

Education researchers at Pearson are conducting a series of summaries around Pearson's Personal and Social Capabilities (PSCs), the “soft” skills that are crucial for employability. This review focuses on teaching and assessing the skill of leadership in K-12 and college classrooms. What follows is a summary of the most significant findings.

What Does Good Leadership Look Like?

There are several different models of leadership in the research literature, including some developed specifically for young adults. In recent years, there has been a particular interest in shifting the focus of leadership from managing and controlling to inspiring and motivating. There is an increasing interest in nonhierarchical and collaborative leadership strategies. Synthesizing across the literature, Pearson has defined leadership as consisting of eight core skills:

1. Challenges assumptions.
2. Establishes vision and possibilities for the future.
3. Fosters collaboration among followers by promoting communication and cooperation and assigning appropriate roles.
4. Respects and acknowledges contributions of followers and treats them fairly.
5. Empowers followers to complete high-quality work and provides them with the authority to make their own decisions.
6. Maintains accountability – provides adequate rewards (or lack thereof) for accomplishments (both followers and for self).
7. Stays open-minded to ideas and viewpoints.
8. Provides mentorship and support to help accomplish goals.

In addition to our eight core skills, we also highlight the importance of leader facilitation of creative problem-solving. This aspect of leadership requires application of several leadership skills (i.e. challenging assumptions, staying open-minded, facilitating communication), critical thinking, and advanced domain knowledge. Problems presented to leaders and organizations are often ill structured and novel, meaning there are often not clear right or wrong answers, and previous experience might not completely apply. Leaders play a crucial role in defining these problems, identifying what information is relevant to the problem, supporting the generation of solutions, and evaluating and deciding among potential solutions.

Why Is Leadership Important?

Leadership is increasingly recognized as a key twenty-first-century skill that benefits learners in school, as they transition to the workplace, and throughout their careers. Research suggests

that a focus on developing leadership skills is important for several reasons:

- Higher-education institutions view leadership as an important skill for both incoming and outgoing college students.
- Students who had leadership experiences in high school were more likely to attend and graduate from college and had higher wages as adults.
- Employers view leadership as an important skill for applicants. In one study, having held a leadership position had a stronger influence on employers' hiring decisions than GPA.
- Hiring individuals with leadership potential can support organizational success as teams and organizations with better leaders demonstrate higher levels of performance, stronger motivation, and more job satisfaction.

Is There a Skills Gap?

Leadership is clearly relevant for occupational success. In the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE's) Job Outlook 2016 survey, employers rated leadership as the most important attribute they look for on applicants' resumes. Having held a leadership position also had a strong influence on employers' hiring decisions, even stronger than GPA. Additionally, research by the World Economic Forum indicates that there will be an even stronger demand for employees with leadership and social-influence skills by the year 2022. Despite the importance of leadership skills, recent graduates may be lacking in this area. Another survey by NACE in 2018 found that while 71 percent of graduating seniors believed they were proficient in leadership, only 33 percent of employers thought new graduates were proficient leaders. Notably, of the eight skills examined during this survey, only one (professionalism/work ethic) had a significantly larger gap between student and employer proficiency perceptions.

How Can Employers Support Skill Development?

Like most skills, leadership can be developed through direct instruction and practical application. Instead of expecting employees to learn these skills on their own, employers should explicitly teach what good leadership looks like in terms of desirable behaviors and useful strategies. Employees should then have the opportunity to practice these skills in authentic contexts (e.g., leading a meeting or mentoring a junior colleague) and receive feedback on their performance.

Notably, the workplace differs from K-12 and higher-education settings in how leadership skills are utilized and applied. The responsibility and authority that student leaders have is often different, and more narrow in scope, than the responsibility and authority held by leaders in the workplace. While it is important that leadership opportunities be developmentally appropriate, particularly for younger learners, educators in K-12 and higher-education settings should also be mindful of how learners will eventually utilize their leadership skills in the workplace. As such, stronger alignment between K-12, higher education, and employer stakeholders will help students fully develop the leadership skills they need before transitioning to the workforce. Employers can sit on advisory boards or work with educational institutions to develop programs for teaching the specific leadership skills required in the workplace. These programs may be particularly effective when integrated into "Capstone" or other transition-oriented courses for older students preparing to enter the workforce.

Employers can also utilize recruitment, hiring, and compensation strategies to reward candidates who demonstrate strong leadership skills. For current employees, businesses can develop formal leadership training programs which are made widely available or support their employees in seeking out external professional development in these areas. Overall, these practices will help incentivize the development of leadership skills.