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Getting to the CORE: Putting an End to the Term "Soft Skills"

Jennifer Parlamis[1] and Matthew J. Monnot[1]

Introduction

Few of my MBA students major in Management. The overwhelming majority of them major in finance, supply chain, accounting, risk management, or some other quantitatively oriented subject. So, when they face off with me, I tell them two things: 1) regardless of your chosen major, almost all of you are going to end up in management, and 2) because the most difficult issues in managing organizations and the people who inhabit them involve organizational and relational skills, the soft stuff is actually the hard stuff. Well, the authors of the following essay, Jen Parlamis and Matt Monnot, would probably find me guilty of perpetuating an inappropriate label when I refer to the "soft stuff." They are on a mission to convince us that we should drop the frequent allusion to soft skills and replace it with something more suitable. Given the way that the notion of soft skills has insinuated itself into our field, they would seem to have an uphill fight, but they nonetheless have a case worth making.

—Denny Gioia

Abstract

We need to retire the term "soft skills." A new vocabulary for describing critical social and organizational skills is long overdue. Substituting the acronym "CORE" (Competence in Organizational and Relational Effectiveness) for the loaded word "soft" provides a more fitting term for the important skills the term describes and, in doing so, reframes the perceptions of these key skills to reflect their importance for career and organizational success.

Keywords

CORE skills, soft skills, reframing, workplace competencies, leadership

M.B.A. students may get by on their technical and quantitative skills the first couple of years out of school, but soon, leadership and communication skills come to the fore in distinguishing the managers whose careers really take off.

—Rob Greenly, M.I.T. Sloan School of Management (Alsop, September 2002)

Take a moment to reflect on your workplace. Think of a colleague with whom you *most* enjoy working. One or more of the following attributes is likely to describe this person: collaborative, honest, positive, flexible, hard-working, fun, creative, team player, responsible. Now think of a colleague with whom you *least* enjoy working. One or more of the following attributes is likely to apply: complainer, passive-aggressive, untrustworthy, negative, competitive, political, difficult, unprofessional. Note that none of these descriptors include technical skills (so called "hard" skills). Rather, most of the descriptors are social in nature or what have been historically labeled "soft" skills. Strong technical expertise is obviously necessary for the high-skill jobs required in most knowledge work. That said, there is a developing conversation in academic and business circles concerning the importance of "soft" skills—skills such as leadership, teamwork, self-awareness, managing conflict, communicating effectively, getting along, and so on, that are essential ingredients for individual, team, and organizational success.

Integral to this discussion is the terminology used to discuss these skills. We want to retire the phrase "soft skills" and propose that the social skills found to differentiate the average from the excellent employees need a new vocabulary—some word or phrase that can encompass all of these nontechnical skills in a way that more appropriately represents their importance for workplace success. The term we propose is CORE skills.

We are not alone in believing that we need a new term. A recent NPR story (Kamenetz, 2015) posed the question: "Non-academic skills are the key to success. But what do we call them?" The answers included "non-cognitive traits," "character," "growth mindset," and "soft skills," just to name

[1]University of San Francisco, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jennifer Parlamis, School of Management, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117, USA.
Email: jparlamis@usfca.edu

a few. Some argue that these nonacademic, nontechnical success factors describe a construct in the management literature called emotional intelligence (EI), which was first defined by Salovey and Mayer (1990, p. 189) as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions. . . and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions." More recent thinking has expanded and differentiated EI to include competencies such as willingness to learn, openness to feedback, comfort with ambiguity and change, ability to negotiate and manage conflict, emotional awareness and impulse control, persistence in the face of obstacles, interest in developing and inspiring others, willingness to learn, professionalism, and positive attitude (Boyatzis, 2009). That is an impressive list. But the EI notion has not superseded the more colloquial terms that have been used to describe these nontechnical success factors, nor is it clear that when people use these terms there is consistency regarding their definition. Simply put, EI has not proven to be an adequate alternative to soft skills.

Some History of the Term Soft Skills

Before we retire the term, however, it is useful to get a sense of the historical perspective and origin of the term. Although many have studied the interpersonal skills necessary for effective management since the 1950s, it was not until the 1970s that there was a systematic effort to distinguish the elements of work that pertain to content expertise ("hard skills") from those that pertain to managing people ("soft skills"). In 1972, the United States Continental Army Command (CONARC) sponsored the CONARC Soft Skills Training Conference. The conference brought together army educators, leading scholars in systems engineering and assessment, and consultants from the Human Resource Research Organization (HumRRO). HumRRO was invited to survey and more clearly define the army's use of the term soft skills. Apparently, the army's initial definition of the term, ". . . job related skills involving actions affecting primarily people and paper, e.g., inspecting troops, supervising office personnel, conducting studies, preparing maintenance reports, preparing efficiency reports, designing, bridge structures" (Whitmore, 1972) was not very helpful for analyzing job requirements and responsibilities. Military schools were teaching course content under the guise of such terms as leadership, chaplain responsibilities, affective skills, and communicative skills. CONARC wanted to define and standardize the content taught in these courses.

They held working group sessions, composed of presenters and conference participants, at the conclusion of the presentations. Interestingly, the conference report concluded, "no distinction should be made between hard skills and soft skills and recommended that the term 'soft skills' be eliminated from systems engineering terminology" (U.S. Continental Army Command and U.S. Army Defense School, 1972). Even so, the dichotomy between soft and hard skills has persisted. The presence of soft skills training (e.g., leadership, affective and communicative skills) shows up in courses within business schools devoted specifically to organizational behavior and related content, as well as texts devoted to leadership.

Why Does This Matter?

Recent surveys of employers frequently list team skills as a most desired attribute for graduates about to enter the workforce. Likewise, recruiters often list social skills as the most preferred qualities among recent college graduates. Robles (2012) investigated the fundamental skills for the current work environment and found that integrity, interpersonal skills, responsibility, teamwork, and work ethic were among the top 10 most important attributes. MBA students and employers recognize the importance of becoming more proficient in critical thinking and social skills, and this demand clearly should lead to a greater focus on the human side of business. Without a significant change in the terminology that describes these skills, however, demand will not translate into action, and soft skills will stay in the shadows. These skills need to be legitimized; one step toward legitimacy is reframing their descriptor.

Reframing Soft to CORE

The word "soft" is too often used as a pejorative term. For example, in political contexts, people or institutions might be reprimanded for being "soft" on crime (i.e., being lenient with criminal accountability, supporting inadequate punishment for offenders, downplaying tough laws, etc.). In academic contexts, the term "soft" science has been used to define fields of study that investigate people, interactions, or behaviors, whereas fields that use measurable and controlled variables (e.g., chemistry, physics) have been described as the "hard" (i.e., more legitimate) sciences, because their means of study is considered more rigorous. Moreover, many of the synonyms listed in Merriam-Webster's dictionary for the term soft, although not all negative, nonetheless have undesirable connotations such as "dull," "debilitated," "unsubstantial," "weak," "wimpy," "characterless," "bland," "indulgent," and "cheap" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/soft). Because of these negative associations with the word soft, it is important that we retire the term and reframe the basic notion so that the term reflects the significance of these skills for workplace success.

Marketing executives, academics, leaders, politicians all understand the importance of framing. A frame is a socially constructed cognitive representation of an idea that influences reasoning and perceptions. A frame essentially assigns meaning to ideas. In ground-breaking work on the framing of decisions, Tversky and Kahneman (1981, p. 453) define a frame as "the decision-maker's conception" of acts or outcomes and describe a frame as "controlled partly by the formulation of the problem" and it is "often possible to frame. . . in more than one way." Single words or phrases (or acronyms) can be used as powerful frames to change thinking

and behavior. For example, research on women negotiators found that framing negotiations as opportunities for "asking" as compared with opportunities for "negotiation" mitigated gender differences found in previous research (Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007). Political operatives also understand the power of framing. Democrats and Republicans constantly spin (frame and reframe) concepts and policies to shift attitudes and influence voters. A few simple examples include labels such as "death tax" versus "estate tax" or "gun control" versus "gun safety" or "drilling for oil" versus "exploring for energy" or "foreign trade" versus "global trade." Given the importance of nontechnical skills for job success, the critical function of framing to influence understanding, and the pejorative connotation that "soft" implies, reframing the term is critical to evolve the positive perception of these skills and promote their elevation to a place of prominence in the academic and professional domains.

Getting to the CORE

CORE is an acronym that stands for Competence in Organizational and Relational Effectiveness. The skills that contribute to success in modern organizational life comprise those that are both relational and organizational. For example, relational skills include notions such as positive attitude, trustworthiness, effective communication, leadership ability, cooperativeness, responsibility, initiative, ability to manage emotions, team- and self-awareness. Organizational skills encompass ability to influence others, read and manage other's emotions, manage conflict, negotiate, coach and mentor, understand organizational contexts, and develop meaningful networks. The idea of CORE skills better reflects the content of the skills in this domain. Although early researchers ostensibly designated skills as "soft" if they were difficult to measure, there have been advances in the measurement of effective organizational behaviors in recent decades. A skill is the extent to which a person is able to exhibit proficiency in a particular domain. Just as we can accurately assess one's proficiency in driving a vehicle and programming computer language, modern assessment techniques make it possible to assess one's proficiency in, for example, communication and negotiation.

The term "CORE skills" avoids the negative associations related to the term "soft" and shifts to a more positive depiction of these skills. If something is referred to as "core," it connotes something essential and fundamental. Core is "a thing or place that is of greatest importance to an activity or interest" (www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/core). The meaning of core is, therefore, consistent with the underlying importance of skills the term is used to describe. Shifting the lexicon is critical to transforming the perception of these skills, so reframing the notion as CORE is more likely to increase legitimacy, broaden research attention, and expand the scope of influence to areas of training, early education, hiring practices, and much more.

Simply put, reframing of the term soft skills is about finding a more appropriate and memorable term, not just a better academic term. Our intention is mainly to prompt a conversation that pushes a change in the common lexicon as a way to better describe the importance of these skills and reflect the current thinking and research findings. We envision this new acronym, to be on par with the acronym STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), in that it becomes part of the vernacular and is powerful enough to shift conversation and perception. Ultimately, words create reality and therefore, words can change reality. Using the word "CORE" in place of "soft" provides a more fitting term for the important skills the term describes and, in doing so, might help to shift the perceptions of these CORE skills to reflect the current understanding of their significance for career and organizational success.

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