

## *Role of Soft Skills for Professional Ontogenesis*

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper imparts a clear picture of what sorts of soft skills are needed in order to ensure the learner's employability and worth presence in the working class culture from the perspective of emerging competitive environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Initially, the paper discusses the necessity, nature and sorts of soft skills. Moving ahead, it focuses upon various ways of cultivating certain soft skills and a discussion on presentational soft skills.

**Keywords**— self-improvement, personal attributes, Kinesics, Eye contact, Paralanguage, Haptics, Proxemics, and Chronemics, Emblems, Illustrators, Affect Displays, Regulators, Adaptors etc.,

In the current complex, competitive and challenging professional ambience, there seems a drastic paradigm shift of workplace culture; and different skills are needed to achieve personal growth and professional success even though perhaps whatsoever policies of our respective educational or corporate organizations may be; but the corporate sector is bound to experience this phenomenal shift.

Illiterate of 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be those who can't read and write but those who don't learn, unlearn and relearn. One gets the fact proved considering the advancing progress in almost all walks of life. Delivering the

keynote address at the inaugural session of the soft skills training programme, Mr. Jayramkrishnan, the Chairman of the Task Force Industry-Institute Interaction, CII (TN), while emphasizing that soft skills played a dynamic role in making professionals-cum-learners worth employable and successful, pointed out that the candidates by and large failed to impress during the interviews not because of dearth in talent, but due to lack of soft skills.

Development of soft skills is a process of life-long learning. This process does not begin with one's job; neither ends with one's job. It is something that everyone starts with as a child. It is a kind of continuous improvement of one's professional behavior. A quote deserves mention here:

“So long as you have an inclination to self-improvement, in all aspects

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of your life, you are well on your way to be a “good” in everything!”

However, training alone is not a sufficient solution for actual behavioural changes in the professional’s day-to-day life; but the intention to change also has to be existent there.

Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill set and ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills relate to a person's ability to interact effectively with co-workers and respective others and are broadly applicable both in and outside the workplace.

Vast research and expert opinions have been sought in an effort to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented and used in higher institutions of learning. Based on the research findings obtained, seven soft skills seem to have been identified and chosen to be implemented in all institutions of higher learning. They are:

- a) Communicative skills.
- b) Thinking skills & Problem solving
- c) Team work force
- d) Life-long learning, Information Management
- e) Emotional Quotient
- f) Ethics, moral and professionalism

g) Leadership skills

### **Be your own trainer for Soft Skills:**

Training on soft skills becomes all the more relevant in a country like India where the education system does not delve into personality development. "Soft skills" training is essential because we do not have it in our academic curricula. Therefore, corporate houses have to take up the task of grooming employees who are the link between the company and the external world, so that they are able to present themselves better, “says Sumeet Mehta, an equity research analyst with Fortis Securities Ltd.

While organizations are definitely investing in augmenting their staff's people skills, here are some inputs for professionals and students who would like to initiate the process themselves:

#### **i. Ask family or close friends to write down your best and worst traits.**

Ideally, have at least four to five people do this for you. Evaluate the common traits all of them have mentioned. Thus, you can be aware of your strengths and work improving your weaknesses.

**ii. Be a part of team activities:-**It could be either as a part of your church choir, or an NGO, or your local youth circle. Observe your own behavior in the group and how you relate to others.

**iii. How well do you manage your time?:-** Think. Can you do more in life? Or is your day too crammed with

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activities? Effective time management is very essential in the corporate world.

**iv. Introspect on how you react to feedback:-** In organizations, people skills mostly come into the picture when there is feedback given -- be it for an idea, an executed project or a presentation.

**v. How good are you at critiquing? -** While responding to feedback is one side of the coin, giving feedback is the other side. Are you aggressive? Pessimistic? Do you believe in constructive criticism? Or prefer to be the yes-man?

**vi. Live consciously:** - Any organization is manned by people; therefore soft skills are all about how you deal with people and present yourself. Though it may be easier said than done, soft skills can be enhanced simply by being aware of oneself and living consciously.

We can break the study of presentational soft skills into six main categories: kinesics, eye contact, paralanguage, haptics, proxemics, and chronemics.

#### A) Kinesics:

Kinesics is the study of how we use facial expressions, gestures, postures, and eye behavior in communication. Kinesics can be broken down into five main categories:

a) **Emblems:** These are non-verbal behaviors that are direct replacements for words, allowing us shorthand for communicating simple ideas. The “thumbs up” sign, a wave hello, and a

shushing finger are all emblems—standing for single words or short sentences.

b) **Illustrators:** Small movements and postures used to stress or punctuate ideas. These are movements or actions that “illustrate” a verbal message. You may mime hitting yourself on the head when you’ve made a mistake, wag your hand in the air to express uncertain or conflicted feelings, point forward when you say let’s go,” or even draw an invisible picture in the air—these are all illustrators. We don’t plan to use illustrators, and we’re often not even aware that we’re using them.

c) **Affect Displays:** Facial expressions sometimes supported by body postures that communicate feelings. Raising your eyebrows when you’re surprised and “making a face” when disgusted are affect displays. Knowledge of the situation and the sender of the message are important to interpreting affect displays: in experiments using demonstrations of ten emotions, audiences can typically identify only half. This is one of the reasons that silent film actors used exaggerated facial expressions—it gave the audience greater context to understand the characters’ emotions and thoughts. Like illustrators, we use affect displays unconsciously. We’ll use them when talking on the telephone, even though the other person can’t see us. Affect displays may increase the intensity of our feelings—when your face takes on a sad expression, you’ll feel sadder. There’s also evidence to suggest that basic displays, like smiling and frowning,

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are universal across cultures. Children who are blind from birth use the same affect displays as sighted children. One group of researchers has concluded that there are eight basic emotions that the face can display: happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, contempt, and interest. Others add bewilderment and determination. We can use affect displays to manipulate, too: children will often cry not to express hurt, but simply to get attention.

- d) **Regulators:** Eye movements, head nods, and postures that regulate conversations. We'll often nod, smile, or make "mm-hmm" sounds to show agreement, or simply to show that we're listening. Other regulators, like head shaking, narrow eyes, or a set jaw, show disagreement. Voice inflections and gestures that signal whose turn it is to talk, is another common type of regulator. Regulators can also indicate boredom—breaking eye contact or changing posture frequently shows a lack of engagement. Context is important to interpreting regulators as well—someone who is bouncing her leg may be indicating boredom, but if she is listening to music it may be a sign of keen interest.
- e) **Adaptors:** Actions that release physical or emotional tension when someone is anxious. Adaptors include cracking knuckles, twirling hair, or biting fingernails. In some cases these behaviors are actually relaxing, but often they're simply done out of habit. Someone who

exhibits one of these adaptors doesn't mean to come across as nervous, but that is often the perception others will get. It's important to avoid making false assumptions—context is essential to understanding all body language.

Eyes and Voice

## B. Eye contact

Where, when, and for how long someone looks, communicates volumes. We can give a dirty look or an icy stare; have shifty eyes or a sideways glance. There are unspoken rules governing what kinds of looks are acceptable—it's considered invasive and rude to stare at strangers, for example, but in some cases a flirtatious gaze may be welcomed. In normal one-on-one conversation, people look at each other from 10 to 80 percent of the time. One study found that those who used the least eye contact were judged as defensive, cold, and immature, while those who used the most eye contact were judged as friendly, mature, sincere, and self-confident. The same principles are important when making a speech: the best public speakers sweep the audience with their eyes, making brief eye contact with as many responsive faces in the audience as possible. This eye contact shouldn't last too long, lest an audience member feel singled out. Speakers who are uncomfortable with a group will look at their notes instead of the group, or will stare beyond the audience. Lack of connection with individuals in the audience can hurt:

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One study found that speakers who looked at the audience over 60 percent of the time were judged as basically sincere, while those who looked at the audience only 20 percent of the time were rated insincere. This isn't to say that constant eye contact is a necessity. In fact, when quoting or referring to statistics, it helps to read the information from the notes or presentation screen, then return to eye contact with the audience to explain the information.

Distinguishing between quotation and explanation increases the audience's perception of the speaker's credibility.

Skilled card players pay close attention to their opponents' eyes, looking for subtle clues—affect displays and regulators—that may indicate what's going on in the other player's mind. They call these “tells,” because they sometimes do tell what the player has in his or her hand. Beginners in poker will often stare at a bad hand longer than a good one, and won't look directly at other players when holding a good hand. These are the same kinds of non-verbal signs that communicate in conversation, and understanding how people use these cues can make you a better communicator.

### C) Paralanguage

No matter what words you say, the tone of your voice communicates a lot. Simply put, paralanguage is your voice minus your words. The speed of your speech can have a big impact on the message you convey. Most people

prefer that a presenter speak at a slightly higher than normal rate of speech, and will generally rate such a speaker as more credible. You should also be aware of the volume of your voice—you want to avoid being considered either too soft-spoken or too much of a loudmouth. Pitch, which can range from deep to high, is also an essential part of paralanguage.

Other aspects of paralanguage can impact the speaker's appearance of credibility and intelligence: pauses like “um” or “uh” may make you seem uncertain, and ending sentences with higher intonation, as if they are questions, can have a similar effect. This particular type of inflection is a recent trend, and many people who end their sentences on a higher tone aren't aware they do it. Paralanguage can override the meaning of your spoken words—sometimes what you say isn't as important as how you say it.

Contact, Space, and Time

### D. Haptics: The science of touch

The study of tactile communication—the language of touch—is called haptics. In some ways, touch is the most basic form of communication. The first communication an infant has, is in the form of contact with its mother, and this communication is vital—infants deprived of physical contact don't thrive. As children grow older, they learn a complex set of unwritten rules governing touch—who they can touch, when, and where. Touch between members of peer groups decreases significantly between the ages of one

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and six. This trend away from touching continues throughout adolescence: in junior high, children touch same-sex peers only half as much as they did in the primary grades. Touch means different things in different contexts. Between equals, touch reinforces friendship bonds and shows solidarity.

But in many cases touch is one-way: only one person can touch the other. Touch can be a symbol of status and control. For instance, a sports coach may put his arm around a player, but the player will not put his arm around the coach. One of the most common ways touch is used to communicate is the handshake. At its most basic level, the handshake communicates trust, goodwill, or agreement with a common decision. In France, men sometimes kiss one another on the cheeks in greeting, and in the Middle East men often kiss in greeting. In Spain and South America, female friends and relatives often walk arm-in-arm, and it's common for men to hold hands in the Middle East. Different cultures emphasize touch to different degrees—touch is less common in England, Canada, Germany, and Japan than in the United States, and it's far more common in France, Italy, southwest Asia, Russia, Spain, and Latin America.

#### E. **Proxemics:** Using space

We all have an invisible bubble surrounding us—an area of space that we consider our own. This bubble is our personal space, and the study of how we structure and claim this space

is called proxemics. Personal space has four zones:

- 1) Over twelve feet is the public zone. A person giving a speech might be this far away from the front row.
- 2) Twelve feet to four feet: the social zone. In this space, we converse with people we need to talk to one-on-one, but that we don't know personally, like store clerks or strangers who are asking directions.
- 3) Four feet to one and a half feet: the personal zone. This is the most-used zone, used for friends and casual acquaintances. Most social conversation occurs within this space.
- 4) 18 inches or less: the intimate zone. We only allow those to whom we are emotionally close, like close friends and family, into this zone. If a stranger comes into this space, we feel invaded.

Animals are often territorial. Many animals mark their space with scents. Dogs will bark at anyone or anything that invades the area they consider their own. Humans will also mark their spaces, placing personal items or photographs on our desks, writing on our notebooks, or putting vanity license plates on our cars. There are both written and unwritten rules about what spaces we're allowed to enter. Space is a status symbol: the more space you can claim, the higher your status. A boss can enter his employees' workspaces, but the employees need an appointment before they can enter the boss's office. It's uncomfortable to have your space invaded—when you're tailgated on the

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highway you may feel threatened, because the space around your car is an extension of your space. If your home is robbed while you're away, you may find yourself more upset about the invasion of your space than any valuables that are taken.

#### F. Chronemics

How you perceive and use time is another part of your personal broadcast. The study of how we use time to communicate is called chronemics. There are two main categories of time: formal and informal. Formal time is specific and standardized. It is carefully measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. A meeting scheduled for 1:30 has an exact starting time; it would be improper to start it 20 minutes early or 40 minutes late.

Different cultures have different ideas about time. Americans and Northern Europeans usually use monochromatic time. Monochromatic time emphasizes doing one thing at a time, sticking to schedules, and meeting deadlines promptly.

The language of our bodies speaks volumes. By paying close

attention to kinesics, eye contact, paralanguage, haptics, proxemics, and chronemics, one can improve his unspoken messages that other people decode during his presentation. Even more importantly, one can learn to read others' non-verbal cues. Understanding the silent signals of body language is essential to becoming a better and more efficient communicator cum presenter.

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