

# Leadership Soft Skills

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## Abstract

This paper mainly discusses leadership soft skills, which comprise of collaboration or teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development or coaching, personal effectiveness or personal mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills. Leaders need to be masters of soft skills because leadership is determined by those who can demonstrate their ability to drive an organization toward excellence and results. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge and literature in leadership soft skills for educational leaders in higher education institutions. In addition, this paper also provides exposure to administrators to understand the importance of leadership soft skills besides highlighting the two relevant models. Furthermore, it also provides an advantage to administrators in developing high quality interpersonal relationships with the people who they associate with in promoting positive working environment. Leadership soft skills can be seen as providing a vital contribution for organizations and administrators in the process of developing of quality human resource.

## Keywords

Leadership soft skills, quality human resource, higher education institution

The business of operating and managing universities is becoming more and more complex in the 21st century. In today's rapidly changing society, university administrators practice their leadership styles in a type of environment characterized by unparalleled complexity and trust. In times of change and challenge, effective leadership in higher education requires university administrators to move away from the highly structured style of leadership to the collective, collaborative, and non-hierarchical style of leadership (Amey 2006). In creating and sustaining excellence in the business of higher education today, university administrators need to collaborate and work together with people they connect if they want to be successful leaders.

Recent studies indicate that 40 percent of corporate productivity is generated by people skills rather than task skills (Warren 2005). Hence, organizations depend on leaders with soft skills

because quality and motivation of human capital drive human performance in the workplace, motivate employees to contribute to the organization, and attract and retain top performers, which constitute the source of future competitive advantage (Liddle 2006). The eight components of leadership soft skills for administrators are collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/personal mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills.

Administrators in collaboration/teamwork situations need to gain cooperation and teamwork

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from a large group of people, keeping them motivated through persuasion (DuBrin 2006). In addition, administrators with good communication skills promote honesty, sincerity, and trust by listening to their employees and understanding them (Amey 2006). Similarly, administrators with initiative skills would be able to recognize issues, problems, and seize opportunities, or take appropriate actions spontaneously (Abell 2002). Leadership ability is concerned with administrator's ability to see the big picture and sharing of power with subordinates (Hoy and Miskel 2001).

Moreover, in people's development and coaching, administrators should support employees through providing feedback, counseling, mentoring, recognition and opportunities for their development (Iles 2001). Additionally, administrators actively and continuously strive to improve themselves by knowing their own capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses, through personal effectiveness/personal mastery (Abell 2002). Furthermore, administrators should analyze relevant information, take action to achieve organizational goals, and organize all economic resources to accomplish their organization's specific objectives in planning and organizing (Quible 2005). Finally, administrators with good presentation skills should be able to get things done faster and effectively through other people by communicating and presenting themselves effectively in the workplace (Odgers 2005).

There is an emergent need to view the student as a client or customer rather than product of the university. To increase the university's effort to succeed and improve over time, university administrators need to collaborate with staff, parents, and community members to foster students' academic growth. Administrator's ability to demonstrate trust, teamwork, and affection, and to remain calm, cool, and collected in difficult situations, is marked the extent to which administrators demonstrate their soft skills as they interact with subordinates and stakeholders (Hoy and

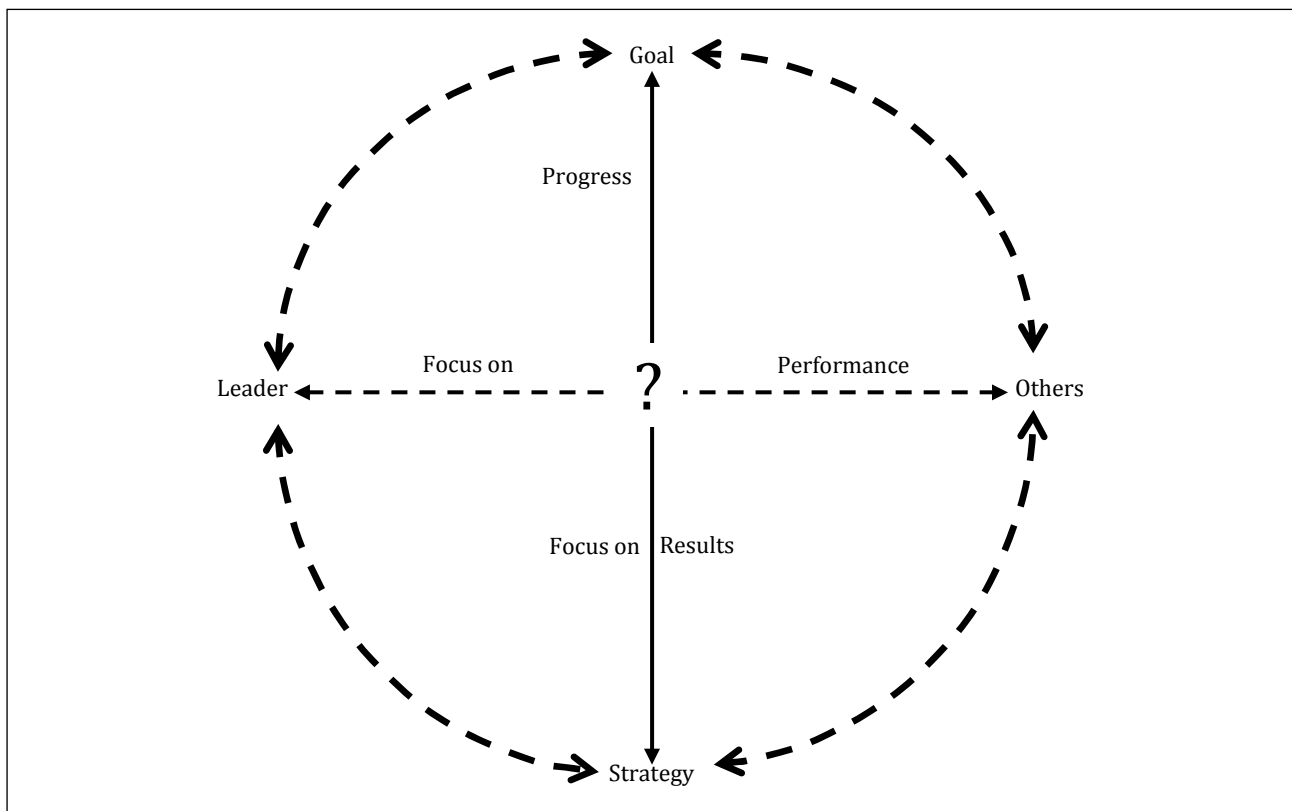
Miskel 2001).

In short, the biggest variables in a workplace are employees, people possessing complex needs, strengths, weaknesses, biases, and not to mention, fears. Therefore, organizational leaders need to help employees communicate, find meaning in their work, and work in cooperation with each other at a higher level. Synergized workforce elements of the leader include his or her ability to communicate, get along with different people, work as a team, infuse creativity, create an environment where people feel valued, and become eager to contribute to the organization. Macvicar (2006) argued that smooth running of an organization depended on leaders' harmonious relationships with staff. Leaders with soft skills recognize that each situation requires them to adjust their leadership style, or even stretch their typical or preferred way of working with others to meet the needs of the people and requirements of the situation.

## **DEFINING LEADERSHIP SOFT SKILLS**

Crosbie (2005) stressed that leaders must be focused on both results and relationships. Even though the theories on leadership are many, research suggests that leadership begins with knowing oneself, and that self-knowledge is insufficient. Although professionals like engineers, scientists, and technicians should always build on their strengths and work effectively with many people from different backgrounds, almost everyone can attain any skill or knowledge so that they are not incompletely incompetent or ignorant about it.

Figure 1 shows Tero's international incorporation leadership model involving good leadership, which is complex and dynamic, and the role of soft skills. A leader must give equal attention to the process of self-knowledge and self-development, and the fostering of relationships through the development of others, all while focusing on a clear strategy in quest of a common goal. The "hard" or strategic skills of



**Figure 1.** Tero's Leadership Model. Source: Crosbie (2005: 46).

leadership are represented by the solid line connecting strategy with goal. The “soft” or relational skills of leadership are represented by the dashed line, connecting the leaders with others. Even though some leaders handle the task with strengths in relationship building or strategy, everyone has to learn how to balance the skills that they possess with the skills they have to learn.

The leadership model depicts that all elements are interrelated and a weakness in one area can have consequences on results, relationships, or both. The heart of the leadership model is to remind leaders to continually ask questions of themselves and others (who, what, where, when, how, and why questions).

Crosbie (2005) identified the skills needed by leaders which constituted many of the personal and interpersonal skills varieties. Crosbie argued that

many of these skills were desired and needed by all individuals and eight components of leadership soft skills were collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/personal mastery, planning and organizing, and presentation skills.

### *Collaboration/Teamwork*

Collaboration/teamwork refers to that administrator finds common ground and cooperates to solve problems. In the same token, administrator effectively participates in meetings and groups, encourages and values diversity through understanding and appreciation of others' personalities, concerns, feelings, thoughts, motives, needs, skills, and competencies. In addition, administrator is considered

as establishing consensus through group discussions, helping each person to articulate his/her own opinion, sensitive to the needs of groups and individuals, open and honest in expressing his/her thoughts, ideas and feelings, while remaining sensitive to the thoughts, ideas, and feelings of others.

### *Communication Skills*

Communication skills refer to that administrator adapts communication to listeners' needs, checking listeners' understanding by listening attentively to the complete message, (including body language), restating, and questioning listeners to ensure comprehension. In addition, administrator is considered as seeking to negotiate win-win solutions to issues, clarifying problems, and resolving conflicts by being open and using employees productively to enhance quality of decisions.

### *Initiative*

Initiative refers to that administrator recognizes and reacts to problems, is self-starting, takes actions to achieve goals beyond specific job responsibilities, is not bias in taking action, readily faces up to and takes a stand on difficult issues. Initiative also refers to that administrator makes decisions and takes actions before being directed or forced, and does things proactively.

### *Leadership Ability*

Leadership ability refers to that administrator provides and communicates strategic vision to employees in order to mobilize others to act, assigns individuals suited to the job based on competencies and delegates responsibilities to optimize staff's skills. Apart from that, administrator takes smart risks to achieve innovative and effective solutions and encourages wide participation in goal-setting, decision-making, and problem-solving. Leadership ability also refers to that administrator gives employees the authority and support to make decisions, appropriately uses and

personalizes recognition and incentives to reward, sets a personal example, shows consistency and maintains high standards of integrity and ethical conduct during both good and tough times, learns from experience, gains insights from mistakes, and analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement.

### *People Development/Coaching*

People development/coaching refers to that administrator recommends and supports appropriate education/training programmes, recognizes employee's performance with positive feedback and corrective feedback to motivate employees, and focuses feedback on specific behaviour not on the individual. In addition, administrators with people development/coaching recognize exceptional contributions, and evaluate employees accurately, consistently, and on time.

### *Personal Effectiveness/Personal Mastery*

Personal effectiveness/personal mastery refers to that administrator seeks to understand and exploits personal strengths and strives to build competency in areas of weakness. Similarly, an administrator having this characteristic is personally committed to and actively works to continuously improve oneself, actively pursues learning/self-development to enhance performance, actively seeks and is open to new information and feedback from others, adjusts one's viewpoint and/or behaviour according to the situation, functions effectively, and maintains good relationships even under stressful conditions.

### *Planning and Organizing*

Planning and organizing refers to that administrator defines short- and long-range objectives, uses other resources to achieve planned goals, prioritizes quickly in an environment with many variables, pursues tasks and goals with persistence despite of daily distractions, achieves established goals by assigned deadlines, meets commitments, fulfills promises, and responds to

change with flexibility and appropriate speed.

### *Presentation Skills*

Presentation skills refer to that administrator has good presentation skills, presenting himself/herself in a professional manner, and creating a good first impression. Apart from that, administrator as effective in presenting ideas to others whether in individual and/or group situations, makes effective use of visual aids in presentations, thinks carefully about effect of words, vocal quality and non-verbal actions, and uses appropriate methods of persuasion to convince others to accept an idea, plan, or activity. Presentation skills also refer to good presentation skills that the administrator has, such as inviting input/questions from others, encouraging open dialogue/exchange of information and ideas, listening actively, and addressing the emotional position of audience members.

Crosbie (2005) emphasized that effective training facilitated people in learning new knowledge. However, she stated that people should act based on the information they had. Moreover, knowledge is important, and it must be followed with action. Finally, she concluded that leadership development was important in times of uncertainty and change as people needed leaders for guidance and reassurance in times of economic, political, and corporate turmoil.

## **MODELS OF LEADERSHIP SOFT SKILLS**

There are two models of leadership soft skills created by Felicity Somerset (2001) and Michael Cole (1999).

### *The Model of Leadership Soft Skills Created by Somerset*

With emphasis on leadership soft skills, Somerset (2001) stressed that functioning effectively in the workplace today involved taking leadership to a deeper level. According to her, this deeper level entailed developing what have been called “the soft

skills of leadership” and involved deepening the capacity of leadership which included a blend of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical skills.

Moreover, she added that the soft skills of leadership involved the mind, the heart, the body, and the need for reflection on becoming a leader. Besides that, she suggested that in coping with change, soft leadership role was required for flexibilities and responsiveness to the complexities of the outside and inside environment of the organization. Furthermore, she argued that soft skills had become more important as a person held a higher position in the organization. Somerset’s components of leadership soft skills were based on her readings of many books on leadership as well as her experience in leadership and leadership training. Her idea of the four components of leadership soft skills consisted of setting and adjusting the direction, communicating, aligning people behind the direction, and motivating and inspiring others.

The first component is setting and adjusting the direction. This implies the leader’s ability to see the big picture and defining a future-oriented vision that is forceful and attractive. For example, in setting and adjusting the direction leaders develop a vision of the future together with strategies to achieve that vision through strategic thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. In providing the framework for implementing the vision, they need to be able to think strategically, rather than tactically. In coping with change, leaders should be flexible and responsive to the complexities of the environment, both outside and inside the organization. In managing dilemmas, leaders should be able to solve problems and make decisions that will impact organization and people in it. The emotional, social, and physical skills need to be linked closely with these cognitive skills required to communicate the vision to others.

The second component is communicating which requires the leader to have communication skills, beginning with the awareness of himself/herself and the impact that he/she has on others. This means

understanding and listening to audiences and creating meaning for them. To convey the meaning, leaders need to use imagery and language. To communicate effectively, they should have the ability to use movement and voice, and communicate plans to the workforce by listening and understanding their employees. Communication pervades almost all aspects of the leader's job. Therefore, it is important for administrators to understand communication because it infuses the interpersonal, organizational, and administrative processes. In short, communication skills therefore are essential tools for an effective administrator.

In addition to communicating, the third component which is aligning people behind the direction involves a leader's ability to influence, persuade and negotiate, resolve conflict between the needs of different stakeholders, empower others, encourage participation, and function as effective team players. These skills are essential in getting people on the leader's side, to resolve resistance, and to build ownership and commitment throughout the organization. In the process, the leader must be able to manage conflict, understand diversity, create, and manage relationships and networks. All these need to be done by a workforce who is becoming more and more diverse.

Finally, in motivating and inspiring others, a leader needs to appeal to the hearts and minds of people in the organization. This requires a deep understanding of what is important to other people and how to involve them in the process. This means working collaboratively with people, being able to enlist others and understanding what matters to other people by emphasizing integrity, cooperation, trust, openness, and continuous improvement in leading their organization. Moreover, a leader's authenticity and ability in creating trust and credibility for the vision are crucial for success in the workplace. Therefore, soft leadership roles are important for leaders to foster positive attitude at work and to create a sense of contribution and importance with and

among employees and for promoting success at the workplace.

Table 1 highlights Somerset's (2001) components of leadership soft skills.

### *The Model of Leadership Soft Skills Created by Cole*

In addition, Cole (1999) argued that leaders should possess a set of leadership soft skills, critical for developing positive working relationships. He continued to define leadership as individual personalities, leader behaviour, role relationships, follower perceptions, influence over others, influence on tasks and goals, and so forth. Additionally, he claimed that leadership involved motivating a group of individuals toward achieving a common objective, reducing any conflict that may occur toward achieving that objective. Besides that, he stressed that leaders should be skilful in soft skills because many of them were severely lacking in the ability to create cooperative and productive relationships with their followers. According to him, leaders who lacked followers' support would have poor working relationships which in turn would undermine the achievement of team's objectives.

Cole (1999) stressed the five components of soft skills that every leader should practise: sensitization to follower expectations, inspiring others, building a positive effect, communicating and listening, and individuation. The first component of soft skills of Cole, sensitization to followers' expectations, involves building positive relationships with followers which constitutes an exchange process. For instance, followers' willingness to contribute depends on leader's performance. Furthermore, he claimed that the team's objectives would not be achieved if leaders failed to meet team's expectations. Therefore, in meeting team's performance expectations, leaders need to process their thinking through the followers' eyes which will then facilitate the achievement of the desired objectives.

**Table 1.** Somerset's Components of Leadership Soft Skills

Component	Description
Setting and adjusting the direction	Visioning Strategic thinking Managing dilemmas: Problem-solving and decision-making
Communicating	Awareness of self and your impact Listening and understanding your audiences Creating meaning through imagery and language Using movement and voice to communicate effectively
Aligning people behind the direction	Influencing, persuading, and negotiating Conflict management Understanding diversity Creating and managing relationships and networks
Motivating and inspiring others	Understanding what matters to other people Authenticity and integrity: Creating trust

*Note:* Source: Somerset (2001: 13).

The second component, which is inspiring others, involves leaders' behaviour impact on the motivation of their followers. Cole (1999) maintained that it was important for leaders to understand group members as they had a defined set of needs that must be met. According to him, the strength of the relationships between the group and their leader depended on meeting the needs of the followers. He further identified the needs of the followers as follows: the need for social acceptance, the need for status, and the need for control over their lives. In the need for social acceptance, followers have a need to engage in social activities as they want to be accepted and respected. In the need for status, followers want to be provided opportunities to succeed and be rewarded for their achievement. Rewards include raises which are tangible or recognition and fame which are intangible. Finally, followers need to have their own control over their lives. For example, they want control in choosing their own work schedule or working with management in improving the safety of all employees in the organization. Similarly, followers must perceive that they have some control over their work.

Building a positive effect, the third component of

Cole, involves leaders building an effective team. Cole defined a team as a group of people, committed in achieving organization goals and objectives. According to him, commitment was based on the clarification of the outcome, socialization, norms, and competent leadership.

In clarifying the outcomes, the objectives of the team or organization must be made known to all team members. In socialization, team members need to know who the other players are. Norms include leaders implementing policies or systems to encourage team members' participation, thus avoiding them from becoming social failures. Finally, in competent leadership, leaders need to understand the team's behaviours, values and needs, and to obtain feedback from team so that the team is committed to the group goals.

The fourth component—communicating and listening—involves the ability of a leader to effectively communicate with group members. A leader who fails to communicate is perceived as hiding something and is not trusted. Similarly, lack of trust between group members and their leader will result in poor performance of the group. Furthermore,

**Table 2.** Cole's Components of Leadership Soft Skills

Component	Description
Sensitization to follower expectation	Building positive relationship through an exchange process; Leaders to think through their followers to enhance the achievement of their team's performance expectations.
Inspiring others	Leaders need to understand group members' needs which are as follows: the need to engage in social activities; the need for status; the need for control in their lives.
Building a positive effect	A leader can build effective team with their followers by: clarifying the outcomes; socialization; norms; competent leadership.
Communicating and listening	Ability of a leader to communicate effectively with their followers by: building trust relationship with their followers so as to increase their group's performance; treating employees as a valuable asset of the organization; listening to employees suggestions.
Individuation	Leaders have to identify their strengths and weaknesses. To identify their strengths and weaknesses they should do the following: ask what can be done to be an effective leader; ask others for opinions or criticisms for improve-ment; practice self-assessment technique.

*Note:* Source: Cole (2001: 9-11).

leaders need to communicate with all employees as employees are considered as a valuable asset in the organization. In addition, a leader should listen to employees' suggestions as they are important for the organization. Hence, leaders should practise the following strategies: know what to say and the type of medium that will be used; listen to understand rather than force others to understand; make sure others understand what is being said by repeating what is said; and be an active listener by being open, ready to accept, and willing to learn.

The last component of Cole's (1999) leadership soft skills is individuation. This component is about leaders knowing their individual strengths and weaknesses. To identify their strengths and liabilities, leaders should ask themselves on what can be done for one to be an effective leader. Second, leaders should ask others for opinions or criticisms, and finally they should practise self-assessment techniques. Self-assessment techniques include identifying one's own weaknesses and improving on them, soliciting

feedback from others on one's own performance, observing people who are good in one's own weakness and asking questions regarding other people's skills and how they were learnt, keeping a journal of critical incidents on what is done correctly and what could be done better and make developmental plans by setting goals that are challenging, but attainable.

Table 2 summarizes Cole's components of leadership soft skills.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge and literature in leadership soft skills for educational leaders particularly in higher education institutions and for organizational leaders in general. Furthermore, it provides exposure to administrators for them to understand the importance and value of leadership soft skills in higher educational institutions. Additionally, this paper can provide an advantage to administrators



in developing high quality interpersonal relationships with the people who they relate and associate with in promoting positive working environment. In conclusion, the increasing significance of capitalizing the potential of human resources in the workplace has been widely acknowledged. Leadership soft skills can be seen as providing a vital contribution for organizations and administrators in the process of developing of quality human resource. This is particularly true in institutions of higher education and other organizations in general, as successful organizations depend on people in the organization. With that note, soft skills will continue to be an essential element of leadership in the 21st century.

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## Bio

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