




A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE EFFECTS OF SOFT SKILLS ON THE PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP STYLES OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Soft skills are important to leadership and leadership styles; however, there are limited studies on how soft skills affect the perceived leadership styles of college students. Therefore, the study assessed the effects of soft skills on the perceived leadership styles of college students. The data were collected from a purposive sample of college students in a leadership training program. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The results show that the most dominant leadership styles were, telling, selling, and delegating. Regarding the selected soft skills vis-à-vis what participants would do in scenarios, there were



four high combined “most likely” and “likely” responses, 70% or above for communication: particularly, for active listening, conflict resolution, writing a letter, and public speaking. For problem-solving, all five combined “most likely” and “likely” responses, were high, above 70% for creative skills, research and consult, consensus solutions, decision-making skills, and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, for work ethic, there were four high combined “most likely” and “likely” responses, above 60% for correcting an oversight, doting “is” and crossing “ts”, doing a task methodically, and completing a task on time. Additionally, the results of the multiple regression showed that the problem-solving soft skills, overall, dominated the composite leadership style. Therefore, problem-solving may be a critical soft skill that affects leadership styles.

Keywords: College Students, Leadership, Leadership Styles, Soft skills

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is needed in developing interpersonal relationships and has been variously defined by several authors and/or researchers. For instance, Ward (2023) indicated that “leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal” (p. 1). According to Barney & Pratt (2023), leadership is the ability of an individual or a group of people to influence and guide followers or members of an organization, society, or team” (p. 1). They emphasized that an effective leader has the following characteristics: self-confidence, strong communication and management skills, creative and innovative thinking, perseverance, willingness to take risks, openness to change, levelheaded, and reactivity in times of crisis. Also, Management Consulted (2022) described leadership as a “process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others towards the achievement of a goal” (p. 2). Furthermore, the National Society of Leadership and Success [NSLS] (2023) defined leadership as “the act of leading a group of people in an organization” (p. 1).

Organizations need effective leaders with appropriate leadership styles to bring about quality individuals and organizations. Leadership and leadership styles are related. The Corporate Finance Institute [CFI] (2022) defined leadership styles as “the behavioral approach employed by leaders to influence, motivate, and direct their followers” (p. 1). It explained that “the major tenet of an effective leadership style is the degree to which it builds follower trust” (p. 1). The Institute alluded to seven leadership styles, mainly democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, bureaucratic leadership, and servant leadership. According to the NSLS (2023), “leadership styles refer to how someone guides, innovates, and manages others while strategizing and executing tactics to meet team and stakeholder demands” (p. 1). It also identified seven

leadership styles, namely, servant leadership, transformational leadership, identity leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and coaching leadership. Yet, Barney & Pratt (2023) referred to 16 leadership styles, including affiliative leadership, authoritative leadership, autocratic leadership, charismatic leadership, coaching leadership, coercive leadership, bureaucratic leadership, democratic leadership, innovative leadership, laissez-faire leadership, pacesetter leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, situational leadership, strategic leadership, and transformational leadership. However, Management Consulted (2022) mentioned eight leadership styles, seven of the ones mentioned by Barney & Pratt; specifically, servant leadership, transformational leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, situational leadership, transactional leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and an additional one; in particular, compassionate leadership.

Indeed, another set of skills needed by leaders is soft skills. The Center for Creative Leadership [CCL] (2022a) defined soft skills as a “term used to describe the characteristics needed to form strong connections with others” (p. 1). CCL also argued that soft skills are necessary for all leaders in supervising roles; however, it emphasized that each leader level will benefit from a specific set of soft skills. Based on this premise, it mentioned, respectively, the set of skills needed for all leaders, and the set of skills needed for each category of leaders. CCL indicated that the four soft skills needed for all leaders are listening to understand, asking powerful questions, challenging, and supporting, and establishing accountability. At the same time, it argued that individuals who are not assigned to any leadership role, need to have four soft skills. These are self-awareness, communication, influence, and learning agility. Further, the Center stated the soft skills needed for four types of specific leaders. The first is frontline leaders, who need soft skills such as self-awareness, learning agility, communication, political savviness, motivating others, and influencing outcomes. The second is middle-level leaders, who need soft skills, such as thinking actively and systematically, resiliency, communication, influence, learning agility, and self-awareness. The third is senior-level leaders, who need soft skills, such as collaboration, influence, forward-thinking, driving results, creating engagement, identifying innovation, and leading globally. Fourth and lastly are “super-level” leaders, who need soft skills, such as articulating a vision effectively, influencing, inspiring, learning agility, communication, integrity, self-regulation, openness to new ideas, and exuding executive presence.

CCL (2022b) also described 10 essential qualities of a good leader, namely, integrity, delegation, communication, self-awareness, gratitude, learning agility, influence, empathy, courage, and respect. Yasar & McLaughlin (n.d.) used the term leadership skills to represent soft skills. They defined leadership skills as the “strengths and abilities individuals demonstrate

that help to oversee processes, guide initiatives, and steer their employees toward the achievement of goals” (p. 1). Beyond this, they listed 15 top leadership skills that make a good leader. These were open communication, empathy, strategic thinking, creativity, positivity, flexibility, conflict resolution, time management, reliability, mentorship, recognizing potential, responsibility, organization, delegation, and feedback.

Leadership styles affect leadership, but appropriate or quality leadership styles may be affected by soft skills. The acquisition of soft skills is critical to the youth in general and college students in particular. However, there have been limited studies on these relationships and on how soft skills may affect leadership styles. Based on the preceding arguments, therefore, the purpose of the study is to assess the effects of soft skills on the perceived leadership styles of college students. The specific objectives are to (1) describe demographic characteristics, (2) examine leadership styles, (3) examine soft skills, and (4) analyze the relative importance of soft skills to leadership styles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review covers studies on soft skills and/or leadership styles. These studies either focused on job performance or organizational outcomes directly or indirectly. They are discussed chronologically. For instance, Crosbie (2005) emphasized that soft skills are critical to success on the job. The author quoted previous research by Howard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Institute on the one hand, and another by Robert Bolton, on the other. The former research indicated that “technical skills and knowledge account for about 15% of the reason an individual gets a job, keeps the job, and advances in that job. The remaining 85% of job success is based on the individual’s ‘people’s skills’.” The latter research indicated that “80% of the people who fail at work, do not fail due to their lack of technical skills but rather because of their inability to relate well with others (p. 2)”; in other words, the savvy use of soft skills is critical to success on the job. According to Crosbie, “helping people define, develop, make tangible, personalize, and effectively use the soft skills that provide enduring value is the mission of many leadership training initiatives (p. 2).”

Marques (2013) reported that soft skills, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, among others, are being sought after by organizations. The researcher also suggested that those who train “future leaders” should focus on inculcating these skills into them to enhance their soft skills acumen.

Nyang, Mohamed, & Kanokorn (2015), in their study, examined eight soft skills regarding school leaders in high-performing schools, and these were collaboration/teamwork (COT), leadership ability (LEA), presentation skills (PRS), people development/coaching (PD/C),

communication skills (COS), planning and organizing (POR), personal effectiveness/mastery (PE/M), and initiative (INI). The mean scores for the soft skills of the leaders (based on the Likert scale) ranged from 4.086 for INI to 4.249 for PE/M. The correlation analysis between the soft skills and school improvement showed a significant and positive association between all eight soft skills and school improvement, meaning that the soft skills of school leaders are quite closely linked to school improvement. The correlation coefficients ranged from 0.532 for PD/C to 0.657 for LEA.

Al Khajeh (2018) found that transformational and demographic leadership styles had a positive and significant impact on organizational performance. However, transactional, charismatic, and bureaucratic leadership styles had a negative and significant impact on organizational performance. Also, he found that autocratic leadership style had a positive effect on organizational performance, but it was not significant.

Valldeneu, Tarrats, & Ferras (2018) reported that transformational and transactional leadership styles were positively correlated with organizational outcomes but more so was the transformational leadership style. However, the passive-avoidance leadership style was negatively correlated with organizational outcomes. The regression results showed that the transformational leadership style had a positive and significant effect on organizational outcomes, and the passive-avoidance leadership style had a negative and significant effect on organizational outcomes. Furthermore, the transactional leadership style had a negative and insignificant effect on organizational outcomes. The authors argued that to enhance organizational outcomes, success, and recognition, two things should be done, namely, leaders need to, one, develop and implement more transactional leadership styles, and two, minimize the passive-avoidance leadership styles.

Dean & East (2019) found that soft skills training is important and that workers lacking soft skills could affect organizational outcomes. They stated that organizations should hire applicants with “basic” soft skills and leaders with emotional intelligence. Moreover, they argued that soft skills training programs should emphasize individual needs, and at the same time, focus on workshops. The reason for the latter was they observed that many employees in their study lacked proficiency in oral communication and problem-solving; as well as had low self-confidence and lack interpersonal skills. The researchers further explained that these deficits affect organizational outcomes, such as worker behavior, safety engagement, and productivity. Therefore, they concluded that industry organizations should develop soft skills training programs to deal with the issue.

Maduko & Puche (2020) reported a positive and significant relationship (correlation) between managers’ hard skills and soft skills and their innovativeness. Multiple regression

analysis also showed that managers' hard and soft skills had positive and significant effects on innovativeness. Additionally, the results showed that soft skills had a more positive effect on innovativeness than hard skills. They concluded that organizations should ensure that their managers possess both hard and soft skill competencies, as they are both needed.

Kusumah & Lee (2019) observed that soft skills, particularly interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills, had positive impacts on motivation and employee performance, which in turn, impacted overall organizational performance. They recommended that organizations should strive to improve the soft skills of their employees to meet challenges in the marketplace.

Gillard (2009) contended that excellent interpersonal or soft skills are necessary for real success in an organization. He posited that to carry out a task or project, a leader is what is needed rather than one who manages or is a manager. Additionally, he indicated that the leadership style of the one leading the project directly affects how the project turns out.

Benstead (2023) mentioned seven soft skills that are important for strong leaders. These are communication, empathy, delegation, flexibility, teamwork, problem-solving, and overall leadership skills. The author maintained that a good use of a combination of soft skills by leaders will lead to getting the best out of employees and team members, and/or ultimately, move the organization forward.

In summary, the literature cited above, Crosbie (2005), Marques (2013), Nyang et al. (2015), Dean & East (2019), Maduko & Puche (2020), Kusumah & Lee (2019), and Gillard (2009) deal with soft skills and organizational outcomes, and Al Khajeh (2018) and Valleneu et al. (2018) deal with leadership styles and job performance. As indicated earlier, soft skills may affect leadership styles and leadership styles affect leadership. Ultimately, soft skills are likely to affect job and organizational performance or outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection

The design adopted is a cross-sectional design, in which data are collected and assessed at a point in time. The instrument used to collect the data was developed by Tackie (2023). It comprised five sections; specifically, situational attributes (reflecting leadership styles); selected scenarios (reflecting soft skills), namely, communication scenario, problem-solving scenario, work ethic scenario; and demographic characteristics. Before the questionnaire was administered, it had to go through the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' Institution for assessment and approval. It was administered to a group of university students from two colleges at Tuskegee University who participated in a series of leadership development workshops in the Spring of 2023. The data were obtained using purposive sampling and through

self-administration by student participants who availed themselves. A select sub-group of researchers collected the data. The total number of respondents was 23. The original design of the study is quasi-experimental, and the participants were placed into two groups because they belonged to two different colleges. However, in the analysis, the two groups were combined because of the overall relatively low number that participated in the data collection.

Data Analyses

The data were analyzed by descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, and multiple regression analysis, using SPSS 12.0[®] (MapInfo Corporation, Troy, NY). For the multiple regression, the general model was stated as:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 X_{i2} + \dots + \beta_j X_{ij} + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Where: Y_i = dependent variable; β_i = coefficients; i = number of observations; j = number of independent variables; X_i = independent variables; ε = error term

Seven empirical models were developed based on selected leadership styles and the overall style: specifically, telling, selling, participating, delegating, autocratic, democratic, and the composite leadership style.

The empirical model for **model 1** was stated as:

$$TEL = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COM_1 + \beta_2 PRS_2 + \beta_3 WET_3 \quad (2)$$

Where: TEL = telling leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 2** was stated as:

$$SEL = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COM_1 + \beta_2 PRS_2 + \beta_3 WET_3 \quad (3)$$

Where: SEL = selling leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 3** was stated as:

$$PAR = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COM_1 + \beta_2 PRS_2 + \beta_3 WET_3 \quad (4)$$

Where: PAR = participating leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 4** was stated as:

$$DEL = \beta_0 + \beta_1 COM_1 + \beta_2 PRS_2 + \beta_3 WET_3 \quad (5)$$

Where: DEL = delegating leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 5** was stated as:

$$\text{AUT} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{COM}_1 + \beta_2\text{PRS}_2 + \beta_3\text{WET}_3 \quad (6)$$

Where: AUT = autocratic leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 6** was stated as:

$$\text{DEM} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{COM}_1 + \beta_2\text{PRS}_2 + \beta_3\text{WET}_3 \quad (7)$$

Where: DEM = democratic leadership style; COM = communication; PRS = problem solving; WET = work ethic

The empirical model for **model 7** was stated as:

$$\text{CLS} = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{COM}_1 + \beta_2\text{PRS}_2 + \beta_3\text{WET}_3 \quad (8)$$

Where: CLS = composite leadership style, a mean of the six leadership styles (TEL, SEL, PAR, DEL, AUT, DEM)

Note: (1) Each of the soft skill attributes was based on a mean of five attributes; For instance, for communication, the five attributes were practicing active listening, practicing conflict resolution, engaging in public speaking, engaging in writing a letter, and display nonverbal communication, which were rated based on four responses: 0 if a respondent indicated not likely; 1 if a respondent indicated somewhat likely; 2 if a respondent indicated likely; 3 if a respondent indicated most likely; (2) Each of the leadership style ratings was based on four possible responses; for instance, TEL = 0 if a respondent indicated not likely; 1 if a respondent indicated somewhat likely; 2 if a respondent indicated likely; 3 if a respondent indicated most likely; and (3) the composite leadership style (CLS) was derived by calculating the means of the responses across six leadership styles.

In short, the empirical models hypothesize that the selected soft skills, communication soft skill (COM), problem-solving soft skill (PRS), and work ethic soft skill (WET) influence or affect the telling leadership style (TEL), selling leadership style (SEL), participating leadership style (PAR), delegating leadership style (DEL), autocratic leadership style (AUT), democratic leadership style (DEM), and the composite leadership style (CLS). The soft skills and leadership styles were selected based on the authors' review of the literature. Regarding the selected soft skills used, Herrity (2023) was very resourceful. It was assumed that the directions of the expected signs were not known *a priori*. The criterion used to assess the models was the beta coefficient or standardized beta. It measures the relative impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable. The size of the coefficient determines the degree of its influence on a particular dependent variable (Gujarati & Porter, 2009). Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 reflects the demographic characteristics of the respondents. About 39% were males and 61% were females; all the respondents were Blacks; the mean age was 22 years. Also, 26% were freshmen; 39% were sophomores; 22% were juniors, and 13% were in the “other” category, particularly, seniors or did not declare their classification. Additionally, 65% intended to hold a college leadership position while in college; whereas 22% did not intend to hold a leadership position while in college, and 13% indicated “other”; either not sure or did not declare any intent. There were more females than males, a reflection of the student population type of the two colleges. Also, most of the respondents were freshmen and sophomores. It may be that these categories of respondents were more interested in the subject matter. Also, it is not surprising that 65% intend to hold a college position; it reflects why they participated in the workshops.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 23)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	9	39.1
Female	14	60.9
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	23	100.0
White	0	0.0
Hispanic	0	0.0
Age		
Mean	22	
Educational Classification		
Freshman	6	26.1
Sophomore	9	39.1
Junior	5	21.7
Other	3	13.0
Did You Intend to Hold a College Leadership Position?		
Yes	15	65.2
No	5	21.7
Other	3	13.0

Table 2 depicts responses reflecting or indicating leadership styles. Participants were presented with the statement, previously used by Tackie et al. (2016) in another study on community development: “The employees in your department or organization usually take responsibility, but recently, they have not responded to your new standards of excellence.” The participants were subsequently asked six questions to ascertain their views. The first question

was, "To what extent are you likely to instruct them to change their behavior?" About 22% indicated most likely; 70% indicated likely, and 9% indicated somewhat likely. The second question was, "To what extent are you likely to persuade or convince them to change their behavior?" About 30% indicated most likely; 48% indicated likely, and 22% indicated somewhat likely. The third question was, "To what extent are you likely to encourage them to buy-in to change their behavior?" Exactly 13% stated most likely; 22% stated likely; 30% stated somewhat likely, and 35% stated not likely. The fourth question was, "To what extent are you likely to relinquish some authority for flexibility and creativity to change their behavior?" Approximately 39% stated most likely; 35% stated likely; 22% stated somewhat likely, and 4% stated not likely.

Table 2. Leadership Style Responses (n = 23)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Instruct, or Direct		
Most Likely	5	21.7
Likely	16	69.6
Somewhat Likely	2	8.7
Not Likely	0	0.0
Persuade, or Convince		
Most Likely	7	30.4
Likely	11	47.8
Somewhat Likely	5	21.7
Not Likely	0	0.0
Buy-in		
Most Likely	3	13.0
Likely	5	21.7
Somewhat Likely	7	30.4
Not Likely	8	34.8
Authority for Flexibility and Creativity		
Most Likely	9	39.1
Likely	8	34.8
Somewhat Likely	5	21.7
Not Likely	1	4.3
Demand Directives be Carried Out		
Most Likely	2	8.7
Likely	6	26.1
Somewhat Likely	7	30.4
Not Likely	8	34.8
Defer to Majority Opinion		
Most Likely	5	21.7
Likely	2	8.7
Somewhat Likely	11	47.8
Not Likely	5	21.7

The fifth question was, “To what extent are you likely to demand that what you want must be done because you said so to change their behavior?” Nearly 9% stated most likely; 26% stated likely; 30% stated somewhat likely, and 35% stated not likely. The sixth question was, “To what extent are you likely to defer to the majority opinion to change their behavior?” About 22% indicated most likely; 9% indicated likely, 48% indicated somewhat likely, and 22% indicated not likely. The previous questions are, respectively, in concert with telling, selling, participating, delegating, autocratic, and democratic leadership styles. Based on the “most likely” responses, the participants reflected a preference for delegating leadership style (39%), selling leadership style (30%), and telling and democratic leadership styles (22% each). However, when the “most likely” and “likely” responses were considered, participants showed a propensity toward the telling leadership style (91%), the selling leadership style (78%), and the delegating leadership style (74%). The democratic leadership style was the least preferred or stated leadership style at 30%. However, the participating leadership style and the autocratic leadership style did not fare any better; they both were 35%, based on “most likely” and “likely” responses.

Table 3 shows responses to the communication scenario attributes presented to participants. Participants were given/presented a scenario: “Overall, effective communication is helpful in one’s career. Communication involves knowing how you should speak to or behave toward others in different situations or settings, such as in your organization or workplace.”

The participants were asked five questions to assess their views as follows: Considering the extent to which they are likely to practice active listening in a conversation with colleagues in their organization or workplace, 87% indicated most likely, and 13% indicated likely. Considering the extent to which they are likely to practice conflict resolution among colleagues in their organization or workplace, 74% indicated most likely; 22% indicated likely, and 4% indicated somewhat likely. Regarding the extent to which they are likely to engage in public speaking outside or inside their organization or workplace, 57% indicated most likely; 13% indicated likely, and 30% indicated somewhat likely. Regarding the extent to which they are likely to engage in writing a letter as a main avenue or tool in the case of a misunderstanding or where clarification is needed on an issue explaining their position to a client of their organization or a coworker in the workplace, 35% indicated most likely; 44% indicated likely, and 17% indicated somewhat likely. Considering the extent to which they are likely to display nonverbal communication in a meeting with colleagues in their organization or workplace, 26% indicated most likely; 39% indicated likely, and 22% indicated somewhat likely.

Table 3. Communication Scenario Responses (n = 23)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Active Listening		
Most Likely	20	87.0
Likely	3	13.0
Somewhat Likely	0	0.0
Not Likely	0	0.0
Conflict Resolution		
Most Likely	17	73.9
Likely	5	21.7
Somewhat Likely	1	4.3
Not Likely	0	0.0
Public Speaking		
Most Likely	13	56.5
Likely	3	13.0
Somewhat Likely	7	30.4
Not Likely	0	0.0
Writing a Letter		
Most Likely	8	34.8
Likely	10	43.5
Somewhat Likely	4	17.4
Not Likely	1	4.3
Nonverbal Communication		
Most Likely	6	26.1
Likely	9	39.1
Somewhat Likely	5	21.7
Not Likely	3	13.0

When the five responses were examined closely from the perspective of what respondents will “most likely” and “likely” do in the described scenario, the rankings were, respectively, active listening (100%), first; conflict resolution (96%), second; writing a letter (78%), third; public speaking (70%), fourth; and nonverbal communication (65%), fifth. In all cases, the combined “most likely” and “likely” were above (50%); in fact, four of the indicators were 70% or higher, respectively, active listening, conflict resolution, writing a letter, and public speaking.

Table 4 presents responses to problem-solving scenario attributes presented to participants. Participants were given/presented with a scenario: “Employers are usually seeking employees with problem-solving skills; also, within an organization, leadership is looking out for employees who have problem-solving skills to put them in charge of teams and/or departments. Of late, the CEO of your organization has mentioned that management will be recruiting such employees from within and without your organization.”

Table 4. Problem-Solving Scenario Responses (n = 23)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Creative Skills		
Most Likely	14	60.9
Likely	8	34.8
Somewhat Likely	1	4.3
Not Likely	0	0.0
Research and Consult		
Most Likely	14	60.9
Likely	7	30.4
Somewhat Likely	2	8.7
Not Likely	0	0.0
Consensus Solutions		
Most Likely	13	56.5
Likely	8	34.8
Somewhat Likely	2	8.7
Not Likely	0	0.0
Critical Thinking Skills		
Most Likely	15	65.2
Likely	3	13.0
Somewhat Likely	3	13.0
Not Likely	2	8.7
Decision-making Skills		
Most Likely	11	47.8
Likely	7	30.4
Somewhat Likely	4	17.4
Not Likely	1	4.3

The participants were asked five questions to assess their views as follows: Regarding the extent to which they are likely to use their creative skills to vie for such a position, 61% indicated most likely, 35% indicated likely, and 4% indicated somewhat likely. Regarding the extent to which they are likely to sell or articulate their ability to do research and also consult with their colleagues to find a solution to a problem to vie for such a position, 61% indicated most likely; 30% indicated likely, and 9% indicated somewhat likely. Examining the extent to which they are likely to sell their ability to seek amicable or consensus solutions to implement projects with team members in their organization or workplace, 57% indicated most likely; 35% indicated likely, and 9% indicated somewhat likely. Examining the extent to which they are likely to sell their critical thinking skills to solve problems to vie for one of the positions, 65% stated most likely; 13% stated likely, another 13% stated likely, and 9% stated not likely. Concerning the extent to which they are likely to sell their decision-making skills to vie for one of the positions, 48% stated most likely; 30% stated likely; 17% stated somewhat likely, and 4% stated somewhat likely.

In this case, focusing on “most likely” and “likely” responses of what respondents will do in the described scenario, the rankings were, respectively, use creative skills (96%), first; do research and consult and seek consensus solutions (91% each), tied for second; use decision-making skills (78%), third; and use critical thinking skills (75%), fourth. Here also, the combined “most likely” and “likely” were above 50%; in fact, all the indicators were above 70%. It appears the propensity of perceived soft skills is toward problem-solving.

Table 5 reflects responses to work ethic scenario attributes. Participants were presented with a scenario: “Work ethic is the ability to follow through on tasks and duties in a timely and quality manner. It helps one to develop positive relationships with colleagues, other employees, and other leaders. Of late, the Board of your organization has indicated it will promote from within those with strong work ethics to fill some sensitive positions.” Once, again, the participants were asked five questions to assess their views as follows: Related to the extent to which they are likely to dot their “is” and cross their “ts” in an essay-writing event that is non-scoring or just for fun, 39% stated most likely, 35% stated likely, 13% stated somewhat likely, and another 13% stated not likely. Related to the extent to which they are likely to correct an oversight of a dollar more of change that a store clerk gave them or where they accidentally paid a cashier at a fast-food place a dollar less and realized it a few seconds later, 52% stated most likely, 35% stated likely, 9% stated somewhat likely, and 4% stated not likely. Concerning the extent to which they are likely to complete a project that they have been given one week to complete and completing it on day 4 versus completing it the last few hours of day 7, 30% indicated most likely; another 30% indicated likely, 35% indicated somewhat likely, and 4% indicated not likely. Regarding the extent to which they are likely to do a task methodically versus doing it haphazardly, 39% indicated most likely; 26% indicated likely, another 26% indicated somewhat likely, and 9% indicated not likely. Considering the extent to which they are likely to show up at work for special days even if those days are not regular workdays, 26% stated most likely; 30% stated likely, 17% stated somewhat likely, and 26% stated not likely.

Here, examining the “most likely” and “likely” responses of what respondents will do in the described scenario, the rankings were, respectively, correct an oversight (87%), first; dot “is” and cross “ts” (74%), second; do a task methodically (65%) third; complete a project on time (61%), fourth; and show up on special days to work (57%), fifth. Here also, the combined “most likely” and “likely” were above 50%; however, only two were above 70%, correct an oversight and dot “is” and cross “ts.”

Table 5. Work Ethic Scenario Responses (n = 23)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Dot the “is” and cross the “ts”		
Most Likely	9	39.1
Likely	8	34.8
Somewhat Likely	3	13.0
Not Likely	3	13.0
Correct an Oversight		
Most Likely	12	52.2
Likely	8	34.8
Somewhat Likely	2	8.7
Not Likely	1	4.3
Complete the Project Early/On time		
Most Likely	7	30.4
Likely	7	30.4
Somewhat Likely	8	34.8
Not Likely	1	4.3
Doing a Task Methodically		
Most Likely	9	39.1
Likely	6	26.1
Somewhat Likely	6	26.1
Not Likely	2	8.7
Show up for Work on Special Days		
Most Likely	6	26.1
Likely	7	30.4
Somewhat Likely	4	17.4
Not Likely	6	26.1

Table 6 depicts the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the regression analysis. The minimum value for the leadership styles was 0.0 and the maximum value was 3.0; the mean value ranged from 1.130 to 2.087. The minimum and maximum values for the soft skills components and the overall or composite soft skill indicator were, respectively, 0.60 and 3.00, and the mean values ranged from 1.638 to 2.444. Table 7 shows the multiple regression results based on the beta coefficients. The first reflects the relationship between the selected soft skills and the telling leadership style. The beta coefficients, reflecting relative impact, were, respectively, 0.337, 0.167, and 0.164 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The second reflects the relationship between the selected soft skills and the selling leadership style. The beta coefficients were, respectively, -0.032, 0.460, and -0.043 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The third reflects the relationship between the selected soft skills and the participating leadership style. The beta coefficients were, respectively, 0.231, -0.255, and 0.213 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The fourth presents the relationship between the selected soft skills and the delegating leadership style. The beta coefficients were,

respectively, -0.004, 0.624, and -0.043 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The fifth presents the relationship between the selected soft skills and the autocratic leadership style. The beta coefficients were, respectively, 0.218, 0.041, and -0.205 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The sixth presents the relationship between the selected soft skills and the democratic leadership style. The beta coefficients were, respectively, -0.139, -0.212, and 0.235 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic. The seventh shows the relationship between the selected soft skills and the composite leadership style. The beta coefficients were, respectively, 0.157, 0.176, and 0.096 for communication, problem-solving, and work ethic.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics (n = 23)

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Telling	23	1.00	3.00	2.130	0.548
Selling	23	1.00	3.00	2.087	0.733
Participating	23	0.00	3.00	1.130	1.058
Delegating	23	0.00	3.00	2.087	0.900
Autocratic	23	0.00	3.00	1.087	0.996
Democratic	23	0.00	3.00	1.304	1.063
Communication	23	1.40	3.00	2.357	0.451
Problem-Solving	23	1.00	3.00	2.444	0.597
Work Ethic	23	0.60	3.00	1.913	0.668
Composite LS	23	1.00	3.00	1.638	0.504

Overall, the communication soft skill dominated in three leadership styles, telling, participating, and autocratic (0.337, 0.231, 0.218); that is, there were more positive relative impacts compared to the other soft skills. The problem-solving soft skill dominated in two leadership styles, selling and delegating (0.460; 0.624); that is, as before, there were more positive relative impacts compared to the other soft skills. The work ethic soft skill dominated in one leadership style, democratic (0.235); that is, there was a more positive relative impact compared to the other soft skills. However, taking into consideration the composite leadership style, the problem-solving soft skill had the most positive relative impact (0.176). This is not surprising as the problem-solving soft skill had a very pronounced positive impact on the delegating leadership style (0.624) (Table 7). As a result of this (and also), the high combined “most likely” and “likely” responses on problem-solving soft skill indicators (Table 4), it stands to reason that the problem-solving soft skill has the most effect on the composite leadership style, all things equal. Also, taking into consideration, the specific leadership styles, the soft skills either enhance or depress them. In this study, the soft skills do more enhancing than depressing

(13 positive impacts and 8 negative impacts). Overall, the communication, problem-solving, and work ethic soft skills positively affect the composite leadership style (Table 7), although relatively smaller for work ethic. The overall results agree with the findings of Dean & East (2019) and Benstead (2023) who indicated that problem-solving and communication were critical skills needed by personnel (both leaders and employees) in organizations or the workplace.

Table 7. Relationship between Soft Skills and Telling, Selling, Participating, Delegating, Autocratic, and Democratic Leadership Styles (n = 23)

Variable	Beta Coefficients
Soft Skills/Telling	
COM	0.337
PRS	0.167
WET	0.164
Soft Skills/Selling	
COM	-0.032
PRS	0.460
WET	-0.043
Soft Skills/Participating	
COM	0.231
PRS	-0.255
WET	0.213
Soft Skills/Delegating	
COM	-0.004
PRS	0.624
WET	-0.043
Soft Skills/Autocratic	
COM	0.218
PRS	0.041
WET	-0.205
Soft Skills/Democratic	
COM	-0.139
PRS	-0.212
WET	0.235
Soft Skills/CLS	
COM	0.157
PRS	0.176
WET	0.096

CONCLUSION

The study assessed the effects of soft skills on the perceived leadership styles of college students. Specifically, it described demographic characteristics, examined leadership styles, examined soft skills, and evaluated the relative importance of soft skills to

leadership styles. The data were collected using a questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The results showed that most of the respondents were females (61%); freshmen and sophomores (65%), and they intend to hold a college leadership position while in college (65%). The most dominant leadership styles were, telling, selling, and delegating; respectively, they ranked first, second, and third, with combined percentages based on “most likely” and “likely” responses of 91, 78, and 74%. Regarding the selected soft skills vis-à-vis what they would do in scenarios, there were high or relatively high combined “most likely” and “likely” responses, above 50%. All were above 60% for communication, respectively, 100%, 96%, 78%, 70%, and 65% for active listening, conflict resolution, writing a letter, public speaking, and nonverbal communication. For problem-solving, all five combined “most likely” and “likely” responses were above 70%; respectively, 96%, 91%, 91%, 78%, and 75% for creative skills, research and consult, consensus solutions, decision-making skills, and critical thinking skills. Moreover, for work ethic, all five combined “most likely” and “likely” were above 50%; respectively, 87%, 74%, 65%, and 57% for correcting an oversight; doting “is” and crossing the “ts”; for doing a task methodically rather than haphazardly; completing a project on time and showing up for work on special days.

The results of the multiple regression showed that communication dominated in three leadership styles, telling, participating, and autocratic; problem-solving dominated in two leadership styles, selling and delegating; and work ethic dominated in one leadership style, democratic. However, problem-solving dominated in the composite leadership style. This was not surprising as its relative impact was greater than the other two soft skills on individual leadership styles. A possible or realistic interpretation of this is that a major soft skill needed in leadership is the ability to solve problems, and therefore, the problem-solving soft skill dominates. The contribution of this study is that when college students acquire soft skills, it is likely to influence their leadership styles, and ultimately, possibly affect their individual and/or organizational performance or outcomes. Specifically, it also shows that problem-solving soft skill is a major contributor to leadership styles. It is recommended that further studies be done to ascertain if the results will replicate. A way of doing that is; for instance, to increase the sample size and/or add more soft skills to the variables.

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