

Being “soft” pays

Early in my career I was working for a large aerospace company in charge of several important organizational development (OD) projects. I had just been given a brand new project that my team and I had been recommending to management for nearly two years: we were going to start a cooperative program in association with a local engineering school to bring much-needed young talent into the company at entry level.



The problem we had was very reminiscent of the one all organizations are facing now: we needed to attract and retain top-quality professionals – in our case, aerospace engineers. For too long, we had relied on recruiting abroad. This was a costly process and few of our recruits felt any long-term loyalty to the company. As a boom-and-bust industry, we were vulnerable to our best engineers being pirated by our competitors. The joke was that, as soon as the first snow storm hit, these competitors, often from sunny places in the States or Europe, would set up recruiting shops opposite our offices and lure our people away with posters of blue skies and sunny beaches.

Cooperative programs were fairly new to Canada and our company had never yet made a serious effort to try one. Once we had decided on which local university to partner with, one of the biggest problems I had to resolve was how to ensure our engineering students had a positive work-study experience, one that was productive for both them and us as a company.

The program called for small groups of final-year students to spend 6 months with us and have work experience in three different engineering departments for periods of 2 months.

My main concern was where to place them. The host departments were very busy places and there was a frequent tendency for them to view rookie engineering students as a disruption. But fortunately I had one big advantage: as a result of a major management development program in the company, I had leadership profiles on many of our Engineering managers. As I reviewed these profiles I was looking for high scores in the “Humanistic” style in the Human Synergistics (HS) leadership circumplex. Why?

It turns out that HS’s research over the years has revealed that this style, despite its soft-sounding name, is one of the toughest and most productive of all leadership styles. Leaders with high scores in this style tend to approach leadership with a high level of spontaneous trust in others, whether or not they know these individuals well. They have an innate belief that most people act and work in good faith and want to grow to their highest potential.

This set of beliefs leads them to genuinely enjoy the process of coaching and mentoring others. They tend to be excellent listeners, for example being natural practitioners of Stephen Covey’s fifth habit of highly successful people: “Seek first to understand, before making yourself understood”. Whatever operational objectives managers and leaders with high humanistic scores are given, they always add their own ones. For example, a manager may be leading a program which calls for him or her to deliver X number of units by date Y within a budget of \$250,000. On top of these operational budgets, he or she will always set others, such as to use the program to develop one or more key talents, to groom a successor, or to fine-tune the interpersonal skills of Team Leaders.

The results of this “soft” style which is characterized by high levels of trust and lots of active listening and coaching on the boss’s part, are that their employees’ feel a very strong, but also very positive pressure to perform and not to “let the boss down”. They know they are being trusted, that they will

be listened to when they need help to resolve problems and they know that they will grow and develop professionally.

Our first cooperative program was a success and went on to grow over the years. The Engineering department managers we chose to host our students typically viewed their young students as opportunities rather than problems. Many said that they learned as much or more from the experience as did the students they hosted. They also welcomed the chance to have a two-month job-based interview with each student and to be able to choose “the cream of the crop” when the best ones graduated.

The company also gained greatly. Retention rates shot up and indeed many of our cooperative students made life-long careers with the company, a rarity in recent times. Our new hires came to us with valuable hands-on experience in the day-to-day work of the company, they already knew their way around and, as they were frequently locally born and bred, they were naturally inclined to want to stay with us for the long term. Many became highly humanistic managers in their own right, the result of the excellent coaching and development they had received in their formative last year of studies.

The lesson is that believing in your people and investing time to develop them to their maximum potential is a highly effective long term leadership style. In short, being “soft” pays.