

teaching note

Developing Soft Skills for Future Hospitality Leaders: A Case Study

Introduction

This case study examines a five factor model of soft skills for the hospitality industry. Interestingly, many companies are not often concerned with the technical skills and abilities of their entry-level managers because they will train them according to their company standards. These companies want their future managers to have the soft skills needed to be successful within the environment of their organization and will select from applicants with those soft skills. Therefore this case focuses on the development of a model of soft skills for hospitality leaders, application of the model into human resources within the hospitality industry, and application of the model for each student in preparation for future industry success.

Target Audience

This case is suitable for use in hospitality undergraduate courses. More specifically, human resources, professional development, and/or internship preparation courses are all relevant outlets for the use of this case. The case provides the opportunity for hospitality students to explore and discuss soft skills, development of soft skills, and their importance in the hospitality business setting.

Teaching Objectives

- Describe the differences between hard and soft skills
- Identify the five key factors that make up soft skills and the 33 specific skills these include
- Describe the workplace benefits when soft skills are present among employees
- Apply the five factors of soft skills to a hospitality business setting
- Analyze the human resource functions that allow for soft skill development
- Assess your soft skills using the five factors model
- Formulate your plan for improving personal soft skills for your professional development

Teaching Strategy

The case can be used in a variety of ways. Some of these include an independent assignment, a small group assignment, and/or a multi-day in class discussion and assignment. The recommended strategy for the case below relies on two 50 minute class meetings and the expectation that students will read the case before the first 50 minute class session.

A) Questions to generate discussion:

Use the first 5-10 minutes of class to discuss the case, the instructor can ask as many (or as few) of the following questions:

- What are soft skills? How do they compare to technical skills?

- Why would this restaurant company include both soft skills and technical skills on their evaluation?
- Describe your initial reaction to the case. Do you think Sara was surprised by her evaluation?
- Summarize the historical research that led to this model, specific for hospitality management. What information has changed over time, remained the same over time?
- While reading through the five factors and 33 skills were you reminded of a manager you have worked for in the past?
- While reading through the five factors and 33 skills did you recognize skills that you have? Were any of these strong/weak?
- How can human resources Sara to further develop these soft skills?
- Of the 33 skills in the case, which do you think are most important? Most important in meetings/event? Most important in food and beverage? Most important in lodging?

B) Using a hospitality job posting website have students search for and find job postings that include some of the 33 soft skills. Feel free to have students look into all segments of the industry. Have them identify the soft skills listed. (5-10 minutes)

- Hospitalityonline.com
- Hcareers.com

C) Using the findings from one of the websites, place students into small groups and have them begin discussing what soft skills are expected in the industry. What soft skills are most important to Sara's job performance? How does better understanding these necessary skills enable Sara to be a better manager? What are key tasks students can carry out now to start developing these soft skills? (10-15 minutes)

D) Come together as a whole and share the findings from each small group. (10-15 minutes)

E) Below a listing of potential assignments is provided. Select those that are most applicable and assign as a small group or individual homework assignment. Students should be prepared to submit, share, discuss, and defend their response during the next class meeting.

F) Small groups present their findings/assignment and support their decisions to the class. The instructor and other student groups should ask clarification questions as well as probing questions. This will facilitate discussion. (35-40 minutes)

G) The instructor should use the discussion and the case to provide

a summary of the key points. (10-15 minutes)

Key points of the case:

- Inner work standards equated to having high standards of work performance even though a lower standard may be sufficient to satisfy the manager's superior (Bray & Howard, 1983).
- KSA's associated with working with others (a soft skill competency) relates to performance effectiveness (Stevens & Champion, 1994, 1999).
- Soft skills assist in developing good working relationships with customers and employees
- Competencies that have remained consistent for the past 25 years include communication, customer focus, interpersonal skills, and leadership
- In addition to these studies, competencies needed for managers in the hospitality industry have been identified for club managers (Perdue, Ninemeier, & Woods, 2002), information technology managers at the hotel property level (Cobanoglu, Pelin, & Poorani, 2006), hospitality managers at different organizational levels (Kay & Russette, 2000), in the United Kingdom (Baum, 1990), in Spain (Agut, Grau, & Peiro, 2003), and in Australia (Dimmock, Breen, & Walo, 2003).
- Developing soft skills in employees can be used to increase employee retention, thus profitability and impacts performance.
- Sara's overall job performance is impacted not only by her technical "know-how" but also by her soft skills.

Discussion Questions and Assignments

For this case study the discussion questions/assignment have been linked to each of the teaching objectives. Through the use of these discussion questions and assignments the instructor will be able to gauge the student's understanding and successful application of the material. Upon completion of the case student should be able to:

1. Describe the differences between hard and soft skills

Hard skills-skills in the technical and administrative categories
Soft skills-correspond to the skills in the human, conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal categories.

2. Identify the five key factors that make up soft skills and the 33 specific skills these include.

A. Define hard and soft skills and give examples of each. Use Sara's roll as a manager in a restaurant as an example to answer the following questions: what hard skills might she use on a daily basis? what soft skills may she use on a daily basis?

Hard skills correspond to the skills in the technical and administrative categories and soft skills correspond to the skills in the human, conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal categories. Student examples will vary.

B. Define the similarities/difference between competency and soft skill

The instructor can provide descriptions and definitions found in the literature, including:

Competency	standards of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for successful job performance
Soft skill	human relation skills that we use when interacting with others, making decisions, and thinking creatively

Have students in small groups do a web search for other definitions. You can direct them to look in previous soft skill research literature. Otherwise, the definitions will likely come from popular press. Students should discuss the definitions they found and synthesize the information, creating their own definition.

C. Discussion question: Are there any factors missing from this model? From your recent work experience, identify a manager. Did he/she possess these soft skill factors? If so, identify the specific skills associated with the factors he/she possessed. Were they overall an effective manager? How did these soft skills help him/her carry out the job?

Have students share any missing factors they may have found. Redirecting them to the case's discussion of the factor development may be helpful. Have students connect the effective manager and the soft skills he/she possessed. Accessing personal examples will provide students with a better understanding of the five factors and 33 skills found in the model.

3. Describe the workplace benefits when soft skills are present among employees.

A. Define key workplace benefits. Have students define these workplace benefits using their own experience. Provide personal examples.

Job satisfaction	emotional state created from the assessment of one's job as achieving or allowing for achievement of one's job values (Locke, 1969).
Empowerment	"individual and personal; it engages the employee at the level of emotion; it is about discretion, autonomy, power and control; and it is about responsibility, commitment and enterprise" (Lashley & McGoldrick, 1994, p. 26).
Organizational commitment	an employee's participation in, sense of belonging to, and emotional attachment with an organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996).

4. Apply the five factors of soft skills to a hospitality business setting.

A. Interview a manager that you feel is successful in the hospitality industry. Ask about their perception of soft skills, and how these five factors fit into the hospitality business setting. Ask them how they have applied soft skills to their professional experience.

Connecting to a current industry leader will provide the students with timely information and with the opinions/experiences of one that deals daily with the skills in question. Have students summarize the interview for the class as a whole.

B. Select a hospitality business. Research the company and its website. Students should use the list of 33 competencies to illustrate how soft skills affect work relationships in all functional areas, including housekeeping, front office, catering, sales, etc. Additionally use the restaurant from the case and identify how these soft skills may impact Sara in her position and in relationships with front of the house, line level employees and/or back of the house employees.

Using the mission and/or vision of the selected business students can begin to see where soft skills may help to carry out the mission and/or vision. Additionally, students may use personal experiences and examples to highlight teamwork, decision making, and communication and how soft skills may have an impact.

5. Analyze the human resource functions that allow for soft skill development.

A. Interview a human resources manager from the hospitality industry. Ask about their perception of soft skills, and how they work to develop soft skills among their employees. What HR functions do they use for soft skill analysis and development? What HR functions could be used to help Sara develop the needed soft skills?

Connecting to a current industry leader will provide the students with timely information and with the opinions/experiences of one that deals daily with the skills in question. Have students summarize the interview for the class as a whole.

B. Analyze human resources function that allow for soft skill development. Students should define and provide examples of the following functions: recruitment, selection, orientation, training, and performance evaluation. Use the hospitality business selected previously to apply methods of soft skill development for each HR function. Which of these functions could be used to help Sara develop the necessary soft skills?

C. How could you use soft skills throughout these HR functions to help Sara better prepare for advancement in the company?

Developing soft skills in employees can be used to increase employee retention, thus profitability. Numerous studies examined the impact of hiring and promotion practices on retention and performance (Becker & Huselid, 1999; Cho, Woods, Jang, & Erdem, 2006; Milman, 2003; Milman & Ricci, 2004). Cho, Woods, Jang, and Erdem (2006) theorized that pre-employment testing (and the applicants passing these tests) can heighten the new hires' sense of organization commitment. A further explanation of the impact of soft skills on the HR process can be seen in Figure 1.

6. Assess your soft skills using the five factors model.

A. Complete your self-analysis of soft skills, see the Appendix. For the upcoming week, list your educational/professional goals. As you complete each day, complete a journal entry on your goal, and how it relates back to soft skills.

Have students complete the self-analysis. Use the goal setting and journal aspects as a homework assignment. Have students prepare a personal reflection. Students should discuss their experience and future planning with the soft skill concept and their expectation of its impact in the hospitality industry. This allows for further understanding of the case material, how it impacts the industry, and their future managerial roles.

7. Formulate your plan for improving personal soft skills for your professional development.

A-1. Interview a manager or a human resources manager that you feel is successful in the hospitality industry. Ask about their perception of soft skills, and share with them your self-analysis of your soft skills. Ask them about their expectations of soft skills in their entry level managers, line level employees, and executive managers. Ask for their thoughts about how to develop these skills now, before entering the industry as a professional.

A-2. While interviewing a manager or a human resources manager, ask him or her to complete the Appendix for him/herself and if he /she was your manager previously ask him/her to complete the Appendix for you. Now compare your self-evaluation to the manager's self-evaluation and the manager's evaluation of you. Highlight the key skills where there is the greatest difference.

Recruitment	The practice of soliciting and actively seeking applicants to fill recently vacated or newly created positions using a variety of methods
Selection	The process of choosing an individual for a current or future position vacancy
Orientation	The introduction of employees to their jobs, co-workers and the organization by providing them with information regarding such items as policies, procedures, company history, goals, culture and work rules
Training	A process dealing primarily with transferring or obtaining knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to carry out a specific activity or task
Performance evaluation	A periodic review of an individual's job performance

These are key areas to work on.

Connecting to a current industry leader will provide the students with timely information and with the opinions/experiences of one that deals daily with the skills in question. Have students summarize the interview and their findings for the class as a whole.

B. Build a short term action plan (present to 6 months) and a long term action plan (greater than 6 months). Use the self-evaluation and the manager's evaluations to shape the action plan. Develop

a short term action plan (present to 6 months) and a long term action plan (greater than 6 months) for Sara. What key areas should she focus on to improve her performance in her current role?

Have students complete the action plan as an individual assignment. Students can carry out this action plan to develop a competitive advantage for their professional start in the industry. Creating the action plan synthesizes the information from the case, and allows for better understanding of how it impacts the industry, and their future managerial roles.

Figure 1

Application of soft-skill competencies (Weber, Crawford, Rivera & Finley, 2010)

