

Becoming a Soft-Side Accountant

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Most of us in business spend a great deal of time measuring. We keep close tabs on sales, profits, rate of growth, and return on investment. In many ways, part of being an effective leader is setting up systems to measure everything that matters. It's the only way we can know for sure how we're doing.

Give our addiction to measurement and its documented value you would think that we would be more attuned to measuring the "soft-side values" in the workplace: how often we're rude to people, how often we're polite, how often we ask for input rather than shut people out, how often we bite our tongue rather than spit out a needlessly inflammatory remark. Soft values are hard to quantify but, in the area of interpersonal performance, they are as vital as any financial number. They demand our attention if we want to alter our behavior and get credit for it.

About 10 years ago, I decided that I wanted to be a more attentive father. So I asked my daughter, Kelly, "What can I do to be a better parent?"

"Daddy," she said, "you travel a lot, but I don't mind that you're away from home so much. What really bothers me is the way you act when you are home. You talk on the telephone, you watch sports on TV, and you don't spend much time with me."

I was stunned, because one, she nailed me and two, I felt like an oafish dad who had unwittingly caused his daughter pain. There's no worse feeling in the world. I recovered quickly, however, by reverting to a simple response that I teach all of my clients. I said, "Thank you. Daddy will do better."

From that moment, I started keeping track of how many days I spent at least four hours interacting with my family without the distraction of TV, movies, football, or the telephone. I'm proud to say that I got better. In the first year, I logged 92 days of unencumbered interaction with my family. The second year, 110 days. The third, 131 days. The fourth, 135 days.

Five years after that first conversation, even though I was spending more time with my family, my business was more successful than it had been when I was ignoring them. I was beaming with pride, not only with the results, but also with the fact that, like a skilled soft-side accountant, I had documented them. I was so proud, in fact, that I went to my kids, both teenagers by this time, and said, "Look kids, 135 days. What's the target this year? How about 150 days?"

My son, Bryan, suggested paring down to 50 days. The message: You have overachieved.

I wasn't discouraged. It was an eye-opener. I was so focused on the numbers, on improving my at-home performance each year, that I forgot that my kids had changed, too. An objective that made sense when they were 9 and 12 years old didn't make sense when they were teenagers.

Soft-side accounting has other benefits. If you track a number, it will remind other people that you are trying. It's one thing to tell your employees or customers that you'll spend more time with them. It's a different ball game if you attach a real number to that goal, and people are aware of it. They become much more sensitized to the fact that you're trying to change. They also get the message that you care. This can never be a bad thing.

Everything is measurable, from days spent communicating with employees to hours invested in mentoring a colleague. All you have to do is look at the calendar or your watch and count.

Once you see the beauty of measuring the soft-side values in your life, other variables kick in, such as the fact that setting numerical targets makes you more likely to achieve them. Another measurement that I tracked was how often I spent 10 minutes each day engaging my wife and each of my kids in one-on-one conversations. Ten minutes is not a long time, but it's a significant improvement on zero. I found that if I measured the activity, I was much more likely to do it. If I faltered, I always told myself, "Well, I get a credit toward the goal, and it only takes me 10 minutes." Without that measurable goal, I was much more likely to blow it off.

Creating an income statement for the soft stuff will make you a better leader even when your teenagers want less of your time.