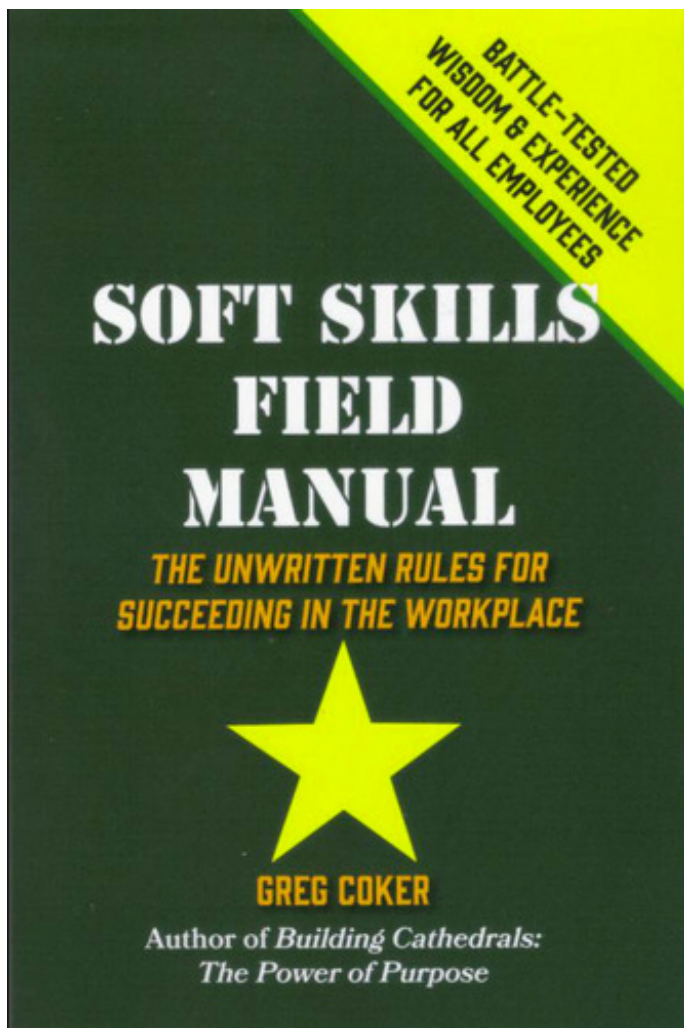


‘Soft Skills’ inspires reviewer

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“Soft Skills Field Manual: The Unwritten Rules for Succeeding in the Workplace” by Greg Coker. Harrodsburg: Soft Skills Boot Camp HQ, 2016, 316 pages, \$20.



“While not an entirely new term, ‘soft skills’ commonly refers to personal attributes that enable one to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people,” Greg Coker explains near the beginning of “Soft Skills Field Manual: The Unwritten Rules for Succeeding in the Workplace,” his new treatise on the increasing importance of human relations competencies in the contemporary workplace. “Soft skills contrast to hard or technical skills, which are generally more easily quantifiable and measurable.”

“I would be the first to say the ‘hard skills’ are the most important,” he continues. “We wouldn’t be in business if it weren’t for the products we produce and the services we provide. But now more than ever, even the most technically focused managers are realizing those products and services are being minimized and slower to market absent the much needed ‘soft skills.’”

As someone who has spent a fair amount of time engaged in the kinds of professional development activities Coker’s exquisitely written primer is designed to augment, I immediately recognized the intrinsic wisdom

contained on virtually every page. In fact, it is obvious from page one he knows his subject matter intimately. Having been in several senior leadership positions during the course of his lengthy and distinguished career, Coker knows what it takes to be successful in today’s fast-paced global market. More importantly, he knows how to articulate the insights he has gleaned through his boots-on-the-ground experiences with leading others in a powerful and motivating manner. With this particular volume, you definitely get the impression that this is someone who “walks the talk.”

“Soft Skills Field Manual” consists of 30 relatively brief yet distinct chapters, each devoted to a different aspect of leadership. Coker covers all the bases while doing an exemplary job of educating the reader about the qualities and characteristics that tend to precipitate world-class leadership. But Coker doesn’t stop there. At the conclusion of almost every chapter, he provides a “questions for consideration” section in which he presents several thought-provoking queries designed specifically

to spur additional reflection over the material he has just delivered. For instance, chapter 23, “The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership,” deals with the work of celebrated and often-cited researchers Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, who found that exceptional leaders tend to engage in five behaviors. Briefly, they tend to model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart. After a concise description of each of these actions, readers are encouraged to answer three questions about how they see themselves employing these practices personally as well as for the benefit of the organization as a whole.

Coker has more than 25 years of experience as a senior manager with three Fortune 500 companies. The founder of The Cathedral Institute, a full-service leadership development and consulting firm, the author is also a registered lobbyist who advocates for clients at the local, state and federal level. In demand as a keynote speaker, workshop presenter and corporate trainer, this is his second book, the first being “Building Cathedrals: The Power of Purpose,” which was published in 2012 and reviewed in the Sept. 2, 2012, Daily News.

The 28th chapter, “Organizational Dynamics,” is perhaps my favorite and one I believe many readers would be able to relate to on multiple levels. Most of us work in environments that are inherently political; i.e., power struggles and hidden agendas tend to affect the quality of our interactions with supervisors, colleagues, team members and subordinates – sometimes to the point of making us doubt our ability to be successful in the performance of the duties and responsibilities associated with our jobs. Coker’s sensitivity to our plight is uncanny, as is his advice about how to best negotiate the challenges we all encounter when working with other people.

“Organizations are paradoxes,” he writes with the wisdom of an insider. “They’re wonderful places; they’re horrible places. They build employees up; they tear employees down. They’re good for one’s self-confidence; they’re the reason many are in therapy. Because most organizations model their structure and governance from military operations, they tend to be both autocratic and hierarchical in nature. One of the most blatant forms of an organizational caste system is the level placed on employees that determine pay and responsibility.

“Be aware of organizational dynamics without becoming obsessed with where you are and where you desire to be,” he continues, offering some good advice, especially for the less-experienced manager. “As a leader, demystify pay grade levels and the titles that divide. Don’t wear your position on your sleeve. Employees are keenly aware of who’s in charge and where they fall in the organizational hierarchy. Pay close attention to the subtle signs that discriminate (parking, perks). Keep your head down and do the best job you can do. You’ll be noticed and get ahead.”

If only I had attended one of Coker’s workshops earlier in my career, perhaps I could have saved myself quite a bit of heartache and frustration. As I constantly remind my graduate students, experience is always the best teacher – but it doesn’t have to be your own experience. Learning from those who have been where you want to go is an efficient and powerful way to acquire the knowledge and skills you will inevitably need to be successful in both work and life. If you are looking for someone to emulate as you aspire to move up the proverbial corporate ladder, you might want to consider Coker as a potential mentor.

Just in case you haven’t already picked up on it, I enjoyed “Soft Skills Field Manual” immensely. It’s inspirational, but Coker’s observations, clarifications and recommendations are also concretely anchored in reality and a trial-by-fire sensibility that is in short supply these days.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.