



WHELAN PARTNERS CONSULTING

There are two types of leadership skills, interpersonal or relational skills, often called “soft skills” and the more mechanical or technical skills, we call hard skills. If leadership is like a painting, hard skills are like the outline or the shapes, and soft skills are like the color. While you can have a picture without color, color without an outline is chaos. Depending on your personality type you may find that one of the sets of skills is much more natural to you than the other.

In the interest of precision, we need a clearer definition of hard and soft skills. Hard skill leadership requires clear communication and consistent execution. A good hard skill leader will make sure employees always have clarity around roles and expectations and will hold people accountable exactly to their defined expectations. Hard skill leadership requires preparation as the leader must regularly consider employee’s roles and what’s needed for the organization to achieve its objectives.

Soft skill leadership requires strong listening and high empathy. A leader with strong soft skills makes it a point to understand how employees feel, whether someone is feeling energized by a project or disenchanted with an assignment. When employees need an emotional boost the soft skill leader recognizes those needs and can provide it.

Leaders who possess strengths in either set can add value to an organization. However, lacking ability on either side will eventually manifest itself as a limiting factor to growth. Leaders and their organizations will have similar characteristics depending on which set of skills they feel most comfortable deploying. The graph below shows the different possibilities.

		Hard Skills	
		Weak	Strong
Soft Skills	Weak	Temporary	Effective
	Strong	Charismatic	Transcendent

Starting in the upper left corner, a leader with weak hard skills and weak soft skills will not last long. Organizations with this type of leadership will seem chaotic and the culture will likely become toxic. Employees will be disenchanted as the lack of hard skill leadership will create uncertainty around their roles, and the lack of soft skill leadership will manifest itself as resentment toward their leaders and job duties. Turnover in these types of organizations will be rapid and drastic. Owners with these types of leadership skills will often find themselves regularly making the decision to “do it myself,” and will find it hard to trust people in the organization.

Moving to the right, you’ll find that strong hard skill leaders are effective. Organizations with these types of leaders tend to be productive, but emotional setbacks can be hard to overcome. Sudden turnover can become an issue in these types of organizations. Since the organization won’t have leadership supporting emotional resilience, groups of employees can become disenchanted all at once leading to mass turnover. Leaders lacking soft skills should find partners within the organization to provide updates on the cultural health of the organization. A hard skill leader can handle those issues with the same sort of strategic leadership techniques that already come naturally.

A leader with strong soft skills but poor hard skills is seen as charismatic. Organizations with these types of leaders will find that employees are generally happy and very attached to their leader. The charismatic leader can get employees to get behind a project enthusiastically, but issues will pop up. Employees may have difficulty with time management and prioritizing objectives and the organization as a whole can struggle with hitting their deadlines and objectives. The charismatic leader will keep everyone engaged and emotionally together, but the team will likely experience regular highs and lows in terms of performance. Eventually the rollercoaster will take its toll and employees may leave, feeling burnt out. As with leaders lacking soft skills, leaders with these strengths should find other members in the organization who can help keep projects organized and make sure that resources are properly allocated.

Finally, the rare leader with both is transcendent. Transcendent leaders are great at both keeping everyone on the same page and engaged as well as making sure resources are deployed appropriately. Organizations with these types of leaders are the most productive and rarely face turnover issues. Employees feel connected to their teams and feel like problems are easily handled.

As you consider your organization and its leaders you may find that you are lacking in one area or another. If that’s the case, be willing to ask for help, either from an employee with complementary strengths or from a partner. Over the next few weeks, I’ll be sharing ways to improve your own leadership on both sides.