

first interview day, I discovered that seven of the others were currently working as teaching assistants at the time; yet not only had I secured an interview, I was telephoned back late that afternoon and told that I was felt to be the stand-out candidate that was seen that day. I was even told that I was one of only a small number of candidates in recent memory to have scored 100% on the maths test.

This coda is therefore intended as a message of hope to job hunters everywhere. Clearly, the professional skills which have been gained from working in the library profession can be very useful elsewhere if a day comes when we no longer have a place in it, and I hope that some readers may be able to take encouragement from this.

Biography

Mark Haines BSc MSc MCLIP worked in the library and information profession for over twenty years (with most of this time spent in professional posts), and has been chartered for more than a decade. After previously holding posts in both academic and commercial law libraries, eventually he moved to the middle ground and for over six years held the role of Library Manager at BPP University College of Professional Studies. Until recently Mark was Chair of the BIALL Professional Development Committee, organising seminars and training events of professional interests to BIALL members. He also lectured and presented at BIALL events such as the Legal Reference Materials Course and the Graduates Open Day, as well as the BIALL Conference.

On 4 September 2013, Mark left the library and information profession to take up his new position as a trainee primary school teacher with the Wandsworth Primary Schools Consortium.

Legal Information Management, 13 (2013), pp. 251–255

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doi:10.1017/S147266961300056X

Soft Skills: a Valuable Business Tool or Just Psychobabble?

Abstract: In this article Jackie Fishleigh reviews and analyses three of the sessions, held at the BIALL Conference 2013 in Glasgow, that were concerned with ‘soft skills’.

Keyword: soft skills

INTRODUCTION

Standing on one leg drawing an imaginary number in the air, saying “no” firmly but clearly in a role-playing exercise, staring intently into a stranger’s eyes for one minute – do any of these activities really help us improve our performance in the workplace? Isn’t it enough to be intelligent, hard working and on a mission to get things done?

DR DAVID FRASER

Well, not according to Dr David Fraser who claims in his book, **Relationship Mastery: a Business**

Professional’s Guide (Print List Price: £14.99, Kindle Price: £1.99) that the ability to relate to other people is the most critical skill a person can ever have at work, at home or anywhere else. Strong relationships simply make everything easier he says. And yet while there are endless management titles on getting more out of one’s self as an individual, very few look at building and improving our relationships with others at work.

Dr Fraser has a First Class Honours degree and PhD from Glasgow University. A Chartered Engineer, he also holds an MBA from Strathclyde University. His first career stalled somewhat because others found him “difficult” to work with. This and the fact he was also “making

a mess of his marriage” led to a period of soul-searching and eventually to a whole new professional direction. Dr Fraser is very open and honest about how he was forced to confront his failings in relating to other people, describing a particular eureka moment which occurred when he was with his young son at the point when he was diagnosed with autism.

David Fraser is now a qualified commercial mediator and a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Master Practitioner. Having trained with the leading proponents of these disciplines he is also a public speaker and broadcaster on what his book sums up in its title as “relationship mastery”. Because of his unusual blend of expertise David is able to support disparate groups working together in complex circumstances, including major collaborative projects and matters of national importance.

He claims that his book is the natural successor to Dale Carnegie’s ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’. This sounds ambitious but maybe it will be one day. Only time will tell. The twelve essential areas of interpersonal insight and growth identified by Dr David Fraser are as follows:

1. Attention to others
 - Ask great questions – what, where, when? etc. But not why? which can sound abrasive and/or childlike.
2. Attitude
 - Believe everyone is doing their best, including yourself
3. Self-control
 - Sit and focus for 20 minutes
4. Wavelength -tuning in to people/ filters and focus
5. Personality/Flexibility
6. Connection
 - Common ground, small talk, big themes
7. Values
 - What is important to you or someone else. First answer to question is conscious, 2nd is unconscious – may be how you truly feel inside and more significant.
8. Language
 - Notice when you act as if you don’t have a choice, when you actually do.
9. Self-awareness
 - “See ourselves as others see us” (Robert Burns)
10. Attention to yourself/ vision
 - Where do you really want to go long term?
11. Balance
 - What I want/what you want (often there is no single right answer)
12. Love (yes Love!)
 - Power of human connection

The book aims to provide a consistent route to success you can rely on over and over to improve your life in every area. It claims it can help you win more business, keep your

job or get a better one, connect with people quickly and easily in a lasting way, collaborate effectively, resolve disputes, handle conflict with ease, be confident and resourceful with people, and enjoy your relationships at home.

It draws on practical psychology, Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), ancient wisdom and first-hand experience of organisational life at all levels which all builds into a powerful, systematic formula.

There are various accompanying mantras:

“Change is a constant.” “This too shall pass”.

“Journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”
(Daoism)

“Tackle difficult things when they are easy”.

“Life is about doing small things well”.

In terms of NLP Dr Fraser says we should not be put off by the long-winded name. One aspect of NLP is that it promotes the use of empathy in verbal encounters, e.g. if a colleague says they are “hacked off” about something then it is important to mirror back what they say and respond incorporating the exact phrase “hacked off” to show you are listening carefully and understand the feelings they are expressing. Although you might prefer the phrase “cheesed off”, in your colleague’s model of the world, “cheesed off” may have a different meaning or evoke a different feeling than ‘hacked off’. In this case, you would not be matching but mismatching their words.

According to Pegasus, a specialist NLP training organisation, the benefits of incorporating NLP techniques in the workplace could include the following skills, such as the ability to:

- Communicate perceptively and skilfully with peers, direct reports, and with senior management;
- Understand the thinking and emotional make-up of teams and of the individuals within these teams - and of the manner in which these individuals pull together;
- Understand the role of beliefs and values in what makes people tick;
- Know how to utilise values to tailor the motivational approach to suit each individual.

NLP is just one aspect of a multi-faceted approach to building the best possible relationships with others.

If we take Dr Fraser’s fourth chapter with the heading of ‘Wavelength’. This section on tuning in to people was an eye-opener to me. It examines VAK preferences which show themselves in various ways:

Words used

Eye movements

Sound of the voice

Breathing

Body shape and movement

Posture

We all have several representational systems and varying preferences for how much we use each one:

V – Visual (images)

A – Auditory (sound)

K – Kinesthetic (feelings and sensations)

A–D – Auditory-digital (internal dialogue)

Although I was aware of different learning styles I had not heard of this. There is a lot to absorb (I am still trying to work out my own preference) but the aim is to match other people's preferences and, by so doing, talk to them the way they talk to themselves. Most of us are predominantly visual. I probably am too. Notice my use of the word "eye-opener"!

I hope this brief and highly selective summary gives an indication of the breadth of the text. I am gradually working through it and will I am sure return to it many times to get the most out of it. Dr Fraser's book is a really substantial body of work; the fruits of many years' experience and wide ranging research on a topic about which he clearly feels passionately.

SUSIE KAY

The Professionalism Group: Doing More With Less – The Quick Route to Being More Effective, Mind Full or Mindful?

Susie Kay's approach is very practical and she describes it as, "a new look at basic advice". Her main aim is to help people avoid overload and reduce stress which can be acute in today's frequently restructured and very often understaffed and inadequately resourced workplaces. She suggests we analyse carefully how we allocate our time and energy. Spending a few days noticing which situations we enjoy or please us and which ones prove difficult can be worthwhile. A pattern is likely to emerge and we can develop strategies to avoid stressful situations. Even an emergency does not need to produce a panicked response.

As Einstein once said, "A clever person solves a problem, a wise person avoids it".

She reminds us that the time we have available is finite – we all have exactly 24 hours a day, 60 minutes per hour. (Mind you, I feel sure that a gremlin must sneak in and steal a few of my hours at weekends!) We need to use our working hours wisely as so much time is spent eating, sleeping, socialising, on transport, breaks and so on. Susie points out how only a few hours are left of productive time so must use them efficiently and effectively.

She puts forward a number of strategies for dealing with unreasonable expectations and overload. She argues that although we are "here to help" we are professionals in our own right who are not at anyone's beck and call.

The mysteriously titled "Moscow Rules"

Taking inspiration from the MoSCoW project management rules ("must do, should do, could do, won't do") she recommends focusing on core outcomes by planning, prioritising, batching and streamlining activities.

Please note these are not to be confused with the Moscow Rules on spying during the Cold War i.e. 1. Assume nothing, 2. Never go against your gut 3. Everyone is potentially under opposition control 4. Don't look back; you are never completely alone etc.

If push comes to shove she says we may have to look at what the repercussions may be of not doing something. I don't mean from Vladimir Putin obviously (don't upset him on any account folks!) but from one's manager I assume.

Susie Kay is very keen on being prepared and ready for what needs doing as opposed to being subject to other people's agendas. She likes to avoid being swamped and dealing with the instant demands of others on the grounds that; if you only pay attention to their agenda you will end up ignoring yours. This is so true but I am not convinced she has ever worked in a law firm. The culture and atmosphere at work are important in all this. She recommends thinking about your standing amongst other professionals around you. You may do a great job but you also need to be seen to do so.

It is worth thinking about how you are viewed as an individual and as a contributing member of the team.

It is vital to be viewed as a member of the contributing team. We must demand respect due to our equivalent standing and be aware of the impact of who we are and what we do. We should earn respect due to our very specific knowledge and skills. The added value we provide should instil confidence and we need to manage our reputations to support this.

Susie is very aware of the impact of the myriad distractions to which we can all be subjected when we are at work, whether they are events at home, social media or just clutter and overload; if we are always thinking about the "next" e-mail or task we can end up scanning, skimming, and barely registering what we see. In all types of work it is easy to be physically present but with one's mind elsewhere being distracted by a million other things (well hopefully not air traffic controllers). It means we are not fully there and unable to perform well. This can lead to "off days" which are not good news for a professional.

She recommends that we avoid distraction and procrastination by getting organised both physically and mentally. We may think that getting our work space and living space more organised is optional but it is important to be perceived by others as able to lay hands on things urgently. Staying in control will help us save time and stop overload setting in.

"Don't put it down, put it **away**" is a mantra she likes.

Daily “to do” lists and a diary can be helpful but only if the lists are prioritised and achievable and the diary is controlled! Learning to say no or asking for help are essential.

The concepts of ‘Eating the Frog’ and ‘Eating the Elephant’ were new to me although I knew the theories. (Not sure I always put them into practice though folks!). Eating the Frog means confronting something revolting that you have been avoiding. Do the toughest thing first and after that everything will seem easy. Unless it’s another frog/toad I guess! Eating the Elephant is the habit of dealing with things one slice at the time and breaking them up into small taskettes. This is in contrast to multi-tasking which she does not believe is either possible or a good idea because you don’t achieve anything very well.

E-mail can be managed by handling everything only once and not becoming a slave to it. There is a danger of one’s in box becoming a delivery system for other people’s priorities. So it is important to control it rather than use it as a storage device. Susie recommends showing it who is boss by emptying the inbox every day and creating folders. Do it, store it (in folders), delete it but above all control it is her mantra.

Mindmaps

These are another tool for staying on top of things. They help show how things are interconnected and their visual creativity triggers a response in the brain. They are flexible and adapt to everyone’s style. Susie put an entire year’s curriculum on 8” x 5” index cards and used them for exam revision. She put a topic on a single page and found it helped highlight the essentials and also made connections between keywords and details. They can also help show interdependency and display several layers simultaneously. This in turns helps with time planning and adds value.

IBM, NASA, various research and professional associations all use mindmaps.

ALEX GOULD

Gould Training: “Managing difficult conversations at work – How to say ‘No’ without jeopardising your career or reputation”

The typical situations the session aimed to address included:

- An urgent request for some research coming in without prior warning.
- A senior person pulling rank to pressure you into prioritising their work.
- Someone accepting a piece of work which you need to sign off, then not making a particularly good job of

it, and leaving you to pick up the pieces which wastes your time and delays other work.

These scenarios can all produce the dilemma of maintaining one’s reputation as a reliable supplier of a valuable service while on the other hand running the risk of overload, and/or a reduction in quality of the work produced for this request or for other existing pieces of work. Saying ‘no’ is difficult because others could question one’s competence, helpfulness and/or management of one’s work load. This could lead to criticism, conflict and emotional responses.

Alex Gould suggested ways to handle negative emotions by:

1. Buying time – you need to sound so clear and reasonable that it is hard for the person you are speaking to not to accept what you are saying
2. Saying no, explaining your feelings and reasons why. Aim to sound clear and reasonable so that it’s hard for the person you are speaking to not to accept what you are saying.
3. Showing empathy. You need to keep paying attention to how understood you are making the other person feel.

This ‘3 point plan’ should make things go more smoothly but it is not a panacea and it needs to be practiced.

SUZANNA WHEATLEY

Suzanna Wheatley’s session on **honing one’s elevator pitch** also touched, at times, on similar ground to the other speakers, particularly when she recommended ending the pitch with a thought provoking question.

COMMON THEMES

So what are the common themes here and are they just the usual “warmed-over common sense” tips? **Calm down, dear** (– to quote the late Michael Winner, and David Cameron)!

Well I am surprised to find that **calmness** seems to get top billing. Both David Fraser and Susie Kay repeatedly recommend the virtues of living in the moment and various forms of meditating.

Sit and focus for 20 minutes. Meditation (DF)

Do nothing for 2 minutes (SK).

Being in the now – Mindfulness Exercises:

Waking up – notice your breathing while lying in bed before you do anything else;

In the shower – open your senses, notice the smell of the soap, feel the suds in your hair, don’t think about day to come.

Breakfast – pay attention to the food you eat. How does it taste?

Walking to work – slow down, pay attention to the skill you use to move your body.

Search for inner peace.

Find the calm that comes with understanding (SK).

Having an awareness of self and being true to oneself will recoup your investment of time through your increased calmness and focus.

Mindfulness and avoidance of distractions

Avoid distractions including unhelpful and/or irrelevant thoughts.

Give complete attention to the present experience.

Mindful listening is like meditating but you focus on what the other person is saying rather than on your breathing. Keep awareness on what the speaker is saying. Let whatever thoughts come into your head go past and fall away.

“We may have avoided letting our minds settle because we fear what would come up when we do.

We fear the things that will be uncovered when we stop overlaying them with extraneous distractions” (DF).

When someone is talking to us it is easy to get distracted by our own thoughts. (DF).

Take time out to think and reflect.

Questions

Wait until the speaker finishes before thinking up your own question. If you lose concentration and eye contact the speaker will not feel that you understand them (DF).

Ask great questions of others (how, what, where etc.) (DF).

Conclude your elevator pitch with a question (SW).

Paying close attention to other people and things – empathy

Connecting to other people. Ability to relate to other people. Pay close attention to other people. Show empathy for how understood you are making them feel (AG).

Be positive and straightforward with others – avoid sarcasm and be careful with banter (DF, AG).

Attention to small things. EAT THE ELEPHANT – one slice at a time. Can be done in small taskettes. (SK).

Focus/concentrate on the task at hand.

Honesty

Values (AG).

What is important to you or someone else. First answer to a question is conscious, the second is unconscious – may be how you truly feel inside and more significant (DF).

If you get overwhelmed, stand still for 2 minute and find out what it is that is causing it. It will surface (SK).

Staring into another person’s eyes for 1 minute (SW).

Managing priorities and expectations (SK, AG).

More than just maintaining eye contact – honesty, equality (SW).

Two most crucial people skills: how to be assertive and have empathy (AG).

Need to keep practising these skills!

CONCLUSION

While being intelligent and hardworking never goes amiss, the qualities of calmness, empathy and honesty, though hugely valuable are rarely mentioned as business assets in daily life. Attending these sessions, reading Dr Fraser’s book on my kindle and writing this article have shed new light on a comment I recently received at my appraisal namely of being “always calm”. At the time I was rather non-plussed but now I can see (visual again!) that it was quite the compliment!

Getting involving in practical exercises and role plays may seem contrived and even silly. However the standing on one leg and drawing a number in the air exercise was Dr Fraser’s way of showing us how the different halves of the brain work or can have difficulty functioning. After Alex Gould’s session we did some role plays explaining clearly and firmly why something could not be achieved. It was very useful to try this on live humans and to receive feedback on how we came across. Finally the minute spent staring into a stranger’s eyes was valuable as it underlined the importance of maintaining a balanced and honest outlook, of focusing calmly and staying in the moment.

Biography

Jackie Fishleigh has been Library and Information Manager at Payne Hicks Beach since 2002. She was President of BIALL for 2008–2009 and is a Fellow of CILIP. Currently she is Chair of the Supplier Liaison Group of BIALL.