
Mindset, Methodology and Material-the Magic Mantra of Soft Skills

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Abstract

In the 21st century, every graduate dreams to settle down in any one of the MNCs and this is not an easy task given the challenging roles and responsibilities these prospective candidates have to play in these companies. There is a raging demand for versatile employees who can creatively deliver goods and make the projects assigned to them a great success. In India, the number of graduates coming out of institutions is very high, but a very few of them are able to make the final cut. This paper draws everyone's attention towards an understanding of what soft skills are required to be nurtured by the graduates for their survival and ultimately the eventual success. This paper also looks at how these soft skills can be nurtured by English teaching fraternity or Soft Skills trainers using the 3 M's- an approach that advocates a paradigm shift in teaching and learning of soft skills.

Key words: Indian graduates, Industry demands, paradigm shift, 3 M's

I. Introduction

The MNC's are rooting for graduates who understand the role they are to play in building their organizations, and have the practical skills to work effectively

in their 'company-assigned' roles. Plainly speaking, it means engaging with the organization and its goals, understanding the dynamics of the workplace etc. These are the skills, attitudes and actions that enable workers to get along with their fellow workers and supervisors so that they are able to make sound and critical decisions that would positively impact the workflow of the company besides contributing to its growth and development.

It is common understanding that 'soft skills' are general skills that are needed by a candidate to get a job, to stay in a job and to reach higher cadre or the top position in an organization. The organizations of today need professionals who are responsive to economic, social, cultural, technical and environmental changes that happen in quick time and can work flexibly and intelligently across business contexts with a responsible mindset.

II. Soft Skills-Industry Expectations

A 'skill' is defined as the ability to perform a task. Every human being is called upon to perform a number of routine tasks every day. Some are simple but others require special skills. A few skills are 'inborn' - but most skills have to be learnt or acquired through practice. We develop the ability to perform an activity by repeatedly making the effort to perform it.

Wikipedia defines soft skills as “a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, career attribute, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients among others that enable people to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard skills”.

Eastern Kentucky University has come out with the following list of Soft Skills that aid a prospective candidate to succeed at the higher level:

1. “Communication – oral speaking capability, written, presenting, listening, clear speech & writing.
2. Courtesy – manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, says please and thank you, respectful.
3. Flexibility – adaptability, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable.
4. Integrity – honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what’s right.
5. Interpersonal skills – nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, and social skills.
6. Positive attitude – optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy, confident.
7. Professionalism – businesslike, well-dressed, appearance, poised.
8. Responsibility – accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined wants

to do well, conscientious, common sense.

9. Teamwork – cooperative gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, and collaborative.
10. Work ethic – hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance.” (Marcel M. Robles in his article ‘*Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today’s Workplace*’ published in *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4) 453–465)

A report titled ‘*Soft Skills are Hard*’ prepared by Wendy Cukier and Aisha Omar, Ryerson University & Jaigris Hodson, Royal Roads University submitted to the Ryerson University, Canada in November 2015 arrives at the following key points (p.ii) in the Canadian context which are highly relevant for the Indian students. Some of the key findings include:

- There is wide agreement that “soft” skills are among the skills essential to employment across sectors. There is little agreement, however, on how specifically these skills are defined.
- There are significant differences in the expectations and perceptions of employers and the perceptions of educators and graduates regarding the ‘level of soft skills’ graduates

possess.

- While there are some standardized tests for some soft skills – writing and critical reasoning for example, many soft skills can only be assessed in context.
- More research is needed to systematically assess empirically the ways in which soft skills can be defined, developed and evaluated.

III. Nurturing Soft Skills-the 3 M's

In the Indian context of teaching soft skills, there seems to be many theories. Each soft skills trainer has a different understanding of the concepts related to soft skills. No two trainers, no two authors and no two companies agree on the list of soft skills to be taught to the students. Moreover, there is no methodology nor the material and the standardization procedures approved by an authorized body (of MNC's or NASSCOM) so that it can act as a guide to all the stakeholders and ensure students are industry-ready. It is in this context, the present paper wishes to propose the 3 M approach. The 3 M's of Soft Skills Training stand for the Mindset (of the stakeholders), the Material and the Method (being used to teach Soft Skills). Let us try to analyze these factors in detail.

The first M – 'Mindset': India is a major provider of IT professionals to countries like the USA but most of the Indian students are known for a glaring lack of soft skills, including the communication

domain. As English teachers or Soft Skills trainers, we need to attempt to reduce the yawning gap between industry requirements and the present inadequate skill levels of students and enhance their employability and job-readiness.

The first step in this direction is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. When students realize the importance, they will take the initiative necessary to identify their core strengths and obvious weaknesses (through SWOT/SWOC analysis) and work towards strengthening their strong soft skills and weakening their weaknesses (thereby converting weaknesses into strengths). This could be done with the help of the trainers who have a strong rooting in psychology and deep knowledge of soft skills 'markers' and 'identifiers' as defined clearly by an authorized body.

Most of the Indian classrooms are heterogeneous in nature. Learning nature, speeds, styles, attitudes, intelligence levels and communication abilities are different. Different strategies may be effective for different people. Trainers need to explore various options to address the different needs of the participants to make them interact and communicate rather than just listen to a one-way lecture.

Students of the past generations didn't have the need to attend exclusive classes in soft skills because of their very strong 'family roots'. Most of the students of the past learnt soft skills naturally thanks to the strong 'joint family' system that was in vogue at that time. They learnt to communicate naturally, they helped each other, they adapted themselves to the

changing circumstances very quickly, adjusted themselves, shared and cared for each other despite the differences, understood and valued the plurality of mindsets and attitudes prevalent in a family. In the joint family system, each family is a replica of the society. Each 'joint family' is a 'nuclear society' and each child would acquire the majority of soft skills, naturally.

Things have changed greatly with the onset of the nuclear family system. The members of the family are unto themselves. They live in a 'small world' without an iota of exposure to the pluralistic lifestyle of the society. This glaring lack of exposure to different people, mindsets, and value systems has put the modern students in a spot of bother. For example, though the students of the past studied in regional medium schools, they used to learn to speak in English, prepare for competitive exams all on their own. The 'Gen Z' students study English for 18 years ($2+10+2+4=18$ years) out of 20/21 years of their early life, but most of them struggle to write simple sentences and speak good English. This is a sorry state of affairs.

It is in this context that there is an obvious problem. As mentioned before, "there are significant differences in the expectations and perceptions of employers and the perceptions of educators and graduates regarding the level of soft skills graduates possess" (Wendy Cukier et al. p.ii) and should possess. There is a wide gap between the 'IS'ness and the 'OUGHT'ness. However, there is no mechanism or an agency/industry which comes out with a common list of soft skills expected of a prospective student. Even

among the MNC's, there is no common agreement. No two companies accept the same type of 'Resume format'. No two companies or no two HR Managers of the same company conducting the drives on the same campus the same day follow the same criteria of judgment as each HR Manager brings with himself/herself his/her own persona based on which he judges a person. A common evaluation criteria of soft skills is neither developed nor followed and so it becomes very difficult for the soft skills trainer to train the students accordingly and the student to understand what exactly is needed of him. Standardized and empirically proven parameters don't exist. Despite his talents, meritorious academic performance and possession of right skill sets, a student doesn't get selected because he/she hasn't been able to 'make an impression on the HR Manager' of the day. A day should come in the recruitment process whereby the interview process is streamed 'live' to the Head Office so that the HR Managers follow the same set of guidelines given by the company and recommend the selection of a person to the final selection committee who will by themselves reevaluate the student's performance and offer him/her a job. This process would improve the quality of recruitment process and remove any chance of biased judgment.

It is fitting in place to note that the students, the soft skills trainers and the companies need to reorient themselves in the way mentioned above so that a win-win formula for the students and the companies is arrived at through the 'conscientized' training approach of the soft skills trainers. If a paradigm shift

takes place in the mindset of these stakeholders, half the battle is won. .

The Second M- 'Material'

Soft skills aren't always taught, but most of the time they are caught. Some captivating and inspiring material could be used for this purpose. An intensely interactive teaching method besides a range of fresh materials like cartoons, stories, anecdotes of great leaders and successful people, tidbits on cricket and films, advertisements, sports commentaries, clippings from films, and newspapers would involve learners directly in the teaching-learning process. The traditional lecture mode would make the teachers obsolete, the sessions boring, and also impractical.

Soft Skills trainers will have to embrace newer materials from various resources with which the students of this generation are familiar. 'Little Jack Horner sat in a corner' and 'All roads lead to Rome' shall give way for 'India win their first ever Series Down Under' and 'Bahubali collected 1800 crores at the Box Office' kind of examples. Even the sources of the resources are many.

Stories from the vedas, upanishads, puranas, epics etc., could be value additions to the regular classroom. There could be many examples from these ancient Hindu resources that could be used contextually. Zen Stories, short narratives, provide nourishment to the mind and soul of a person and they could leave the students with affirmative and optimistic mindset. Google will provide many stories with the title 'corporate lessons' and each one is rich in thought and easy to practice and follow. Jataka Tales/Panchatantra Tales/ Tales of Tenali Ramalinga, Akbar-

Birbal and Mulla Naseeruddin could be lavishly used in the class. Examples of success/failure and the journey towards achieving success or meeting with failure from the world of Cricket and Cinema(the twin religions of India), individual excellence in any field, examples from the commitment of the Indian Army, highly relevant and beneficial material from the social networking sites like FB, Whatsapp, stories of success and failure that we come across in newspapers, stories of our friends, neighbors and other sons of the soil(reported in newspapers and Facebook) should form part of a regular classroom as part of developing the personality profile of the prospective candidate. This material could be used as examples for preparing them for the written tests and for helping them improve their overall communication ability.

For this to happen on a regular basis, the soft skills trainer should be an avid reader and observer of all the observable details around him. Contextual material suited to that particular class like providing students with examples from the 'known to the unknown', giving them an opportunity to study/analyze/brainstorm/propose workable solutions to various case studies could actually do the trick. Using these materials, they would learn by thinking and by doing.

Stories of achievement and courage of common people like Prema Jayakumar / J Raja Sekhara Reddy / Pratish Datta / Tukaram Omble / Nick Vujicik; real incidents like Yuvraj Singh's fight against cancer, rise and fall of Mike Tyson/Lance Armstrong, speeches of famous people like Martin Luther King Jr./ Steve Jobs/JK

Rowling/ Abdul Kalam etc., Youtube videos, TED Talks and Josh Talks could be the materials besides hundreds of Self-help books and scores of ‘Chicken Soup for the Soul’ series of books.

Revolutionary changes have happened in the last three decades and the students need to be provided opportunity and the right material to understand the simple fact that life is ‘what you make it to be’ and with the right steps in the right direction everything will fall in place, naturally.

The Third M- ‘the Methodology’

The soft skills trainer has to be a facilitator, not an instructor. After a lesson on communication skills, if the teacher becomes a better communicator, understands the body language better, participates in discussions better, it is of no use to the students. If the student hasn’t become better after a class of one hour, it only means the English teacher has missed the bus. The same strategy applies to the soft skills trainer as well. It is the students who have to become stronger in soft skills, not the trainer.

The soft skills trainer should embrace a student-centered learning. He has to treat the student as the ‘king’ of the class. A congenial atmosphere for interaction and exchange of ideas needs to be created by the managements, the trainer and the students. The focus should be on reducing TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and increasing STT (Student Talking Time) after doing away with the PPP (Present, Practice, and Produce) system of the past.

Activity-oriented class needs to replace traditional class method. Individual, pair and group activities need

to be meticulously planned and systematically conducted. This methodical approach will happen provided the trainer has the right mindset and the right material at his disposal. Even the managements of colleges which give importance to teaching of soft skills should have a mindset where noise (highly relevant for an ‘activity class’) is allowed.

Students should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying the methods like reading books on self-help and personality development which are readily available in the market, attending courses, and joining clubs or societies like debating societies, Toast Masters who are practicing Rhetoric, or scientific societies who offer presentations and discussions, to broaden their horizon.

It is being proposed that a paradigm shift is the need of the hour. If all the stakeholders to learning and teaching of soft skills expected of a graduate come to an agreement and if the magic mantra of 3 M’s is followed, everyone will be a clear winner and the quality would naturally improve by leaps and bounds.

IV. Conclusion

Swami Vivekananda says, “Education is the manifestation of perfection already in men.” Dr. A.P.J Abdul Kalam has correctly said that India does not have a problem of unemployment but unemployability.

If the student of the 21st century has to move from survival to stability, from stability to success and from success to significance, we need to understand the fact that the new elixir of life is “We are all angels with only one wing. We can all fly, but only while embracing each

other”(a quote by Luciano de Crescenzo) and that is what soft skills are meant for. If each English teacher/soft skills trainer or lecturer or professor can help at least one student of each batch of students understand this simple fact of solidarity, simplicity and good communication, the mission of the teacher/trainer is accomplished.

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