

DIFFERENTIATING SOFT AND HARD LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Rosie Steeves, PhD

Organizations have come a long way in recognizing the importance of “the softer side” of leadership. Unfortunately, it can be rare to find the effective application of soft skills where high standards in business results are also achieved. Instead of compromising the hard stuff for the soft stuff, what matters is how leaders do what needs to be done to win.

This is simple but not necessarily easy.

The idea of differentiating soft and hard skills is not new, though it has re-emerged in the business world in recent times. There are many ways to describe similar sets of behaviours: social vs. technical; relational vs. task; attributes vs. results.

It’s worthwhile noting that all of these differentiations are somewhat simplistic when, in reality, leadership is far more complex. There is always a danger in presenting two ends of a continuum. It creates a pendulum of sorts, with people thinking they need to choose one or the other, swinging madly between extremes. This is part of the problem and reason for the re-emergence of the soft versus hard skills debate. .

Soft skills refer to the following: inspiring, motivating, communicating, listening, and empowering. They reflect genuinely caring for people, connecting on a deeper level, and seeing into the heart of what makes others tick. Leaders create synergy and spark in others when they live the value of “people matter”. You can’t fake this. When you walk into an organization where soft skills are practiced, you can sense it. People do business with a sizzle that comes from knowing you are important and that you understand the contribution you are making.

On the other hand, leaders that lack these attributes alienate employees and fail to get the best out of people, resulting in organizational mediocrity. There is something missing, and everyone knows it. Destructive emotions abound and water-cooler venting is often the norm.

Such leaders often lean too heavily on the technical, “hard” skills, oblivious to the importance of building effective relationships and teams. These leaders see the people part as an add-on to the “real” job. Some even consider it a nuisance and rarely take any time to address others’ needs, ideas, motivations, issues. They are just too busy with “more important things”. While the technical aspects of the job get done, the business does not excel.

Many leaders have misinterpreted how soft skills play out most effectively in the business world. Perhaps this is due to the lack of quality education about what soft skills really mean. Shockingly, less than 1/3rd of the top 50 business schools in the US require courses in soft skills.

This misinterpretation means that converts to the softer side too often end up wishy washy and overly “nice”. Soft skills show up as overly polite, weak, indecisive, faltering, and unfocused. Somehow, in our efforts to learn how to relate to people in the workplace more effectively, we can lose site of the big picture and the bottom line. The impact is that organizations end up being nice and weak, rather than respectful and strong.

To be respectful and strong means leveraging soft skills to accomplish the hard stuff. Some refer to this focus as “playing hardball”. Business leaders must maintain an unwavering focus on striving for competitive advantage, but HOW they do this is vital. Soft skills determine how leaders are when being tough, decisive, clear, focused, competitive, and delivering results.

This requires being brave, but not ego-driven, being bold without being a bully. It’s about being fierce at the same time as compassionate, empathetic, inclusive and understanding. Jim Collins refers to the most effective leaders as having ambition for the company, and being fanatically driven to produce results. At the same time, these leaders are not out for themselves, and are the first to step up and give credit to others, displaying ample doses of humility. It’s about being rigorous rather than ruthless. This is how the soft plays out when it’s integrated with the hard.

When leaders leverage their soft skills to accomplish the critical business tasks at hand, better results are achieved. In our haste to incorporate empowerment, engagement, or whatever other soft flavor-of-the-month is being touted, we cannot lose site of the reason why.

Be very clear that leadership development is not all “touchy-feely” and group hugs. Any program worth its cost will maintain a demand for tangible, meaningful results.

Tips for Organizations

- ❑ Apply the “so what” test to ensure that soft skills integrate with hard results. For example, we want to improve how people communicate in our organization so *that...*(define the result).
- ❑ If you are embarking on leadership development initiative, be sure that participants define the results they expect to achieve for the organization as a result of the experience.
- ❑ If your organizational culture is “nice”, be sure to educate people about the complexities of higher levels of soft skills. For example, how to have effective tough conversations.
- ❑ Know that leadership is complex. Simplifying it by saying that.

Rosie Steeves is principal at The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc. She can be reached at rosie@refineryleadership.com. Steeves writes in BIV monthly.