0025 The Soft Skills Myth

The Fundamental Preface · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/0025-the-soft-skills-myth/

We've developed the habit of referring to people skills as "soft skills." It's the biggest oxymoron in the lexicon of workplace bullshit.

The people stuff is extremely hard. And because it's hard, we dodge it. We stop trying. We eat the turnover. We paper it over with fads, free donuts, and "fun" mandated by some HR pinheads sitting in the chain's HQ, whose only operational experience comes from their expense account picking up the check once a month.

The industry tells a story about skills. The hard ones are the ones with numbers attached — food cost, labor percentage, prime cost, covers, average check, turn time, kitchen throughput, P&L literacy. The soft ones are everything else — leadership, communication, culture, hiring, coaching, conflict, presence, the ability to read a room.

The story is exactly backwards.

The so-called soft skills are the hardest skills in this business. They take the longest to build, the longest to recover when you lose them, the longest to teach to someone else, and the longest to recognize you're missing. The numbers can be learned in a quarter. A single decent CFO or a single piece of software will close most of the gap on the financial side in months. Nobody — no consultant, no software, no hire — is going to close the gap on whether you can walk into a room and read what's actually happening in it. That one is on you, and it takes years.

Calling those skills soft is how the industry gives operators permission to neglect them. Soft sounds optional. Soft sounds like a personality trait. Soft sounds like something you either have or you don't, so why work on it. Soft is the word that lets an operator look at the part of the job that's actually the hardest and decide it doesn't count as work. It counts. It's most of the work.

The operator who can read the room, name what they're seeing, ask the right person the right question, build a cast that doesn't need to be managed shift by shift, and hold a standard without flinching when it costs them something — that operator runs circles around the one with a tighter food cost and a colder room. Every time. For forty-four years, every time.

I'm going to stop calling them soft skills. I'm going to call them what they are: the operator's actual skills. The ones the Operator's Doom Loop punishes you for not having. The ones the five fundamentals are built on. The ones nobody can do for you and nothing can replace.

The numbers matter. Nothing in this work is going to tell you they don't. But if you came here looking for a tighter spreadsheet and a sharper P&L, you came to the wrong place. The spreadsheet is downstream. The P&L is downstream. The room is upstream. The cast is upstream. The standard is upstream. You are upstream of all of it.

That's why the rest of this work is structured the way it is.

Gallup's 2026 State of the Global Workplace report found that employee engagement declined for the second consecutive year worldwide. This isn't a "you" problem. It's an "everywhere" problem. The question is whether you're going to be one of the operators who does something about it.