the basic technical job skills. Beyond that, what employers really want to see is someone with strong soft skills, those specific skills that spell success in any position, those skills which are transferable."

In a recent interview with me, Beverly Hamilton-Chandler, director of career services at Princeton University, discussed the necessity of building a broad-based skill set. "We encourage our students to study what they love, but to develop a wide range of skills," she said. "We ask them, 'What are the knowledge areas you have, where else can you use those skills, how can you make them work for you in another setting, and how can you make that match?'"

Professional and career progress depends on developing an integrated package of skills, both hard and soft. It will dictate what you do, the contributions you make to your organization's and your own growth and future, and how and whom you will manage and lead.

For anyone at any level of any organization, the employee's soft skills add value to the organization, and, in turn, increase the employee's value. As FDU's Steele says, "Given a choice between qualified people, the person chosen every time will be the one with the outstanding interpersonal skills. There is no question about that."

His message, he had said, is simple. There is no question about that, neither.

"Change is the law of life," said John F. Kennedy, "and those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future." It is a very large paradigm shift. It is the future, but it is here now. □

In subsequent issues, Eli Amdur will examine more closely the implications and applications of the content of this article.

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