



University of Phoenix®

Professional Development



# HOW TO LEAD SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

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# WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

Organizations and the workforce of the future are facing several practical and operational challenges. As technology advances, soft skills – which technology can't replace – have become increasingly important in the workplace.

The key to professional success isn't always what you know. Instead, it's about how well you play with others. Harvard University, Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center agree that developing soft skills is essential in today's job market as they account for 85% of one's career achievements. Only 15%, on the other hand, comes from mastering technical abilities.

In today's ever-evolving landscape, organizations must find creative ways of motivating and managing their workforce while giving them the tools they need to hone critical soft skills. By engaging in meaningful development initiatives such as training sessions or workshops, companies can empower their employees with valuable abilities that will help put them ahead of the competition.

**85%**

of job success comes from having well developed soft and people skills

Only

**15%**

of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills)\*

\* <https://www.nationalskills.org/the-soft-skills-disconnect/>



# THE NEED FOR SOFT SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Soft skills have become essential in the modern workforce, with HR professionals noting their growing demand for the future. They can help workers stand out from the competition, improve communication, foster collaboration and build better relationships.

Here are the necessary soft skills needed in the workplace that will help applicants future-proof their careers:

## COMMUNICATION

Strong communication skills are essential for success in any profession — from entry-level to executive. Knowing how to interact with colleagues and customers effectively can make all the difference in career growth.

## PROBLEM-SOLVING

Thinking outside the box and developing new solutions for challenging issues can be a significant asset in any professional setting. From improving workflow to helping secure future employment opportunities, creative problem-solving skills are invaluable in today's job market.

## EMPATHY

A firm grasp of empathy is a must-have asset in the workplace. It helps foster trust and mutual understanding among colleagues, allowing teams to better serve their customers' needs with compassion.

## TEAMWORK

Nothing is more essential in the workplace than developing effective collaboration skills. It's paramount for team members to be comfortable working with others within their department and outside of it — ensuring smooth operations throughout the organization.

## LEADERSHIP

Every successful business professional needs an edge in today's fiercely competitive environment, which often lies in polished leadership soft skills capabilities. Not only can these skills help build a strong team unit, but they also provide the opportunity to foster individual growth while mentoring others toward greatness.

Out of these key soft skills, the three most challenging soft skills for HR recruiters to find are problem-solving, the ability to deal with complex tasks, and communication. Luckily, HR departments can develop these skills within employees if they want the organization to succeed.



# SOFT SKILLS VS. HARD SKILLS

Opposed to soft skills, hard skills mainly focus on technical abilities. Soft skills relate more to people's interpersonal, communication, and problem-solving capabilities.



## Hard Skills

Hard skills used to be the cornerstone of success, but with digital transformation in full swing, soft skills have become increasingly important. We now live in a world where proficiency at typing and memorization takes second place to qualities like empathy, creativity, and critical thinking – these will give anyone an edge in a competitive as automation takes over more technical tasks.



## Soft Skills

Soft skills may seem intangible compared to 'hard' abilities – such as writing code or data entry – however, they can prove invaluable when leveraging existing relationships, negotiating better deals and thinking outside the box. Having both hard and soft skill sets is vital for those looking ahead toward future success.



# THE COST OF SOFT SKILLS GAPS

If employees or candidates don't work on advancing hard or soft skills alike, they may have a skills gap on their resume. On a definitional level, a skills gap is any lack of skills an employee has that a job role or position requires. Potential costs to an organization or its people that can result from gaps in soft skills include:

## Decreased productivity

Poor soft skills can be just as detrimental to productivity and success in the workplace as a lack of knowledge. Ineffective communication, weak problem-solving abilities, and inadequate leadership all cause hiccups in any workplace.

More than that, however, these inefficiencies prevent employees from having what it takes to succeed — leaving them unable to reach their highest potential.

## Lower employee retention

Soft skills form the foundation for successful work relationships and a productive environment. Without them, employees can feel isolated from their coworkers or unmotivated, which leads to decreased employee retention rates.

Gallup estimates that voluntary turnover costs U.S. businesses upwards of \$1 trillion annually. However, this number doesn't account for the additional intangible costs of low retention, such as lost innovation and further decreases in team morale and productivity.

Though the exact cost of employee turnover can vary between organizations and even different positions,

## Lack of innovation

Gaps in soft skills can also negatively affect innovation within companies, as employees need help to think outside the box and develop creative solutions when facing problems. This could lead organizations behind their competition and slow down advancements in their field.

These costs of a soft skills gap are evidence that investing in developing the right soft skill sets is

essential for today's businesses. With the proper attention and focus, individuals can leverage their existing capabilities to bridge any remaining gaps and maximize professional success.

Voluntary Turnover Costs  
U.S. Businesses Upwards of

**\$1 TRILLION  
ANNUALLY\***



\*<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/247391/fixable-problem-costs-businesses-trillion.aspx>



# THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Business leaders and HR managers should not only plan strategies for employee development but also take the initiative to assess and improve their own soft skills. By doing so, business leaders and HR managers will be more equipped in teaching and evaluating soft skills within employees to ensure success.

## The challenges of...

### teaching soft skills

Opposed to hard skills, soft skills can be applied to a variety of different situations – which makes it difficult to pick up and develop over time. Additionally, soft skills may require more practice and feedback to hone over time – which is where managers and business leaders can help out. However, since soft skills are so subjective, there are plenty of challenges any teacher may experience, including:

- **Teaching an intangible concept:** Soft skills cannot be taught through written instruction or lectures alone – they must be practiced and observed to grasp the ideas around them.
- **Addressing personal biases and preconceived notions:** Soft skill development requires individuals to challenge their beliefs and behaviors, which may sometimes be uncomfortable. There must also be a consideration when providing feedback due to varying cultural norms.
- **Encouraging personal development:** Soft skills constantly evolve and require employees to take ownership of their products. They must be open to feedback, experiences, and learning to reach their growth potential.

Though challenging, these difficulties can be avoided with the right resources and guidance. In the process, you'll foster an environment that values these skills. Organizations can then reap the benefits of a workforce equipped with strong, soft skills, allowing them to reach their full potential.

### evaluating soft skills

Evaluating soft skill development can be challenging because it often relies on qualitative data such as personal observations and self-reported information. However, some techniques measure improvements in soft skills, such as:

- **Observation:** Observing how employees interact with each other and solve problems can be an effective way to measure soft skill development.
- **Surveys:** Conducting surveys about soft skills can provide valuable insight into the progress of individuals and teams.
- **Interviewing:** Interviewing employees before and after training sessions can provide a better understanding of how well they've mastered the skills.

These methods reveal their capabilities – from strong communication skills in the workplace to problem-solving prowess – so organizations gain further insight into each individual's development.





# HOW TO LEAD SKILLS TRAINING FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION

Business leaders can better foster an environment that values soft skills by personally pursuing their own professional development as leaders and initiating employee training programs from there. This will equip them with the skillsets and knowledge needed to confidently take on a leadership role while providing employees with resources to perform their roles effectively.

With this personal knowledge, you can better ensure your training program includes the latest industry trends and best practices. Meanwhile, you can demonstrate your commitment to your employees' growth and development. You will create a more productive work environment where everyone is encouraged to reach their full potential.

To maximize the effectiveness of soft skills training, organizations should encourage their employees to improve their soft skills to stay competitive in the field.

## Communication skills

Communication is essential in the workplace, especially for leaders who must effectively handle difficult conversations.

Leaders can become more effective business communicators by regularly taking their skills to the next level. This could be done through attending seminars and workshops, reading books relevant to strategies for successful talking and listening, or participating in mentoring programs alongside established professionals. With these methods, leaders will experience teams that can converse efficiently and reach the utmost operational success.

## Problem-solving skills

Problem-solving and critical thinking skills are essential because they allow leaders to make effective decisions that ensure the success of their team or organization. Leaders can improve these skills by reading literature on decision-making, attending seminars and engaging in thoughtful conversations with peers.

They should also explore new problem-solving methods such as brainstorming, lateral thinking and strategic planning. With more practice and exposure to different ideas, leaders will be equipped to make decisions that will positively impact their teams.

## Interpersonal skills and business acumen

People skills, or interpersonal skills, are the ability to interact, relate, and work effectively with others. On the other hand, business acumen is a set of knowledge and skills that enable people to make informed decisions regarding the financial direction of their organization. While business acumen focuses on understanding how a business operates regarding finances, people skills concentrate on understanding how people within a business function.

Great leaders are equipped with the skills to balance their knowledge and understanding of both business operations and interpersonal relationships. This is key in creating harmonious working environments while allowing them to swiftly tackle an arising issues that could disrupt team morale or performance. Important people leadership skills include:

- **Motivation:** A leader must motivate their team by setting expectations and helping them understand how to reach goals.
- **Communication:** Leaders must communicate clearly and effectively with those they supervise to foster trust and understanding.
- **Empathy:** Leaders need to see things from multiple perspectives to understand their team's point of view.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Leaders should resolve conflicts among teams quickly and fairly for everyone involved to be on the same page.

HR professionals can train for leadership skills through leadership development training or seminars by industry experts or universities. With hard work and dedication, they will be equipped with everything necessary to foster successful teams within any organization.

## The 7 C's of Communication

To ensure successful communication amongst employees, they must follow the 7 C's of communication:

1. **CLARITY:** Speak in a clear and friendly manner; use language that is understandable to the listener.
2. **CONCISE:** Keep conversations short and to the point. This will help to avoid confusion and ensure that messages are understood.
3. **COHERENT:** Structure conversations logically to convey all relevant information thoroughly.
4. **CONCRETE:** Focus on facts rather than opinions to ensure that messages are understood correctly.
5. **COURTESY:** Always be polite and professional when speaking to someone, regardless of disagreements or opinions.
6. **CORRECT:** Ensure accuracy by double-checking your facts before relaying them to another person to prevent misunderstandings or incorrect assumptions from being made due to inaccurate information delivered through poor communication practices.
7. **COMPLETE:** Ensure all relevant points are covered in the conversation to ensure the intended message is fully understood.

## **Empathy**

Empathy is an invaluable and essential leadership skill that involves understanding, connecting with and responding to the feelings of others. Leaders can use empathy to foster strong relationships with their team, build trust and create a more productive work environment.

Leaders can cultivate empathy by:

- Practicing active listening and processing what is being said to them.
- Taking the time to understand how team members are feeling.
- Asking questions to better understand the perspectives of others.
- Allowing team members to express their ideas openly.
- Making an effort to show interest in what people have to say.
- Seeking advice from other people when making decisions that affect them.
- Being genuine in your interactions and avoiding being judgmental or dismissive.

Empathy helps leaders improve at problem-solving, communicating effectively, creating positive relationships and developing innovative solutions in the workplace. It also encourages collaboration, enhances morale, boosts engagement and creates a sense of unity in the workplace.

## **Teamwork and inclusivity**

Fostering teamwork as a leader is critical to creating a workplace of diversity, equity and inclusion. Allowing employees from different backgrounds to collaborate and promote empathy and understanding. Practical steps to addressing these matters include:

- An inclusive leader will learn the historical implications of inequality on current decision-making to understand the current context and make better decisions in the future. This can involve researching past policies that have had an unequal impact on minorities and learning about their experiences.
- Identifying barriers to success, such as unconscious bias or lack of access to resources and opportunities. These barriers can prevent individuals from underserved communities from achieving the same level of success as others.
- Establish clear and safe public and private communication channels open to all employees so they can express their views without fear or judgment. Additionally, there should be measures to ensure issues are addressed swiftly and equal opportunities for every employee regardless of race or gender.

Teamwork and inclusivity within the workplace are crucial to creating a productive and successful team. A leader that can build an inclusive environment will be able to motivate their teams and create synergy between different departments. This ultimately allows for improved collaboration, decision-making processes, creativity and innovation, which are essential for organizational success.



# HOW TO DELIVER SOFT SKILL TRAINING FOR EMPLOYEES

Leaders and HR managers can upskill employees in soft skills by designing a comprehensive training program. This program should be tailored to the individual needs of each employee. It should provide targeted instruction to improve communication, collaboration, problem-solving, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence and other interpersonal skills.

Whether mandatory or voluntary, soft skill training should be interactive and engaging. It can be conducted online or in a classroom setting using lectures, case studies, role-playing scenarios, presentations and other forms of experiential learning.

Soft skills training is distinct from hard-skills training, requiring coaching and continual engagement rather than lecturing or memorizing facts. The effects are often intangible but extremely valuable in the workplace. Let's dive into the specifics of each step of a soft skill training program.



## Assess current needs

An organization can evaluate soft skills by creating a structured feedback process, gathering multiple perspectives and using qualitative and quantitative assessment tools. This will allow the organization to systematically assess each employee's soft skills at scale, creating greater objectivity and accuracy when measuring success.

Leadership training programs can also help managers better identify and develop soft skills.

Soft skills training is distinct from hard-skills training, requiring **coaching** and **continual engagement** rather than lecturing or memorizing facts.

## Define objectives

To define objectives for developing soft skills in a company, it is essential to evaluate the organization's current needs first. This can be done by assessing employee performance, observing team dynamics and getting feedback from staff on areas they feel require improvement.

From there, you can design an effective learning and development program to meet the needs of each

employee. This plan should outline specific skills with developed and detailed timelines for completion. Set expectations upfront on how the training will be conducted and what success looks like. This will give employees a better picture of what they can expect and what you'll look for in their progress.

## Design a training action plan

When designing or sourcing a training program based on needs and objectives, consider the following:

- Before developing a training program, ensure you have an in-depth understanding of the desired outcomes. Ask yourself questions like what do participants need to take away from this experience? How can they apply their learning and knowledge after completion? Identify these objectives so that you can create an effective plan for success.
- Once you understand the needs and objectives well, you can start sourcing or creating materials for the program. This may include finding existing e-learning courses or creating custom content.
- When it comes to delivery, choose an e-learning design that will be easy for employees to use and effectively support the delivery of the training content.

The right program design, when combined with effective execution, can unlock an employee's potential both inside and outside the workplace. By following best practices in this field, employers equip individuals with skills that will last a lifetime.

## Create additional learning opportunities

Employers need to consider different learning styles and provide multiple learning opportunities to ensure that employees can retain information.

By understanding the differences between training and learning, employers can create a more effective education system for their employees. For example, employers can utilize seminars, on-the-job coaching, simulations, or job shadowing so that their employees have multiple avenues to obtain knowledge and skills.

Additionally, employers can host employee education courses or workshops where employees can have the opportunity to learn from colleagues or industry experts. Moreover, employers can provide online resources such as videos and e-courses for employees to review at their own pace.

All of these methods give employees a chance to engage with information in different ways. They're also able to practice what they've learned so that they can put it into action on the job.

## Evaluate progress

An effective way to measure the progress of learning soft skills is to track key metrics. This can look like the time taken to complete a task, the number of assignments completed, feedback from peers and mentors and overall performance. The criteria for evaluating soft skills should include self-assessment, manager assessments, customer feedback, surveys and peer reviews.

Tracking learning progress can also involve gathering information on engagement levels in the classroom or online training sessions. Using data derived from metrics such as these will help ensure that employees are acquiring and mastering desired soft skills.



# SOFT SKILLS ARE CRITICAL FOR TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE

Soft skills are essential for organizations to future-proof their workforce and stay competitive in the changing job market. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, employers recognize that technical skills alone aren't enough to succeed in the workplace; soft skills like communication and collaboration are just as vital to make workers highly employable. Additionally, companies have identified that employees need to have the ability to network, stay enthusiastic and remain agile in a rapidly changing environment.

Leadership and HR ensure employees develop these soft skills by offering training, mentorship, and coaching opportunities. However, it is equally important that leadership and HR continue to upskill themselves with the latest technologies and trends to succeed.

