How to Help Your Team Manage Soft Skills

When your focus is on people's well being, the entire environment shifts.

January 3, 2020 6 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

> *"Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others." — Jack Welch*

Many years ago, when I first founded my company, JotForm, I thought success came down to finding the right formula. *If I could increase my technical skills and do XYZ, then I could reach clear, measurable goals.* I thought that being able to demonstrate my abilities was what led to becoming a great leader, but the problem was that I was only thinking of *me.* If I could become the most creative, innovative and capable version of myself, then everything would miraculously fall into place.

Here's what I've learned since then: Helping your team manage soft skills is just as important, if not more so, to maintaining an engaging and productive work environment.

Wait, what exactly are soft skills?

Think of all the demanding, complex tasks your team performs on a daily basis, from writing reports and answering emails to dealing with demanding customers. There's an element of stress

to all of these activities, whether external or internal. No matter how much an employee loves their job, there are moments where all of this builds into overwhelm. While we've all experienced an overload of stress at some point, aside from the unpleasantness, it also negatively impacts our performance abilities. As Rick Fernandez writes for *Harvard Business Review:* "Because work is getting more demanding and complex, and because many of us now work in 24/7 environments, anxiety and burnout are not uncommon. In our high-pressure workplaces, staying productive and engaged can be challenging."

Enter soft skills, or the ability to build resilience and interact effectively with others. Flexibility, problem-solving and being a good communicator are all essential to managing these feelings of tension.

Related: How to Develop the Soft Skills of the Successful Entrepreneur

Why building resilience sets you up for success.

> *"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership." — Harvey S. Firestone*

Being a leader means creating a workplace focused on your team's personal growth and development. If my 13 years of experience as a CEO have taught me anything, it's that focusing on productivity without wellness will get you nowhere.

Eric Garton wisely notes in a story for *Harvard Business Review* that while burnout is a common phenomenon, it's a problem with the company, not the person. He writes: "Executives need to own up to their role in creating the workplace stress that leads to burnout — heavy workloads, job insecurity and frustrating work routines that include too many

meetings and far too little time for creative work. Once executives confront the problem at an organizational level, they can use organizational measures to address it."

In other words, If you don't make workplace happiness a priority, your business will suffer. And rightly so. As Woodrow Wilson put it: "You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand."

It's easy to internalize aggressive growth pressures, but here's the thing: When people feel looked after and cared for, their performance skyrockets. That's because the foundation of your business is built on empathy and compassion instead of conversion rates or getting to the top of TechCrunch.

In my time at JotForm, I've made it a point to focus on slow-and-steady growth that allows my team to work sane hours and lead fulfilling lives. This has also meant implementing approaches that have enhanced their resilience.

How to help your team manage soft skills.

John Maxwell, American author and speaker, argues that to add value to others, one must first value others. As a leader, finding ways of helping people pause and recharge throughout their workday should take priority, but how can you build in these systems? In simple terms, by focusing on creating mini-buffers throughout the day and being more flexible and mindful of employees's time.

Dispel the myth of multitasking.

When employees splinter their focus between tasks, burnout comes on faster. Instead, encourage team members to focus on deep work, or a “flow” state, which is when we’re intensely focused on an activity and feel a profound sense of satisfaction.

As I’ve written before, when we’re absorbed in a single task, we don’t have enough leftover attention to dwell on inane mental chatter or worry about problems beyond our control. Rather than expect team members to juggle 10 different tasks, ask them to devote 90-minute time blocks for uninterrupted work.

Prioritize time-off.

It’s important to be intentional and explicit about your expectations. As digital distraction piles up around work, communicate to your employees that you don’t require them to always “be on.” For example, I tell my team to take Slack off their phone and not answer work emails on their breaks or on weekends. This allows them to fully disconnect and come back more rested and recharged. Promoting physical and mental well-being helps employees feel more cooperative, creative and capable of displaying leadership skills when necessary.

Related: How Soft Skills Can Help You Get Ahead in a Tech World

Foster a supportive environment.

Nothing enhances or impacts productivity and performance like having happy employees. That’s why emotional engagement should take center stage; meaning, being open and genuinely interested in their personal development. Encouraging the right support for your team means asking them about their

interests outside of work. Be deliberate in welcoming feedback and in spending time developing and recognizing their skills and talents.

The bottom line: When your focus is on people's well being, the entire environment shifts. People are energized by the work they do, and it shows. Whenever I'm in a meeting and witness my team's creative input and innovation, I know we've made the right decisions. And I remember Orison Swett Marden's definition of "real" success:

> *"There is no investment you can make which will pay you so well as the effort to scatter sunshine and good cheer through your establishment."*

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/343961