

# CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER



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# Has Executive Education Gone Soft?

FRANK KALMAN

Modern leadership is rooted in skills such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, wisdom, influence and authenticity. Can these soft skills be taught?

It wasn't all too long ago that emotion and business were considered about as compatible as fire and water. Consider the case of Sigal Barsade, a professor of management at The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, who studies subjects such as emotions in organizations and teaches it as part of the school's executive education program.

When interviewing a bank executive early in her career, Barsade recalled asking the banker about the role of emotions in the bank. The executive responded: "Professor, we have no emotions in our bank. And if we did, we would need to get rid of them, because they're disruptive."

Oh, how times have changed. Spark a discussion with a business executive these days on the topic of leadership, and emotion isn't missing from the conversation — it is the conversation.

In a September survey of business leaders, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) found that mastery of technical skills — closely associated with finance, accounting, engineering or marketing — was relatively less essential for executive leaders today than it was 20 years ago. Conversely, learning adaptability, communication and multicultural- and self-awareness were viewed as vital for leaders in the current and future business environment.

In executive education programs at business schools such as Wharton, Harvard and Dartmouth, there are courses that focus on topics such as "Authentic Leadership" (Harvard), "Influence Without Authority" (Dartmouth) and "Building Relationships That Work" (Wharton).

Professors, learning practitioners and others in leadership development say the skills the market demands of today's executives have less to do with spreadsheets and more to do with prodding employees' emotional, motivational and behavioral tendencies. Executive education, to a notable extent, has gone soft. However, that does not mean one should confuse soft with easy.

"The soft skills are the hard skills," said Amy Edmondson, a professor of leadership and management at Harvard Busi-



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ness School. "People who master the critical leadership skills today are anything but touchy-feely — they're direct, they're clear, they're compassionate, they're no-nonsense. But they're not soft."

## The Shift Toward Soft

The concept of soft skill development isn't new, but the formalization of emotional acumen in business curricula at the executive level is relatively fresh, Edmondson and others in the space said. Further, the emphasis and enthusiasm among executives and development professionals to study and perfect soft skills is distinct from the command-and-control culture of leadership common during the majority of the last half-century — for example, Barsade's exchange with the bank executive.

To some experts, a few commonalities explaining the shift toward soft stand out.

First, business in 2012 moving into 2013 is far more complex, fluid and interconnected across geographies and virtual networks. Technical skills have grown less static and reliable, placing an increased emphasis for executive leaders on those skills considered soft, while those they lead focus more intently on technical skills. "I could teach you the latest new way to model cash flows, and there might be a different way to do it next week," Edmondson said.

Modern leadership is also less about being an expert in a technical skill area and more about creating context for others to learn, become the experts and then execute quickly. Edmondson said creating context requires leaders to motivate and influence others to perform at their best. How that is accomplished is largely emotionally driven.

Second, more research has been done in the last half-centu-

ry, and even the last 15 years, examining the link between organizational performance and emotion. Daniel Goleman, a psychologist and author of numerous books, including *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence*, made waves in the mid-1990s with his work in arguing for the importance of emotional intelligence (EQ), which discounts IQ as the sole measure of someone's ability.

Goleman said a leader's ability to understand and manage people's emotions has always been more important than technical capacity. With a strong EQ, great leaders can sustain influence over time and change, even if their IQ is average.

"There's a direct relationship between our emotional state and our mental state," Goleman said. "Emotions are what determine what we can perform at our best. So from the get-go, there's a hard-wired case for making sure people can manage emotions, and emotional intelligence means being intelligent about emotions. That, I would argue, is as hard a skill as knowing how to write software."

Business leaders, however, might be moving backward in their EQ development, Goleman said. The proliferation of mobile devices, social media and virtual communication has resulted in less face-to-face personal and professional interaction. This is a perturbing trend, Goleman said, considering face-to-face interaction is a vital component for strong EQ development.

The expanding boundaries of business also have heightened the importance of soft skills in leadership. Sydney Finkelstein, associate dean for executive education and a professor of management at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, said globalization has hastened the emphasis on soft skills development for executives.

In a class of 30 leaders in Tuck's executive education program, it wouldn't be surprising to have as many as 25 different nationalities in the room, Finkelstein said. The same can be said for many corporate offices. Understanding how to bring together diverse groups in a cohesive manner requires leaders to be privy to emotional and behavioral tendencies across cultures.

Experience is also a factor. By the time individuals reach the executive level they're likely well-versed in the hard, technical skills of their craft, thanks to undergraduate business and graduate MBA programs and on-the-job learning. However, Finkelstein said most aren't conditioned to truly embrace advanced soft skill development until they reach the executive level — which is why courses firmly focused on the subject are more common in executive education. Including soft skill development at the undergraduate level in business schools or earlier would be premature because students don't yet have the business experience to base that development on, Finkelstein said.

It seems emotions have become anything but disruptive in executive education.

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— Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence*

## TOP 10 LEADERSHIP SOFT SKILLS

**J**ean Leslie, a senior fellow with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), highlights these 10 soft skills for business leaders.

**Self-awareness:** Leaders must have an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses.

**Learning agility:** This is an individual's readiness, willingness and ability to learn from experience.

**Emotional intelligence:** Emotional intelligence is a constellation of abilities that help leaders deal with their emotions and the emotions of others.

**Resiliency:** Bouncing back from adversity.

**Building relationships at all levels:** Being able to show compassion, sensitivity and have a sense of humor with others — above and below in organizational structure — and being able to cultivate these relationships toward positive business performance.

**Political savvy:** The ability to influence people to obtain goals. The heart of being politically savvy, according to CCL, is networking, reading situations and thinking before speaking. Not every leader likes politics, but it's present in every organization.

**Motivating and engaging others:** How many leaders have been successful when they cannot motivate their teams?

**Building and leading effective teams:** This is one of the top challenges CEOs report, according to CCL. Building trust, setting strategic direction and breaking down silos are some of the micro skills needed.

**Creating a culture of trust and respect:** This has become a big challenge since the rise of virtual communication, yet trust and respect among team members — and chiefly among leaders — is paramount.

**Communication:** Voicing goals and inspiring others is vital — but so is listening.

— Frank Kalman

“The bottom line is emotions are information,” Wharton's Barsade said. “And if you don't use that information, you're playing with one hand behind your back.”

### Experience, Experience, Experience

Soft skill development is steeped in experiential learning, which is why learning leaders should aim to create experiences meant to test leaders' behaviors and EQ.

Many organizations opt to send their leaders to executive education programs such as Harvard or Dartmouth. But learning leaders also can make internal efforts. The ideal scenario is to put leaders in situations where they catch themselves in the act of their own leadership habits — increasing self-awareness — then, give them the ability to pause and reflect and hear feedback from peers.

Scott Miller, CEO of Action Learning Associates, an executive development firm, said peer learning reflection should feature both the good and the bad. “Push the pause button long enough for people to hold up the mirror and say, ‘What am I doing as a leader that's helping us get performance results?’” Miller said. Also, “‘What am I seeing other people do that I [as a leader] wish I would emulate more?’”

Miller said peer learning is effective when teaching soft leadership skills because, when it comes to changing behaviors, people are more likely to mimic their peers rather than an authority figure or instructor.

Tuck's Finkelstein is also a fan of peer learning. He said coaching is an expanded form of peer learning. Having a peer mentor or coach can help the individual identify and reflect on soft skill tendencies. Soft skill learning, however, can be more challenging because a different part of the brain is at work.

“Our emotional brain operates by a different dynamic than our logical brain,” Goleman said. “It's more primitive. And the model for teaching is not the going-to-school model, where you read something or you hear a lecture and it changes your understanding. But, rather, it's a skill building model — like playing golf.”

T.J. Elliott, vice president and chief learning officer of strategic workforce solutions at nonprofit learning assessment firm Educational Testing Service (ETS), said action learning is also a vital aspect to soft skill leadership development. “There's got to be something that's meaningful, that's a real problem that you give to people,” Elliott said. “It has to have just enough challenge; it can't be routine.”

Some take more reflection-oriented pathways to help leaders cut through the haze of their weekly stresses and refine their emotionally driven skill sets. Teresa Roche, vice president and chief learning officer at Santa Clara, Calif.-based Agilent Technologies Inc., said she encourages team members to leave open time to reflect. Like Goleman, Roche said the abundance of technology-driven communication and mobile devices has left leaders without time for deep conversation and reflection. “We

have to create the surroundings to enable [reflection] because it's not as natural as it used to be," Roche said.

Pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson aims to simplify the foundation for its soft skill development through another area — wellness. The company emphasizes clearing the mind through wellness to maximize human performance and energy, said Michael Ehret, the firm's vice president of leadership development and training. The centerpiece of this initiative is the firm's Corporate Athlete program, a three-day event where leaders learn authenticity by focusing on fitness, nutrition and spirituality to bring the whole self to work.

The firm also aims to include soft skill development in all of its learning offerings. No single program is dedicated specifically to soft skill development; things such as targeted coaching through listening, probing, motivating, creating engagement and leading virtual teams are all embedded in each of Johnson & Johnson's leadership experiences, Ehret said.

Most importantly, soft skill leadership development should be capped off with an intense measurement process, according to Pat Crull, chief learning officer for Time Warner Cable. This should happen at all levels in the organization, not just for executives.

"We can't afford to make guesses [about soft skill development] any more than we can afford to guess about our technical skills, or auditing skills or our legal skills," Crull said.

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Johnson & Johnson, for instance, ties its soft skill measurement to its performance management and compensation. It's not just the results leaders accomplished, Ehret said, but how they led that matters. **CLO**

## WISE UP ON WISDOM

**W**hat is wisdom? What does it look like when someone performs a wise action? What does it mean to build a wiser organization? To some people, these may seem like ambiguous questions centered on the premise that wisdom is a skill.

But for a group of chief learning officers who participated in last year's Learning Innovations Laboratory (LILA) workshop "Weaving Wisdom in Organizations" at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, such questions were at the heart of a conversation in leadership skill building.

Wisdom, many would argue, is visible in every great leader. But how do learning leaders teach it, let alone recognize it?

About 20 CLOs participated in the workshop to help search for the answer, according to Marga Biller, a project manager at LILA and one of the primary workshop organizers. The workshop, which was not a graded course, took place during three gatherings in October 2011 and February and April of 2012.

"As we began to explore the subject, what we realized was that [wisdom] is actually a multidimensional capacity that you can recognize in action by a series of common characteristics that we ended up calling markers," Biller said. "In other words, it's when somebody takes a wise action where you can really see wisdom in action."

To come to this conclusion, Biller said the participating CLOs each brought real business problems to the discussion. Each problem added to the theoretical concepts introduced by various thought leaders who were asked to speak as part of the workshop.

Biller said having the CLOs share real business situations helped drive the conversation and define what a wise action looks like. When it comes to defining the characteristics for soft skills like wisdom, Biller said, it's important for learners to actively share and reflect on real problems.

— Frank Kalman