

Thinking Managers

Robert Heller of www.thinkingmanagers.com looks at the rise of “Soft Management”.

Soft Management And Hard Management

Management has always been considered a 'hard' discipline. The higher a manager rises, the greater his or her powers of command and the greater the number of people who must obey the orders.

The hard managers possess the mandate and the duty to discipline their subordinates, close redundant activities, dispose of whole businesses, move people from job to job, and so on. This sort of authority can easily create an atmosphere of fear and trembling.

But the true hardness began to soften some time ago and the change is accelerating. It's speeded up to such an extent where the Harvard Business Review can declare 'It's Hard Being Soft', describing 'the hard work of being a soft manager' and asking 'why should anyone be led by you?'

Obviously a major shift in attitudes is taking place. How far have you succumbed to the trend of soft management? Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- 1) Soft management is more effective than armour-plated command-and-controlling.
- 2) Highest among the qualities needed to be a strong manager are sensitivity, vulnerability and honesty about your weakness.
- 3) People start wanting to work with you when you give up pretending to be perfect.
- 4) Employees will eventually respect and support you when you let them know that you are only flesh and blood.
- 5) When you've established empathy you can give people what they need so they can excel – which is perhaps what they want.
- 6) You encourage others to share responsibility by dismissing the idea that the fate of the firm rests completely on you.

If you do agree with all or any of these, then you face a tough question: are you putting your soft principles into practice? If not, it is doubtful you work for an organisation that has time for such ideas.

The above Feelgood Formula enshrines the common philosophy that the better you treat people, the better they will work. The problem for the majority of organisations is that the ends often outrank the means.

The soft principles of the Feelgood Formula are just good behaviour: you manage in human and humane ways because that's the correct way to treat your people. The fact that it's also more effective is a bonus, albeit potentially a highly valuable one.

But effectiveness depends, not on the degree of loving kindness brought to bear, but on the competitive quality of the decisions you take, the processes installed, the methods applied, the technologies developed – and so on.

These are the 'hardest' areas of management – in both senses of the word. Take a false step in any of these matters now, and it might take years rather than months to recover.

The pressures are so great that the experts polled in the latest survey undertaken by the Global Future Forum predict some radical changes in management – and these tend towards a 'soft-hard' future.

A great deal of larger companies will become networks of outsourced resources, partnerships, alliances and contractors in order to become (soft) more responsive to market demands. Understanding the customer (soft) and superior retailing skills will win through over (hard) straight manufacturing capabilities as the primary drivers of success. In addition, organisational adaptability and flexibility (soft) are becoming more important to success than operational performance and other traditional (hard) metrics.

Companies need their innovators now more than ever before. These brains need the space to deploy and share their ideas. This is where soft management comes into its own. The onus should be on freedom of thought. You need self-managed teams who set their own targets.

Your model should be the college campus, not the military camp. But in this soft habitat, paradoxically, you require a focus of the hardest military intensity.

About the author: Robert Heller is one of the world's best selling authors on business management.

