Leadership: Hard or Soft Skill?

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So often one hears leadership referred to as a “soft” skill. What does this mean? What’s the difference between hard and soft skills? What makes a skill “soft” or “hard?” Effort? Measurability? Difficulty? Importance? Why make the delineation at all?

Leadership is not a soft skill. Period. Without effective leadership, individuals, teams and organizations would not have direction and/or purpose. Without effective leadership, profitability would be based on luck, rather than on effective and skilled strategic planning. Without proper leadership, individual, team and/or organizational learning initiatives would be poorly focused. Without proper leadership, individual, team and/or organizational performance would lack the guidance and coaching required to meet customer needs. Indeed, leadership is a hard skill, period.

The real point here is that any skill, no matter what type it is, if it is required for success, is a hard skill - - and must be measured using hard performance measures that are linked to performance targets and goals. No “soft” skills allowed. If a skill can’t be linked to performance, don’t train it or use it.

Acquiring effective leadership skills requires great skill and experience. Organizations should never depend on leadership skills to come naturally, either. Sure, some people may have a higher aptitude for being better leaders than others, but acquiring effective leadership skills requires successful participation in an effective and complete development curriculum.

More importantly, becoming an effective leader does not happen in the classroom. This is only the beginning. Effective leaders must practice what they learn in the classroom - - much like the violinist who learns the key concepts of playing a particular piece in the violin lesson, but then spends a great deal of time practicing (in a safe environment, i.e., the practice room with a closed door) his/her skill so it can be successfully performed in public. Practicing is important. Practicing is learning. Practicing is learning from one’s mistakes and then trying it again and again until one finally gets it right. Practicing in a safe environment where one can learn from his/her mistakes is even more important - - no, it is absolutely REQUIRED! Remember a time when you learned something the most, fastest, and it was immediately internalized - - this most probably happened when you made a mistake!

Oh, and then there is the public performance - - the first time it may yet be a little rough because this is the first time for public performance. Public performance also requires practice!

Developing effective leadership skills requires practice - - both public and private. Learning occurs in both venues.

OK. So now we are talking about learning leadership skills. Learning implies a change in behavior. Learning implies reducing or eliminating behaviors that are non value-added and creating or enhancing behaviors that are more value-added. Value added to what? Team performance? Individual performance? Organizational performance? One would then assume that if performance is improved, business results would improve too.
If certain behaviors can be linked to performance (or the lack of performance), and performance can be linked to business measures and results, then for sure, behavior change (i.e., learning) can be measured - and measured against performance and results!

Effective leadership skills are demonstrated through specific behaviors, just as poor (or non-existent) leadership skills are demonstrated by specific behaviors. Obviously then, these behaviors can (and should) be directly linked to the level of individual, team and organizational performance. What is important when determining this link is to clarify what and how much a specific behavior impacts individual, team and organizational performance. At what level does a team or individual perform when directions and/or goals are clearly stated compared to when directions and/or goals are not provided? At what level does one perform when performance feedback is provided, compared to when feedback is not provided? At what level does one perform when performance feedback is effectively provided, compared to when feedback is not effectively provided? (It is critical to define specific behaviors that demonstrate effective feedback and specific behaviors that define ineffective feedback.)

So now we have made a pretty compelling case that leadership behaviors, skills and knowledge (or the lack there of) must be learned, practiced, are measurable, and that they impact performance. Also, some people have a higher aptitude for learning and demonstrating these skills than other. Hmm. Sounds like hard skills to me. In fact, for most individuals, the mastery of leadership skills is as much or more challenging as the mastery of any other skill.

Consider the true case studies below:

Margie is a leader of a team of appliance repair technicians for a billion dollar major retailer. Her team has been performing at the bottom of the heap for quite some time. Margie had had little leadership training. Her style (as was influenced by corporate pressure) was to ride her people hard on completing as many calls per day. (After all, that’s what bonuses were based on.)

Through a company experiment that involved identifying specific and desirable leadership behaviors and their direct link to and level of impact on specific performance measures and targets (such as trips per repair, completes per day, number of recalls, retention, cost of retraining, etc.), Margie participated in several leadership training modules that helped her set team goals, assess, give effective feedback and coach her low performing team members in a way that inspired them to “take charge” of their performance improvement, and boost and maintain team morale. No technical training was involved - Margie already was a proven technical expert in her field. Within six weeks of Margie’s training, her team had improved their performance by almost 100%. This improved performance also was easily translated (via hard performance measures) into significant added profitability. Here is empirical evidence that leadership is part of the hard the hard skill set of repairing appliances.

A major convenience store chain was losing almost 50% of their net profit to shrinkage attributed to employees. In an effort to reduce this shortage, several futile attempts were made to tighten employee surveillance systems. Finally, a consultant, after talking with several store employees, convinced corporate executives to evaluate how employees were trained in the defining and understanding of “shortage” and the responsibility and accountability towards honesty and integrity that is required of all employees. Also, store manager training in how to coach and give employees feedback was also evaluated. Just as importantly, all field employees were evaluated for job and
work environment satisfaction. The results of the needs analysis were astonishing. It was found that over 60% of floor level employees had no idea that eating that “cold hot dog” was considered stealing. Even worse, store manager shortage control, feedback and performance coaching skills training consisted of a corporate generated shortage control manual that was sent to store managers by mail, whereby managers were instructed by memo to read the manual. The feedback and coaching skills portion consisted of a short paragraph that stated “if a shortage incident occurs, have a conversation with the employee.” An additional paragraph outlined a few guidelines to help guide the content of the conversation.

It was then decided, through linking shortage awareness and coaching behaviors to specific performance measures, that training for shortage awareness, as well as practice-based feedback and coaching training needed to be developed and delivered. With three months of these training interventions, shortage was reduced by almost 8 million dollars. Wow!

So where are the “soft” skills in the case studies cited above? That’s right -- nowhere. The lesson to be learned here is that no skill that can be linked to performance measures and results is a soft skill. No matter what skill is to be trained, the skill needs to be directly linked to (and thus measured against) performance measures and goals. Now, training, any type of training, can be justified and evaluated as a real profit center versus a cost center. So when times are tough and a company has to reduce expenses, they will have to think twice about cutting one their most profitable business strategies: training!