

# Effect of Soft Skills Training in Secondary School Principal's Performance in Kenya

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## **Abstract**

A school leader's achievement is not what they study in learning institutions but the way they organize themselves into problem solving and realistic decision making. While this includes some taught hard skills, the bulk of school activities rely on soft skills. Soft skills, however, are frequently neglected, although they play an important role in school principals' daily operations as an instructional supervisor. This study aimed to examine the relationship between soft skills training and Principals' performance. The study adopted a cross-sectional mixed survey design. Using Yamane formulae, the sample comprised of 167 principals from 286 public secondary schools in Kiambu County. These were spread proportionally across all the 12 sub-counties in the County. The principal research instrument was primarily a questionnaire. The reliability of the instrument using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was deemed reasonable at .73. The findings showed that a substantial relationship exists between the training of the principal on soft skills and their good performance of the duties. The study suggests routine in-service training should be undertaken in the county to improve the development of soft skills. It is also advisable that undergraduate, postgraduate, or in-service training include soft skills as a unit, to build knowledge of the value of soft skills.

**Keywords:** Soft skill, instructional supervisor, performance and training

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The performance of a school leader is not what they learn in learning institutions but the way they package themselves in problem-solving and decision making. Goleman (2010) reiterated that good manager's secret is not what they learn in schools but the soft skills they possess. Ward and Dorothy (2014) stressed that soft skills play a very important role in career-life and must not be overlooked by the employees. Effectively, any organization will be effective if leaders incorporate and leverage soft skills and integrate them into everyday services.

Many researchers have described soft skills as personal characteristics that individuals possess and that which helps them to survive in their daily chores. Marcial (2013) has described soft skills as the personal qualities that influence individuals' interpersonal relationships, job performance, and career outlook for individuals. Marcial argued that those skills help to shape a manager's personality and integrity in the work environment. Soft skills as seen by Pereault, (2004) are special characteristics and abilities that distinguish a person from individuals who have similar professional backgrounds and experience. In other words, Robles (2012) saw soft skills as a person's personal qualities such as honesty, competence, commitment, and versatility which are considered to be very important in the workplace. Robles further argued that soft skills use character characteristics, habits, and attitudes instead of technological aptitude and experience. Soft skills can therefore be defined as those qualities in a person that one uses in their day-to-day management to solve problems, respond to crises, or even manoeuvre in negotiating times.

Bhatnagar (2011) insinuates that soft skills are the key qualifications in today's economy for getting a job. He believes that a small percentage of technological skills inspire, but the ability to use soft skills counts for a greater percentage. Deepa and Manisa (2012) agreed on this view, adding that soft skills provide a variety of an individual's interpersonal skills required to establish a relationship with others, and therefore a requirement for employees of the 21st century. This Wijan (2012) noted that leaders of the 21st century need creativity, communication, and innovative thinking among other soft skills to tackle the challenges of the technological era.

Wallapha (2012) listed seven soft skills including critical thinking and problem solving, communication and presentation, teamwork, lifelong learning and knowledge management, development and construction of innovation, morality, and professional skills as the soft skills administrators and teachers can use educational management. In their day-to-day operations, school leaders find themselves in situations involving negotiation, responding to emergencies, and dispute resolution. Negotiation skills, for example, enable the principal to be able to turn agreements into partnerships with strong communication forces. That needs the ability to use soft skills and possess it. Bhatnagar (2011) thought that leaders with low soft skills have drawbacks in achieving personal as well as professional success. Farmer, Meghan, and Jill (2011) reiterated this stance by noting that educators have the

crucial task of perceiving the worker as a whole about the roles of the community of which he/ she is an integral part. Therefore, the effectiveness of the principal has a major impact on the school's progress.

Ordinarily, leadership classes teach three skills essential for leaders namely, technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills. Technical and conceptual skills are very useful at the lower managerial levels. Human skills are what primarily houses soft management skills which are mostly applicable at higher management levels. As noted earlier, seven soft skills in Wallapha (2012) should be highly practiced by educational administrators. Wijan (2012) further stressed that it is the responsibility of educational administrators to build these soft skills among their staff to allow them to perform highly. According to Katz (1974), if educational administrators want to operate school organizations effectively and efficiently, they must incorporate and integrate these essential skills.

As Goleman (2012) suggests, when leaders reach senior management ranks, more human skills are required than technological skills. Goleman argued that the competencies of emotional intelligence are synergistic with those of cognition; the top performers have both. The more complicated the work, the more it's about emotional intelligence. This is because a shortcoming in these capabilities could impede the use of whatever technical expertise or intelligence an individual may have. Simply put, if one does not regulate one's emotions, it may make them dumb however intelligent they might be.

Ang, Van, and Rockstuhl, (2015), describe cultural intelligence as the capacity of an individual to adapt as he/she communicates with others from different cultural regions and has behavioural, motivational, and metacognitive aspects. On the other hand, Ababneh (2016) sees cultural intelligence as the cognitive, motivational, and behavioural capacities for recognizing and reacting effectively to individuals and groups' beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours under dynamic and evolving conditions to bring about the desired change. People with higher cultural intelligence are considered to be able to integrate successfully into any climate. Another culture can have the same cultural practices as a leader but vary in department specialization. Seeking a common ground helps the leader understand other people and reduce contact barriers (Alon, Boulanger & Taras, 2016).

A school principal should avoid stereotyping. Stereotyping gives a leader the profile of other persons but can be risky as it can lead to making negative and incorrect assumptions being made. A leader should note that for a common purpose, people from different cultures have their traditions and values that may vary (Livermoore 2011) but must be a blend for a common goal. Principals should therefore cultivate understanding rather than the judgment of a person on his/her worth instead of assessing him/her from a cultural point of view.

According to Adeel and Pencheng (2016), people with high cultural intelligence are attuned to the values, beliefs, attitudes, and body language of people from different cultures. They use this knowledge to interact with empathy and understanding. They also use observation, empathy, and intelligence to read people and situations and make

informed decisions about why others are acting the way they are. In the era of advanced technology, delocalization, and 100% transition in Kenya, principals must possess emotional and cultural intelligence. Being able to control emotions, helping employees appreciate their feelings, and functioning well in any situation with any form of the employee helps leaders build trust and accomplish goals.

Communication is a central feature of leadership. Communication skills are important in individual and organizational success, as Conrad and Robert (2011) have emphasized. School principals lead teachers, support staff, students, Board of Management (BOM), parents, community, and other stakeholders. Principals, therefore, need to be great managers, meaning they must have things done by people and through people. And therefore, the individual interpersonal relations must be prevalent for positive perception. This requires good communication between the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate. The way the administrators converse with their employees determines the level of trust they received from them. Lee and Tien-Tse (2011) posited that communication skills are one of the soft skills that must be acquired by all leaders and especially school principals. They believed that principals could improve their roles by sharing insights through various forms of communication and learn from them.

The way followers perceive you as a Principal determines your competence and therefore the overall productivity. Bhatnagar (2011) mentioned that communication is one of the most important soft skills which when it lacks in principals, the whole system may collapse. Through communication skills, principals can persuade, train, present, inspire, and teach the implementers of the vision.

Effective leaders regularly evaluate their leadership styles when they manage others. This calls for a leader to periodically assess their managerial strengths and weaknesses. Wijan (2012) argues that to effectively communicate, it is important for the leader to re-assess the channels of getting objective feedback. According to Dede (2010), the success of every school principal is connected with the subjective judgment that others have about them whether verbal or non-verbal. These include those above, on the same level, and those below the principal in the pecking order. Their perception about you majorly affects leaders' productivity at a given time and space. This was viewed by Marcial (2012) as the practice of open communication and demonstrates fairness in the workplace.

Teams are groups of people in an organization composed of members who are interdependent, share common ideals. In a school, teams must be coordinated to achieve intended organizational objectives. Teams emphasize the collaborative effort of all members. Team building is an important factor in providing quality service and remaining competitive as an organization. Teamwork was seen by Lingard, (2010) as comprising various skills such as arriving on time promptly, sharing opinion and knowledge, considering the suggestion of others, showing respect to other team members, and providing help to others.

Goleman (2012) posits that when teams operate at their best, the results can be more than simply additive and hedge at multiplicative, with the best talents of one-person catalysing the best of another and another to produce

results far beyond what one person might have done. The explanation of this aspect of team performance lies in the members' relationships that are in the chemistry between members. According to Pauli (2018), teamwork can improve communication and increase the efficiency of the individual, bringing benefits to everyone. Pauli asserts that collaborative skills are very important in the workplace to enhance cooperation with colleagues for better results. The ability to work with other team members is a very important soft skill, which increases significantly the chances of getting the job done.

Principals' performance in this study will comprise of results of an institution measured against the intended output. Specifically, the study will measure performance by academic and financial performance. In an era where there are so many changes happening including technological advancement, crisis management, delocalization in Kenya, the introduction of Teacher Professional Appraisal and Development (TPAD) and more importantly enshrining of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), principals must have soft skills to ensure achievement of objectives.

Although principals' operations require hard skills taught, the bulk of school operation is dependent on the soft skills. Soft skills, however, are often overlooked, yet they play an important role in the day-to-day operations of a principal as an instructional supervisor. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between soft skills training and Principals' performance.

### **The objective of the study**

The objective of this study was to find out if there exists a significant relationship between soft training and principals' performance.

### **Methodology**

A total of 286 principals in Kiambu County were targeted to participate in the study which was done between July 2019 and November 2019. Using Yamane formulae, a sample comprised of 167 principals was selected from 286 public secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. These principals were proportionally distributed in all 12 sub-counties in the County.

A monkey survey was sent to principals' emails after a formal request through a phone conversation. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended to elicit reactions and to provide flexibility in the answers. A five Likert scale was used for easy of finding the effect between training on soft skills and principals' performance.

### **Results and Discussions**

#### **Findings**

Out of a total of 167 principals who were sent the questionnaires, a total of 156 completed and returned. This gave a response rate of 93.4 %. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) in which they assert that a 50 % response rate is adequate, a 60 % response rate is good and above 70 % response rate is very good. Creswell (2014) asserts

that a questionnaire return rate of above 75% is sufficient for generalization of the findings to the target population. The return rate was thus favourable for data analysis.

The study sought to find out the demographic characteristics of the sampled principals. This was necessary because the experience for example would enable principals to acquire soft skills not taught in school. Table 1.1 gives a summary of the demographic characteristics.

Table 1.1  
Demographic information for school principals

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Gender	Male	87	55.8%
	Female	69	44.2%
Academic qualification	Bachelor's degree	109	69.9%
	Masters	54	34.6%
	PhD	1	0.006%
	Others	1	0.006%
	Less than one year	13	8.3%
Administrative experience	1 – 5 years	48	30.8%
	6- 10 year	53	34%
	More than 10 years	42	26.9%

Table 1.1 shows that there were more male teachers than female teachers sampled. This could be attributed to the possibility that the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) in their deployment policy endeavour to acquire gender parity especially in a leadership position in schools. The increasing number of female principals could be attributed to this and as observed also the fact that more women are gradually accepting leadership positions in institutions of learning in Africa (Muzvidziwa, 2014)

Almost all principals (99.94%) had a bachelor's degree and above. This shows that all the principals sampled had gone through common courses in the University that are geared to providing soft skills to graduates. Among, these a big number (35.66%) had a Master of Education degree. This means that they have been taken through leadership skills in their course work.

Quite a sizable number of principals (61%) have had enough administrative experience of more than 5 years. This shows that a majority of principals have served for a substantially long period thereby accumulating some soft skills necessary in work performance. They were therefore able to address the items presented to them with confidence and knowhow. As theorized by Palestini (2009) experience of a leader can influence efficiency and productivity through repeated situations and environmental circumstances. This is for example true when a principal increases performance by emphasizing order, rules, and defined roles in a group that is not motivated.

Further, the principals were asked to rate the training effectiveness of various soft skills selected for the study. The results were as shown in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Mean scores of importance of soft skills training and school principal's performance.

Soft skill	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communication	3.67	.23
Cultural Intelligence	3.26	.57
Emotional Intelligence	3.33	.47
Teamwork	3.64	.32
Problem Solving	4.21	.53
Critical Thinking	3.60	.49
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.62</b>	<b>.44</b>

Table 1.2 shows that among the skills identified as soft skills, principals scored highly on problem-solving (4.21) and communication skills (3.67), followed by teamwork (3.64) and Critical thinking (3.60). The principal's rated training on cultural intelligence (3.26) and emotional intelligence (3.33) as not very important.

The study sought to find out if there exists a significant impact of soft skills training on principals' performance.

Hypothesis testing

**H01: There is no significant relationship between soft skill training on principals' performance**

The impact of soft skills training on principals' performance was measured using school performance. The results were summarized in Table 1.3

Table 1.3

The relationship between soft skills training and principal's performance

Soft skill	Beta	t- value	sig	Comment
Communication	-0.432	-2.1	0.046	Sig
Cultural Intelligence	-0.187	-0.751	0.524	Not sig
Emotional Intelligence	0.017	0.863	0.645	Not sig
Teamwork	0.568	2.875	0.004	Sig
Problem Solving	0.316	1.63	0.001	Sig
Critical Thinking	0.617	0.684	0.021	Sig

Table 1.3 presents statistical estimates of standardized coefficients and p values of the predictors (Communication, cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills). Among the predictors, cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence were found not too significant predictors of principals' performance.

Table 1.4

Relationship between soft skills training and principals' performance

Model	Sum of Square	DF	Mean Squares	F	Sig
Regression	42.75	5	5.213	2.542	0.034
Residual	119.876	61	2.152		
Total	162.626	66			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Communication, Cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving skills

b. Dependent Variable: Principal performance

Table 1.4 shows the regression of combined independent variables. The results had an adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of .378 which shows that at least 37.8% of the variance in principals' performance was accounted for by selected soft skills training. The F value (2.542) was significant at 0.034 ( $p < .05$ ) shows the effect of selected soft skills training on principals' performance.

### Discussion of the findings

The results revealed an average rating of soft skill training ranging from 3.26 to 4.21 with an average of 3.62. The results of simple linear regression showed that training on soft skills impacted the principal's work performance. This finding is in agreement with many researchers on soft skills such as Ibrahim (2017), Homer (2001) who found that soft skills are needed in day to day running of schools. However, it disagrees with the findings by Donald (2001) who assert that there is no relationship between training in soft skills and work performance. Although Donald does not agree that soft skill training is important for performance, he alludes that these important skills can be acquired as one climbs the ladder of management.

Generally, principals pointed out that problem-solving skills should be introduced as a unit in Universities as there are so many emerging issues that require this skill. They also were all in agreement that communication skills, critical thinking, and teamwork should also be taught to school managers. A probable reason being why problem-solving rated very high was that principals especially in Kenya are encountered with varied issues to handle including unrest, 100% transition which requires infrastructural development, nationalization of teachers, teacher utilization, internally displaced students, and other emerging issues in education.

The principals were aware of the importance of soft skills in their performance of duty. They alluded to the fact that although some skills seem more important than others, situational analysis is necessary to determine the most appropriate skill. Training in emotional intelligence for example will make principals associate with workers

professionally without feelings. The principals agreed with the assertion by Coleman (2010) who said that employees will not ordinarily become emotional, but leaders will. When leaders become emotional, they may not be able to control the emotions of their employees. Hence the need for training on emotional intelligence.

### **Recommendations**

Based on study findings, the following recommendations were proposed.

Soft skills training should be encouraged as it raises awareness among the school administrators. Before being appointed as principals, TSC should establish whether principals have some soft skills. Today's employees should have more soft skills than hard skills.

Training of principals on soft skills should be incorporated at all levels of training school administrators. This would make the administrators have basic soft skills.

Training agencies mandated to offer INSET should break from the normal practice and modernize training to include a unit in soft skills. For employability, Universities and other institutions offering INSET, should offer a course in soft skills at all levels and especially at master's level. Such institutions could create awareness on the importance of soft skills in life.

### **Conclusion**

Principals should have a high level of soft skills if they are to be abreast with day-to-day efficient performance of duties for the general school productivity. Training in soft skills may not be in the mainstream academic teaching and learning calendar but this study has revealed that it is an important ingredient for principal performance. To address the challenges of the 21st-century principal in times when information is at the click of a button and upsurge of collaboration, acquisition of soft skills to have effective communication, build teams, solve problems through critical thinking, and above all have some level of intelligence. Principals can also improve their proficiency in soft skills through In-Service Training (INSET) to meet the school goals and objectives.

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