

# SOFT SKILLS

## SOFT SKILLS IN LEADERSHIP

By Shannon Leduc

It has long been recognized within the paramedic profession that some paramedics “just have a certain way” with their patients. These are the paramedics who can speak to a confused elderly lady in one manner and a belligerent patient in a completely different manner and in both cases is able to develop a relationship of trust. These paramedics have a unique ability to engage with every patient they encounter and connect with them in a meaningful way and as a result are able to influence that person and in many cases, the overall outcome of the call. Having these abilities can help with simple matters such as obtaining better patient histories and can also help with complex situations such as being able to direct multiple allied resources on a high acuity call all the while reassuring the patient’s family.

These abilities are often referred to as soft skills, and having these soft skills often makes the difference between competent paramedics and exceptional paramedics. This subtle distinction is an often discussed nuance in leadership studies; what it is that makes competent leaders, exceptional leaders? Psychologist Daniel Goleman defines soft skills as emotional intelligence. (1) The soft skills include communication skills, the ability to collaborate and work well with others, as well as the ability to motivate and influence others.

When you are a leader, your main purpose is to support the people who are around you. It isn’t focussed on the technical skills at the forefront but the ability to move forward by influencing your team or organization. The ability to influence and build strong interpersonal relationships is becoming increasingly important as organizational structures flatten, and formal leadership status and rank is becoming of less consequence. Reporting structures—and more importantly, actual work flows—are becoming less linear and have many more inter-dependencies. They are starting to resemble spider webs more so than the straight chains of command that they used to.


As the paramedic profession matures a more educated workforce is emerging and is being influenced by “Generation Y”, a demographic of new students who respond less to authority and more to inclusiveness. (2) Frequently called “Generation Why”, these employees have a completely different mindset towards authority and work culture than past generations. They recognize that soft skills are not just beneficial within organizations but also when working with community partners, helping to bridge the gaps of the past. When working with community partners one may have no

formal authority and may often lack funding to contribute, but with the right soft skills, are able to assist partners to navigate issues and create unique solutions. Perhaps this is why paramedic services are increasingly becoming the new—and very welcome—players at the table of well-established health care networks.

So with all of these demonstrated benefits, why is it that soft skills seem to get a bad rap in some leadership circles? In fact, when surveying my peers about their thoughts, soft skills were regularly referred to as “abstract”, “wishy-washy” and “fluff”. In our era of evidence-based practices and performance-based services, soft skills are not easily quantified in an operational matrix and therefore easily disregarded. Interestingly, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, argues the contrary: that the possession and use of soft skills contribute more to a person’s success than technical skills or intelligence. (1) Perhaps then, the connotations are derived from the thought that soft skills are considered feminine traits. An article in *Director Magazine* from the UK refers to the rise of female influences in business as the “soft revolution”. (5) A study completed by the Hay Group, a global management consulting firm, showed some interesting results. They compared 45 outstanding women executives from large companies including IBM and PepsiCo to effective male executives and less effective female executives with one intent of the comparison being to understand what strengths women bring to leadership. What Hay Group found was that all of the outstanding women included soft skills in their leadership style and all of the less effective leaders, male or female, used more authoritative and directive leadership styles. (3)

Perhaps soft skills are poorly named. There is nothing soft or easy about “soft skills”. They are hard! It is no easy task to give constructive, effective feedback or to coach poor performance. Nor is it a simple task to increase engagement and motivation. Soft skills would perhaps be better named as operose skills or exacting skills. When I look back on some of the mistakes I’ve made (and yes, I make my share), when broken down to the most basic level, they revolve around how I used my soft skills. When reflecting on failures and lessons learned, I have never thought, “Gee, I wish I designed that process more efficiently or allocated those resources differently”. While remaining as areas to address, they are not the thoughts that keep me awake at night. The thoughts that stick with me and drive me to improve revolve around how I treat my relationships with people. I am more

likely to think “I wish I had communicated that differently, been more patient with someone or been more appreciative of where they were coming from”. Similarly when I reflect on my successes, regardless of what area of my life they have been accomplished in, they all share a commonality. None of them occurred in isolation, they all occurred in a large part because of the contributions or support of others.

While there is definitely a time and place for authoritative and directive tactics, there exists a risk of uncultivated potential on your team and the risk of mediocrity or outright failure is significant with this method. Much like in the sports arena, it is invaluable to have a team who is engaged and motivated, working together to reach goals and ultimately working for the best interests of all. This is particularly important in the paramedic profession. In addition to the demanding tasks of caring for our patients and our communities, our services constantly face other challenges such as budget pressures, infectious diseases or offload delays. These challenges are easier to navigate with the support of strong relationships. These relationships were not developed because of a formal organizational chart or through grandiose gestures, but rather by the day-to-day interactions shared in the months and years before. It is most often less about what we do than how we do it. Relationships are best formed by having a genuine interest in people and caring about their success. 

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### References

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