

Wayne Rivers:

Hello, this is Wayne Rivers at The Family Business Institute, thanks for tuning in as always.

This week, I'm joined by our senior consultant, Mike Flentje, and the reason that I wanted Mike to come on this week was because I wanted him to delve into a thing he said at Boot Camp that really, really fascinated me. We were talking with these high potential rising construction leaders and Mike made the comment, "The soft stuff *is* the hard stuff." So, Mike, tell our listeners, our viewers, what you meant when you said that to the Boot Camp group.

Mike Flentje:

Thanks Wayne. To everyone, great to be with you today. So, what we're really talking about here, are hard skills versus soft skills. And the best way to maybe talk about them is sort of compare and contrast, you know, what are the differences in the two. So really, a lot of the differences are driven by how you obtain them and then how you use them. And the way you obtain hard skills is typically going through some formal education, college, certificate program, or some sort of formal training. And it's really about black and white stuff. A way to describe it would be the STEM arena – science, technology, engineering, and math. These are things that are black and white. They're things that, you know, there's pretty much the facts and the concepts, and they don't really change. Black and white, again, every hard skill isn't easy for everyone to accept, because some are a little more complex, but the bottom line is they're pretty much written in stone.

Now, the soft skills, while they are defined, they are driven more by your life experiences. What you observed with respect to these soft skills and your personal and professional lives as you grow and mature, really sort of set your own personality traits. You have some inherent, but they're reinforced or adjusted, based on what you see in your life experiences. And really, what the result is in obtaining those hard skills is you're obtaining technical acumen, and on the soft side, you're developing your personality traits. And then the way it's used is, I have a saying that I use a lot – *"It's your attitude not your aptitude that determines your altitude."*

So, for me, the attitude part are the soft skills and the aptitude part are the hard skills. And that's what really drives the success. You can have two people go through identical curriculum or learning the hard skills, the technical things, and have totally different levels of success, and the organizations, and it's because of their attitude, it's because of the soft skills they're employing.

Wayne Rivers:

So, if we get our hard skills via training and education and formal classroom stuff and study, then how do you develop the soft skills? I mean, I am not a naturally empathic person necessarily, so how do I go about developing that stuff if I'm inclined to do so?

Mike Flentje:

Well, certainly, you know, there are some training courses that kind of go over some basic concepts, and that just gives you an outline of what you need to do to develop those soft skills. It's up to you to sort of fill in the blanks of that outline, to really develop those skills. You think about leadership, there's all sorts of leadership courses, but you don't really develop your leadership memory muscle until you see it and you try it and you observe the results and determine what will work best.

I think that in this way, the soft skills are more difficult to develop. The soft skills require a personal exchange, whether you're observing or whether you're speaking with a mentor or a coach or whatever, it requires a personal exchange and it's ongoing. You know, the technical skills, you kind of go to that course and you've kind of learned, Hey, you have to use

those skills in your occupation, or you'll lose them. The soft skills are more difficult in that way, because they require personal engagement and they are ongoing throughout your career.

Wayne Rivers:

So, is it fair that we sometimes associate the soft skills with older people? And the reason I bring that up is because it seems like people get the hard skills first through formal education and training. And then later on to develop to that next level of leadership and become a senior leader in an organization, you have to have some soft skills to be able to relate to people, to communicate with them, to listen to them effectively, et cetera. So, is it fair to say that older people have better soft skills? Do you and I have better soft skills than a 30-year-old?

Mike Flentje:

Well, I don't necessarily think that's the case, because some older folks have a mindset that, you know, they just view it as all touchy-feely stuff, and they don't, you know, "Let's just get the job done, let's just build that building." Right? And, I mean, they're a product of their environment, their dads and moms and all, we're probably like that. And it's just, again, it's something you learn because you've been in that environment your whole life. So, I think if anything, older people are less inclined to understand the value and have the soft skills, but the ones who are very savvy, at least even semi-savvy, recognize that those soft skills are critical to success. You can certainly run a very adequate business with minimizing soft skills and focusing on the technical stuff. Like if you want to have a truly outstanding and high performing business, you have to incorporate the soft skills in order to get there.

Wayne Rivers:

All right, so there's the question, nature versus nurture. So, I wasn't born with any soft skills whatsoever.

Mike Flentje:

I know, some day you'll develop them.

Wayne Rivers:

But eventually some of the rough edges have gotten worn off. So, is nature in charge or is nurture? Can somebody like me, who's sort of rough around the edges, learn the soft skills, just as I learned technical skills way back when?

Mike Flentje:

Anyone can learn the basic concept, the leadership. I'd say you can go to a leadership course, you can understand the basic concepts of servant leadership or other leadership concepts, but you truly have to embrace the change. If you're not like that, and you think the soft skills are a bunch of hooey, you've, number one, have to get your mind right, you have to embrace the change and say, "I need to get better at these things." And then you have to commit to it, and it's something that you need to work on. If you're a leader and let's say you have a meeting and you go in and you say, "All right, we just won this job, we're going to get this thing built on time, on budget, no problems. And, oh, by the way, we just implemented Procure, so that's going to be great for us. It's going to be a fantastic job."

And you go and you think about it, well, maybe a better way to communicate would say, "Yeah, we're going to do all that, but let me tell you why it's important to the company's growth and development, why we're implementing this Procure, what it's going to do for us, what we've established in terms of training and communication, to make sure that you know

how to use Procore and we can get all of its benefits.” That's when you begin to recognize that I can do better if I utilize these soft skills a little better.

Wayne Rivers:

And hopefully before you've made a change, such as moving to a different software package, you've integrated the team in decision making.

Mike Flentje:

Exactly, exactly.

Wayne Rivers:

Outstanding.

All right, Mike. Thanks very much, we appreciate it. And thank you, we'd like to have your comments on how you see hard skills versus soft skills in your company and in the construction industry. Thank you, this is Wayne Rivers.