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## Improve your “soft skills”

**E**MPLOYERS place a premium on soft skills in today's work environment. It is no longer enough that you are technically competent in turfgrass management; more and more employers assess you on the qualities and habits that reveal if you are a good employee and a team player. According to Kate Lorenz, CareerBuilder.com editor, “Companies value soft skills because research suggests and experience shows that they can be just as

important an indicator of job performance as hard skills.”

Whether you are in a job-seeking mode or are a long-time employee, successful soft skills play a crucial role in employment security and advancement opportunities. Good communication skills top the list. According to Quintessential Careers, “By far, the one skill mentioned most often by employers is the ability to listen, write, and speak effectively.”

Exhibiting a strong work ethic, a pos-



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## What are “soft skills”?

Soft skills is a sociological term relating to a person's Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ) and the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills (part of a person's IQ), which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities.

A person's soft skill EQ is an important part of their individual contribution to the success of an organization. Screening or training for personal habits or traits such as dependability and conscientiousness can yield significant return on investment for an organization. For this reason, soft skills are increasingly sought out by employers in addition to standard qualifications.

### Examples of soft skills

- ⊙ Participate in a team
- ⊙ Lead a team
- ⊙ Unite a team amidst cultural differences
- ⊙ Teach others
- ⊙ Provide services
- ⊙ Negotiate
- ⊙ Motivate others
- ⊙ Make decisions
- ⊙ Solve problems
- ⊙ Observe forms of etiquette
- ⊙ Interact with others
- ⊙ Maintain meaningless conversation (small talk)
- ⊙ Maintain meaningful conversation (discussion/debate)
- ⊙ Defuse arguments with timing, instructions and polite, concise language
- ⊙ Feign interest and speak intelligently about any topic
- ⊙ Listening
- ⊙ Coaching

Soft skills are sometimes broken down into personal attributes, such as optimism, common sense, responsibility, a sense of humor, integrity, time-management, and motivation. Also included are interpersonal abilities such as empathy, leadership, communication, good manners, sociability, and the ability to teach.

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itive attitude and the ability to work collaboratively with others sets you apart from the average employee. Being able to prioritize projects and multi-task demonstrates sound time management skills. Employers also seek employees who are resourceful and able to solve problems. If you find that you need to brush up on soft skills, the good news is that they can be learned and there are many professional development resources at your fingertips online.—Kim Heck, CEO, Sports Turf Managers Association

*Editor's note: Here are some real-world examples of turf professionals' using soft skills to obtain better results at work.*

### **ERIC ADKINS, Toyota Park, Chicago**

One of the things I have learned over the years is how to get more out of my employees and other co-workers. I just don't bark out orders, I want this done or that that done, I ask if "you can do me a favor." It could be the worst job or task but I think it

makes everyone think like they are helping instead of working. The other thing that I think I have learned is that "It's just grass," no matter how things are going or what's going on in life at the end of the day. We do the best we can and tomorrow is another day. It's just grass.

### **JESSE PRITCHARD, CSFM, University of Virginia**

I would call the weather situation [in mid-February] we are in here at the University of Virginia a crisis. As many of you have seen on the news or even experienced, the Mid-Atlantic region has received record amounts of snowfall this winter. We are fortunate to have four synthetic practice fields from which we have plowed nearly 5 feet of snow. While these fields are very nice for football and lacrosse, baseball and softball need to be played on dirt and grass.

It has been an interesting process explaining to both our head baseball and softball coaches that their opening games

are in serious jeopardy of being canceled due to the snow. Coaches have different personalities, and these two are no different. Our baseball coach is adamant about playing on the field to the point where it's nearly play at all costs. I understand this and have to steer him in the direction that will help him play as soon as possible and save the integrity of playing surface at the same time—this is usually a huge compromise on his part. Our softball coach wants to get on the field as early as possible but understands the investment athletics has made in her field and wants to do nothing to damage it. These are completely different approaches from our head coaches. I need to use thoughtful communication and pull from a background of trust that I have developed with my coaches to make them comfortable with how the field crew will make their fields playable. The relationships I have developed with our coaches go a long way in determining how green the grass appears and how true the ball bounces.

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## **JEAN TANSEY,** **Recreation and Parks, Baltimore County, MD**

Soft skills are required to be used extensively in our agency's presentations at community meetings and public hearings on park development. While everyone likes the idea of parks, few people like them "in my backyard." Add to that a basic distrust of "government" and navigating through a public meeting can be tricky!

One meeting in particular comes to mind. A piece of property recently acquired by the County for a park was surrounded by single family residential homes. At the beginning of the meeting residents were angry, hostile and worried about what was going to be developed behind their homes. Worries about crime, rowdy behavior and traffic were all part of the concern.

Simply by setting a friendly tone, actively listening and validating residents' ideas and comments, and generating an attitude of calm, control and respect among the crowd, the attitude and demeanor of the meeting changed dramatically. By the end of the meeting 2 hours later, the audience actually applauded our efforts and supported the idea of developing a park that respected their ideas and desires. The park is now a much-used and appreciated part of the community.

Active listening, an air of openness and friendliness, and a collaborative, inclusive attitude go a long way to insuring any project is successful.

## **RICK PERRUZZI, CSFM,** **City of South Portland, ME**

In years past I have been lucky enough to have hired and worked with some very talented people whom bring a wide range of skills to the workplace. Although I have the final say on what is to be done, I have allowed these individuals to express their opinions on many areas of maintaining sports fields and collectively we overcome issues that arise. In return the individuals feel a sense of pride and worth in obtaining our goal of producing and maintaining safe fields.

## **JODY GILL, CSFM,** **Blue Valley (KS) SD**

When dealing with difficult people and/or situations, I tend to be very patient, understanding and optimistic. Recent examples include the bad winter weather. Sometimes people get very upset when they think we are not doing enough to eliminate ice or isolated slick areas and they fail to understand why salt will not melt ice when the temperatures are single digits and below. By being patient and just listening to them sometimes they will talk themselves out of the problem when they realize there are safer routes of travel to get to a building.

If you get confrontational with people, the situation will most certainly elevate into a bigger problem. This means that sometimes we must be able to tolerate some level of non-personal, verbal abuse. Just grin and bear it and let them vent.

I think there are countless times in our industry when this personality trait is very helpful. Best example is when a field does not look or play as well as a coach, player or (worst of all) a parent thinks it should and they want to make sure you know about it. You know there is a specific reason why the field may not be at its best, but that explanation will just sound like an excuse to the complainer. I think the best way to handle it is to listen intently, take nothing personally, thank them for providing input and feedback and assure them that you will work to improve the situation. People who are impatient, confrontational and lack a "thick skin" probably would not last long in our industry.

## **DEBBIE KNEESHAW,** **City of Portland, OR**

I have been thinking of soft skills quite a bit because I depend on them immensely to obtain desired outcomes. I have always believed in positive personal connections/interactions equating in better outcomes. I tend to invest in each individual who assists me in my job, so that they "buy in" to my ownership and vision, and hopefully put more investment into their job so that they help achieve the same ownership, vision, and goal.

With my co-workers, I tend to offer choices on job duties for the day. I believe it helps empower them and gives them ownership to their choice. Inevitably all the work needs to be accomplished; it just works well if a choice is available to offer it. We also work very closely as a team, and I communicate the big picture, so that we are all on the same page of why we do job tasks in the manner and order that we do them.

That I use "please" and "thank you" is very important to me when



Courtesy of West Coast Turf

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I am addressing anyone. In job task notes that I write, I always make sure to write "Could you please..." and end with "Thank you." I also recognize a job well done and the strengths of each individual.

I also think that a happy disposition and an eagerness to perform my job well are infectious and tend to set the mood for the day. I do tend to get focused on the job tasks, and at times have to remind myself to slow down a bit, and to invest on a personal level.

It truly is the subtleties that make people respond more favorably.

**JIM CORNELIUS,  
West Chester (PA)  
School District**

In the midst of budget cuts, Mother Nature serves up a volley of unprecedented snow storms and each becomes the new record for the area. We have dealt with three so far and as I type we are expecting number four. Due to my lengthy years of service and experience I am calling the shots and I can proudly say we become stronger with each storm. I preach to the staff that we are the best and we need to always think positive. We teach the younger staff the new ways and the old ways, allowing them to experiment with what works for them and that has proven invaluable. As a leader I pass the torch to see who runs with it and when they have been trained the torch keeps burning and almost always makes it back. My staff comes in as individuals each day and by day's end they leave as a team.

In the midst of huge budget cuts, facilities and operations had to cut \$1 million from an \$8 million budget, and we did it without cutting staff. By communicating with all parties we asked the staff to present ideas on how to do this, and although we were never a fat organization, they came up with ideas that management would have never thought of. They reduced overtime hours by willingly changing their shifts to cover outside user groups, they encouraged the students and teaching staff to turn off lights when not needed, they gave up their uniform allowance, examined the grounds areas that did not need weekly mowing and presented a plan to incorporate wild flowers into these areas. When faced with the hardships of the



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economy one needs to give their power to the people and the people will return the power with a higher level of respect.

Four years ago I began training the athletes in the middle schools and high schools on how to maintain their fields in a way to help out my grounds crew. Along with my grounds crew we taught the athletes how to rake infields, pitcher mounds and batter boxes, fill divots, use off-field areas for practices and goal drills and this has parlayed into something bigger than expected. The students bought into it and along came the coaches, soon enough the outside users were on board. We now have neighboring townships asking us to hold classes for their users as well. With the economy trying to recover we have groups willing to give us money for seed, fertilizers and topdressing. Learning to work with them vs. fighting with them has been a blessing and when you examine the little details you learn we always had the same dreams: provide good, safe fields for the users to enjoy. Yes we have limited the number of total events on every field, which has caused the outside users to look elsewhere; ironically few complain as long as they can get something. I guess the old saying a dollar today is worth more than a hundred dollars tomorrow is true since tomorrow never gets here.

### **MIKE TARANTINO,** **Poway (CA) USD**

At one time or another we have all had to use what I'll call negotiation skills or soft skills; whether at home or on the job these traits become a handy tool to assist us in winning over a spouse, child, customer or contactor. While I'm not saying that these skills will solve all of your problems all of the time, you may find they help you solve problems a good majority of the time.

A particular problem comes to mind dealing with the recent budget problems; I found myself needing to justify my department's need for additional staff and money. I could have easily gone into that negotiation with the attitude I'm going to get what they give me and let's move on. However, that isn't the tactic I decided to use. Everyone in the meeting was tense but a simple friendly greeting of "hello and how are you" to the attendees let them know I wasn't here in a confrontational mode. While my superiors gave their accounts of what they thought I needed to do, I went into what I'll call understanding mode which I said I understand your point of view and then continued to make my case, the who, what, why and how we do to support the education of children and the community. While not all positions and dollars were saved, fewer positions were lost and we were budgeted for needed equipment.

Without the use of these soft skills in a time of desperate measures, I'm not sure the outcome would have been what I wanted.

### **KENNY NICHOLS,** **Westerville (OH) City Schools**

I often use these "soft skills" by purchasing a good book that relates a point or conveys a message I wish to send, and giving it to a person I wish to influence. Then I wait. Once they have read it, doors are usually open to discussion on the subject. Of course,



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I have either already read the book myself or am reading it in parallel with them.

Employing this in reverse: if a friend or co-worker mentions a good read they are into, I often pick up the same title and read it at the same time hoping to gain shared perspectives with them.

I have a friend who is fond of saying, "If you force a man against his will, he will remain of the same opinion still." Over the years, I have come to learn that coming along side someone to share thoughts and ideas is much more effective than coming at them head-on.

Think of the baseball coach trying to get the call changed by going nose-to-nose with the umpire vs. the father with one arm around his son's shoulder as he points the way and shares his vision. Which is more effective?

We just might see a few calls changed if a coach could bring themselves to put an arm around the ump and attempt to gain a shared perspective!

### **BRAD PARK,** **Rutgers University**

Working with sports field managers, administrators (i.e. municipal and K-12 schools), engineers, and contractors to assist in solving sports field problems frequently requires finesse and a comprehensive set of soft skills.

Annually, I receive requests from engineers representing public facilities to make a site visit to a recently constructed sports field. During some conversations or visits, the engineer will explicitly state or imply that a contractor has failed to perform according to specifications. The engineer is often seeking documentation from an expert to support their point of view.

Conversely, I am also contacted by contractors requesting a site

visit to assess a construction project. These contacts are often seeking a report on University letterhead that states their work was completed according to specifications and concludes that problems with the project were a function of engineering flaws.

Enter soft skills.

In the vast majority of these requests, I ask the engineer or contractor to provide my contact information to the owner of the facility. As an employee of a public University I believe it is more constructive to visit the site/project on behalf of and in the presence of the "owner," who is ultimately responsible for the long-term management of the property.

Additionally, working with the owner and deciphering his or her intentions often requires soft skills. In some cases, the owner may be looking to assign blame to one or more parties. As an educator performing visits in an Extension capacity, my goal is assist the owner in *improving* the site rather than directing blame. Tactful report writing with a problem-solving focus is another important soft skill.

### **MARCUS DEAN, CSFM, University of Kentucky**

I think a successful person must use good soft skills all the time. Soft skills are a valuable asset to no matter what profession you are in or what you are trying to achieve daily. When you are at work you must be able to have good clear communication with your co-workers (or coaches, family, administration, the public, everyone, etc). You must be able to speak the language of whom you are communicating with. I have learned to ask for a response from the person I am directly giving instructions to because I understand what I am asking but a lot of times the person taking the instructions doesn't see the same thing I do.

Something my mom has been telling me since I was a kid is, "It is not what you say but how you say it." I am still learning to master this skill and have had other mentors tell me the same thing. I wear my emotions on my sleeve and put too much emotion into my responses.

As I have grown professionally, I have

done a better job with this but at times I still have lapses. Another form of soft skills is being able to listen. Listening is more than just hearing the person talk; it is looking them in the eye when communicating. Soft skills are required at home, at work, and out in public. In my opinion, soft skills are communication, listening, body language, practicing good manners, being polite, etc. As I have matured personally and professionally my soft skills have gotten a lot better. I have to give a lot of credit to my parents and my mentors for what I have developed into as a person and as a professional.

### **PETER THIBEAULT, CSFM, Noble and Greenough School (MA)**

Example of soft skills in action: The year leading up to our entry into the "Field of the Year" competition sticks out in my mind the most. After having been to the STMA National Conference and having seen first hand some of the winners, I knew it was going to take everyone's effort. The communication started before each event or activity and kept going throughout.

The field that we entered that year happens to host baseball, graduation, summer day camp, Jimmy Fund, and fall soccer. This meant I had a broad spectrum of background in the audience to work with. This at the same time also allowed me to strengthen relationships. It really was nice to see the satisfaction in each after their event or activity on how nice everything remained. So accidentally I had almost shared the excitement that I had. When we entered and had actually won it was very exciting for our community to receive that kind of achievement. This has helped my relationships within the community and it really is difficult to give one particular instance, because these skills are used seemingly all the time.

The effort of this particular time stood out the most for me because it showed to me that most of the users were just going at it as "business as usual," when presented with the opportunity to do things differently most were open to the opportunity. ■



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