



GREAT

CLIENT PARTNER

HOW SOFT SKILLS ARE
THE TRUE CURRENCY
IN CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

As the CEO of a large marketing communications agency, I've had the privilege of hosting a group of eight or so new employees for some candid conversations each month. They are full of curiosity, wonder, and optimism. I encourage them to ask me any question that might help them navigate the business or their careers. Over the years, I have hosted a hundred of these meetings, and they all have their own unique feel. The question that I seem to get most often is a flattering but backhanded one, which amounts to something like, "Hey Jared, how did you get this gig...when you're still so young?"

First of all, I am reminded by those who love me that I am no longer all that young. The second and more serious answer is I have been very fortunate to have had many people take an active interest in my career, all whom have helped me understand that very few (if any) skills in the business world are natural.

More fundamentally, they have helped me understand that most things are not intuitive. There is no such thing as a natural leader, just like there is no such thing as a natural Olympic gold medalist or a natural rocket scientist. Soft skills are not soft at all. They are just more nuanced, harder to teach, and harder to learn. In fact, a very rational argument could be made that it's easier to master statistics or coding and perhaps far harder to master how to read a room during a big presentation or give a life-changing review to an employee.

I have spent most of my career in and around communications agencies, Fortune 500 companies, marketing entities, and consultancies, and I can tell you that the secret path to the C-Suite relies on the accumulation of soft skills. The best leaders tend to be vulnerable, are great listeners, are good communicators, have healthy paranoia senses, arbitrate tension well, create trust quickly, motivate others, and speak plainly.

Sadly, in too many circles, that list can be tossed aside as soft skills that come naturally to some and not to others. How many of us have heard someone say, "Well, Billy is a people person. He is just a naturally good listener." We were told that certain folks naturally "put others at ease" or "can sell ice in a snowstorm." Because these things appear to come so easily to some, we got brainwashed into thinking the talents were innate. We also assumed, often with jealousy, that our friends with engineering degrees were smarter and more important.

I am in violent disagreement with that hypothesis. Learning how to be a great listener, for example, is no different than learning how to be a master at using Excel. Each skill can be broken down into parts to practice, use, and optimize until mastery is reached. However, where there are literally thousands of books, courses, and videos on how to master Excel, there are only a handful of credible books on how to be an active listener or to build trust. Further, most of those books tend to be written from a vantage point where everything is seventy-two degrees and sunny, whereas the truth is that soft skills tend to be most useful when things are chaotic, tense, and high stakes. So why is it the case that so few books exist in this area of industry to help people navigate and improve their soft skills?

The problem has three origin points. First, most employees do not realize how critical these softer skills can be. Second, the journey to mastery necessitates self-reflection and vulnerability, and neither are comfortable emotional states for the average worker. Third, there are just not many good books on this topic and even fewer teachers.

We are failing our future leaders. We are taking individual contributors who did well at their craft and putting them in charge of many other young workers. We are then disappointed when they don't lead well. We are surprised during their first review cycle that they demotivate more people than they motivate. We are surprised when they can't seem to arbitrate arguments on their team or they do not know how to run a meeting with twenty people in the room.

If you are reading this book, it is because you want to grow as a leader and ensure you personally invest in more soft-skill acquisition or because you want to find more ways to pass it on to others. Even more specifically, in certain fields like advertising, marketing, creative, consulting, and most marketing communications businesses, the difference between thriving and failure is emotional intelligence and true understanding of those around you.

At the end of the day, what makes a great leader in this business is the ability to deal with the hard things, to anticipate complex moments, and to work around them successfully. Navigating those moments is what defines your career.

Here are some examples of those hard things:

- How to have a conversation with a client about fees they think are too high.
- How to tell an all-star employee they no longer seem to be an all-star.
- How to tell a client you overspent their budget by \$220K. Oops.
- How to recognize when your product is poor and when the market beat you.
- How to listen for signals that your business is in trouble.
- How to convey bad news to your boss faster than good news.
- How to indirectly influence creative, production, sales, product, or executive management.
- How to arbitrate an argument between analytics, creative, and media.

It's dealing with those hard things and all the accompanying nuances that inspired me to write this book and share the benefit of all the amazing advice I have received, as well as the lessons I'm still learning.

Whether you work at a services company, an agency, a consultancy, a customer group at a Fortune 500 company, or any company or division that has clients (internal or external) in need of leading, I expect this book will be applicable to you. I hope it's a book you can share with those curious souls you work with who are trying to hone their craft. I have been so lucky to have been taught what seems unteachable, and my main purpose in writing this book is to pay it forward.

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