

# People Skills: Developing Soft Skills— A Change Management Perspective

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This is another in a series of articles about some of the most effective models, methods, and processes of organization development (OD), also known as change management, a discipline that offers much to professionals intent on solving real-world problems. Because it is based on a systemic view of organizations, OD includes the whole universe of fuzzy people issues that increasingly determine the success or failure of efforts to implement otherwise flawless technical solutions. This article examines the increasingly important set of personal abilities known as soft skills. The primary focus is on how modern change management principles and practices can facilitate the development of soft skills, such as self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and leadership.

*Key words:* soft skills; skills development; change management; organization development; coaching; mentoring; training; self-awareness; communication; collaboration; leadership.

What are soft skills? How important are they to success in comparison to hard skills? Why are people who have good soft skills in such short supply? What is the best way to develop soft skills? How can knowledge of change management principles and practices help to facilitate the development of soft skills? In this article, we seek answers to these related questions.

## Nature of Soft Skills

*What are soft skills?* Although described in different terms, many of the definitions of soft and hard skills in the literature describe similar concepts. For example, Dixon et al. (2010) view soft skills as “a combination of interpersonal and social skills. Hard skills, on the other hand, include . . . technical or administrative” competence (p. 35). For Newell (2002), soft skills (e.g., self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill), are manifestations of emotional intelligence, and hard skills (e.g., logic, analytical thinking, rigor, and strategic, long-term vision) are indications of cognitive intelligence. Similarly, Muzio and Fisher (2009) relate hard skills to innate intelligence and soft skills to behaviors, motivation, and other aspects of human interaction.

*How can we classify soft skills?* For the purpose of this article, a useful way of classifying soft skills,

consistent with the definitions in the literature, is: (1) personal (e.g., self-awareness), (2) interpersonal (e.g., communication), (3) group (e.g., collaboration), and (4) organizational (e.g., leadership). We will use this classification later when we examine ways to develop skills that are consistent with change management principles and practices.

## Importance of Soft Skills

*How important are soft skills versus hard skills?* Based on the literature, the answer is that soft skills are very important in many disciplines, such as analytics and operations research/management science (OR/MS) (Sodhi and Son 2008), accounting (Stovall and Stovall 2009), information systems (IS) (Richards et al. 1998), finance (Dixon et al. 2010), project management (Alam et al. 2010), leadership (Newell 2002), and arguably many more. Many researchers have tried to quantify the importance of soft versus hard skills. Richards et al. (1998) report that senior IS managers, surveyed on the importance of various IS skills as employers, rated soft skills higher than technical skills. The top five IS skills these managers identify (p. 54), all of which the authors classify as business or people skills (in contrast to technical skills), are the ability to (1) interact with internal users and external clients, (2) work cooperatively in a project team environment,

(3) understand the business environment, (4) be self-directed and proactive, and (5) analyze IS solutions to business problems. Beard et al. (2008) report that a survey of 276 employers shows that the primary soft skills required by IS employers are (1) oral and written communication skills, (2) a strong work ethic, (3) teamwork skills, (4) initiative, and (5) interpersonal skills (p. 230).

In a qualitative study of project management professionals, Azim et al. (2010) determine that the key to managing complex projects is soft skills. Seventy-five percent of the participants interviewed say that people skills are the most important factor for dealing with project complexity. Less than 25 percent feel that the hard skills of process and product knowledge are most important. "People deliver successful projects and not just the application of methods and tools" (Azim et al. 2010, p. 397). The most important soft skills identified by Azim et al. (2010) are "communication, motivation, delegation, ownership and sense of achievement" and leadership skills (p. 397).

"Even at Google, technical skill ranks behind the human touch" (Bryant 2011, p. 1). In an effort to determine the characteristics of its best managers, people analytics teams at this quintessential high-tech company applied data mining to Google's internal data on management performance. Their findings strongly suggest the importance of soft skills, even in a company that ostensibly values hard skills. As Bryant (2011) reports, soft skills, such as having a clear vision for the team and facilitating employee career development, characterize Google's best managers.

## Lack of Soft Skills

*Why do so many technical people lack soft skills?* Attempting to answer this question feels a little bit like trying to determine whether leaders are born or made. However, a review of the literature did produce some ideas on the subject worth mentioning. Muzio and Fisher (2009) discuss hard and soft skills in light of Maslow's hierarchy of needs model. Maslow (1987) defines five levels of need from the most basic of physiological and safety to the higher-order ones of love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Muzio and Fisher liken hard skills (e.g., innate and cognitive intelligence) to lower-order skills (e.g., physiological

needs), and soft skills (e.g., emotional intelligence) to higher-order skills (e.g., self-actualization). In the sense that hard skills are either innate or learned through education or training, they are more prevalent than soft skills, which develop as a result of interpersonal interaction and self-reflection, much like it takes time to work one's way up Maslow's hierarchy to the state of self-actualization (which, as Maslow suggests, some people never reach).

Corroboration of the idea that hard skills (e.g., mathematics, computer programming) are learned, whereas soft skills (e.g., communication, collaboration) are developed comes from Stovall and Stovall (2009), who maintain that the root cause of why schools are graduating students who lack soft skills is that "teaching the technical skills... is something that lends itself to individual work, not group projects" (p. 102). Clearly, their assumption is that without sufficient opportunity to interact with peers or mentors, students will be less well-versed in the soft skills (which require human interaction for their development) than hard skills (which they can learn primarily on their own). Regardless of the need for soft skills, most students, particularly those in the more technical disciplines, are likely to have better hard skills when they graduate, thus placing the burden primarily on the employer to develop their soft skills.

## Developing Soft Skills

*What is the best way to develop soft skills?* To answer this question, we must understand how human beings develop. Based on that understanding, we can then decide which methods are likely, in theory, to foster the greatest development of each type of soft skill.

*Nature of human development.* There are many perspectives on how humans develop, but a holistic perspective, such that both Lewin and Bronfenbrenner advocate, has great appeal for systems thinkers like OR/MS and analytics professionals. Lewin (1951) believes that behavior is the result of interaction between a person ( $P$ ) and his (her) environment ( $E$ ):

$$\text{Behavior} = f(P, E). \quad (1)$$

Because skills are basically developed behaviors, it is a small leap to suggest that:

$$\text{Skill development} = f(P, E). \quad (2)$$

Based on this model, having a strong desire (*P*) to acquire a skill is necessary, but not sufficient, to its development. Favorable environmental factors (*E*) must also be at play. For example, a person may want to learn to play the violin, but without the money to pay for lessons will not be able to develop that skill. Similarly, a person may not want to learn mathematics, but if acquiring that skill is necessary for earning a college degree, he or she will have to develop that ability.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) takes Lewin's simple and elegant model one step further. He too sees the environment in which a person lives as a critical element in human development. However, he differentiates the environment in terms of its superstructures, which he terms the ecological environment. "The ecological environment is... a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 3). Briefly, the inner-most level (i.e., the microsystem) contains the individual and the people in the immediate surroundings (e.g., home and parents for a child); the next level (i.e., the mesosystem) consists of those systems (and the people in them) with whom the individual has frequent and important interactions (e.g., school and teachers for a child); a third level (i.e., the exosystem) includes people and events that influence the individual, but are not in turn influenced by the individual (e.g., the workplace of the parents in the case of a child); and the final level (i.e., the macrosystem) is the culture or broader society that surrounds the individual, but does not directly influence the individual on a regular basis (e.g., the educational system).

Fundamental to Bronfenbrenner's theory is the notion of ecological transition. "An ecological transition occurs whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both" (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 22). These transitions occur frequently and mark the occasions of development for an individual. For example, attending or graduating from school, accepting or quitting a job, and marrying or divorcing are ecological transitions that have significant development opportunities associated with them.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) encapsulates all these concepts in a single definition of human development

that incorporates its driving forces, ongoing process, and desired outcome:

Human development is the process through which the growing person acquires a more extended, differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment, and becomes motivated and able to engage in activities that reveal the properties of, sustain, or restructure that environment at levels of similar or greater complexity in form and content. (p. 27)

In summary, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), if you want to catalyze human development, change the systems in the environment of the person for the better. The corresponding interaction between the environment and the person will take the form of either a change in role or setting and will result in an ecological transition to a higher-order environment. If the personal motivation to change is present, the result will be individual growth and development.

For example, if you want a child to learn to read better and faster, read with that child and make it fun. This favorable change in the child's mesosystem, which constitutes a change in the role of the child from individual learner to active participant in an enjoyable and collaborative learning process, will encourage an ecological transition; in all likelihood, the child will become motivated to learn to read on his or her own. The result will be human development.

Consider a slightly more elaborate example concerning the effect of a change in the federal laws designed to eliminate all vestiges of the glass ceiling in organizations. This change in the macrosystem, assuming effective implementation, would result in workplace changes (i.e., the exosystem) that could improve the circumstances and attitude of a parent, which could in turn positively impact the microsystem of a child. For example, if the parent earns a higher salary as a result of the new laws and can afford to spend more time at home with the child, the end result could be more rapid growth of the child, attributable directly to a favorable change in the ecological environment.

*Developing soft skills in theory.* What do the theories of Lewin and Bronfenbrenner tell us about the development of soft skills? Education and training are arguably the basic mechanisms for developing hard skills (Dixon et al. 2010). Essentially, developing hard

skills requires having the personal motivation to learn and a learning environment that supports individual learning, but requires a minimum of interpersonal interaction; whereas, soft skills development requires the personal motivation to learn and a much more complex ecological environment to support the personal interaction with others, which is necessary to foster the individual's development. In theory, therefore, the development of soft skills is much more difficult than the development of hard skills because it requires actively interacting with others on an ongoing basis and being willing to accept behavioral feedback. In short, we cannot learn soft skills by reading a book. We need the help of other people.

It is not surprising, therefore, that students in academic disciplines, such as accounting, IS, finance, engineering, and mathematics, which do not require as much interpersonal interaction as, for example, management, do not enter the job market with finely honed soft skills. First, they are often less motivated to acquire soft skills by nature of their personality (*P*); and second, the academic environment (*E*) does not support the acquisition of those important skills. The job thus falls, as noted earlier, on the employer to facilitate the development of soft skills. But how can employers do this best?

*Developing soft skills in practice.* Few people would argue that teaching soft skills by means of courses or training programs does not work. Such programs have at least the potential to impart basic knowledge and provide limited opportunities for practicing each new soft skill presented. However, because of the short duration and group focus of most training programs, they can at best only initiate the process. The real development comes from continually practicing the skills and processing performance feedback, based on self-reflection or constructive inputs received from others, which fosters ongoing development of those skills.

## Soft Skills and Change Management

We have examined the importance of Lewin's work in the area of change management many times in previous articles in this series (e.g., Levasseur 2001 and 2010). Underlying Lewin's three-stage change model—unfreezing, moving, and refreezing—is the

basic field theory formulation shown earlier in Equation (1) (Lewin 1951), which suggests that an individual's response to change is a function of the interaction of his or her personality and environmental factors (e.g., pressure to change, effectiveness of communication about the change and its potential impact). Hence, the ideas of Lewin and Bronfenbrenner regarding human development, as discussed earlier, share the same theoretical framework as Lewin's work in OD and change management. As a result, the advice presented in this section for developing soft skills—at the personal, interpersonal, group, and organizational levels—has its roots in change management principles and practices.

*Personal skills.* Self-awareness is a critical soft skill for improving individual behavior. "Self-awareness involves knowing how your values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and preferences affect your behavior" (Levasseur 1991a, p. 131). Self-reflection and coaching are approaches that work well in developing soft skills (such as self-awareness). The former enables the individual to examine behavior in light of its causes and effectiveness, and the latter entails ongoing interaction between the coach and mentee until the individual has achieved an acceptable level of ability. Given its greater fit with the requirements for soft skills development, and thus its arguably much greater likelihood of success, coaching, especially when combined with active self-reflection, is an excellent method for developing personal soft skills.

*Interpersonal skills.* Effective communication is an essential soft skill for building good working relationships and influencing others. At the interpersonal level, effective communication involves the application of specific competencies, such as listening actively and providing constructive feedback (Levasseur 1991b). Because these skills are simple to learn, a training program is a viable option for developing them.

*Group skills.* The ability to work in teams is an important soft skill that modern workers must develop. Previous columns in this series examine various aspects of this core competency for modern knowledge workers, such as leading teams (Levasseur 2005), leading collaborative meetings (Levasseur 1992), and launching a cooperative learning team (Levasseur 1996).



A common element of these skills is the ability to facilitate collaborative group interaction. Equally important is the ability to work collaboratively with others as a team member. Developing advanced soft skills of this type requires a more sophisticated approach than does enhancing self-awareness or improving communication skills. Self-study and training are not sufficient. Coaching in the art of group facilitation, often provided by an OD or change management consultant, is essential to the development of good group and (or) team skills. Augmenting such expert change management coaching with mentoring by a manager skilled in facilitation can provide additional input for developing excellent group skills.

**Organizational skills.** Organizational leadership is the most sophisticated soft skill to develop and apply. Although many models of leadership exist, one is particularly appropriate in the challenging environment modern leaders face, as described in Levasseur (2004). Based on Lewin's three-stage change model (Levasseur 2001), this modern leadership model involves creating a shared vision of an ideal future state, working collaboratively to achieve the desired state, and sustaining the ideal state by continuing to develop the people, groups, and the organization itself to that end. Developing this level of sophisticated soft skill also requires coaching, which an expert in OD and (or) change management frequently provides, as previously mentioned. Supplementing expert coaching with self-development, training, and management mentoring can be an ideal approach to developing leadership skills.

Table 1 summarizes the suggestions for developing each type of soft skill—personal (e.g., self-awareness), interpersonal (e.g., communication), group (e.g., collaboration), and organizational (e.g., leadership)—described in the preceding paragraphs.

Soft skill category	Self-study	Training	Mentoring	Coaching
Personal	P	S	S	P
Interpersonal	S	P	S	S
Group	T	T	S	P
Organizational	T	T	S	P

**Table 1:** This table indicates the best methods for developing specific types of soft skills.

**Note.** P = Primary, S = Secondary, T = Tertiary.

## Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the vital topic of soft skills development to the success of OR/MS and analytics practitioners, as well as others whose formal education focused primarily on the acquisition of hard skills. In the process, we examined the nature of soft skills, their importance to success in comparison to hard skills, why people who have good soft skills are in such short supply, the best way to develop soft skills, and how knowledge of change management principles and practices—primarily through OD and change management coaching—can help to facilitate the development of soft skills. Hopefully, this knowledge will help managers facilitate the development in modern knowledge workers of those soft skills, such as self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and leadership, which are so essential to their effectiveness in today's lateral, team-based organizations.

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