



POWER SKILLS

By Vera Jacobson-Lundeberg

ARE YOU TIRED OF HEARING ABOUT THE NEED FOR NEW HIRES TO POSSESS SOFT SKILLS?

Every article I read regarding workforce development has the same message: People are hired for their hard skills, but are fired for their soft skills. Yes, we know that. Yet every new article seems to have

been written by someone who stumbled on a new finding that results in the same old message.

Frankly, I think a lot of people don't know what "soft skills" are. Perhaps what's contributing to the confusion around the term is the sheer number of ways they're

referred to: "employability skills," "success skills," "non-cognitive skills," and, lately, "essential skills." These are vague terms, without clear definitions or meaning.

After doing research and completing my doctoral thesis, I renamed them "power skills" because of the power they hold

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for all students—the power to communicate with and relate to the world around them. Without a working knowledge of these skills, students are at a disadvantage in the globalized economy. If students do not learn these skills around the dining table, then I propose the educational system needs to incorporate them into the curriculum, which many are doing. This is the only way to create an equitable workforce and, therefore, an equitable life.

The Common Core State Standards have incorporated listening and speaking standards (*i.e.*, power skills) into mainstream education, thereby expanding education’s objective to prepare students for both college *and* career success. These skills can be organized into three broad categories: interpersonal (teamwork), thinking (problem solving) and personal (self-management). In other words, the standards include interpersonal behaviors, language ability and relationship strategies, all of which, when combined, ensure positive and successful human interactions.

I am writing this article to increase the educational community’s awareness of power skills; however, before I offer my recommendations for teaching these skills, I want to share some educational, personal and professional aspects of my own story so that you can understand why I am so passionate about this growing field.

Educational

I went back to school in my mid-30s to study theater. When we did character research, we were instructed to study people in their ordinary lives, paying close attention to details such as facial expressions, body language, nonverbal communication, gestures and myriad other human behaviors. We were also trained to study verbal sounds that do not use words; in fact, we learned to speak gibberish to each other so that we could communicate in our own made-up language.

For example, the character that comes to mind is Col. Frank Slade, artfully played by Al Pacino in *Scent of a Woman*, who continually exclaims, “Whoo-awwww.” We never really know what that means, but we can guess that sound was to show excitement; it is part of that character’s personality and is significant throughout the movie.

Being trained as an actor showed me the important role power skills play in all sides of life.

Personal

My daughter is autistic and by definition has trouble communicating and socially interacting with others. The doctors did not know she was autistic until she turned 14, but as her mother, I instinctively knew something was wrong with her social messaging. When she was in eighth grade, I would turn off the sound of the TV during *The Dating Game* and ask her to guess which bachelor was being chosen just by watching the facial expressions and body language of the bachelorette. Sometimes she guessed correctly, other times not.

Because of my theater education, I realized where she needed help perceiving and understanding the social cues normal children could read by observing nonverbal gestures, body language and tone of voice. Because her handicap was a mystery to me, I read a lot about soft skills, or what researchers refer to as “social skills.” I purchased books that helped me teach a formal social skills curriculum to her. Only through learning communication and collaboration strategies would she be able to lead a self-sufficient life.

Professional

I went into teaching in 1994, and I have made a point of embedding power skills into the various courses I have taught as a classroom teacher. For the bulk of my teaching career, I chose to work with

students from marginalized populations; I was also the department head of a program for at-risk youth for several years.

In 2005, I took a team of teachers to a workshop where the presenter told us, “We hire them for their hard skills, but we fire them for their soft skills.” The presenter explained that employers consistently complain that the educational system does not properly prepare students for the real world by educating them in the art of communication and the other power skills. As teachers who worked with marginalized youth and whose students were in need of basic training in these areas, the team and I were immediately intrigued.

When this team and I visited Genentech, a large biotech company headquartered in San Francisco, we were given a tour of the workspaces. We couldn’t help but notice how quiet and sterile the environment was. People talked in hushed tones so that their coworkers could concentrate on their lab work. We could not picture our boisterous and loud students succeeding in an environment such as this. Although we had an outstanding biotech program at our school, which many of our students were enrolled in, I knew they would not succeed unless we also taught them power skills.

The team and I agreed that we would each teach our students some of the lessons I had used in the social skills curriculum I purchased for my daughter. For example, I chose tone of voice, active listening and body language. The others taught how to receive a compliment and the value of eye contact. After three weeks, we reconvened and shared our findings. All of us reported that the behaviors of our students had improved significantly, including more self-control and voice control. We knew we were onto something.

I went on to take many trainings in this field, and I became a certified power

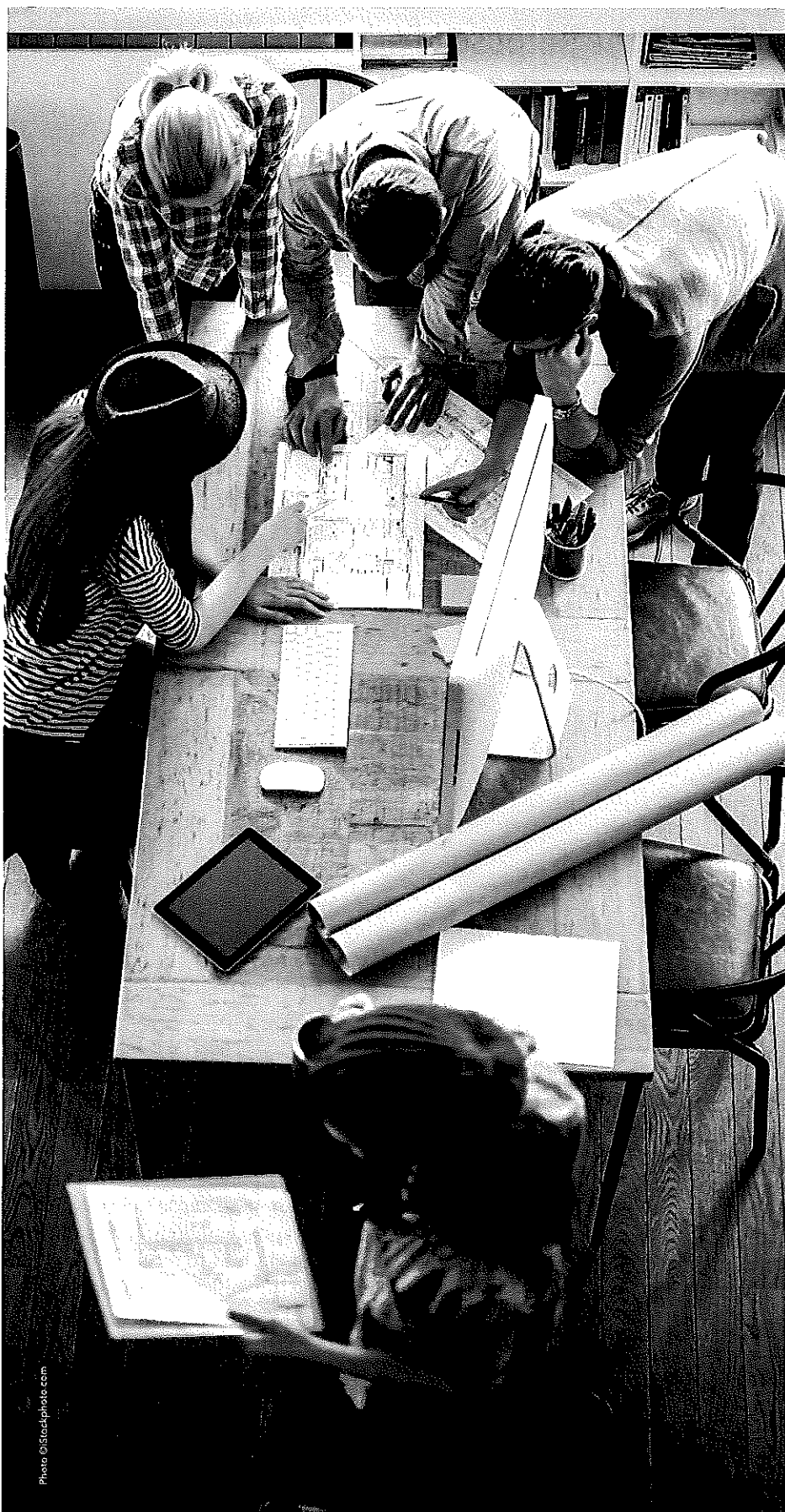


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skills trainer in 2007. When I took the position as career and technical education director for my district, I created professional development workshops for teachers and their students. During this time I met with staff from 13 local companies in the Silicon Valley region, and I asked, "What should our educational system teach students to better prepare them for success in life?" The answer was loud, clear and unanimous: We will teach them the hard skills for our particular company. You should teach them the universal soft skills of work—ethics, communication and collaboration.

Research and Recognition

In 2010, I entered a doctoral program at my local university, and my research focused on the perceptions of 21st-century skills. The title of my thesis was "Empowering Marginalized Youth with 21st-Century Skills." Since receiving my doctorate, besides renaming soft skills, "power skills," I have given a number of talks on my doctoral research findings, as well as facilitated professional development workshops to teachers on embedding power skills into their own curriculum.

Because of the reform movement that the Common Core recently brought to the United States, this body of knowledge is now recognized as having legitimate value. Educational leaders are seeking knowledge regarding this research, and many conferences include best practices on their agendas.

Making Power Skills Your Own

The following are my three main recommendations for incorporating power skills into the educational system:

- Implement project-based learning (PBL). PBL supports students working together in small teams to solve real-world problems. The students actively engage in investigative work, drawing from what they already know to what they need to know. PBL encourages students to improve their problem-solving, research and power skills.
- Strengthen teacher training programs. A course devoted to power skills for 21st-century behavior for the classroom is my recommenda-

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tion for new teachers. New teachers can be instructed to implement 21st-century behavioral competencies into their classroom, or the skills can be directly embedded into the teacher training curriculum. Not only would this help new teachers with classroom management, but it would also prepare students for achievement in all areas of their lives, including college and career.

- Provide professional development workshops for teachers. An ongoing series of workshops devoted to power skills can be managed

through school districts or county offices of education. The vision is to teach practical instructional strategies, starting with communication and collaboration. A survey of teachers and administrators could identify specific skills needed locally.

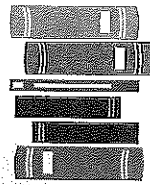
Conclusion

If competition drives innovation, and innovation is driving our economy, then let’s innovate and teach power skills in our classrooms, ensuring that students are competitive and are on the road to success. Knowing the practical and basic rules of

personal human interactions has become a survival skill in the globalized world. Focusing on our students’ lives is the purpose of education, and recognizing the need to teach power skills to all students is a good start. I hope that calling them power skills will change the way educators view them. Power skills will empower students. **Tech**

Vera Jacobson-Lundeberg, Ph.D., is passionate about power skills and has created workshops for teachers; given talks at national and international conferences; and lobbied at the state and federal levels. E-mail her at vjlundeberg@smcoe.org.

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