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Making HR People Complete

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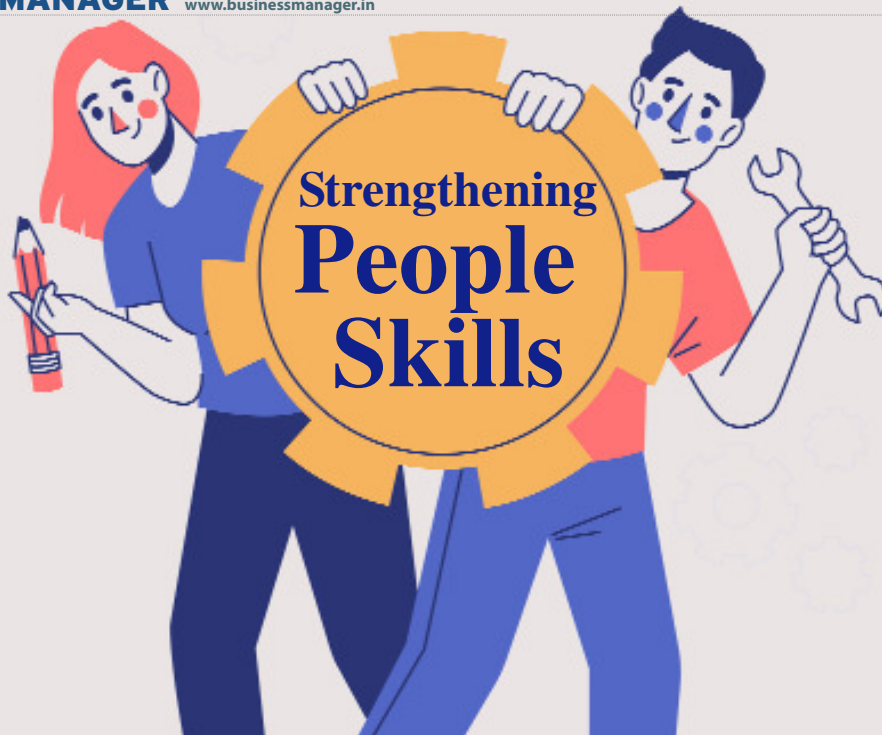
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A close-up photograph of a hand in a dark suit sleeve holding a single wooden block. The hand is positioned over a wooden maze structure made of many similar blocks. The background is a wooden surface.

**Strengthening
People Skills**

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- Arunn S. Kumar



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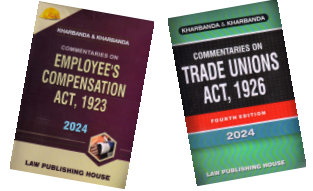
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COVER

FEATURE



Being a Successful Manager is about More Than Just Technical Expertise

In essence, addressing the lack of people skills in technical managers requires a multifaceted approach that combines training, mentorship, feedback, and revised promotion criteria.

Arunn S. Kumar

How important are people skills for managers in their career growth and why do organisations and managers not pay much attention in comparison to functional skills?

About the Author

Arunn, as the Group Director of People and Culture at Dubai Limited Investment LLC, leads human resources and organizational development initiatives for one of the UAE's rapidly expanding conglomerates. With over two decades of experience, he is a distinguished HR professional renowned for his strategic approach to talent acquisition, organizational development, and cultivating thriving workplace cultures. Arunn is also an accomplished author, recently launching his book, "Corporate Takshashila."

AS One skill that doesn't get enough credit in both professional and personal settings is "people skills." In a corporate hierarchy, while every leader should have this skill, I believe it's especially important for managers to be well-equipped to deal with people. It's not just a desirable trait, but a crucial one for advancing their career, being effective leaders and fostering a positive team spirit. Having strong people management skills helps managers navigate through complex challenges within the organisation, such as handling changes and resolving crises.

Numerous recent reports have emphasized the significance of leaders who prioritize open communication and building trust for the overall effectiveness of



an organisation. These are the managers who will thrive in their career paths.

Unfortunately, many organisations and managers tend to focus solely on technical skills, which directly impact day-to-day operations. While these skills are undoubtedly important, they only offer short-term benefits. To truly grow and succeed, managers should prioritize long-term advantages. I can think of a few reasons why they might overlook this crucial soft skill :

- 1. Business Outcomes** : Functional skills are easy to measure and assess during performance reviews since they directly contribute to measurable outputs and productivity. On the other hand, the benefits of people skills, such as fostering a positive work culture, take longer to manifest, can be subjective, and may not be immediately apparent.
- 2. Hiring Practices** : Recruitment processes often prioritize technical expertise over interpersonal abilities. As a result, organisations end up with a workforce and management team that excel in technical areas but often lack essential soft skills.
- 3. Performance Management** : Traditional performance metrics primarily revolve around key performance indicators (KPIs) that focus on achieving targets, often neglecting the importance of behavioural competencies crucial for effective leadership and team cohesion.

To sum it up, while functional skills are crucial for immediate business outcomes, the undervaluation of people skills in managerial roles undermines the long-term health and growth of organisations. Despite their importance, these skills often take a back seat to quantifiable metrics and technical expertise. For managers and organisations to thrive sustainably, there is a pressing need to prioritize and invest in developing robust interpersonal competencies alongside functional expertise.

What are those people skills you rate high; that a manager must acquire and strengthen?

AS In today's fast-paced work environment, being a manager is about more than just technical expertise. It's all about having the right people skills. These interpersonal abilities are essential for creating a productive, motivated, and cohesive team. So, here are a few key people skills that I believe every manager should focus on developing :

- 1. Emotional Intelligence** : This is about understanding and managing your own emotions, as well as recognizing and influencing the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence helps managers handle conflicts, build strong relationships, and effectively motivate their team. It includes skills like empathy, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. Without it, trust and collaboration within the organisation can suffer.
- 2. No to micromanagement** : Micromanaging is a big no-no. It shows that a manager trusts their team to handle tasks independently. Effective managers empower their employees by giving them the freedom to use their skills and strengths to the fullest. A good manager knows when to provide guidance and support on specific details (micromanagement) and when to delegate responsibilities and focus on overall goals (macro-management).
- 3. Leading by example** : One of the most powerful ways to inspire and motivate team members is by leading through your actions. When you consistently demonstrate strong work ethics, like being accountable, embracing

teamwork, pursuing constant improvement, and showing unwavering dedication, you set the standard and create a culture of excellence within your team.

"Leadership is about envisioning the future, effectively communicating it, and inspiring others to work together to achieve it." - Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Ruler of Dubai.

4. Approachability : Being approachable is a key characteristic of effective leadership. Just take a look at figures like Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India, who was lovingly referred to as the "People's President." He was known for his down-to-earth attitude and his proactive engagement with citizens, especially students and young people. By fostering open dialogue and embracing innovative ideas, he won the hearts of the Indian people and motivated a generation to strive for excellence in science, education, and nation-building efforts.

By applying these people skills, managers can create a positive and productive work environment where team members feel valued and motivated to give their best.

Can you elaborate on any structured process that helps managers to sharpen people skills?

AS I believe developing people skills requires a structured approach that combines self-awareness, learning, practice, and feedback. In my opinion, the following process that can help managers sharpen their people skills :

- a. Personality Assessment** : 360-degree performance feedback stands out as the optimal mechanism for comprehensively understanding strengths and areas needing improvement in people management skills.
- b. Training Programs** : Managers should engage in workshops and courses dedicated to communication, leadership, and emotional intelligence. Although there are many trainings available on public platforms, I would want managers to undergo appropriate training such as the likes of Franklin Covey's renowned program, "7 Habits of Highly Effective People," which emphasizes proactive leadership and effective communication. And Dale Carnegie's team building, motivation, and communication strategies that are practical and impactful in real-world scenarios. Continuous (right) learning ensures managers stay effective in evolving workplaces, driving team performance and organisational success through skilled leadership and supportive management practices.
- c. Reflection and Adjustment** : Reflection involves managers reviewing experiences and interactions with their team to identify lessons learned and areas for improvement. For instance, after a challenging project, a manager may adjust their leadership style to improve team communication and collaboration, setting new goals to enhance their effectiveness.

In this tech-driven business environment, where tech tools attempt to replace humans, how do people skills and necessities remain relevant?

AS I fervently believe that while technology significantly assists us in expediting tasks and enhancing efficiency, it will never replace the unique value of human connection. In this tech-driven business environment, where tools and automation seem to overshadow traditional roles, the necessity for people skills remains not only relevant but crucial.



Let me share why. First and foremost, humans inherently crave connection. It's in our nature to seek out and value interactions that are genuine and empathetic. No matter how advanced technology becomes, it cannot replicate the warmth of a smile, the comfort of a reassuring voice, or the understanding gleaned from a knowing glance. These elements of human interaction are irreplaceable and form the bedrock of strong relationships, both personally and professionally. People skills encompass a broad range of abilities - from effective communication and active listening to empathy and conflict resolution. These skills are the glue that holds teams together, fosters collaboration and drives innovation. When we engage with our colleagues, clients, or stakeholders, it's not just about exchanging information; it's about building trust, understanding perspectives, and creating a shared vision.

Moreover, in situations that require nuanced decision-making, ethical considerations, or creative problem-solving, human intuition and emotional intelligence play a pivotal role. Technology, with all its algorithms and data processing power, cannot understand context in the same way a human can. It cannot navigate the subtleties of human emotions or the complexities of moral dilemmas.

In essence, while technology can handle repetitive tasks and provide us with data-driven insights, it is the human touch that interprets these insights, makes informed decisions, and builds meaningful connections. As we move forward in this tech-driven world, let's remember to value and nurture our people skills. They are, and will always be, the heart of our interactions and the key to our success.

As Bill Gates said, *"Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important."*

How should People skills address tech power challenges?

AS People skills are essential in addressing the challenges posed by technological advancements in today's business environment. As a leader, I see these skills as the bridge between technology and its users. No matter how powerful technology becomes, human interpretation and implementation are necessary for effectiveness. Clear communication ensures everyone can leverage these tools properly.

While technology can facilitate collaboration, it's the human element that drives it. By fostering open communication and teamwork, we can harness our teams' collective creativity to solve complex problems. Resistance to change is common with new technologies, and emotional intelligence is invaluable in managing this. Addressing team members' fears and concerns with support and clear communication eases transitions and promotes a positive attitude towards new technologies.

Ethical considerations are another crucial aspect. With great tech power comes great responsibility, and people skills help navigate these complexities. Engaging in ethical decision-making and establishing guidelines ensures responsible technology use.

In customer interactions, personalizing and humanizing experiences is more important than ever. Empathy and active listening make customers feel valued and understood, strengthening relationships and loyalty.

Moreover, the tech landscape is constantly evolving, and leaders must inspire their teams to embrace continuous

learning and adaptability. By fostering curiosity and support, we encourage our teams to stay updated with the latest trends, ensuring our organisation remains competitive and innovative.

Finally, balancing efficiency with the human touch is essential. While technology enhances efficiency, maintaining a positive workplace culture and employee well-being requires empathy and recognition of individual contributions. People skills enable us to harness the full potential of technology while preserving and strengthening human values and connections. This harmonious synergy between humans and technology drives sustainable success in today's business world.

Why do most technical managers lack expertise in people skills and how organisations should fix it?

AS Mostly, these managers do not have good managerial skills due to poor training and hence cannot interact well with other employees. It is common for such individuals to be driven by knowledge aspects rather than other aspects. Sometimes, individuals whose technical capabilities are highly rated become managers in some companies. These organisations do not transform them into managers because of their potential in managing people but they do it because they are technically competent in their fields and hence best suited for such positions. This implies that there exists an ominous hollow between one thing: one's ability to lead by example on one hand and the other one's prowess in their area.

Organisations should recognize the need for human skills in managerial positions. Therefore, organisations should institute comprehensive training and development programs to address this need. One important thing here is targeted leadership training which highlights soft skills like effective communication, conflict resolution, and team motivation among others. Unlike one-time workshops, they should always be available to offer continuous learning chances.

Mentorship programs can also play an important part in bridging this gap. Connecting skilled managers in technology areas with successful people leaders, who are great at managing people, can provide important practical learning and help. Through such mentorship, there will be a culture that consistently seeks to get better at what it does, as well as one that also seeks to grow personally.

To further add, it would be prudent for companies to consider evaluating persons' aptitudes on interpersonal abilities as part of their requirements for promotion. This will assist in making certain that individuals who are selected for managerial positions have both well-developed social skills and are competent in terms of technology.

So, creating an environment where feedback flows freely is super important. When managers encourage their team members and peers to give regular, constructive feedback, it helps them understand what they're good at and where they can improve. This feedback loop not only boosts their self-awareness but also creates a culture of accountability and growth.

In essence, addressing the lack of people skills in technical managers requires a multifaceted approach that combines training, mentorship, feedback, and revised promotion criteria. By doing so, organisations can cultivate managers who are not only technically proficient but also adept at leading and inspiring their teams. **BM**

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