

Introduction

Do you want to learn key skills that help you succeed in high school and college? Would you like to learn skills employers seek and that will prepare you for a productive, rewarding career? Would you like to communicate more effectively? Are you interested in improving your leadership ability? If so, this book is for you.

Since completing my PhD, I held teaching and advising positions at three universities for twenty years, and held leadership positions in universities for more than ten years. I have taught and advised literally hundreds of students. I have seen many students succeed and many others fail. I know the skills that successful students have, and I know which skills are lacking in students who fail.

One of the most important things to understand when you are young is that intelligence alone won't make you successful. To truly be successful, you must develop leadership and soft skills. ***Leadership is the ability to influence others, and soft skills are a collection of abilities, behaviors, and attitudes that increase your effectiveness.*** Many young people fail to fully develop these key skills because they do not truly understand their importance. Furthermore, many young people “don't know that they don't know” the importance of these skills.

In this book, you discover much of what you need to know to develop the leadership and soft skills that will empower you to succeed in your education and in your career. You discover these skills within a framework of the 3Rs: ***Readiness, Relationships, and Results.*** ***Readiness*** teaches you self-awareness and emphasizes the need to understand yourself,

develop a positive attitude, look for and take advantage of opportunities, and overcome challenges. ***Relationships*** teaches you to communicate effectively, forge authentic connections in your personal and professional life, and to be professional. ***Results*** teaches you to be future-oriented and emphasizes the need to know your values and priorities, set and achieve goals, solve problems, and to be accountable. In other words, ***Readiness*** focuses on you, ***Relationships*** focuses on your relationship with others, and ***Results*** focuses on your ability get the job done.

This book contains practical advice and hands-on exercises to help you apply what you are learning. Plus, it will help you develop a new perspective on things you must know. Armed with this new perspective, you deliberately will look for opportunities to enhance your leadership and soft-skills development.

By learning and applying leadership and soft skills, you will set yourself apart from your peers and increase your likelihood of success when applying for college, scholarships, internships, awards, and jobs. You will also possess the skills that empower your success in your education.

Furthermore, soft skills are necessary for success in your career. I interact with employers and career counselors and ask how I can better prepare young people for successful careers. A very common answer is that young people need to improve their soft skills. Indeed, a quick Internet search of “soft skills” yields numerous articles describing the need for, and general lack of, these skills in recent college graduates.

Soft skills are not tied to any particular career or discipline and are sometimes called “transferable skills” because you can “transfer” these skills to different careers. For example, to succeed as an engineer, you obviously must understand engineering. However, you also must use soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and professionalism to work

effectively with your clients and coworkers. By developing soft skills as a student, you can improve your performance in school, and you can then transfer these skills to your career.

Leadership skills are also important. The greater your leadership ability, the greater is your ability to leverage the skills and abilities of others. As an effective leader, you can accomplish much more through the people you lead than you can by yourself. You must develop your leadership skills if you want to influence others and truly make a difference in your family, school, community, workplace, and world. Remember that leadership is the ability to influence people and is not dependent on your title. You may be in a leadership role now.

Furthermore, many of the soft skills that help in your education and career also will enhance your personal life. Indeed, the ability to communicate is valuable to you in all aspects of your life. Knowing how to listen effectively and how to have a difficult conversation can come in handy when talking with family and friends.

How Do You Develop Your Leadership and Soft Skills?

To improve at anything, you must know what you need to know, develop the abilities and behaviors you need, and have the right attitude. In this book, I will show you much of what you need to know. Through exercises, examples, and mentoring activities, you can develop and apply the abilities and behaviors you need. Although I can provide information and give you opportunities to grow, the choice of attitude and effort ultimately is yours. If you are willing, we can begin a journey together to develop your leadership and soft skills.

Perhaps you doubt your potential to grow as a leader or develop soft skills. If so, let me encourage you. **By putting forth effort to learn and apply the concepts in this book, you will grow as a person and as a leader.** Don't let a lack of confidence or prior failures hold you back. I know several successful people who have overcome setbacks or were told they would not succeed. And I will share a personal example of a setback that caused me to doubt my abilities and nearly drop out of college.

I challenge you to never give up, regardless of your background. Sheer determination and “want to” are powerful tools that will help you succeed. **Although you may not accomplish everything, you can accomplish much in life if you dare to believe in yourself (even if no one else does), make the commitment to succeed, and put forth focused effort.**

How Can You Get the Most Out of This Book?

To fully realize the benefits of this book, you must apply what you learn. You must have the goal to improve and work deliberately to improve your performance through practice. If you want to improve your three-point shooting ability, you can't just read a book on basketball—you have to shoot a lot of three-pointers. Developing your soft skills and leadership ability is similar; you must purposefully work to develop them.

I suggest you read this book in its entirety to get the “big picture.” As you read, keep a journal of the thoughts, questions, and ideas that come to mind. Once you have read the whole book, read it again, answering the questions and working the exercises within and at the end of each chapter. Review

the summary at the end of each chapter. Review again material that is not clear. Be sure that you really understand the material in each chapter rather than just checking it off as having been read.

Read this book again and repeat the plan above. As you grow, you will find your context changes, and you may seek growth in different areas. By working through this book on a regular basis, you will be on the path to continual progress. Pick a time such as your birthday, beginning of the school year, or some other meaningful time and commit to reading this book again. How will you know when to stop? That's easy. You can stop when you no longer find areas to work on.

Finally, make a commitment to grow and realize that developing leadership and soft skills is a process. Seek a mentor to hold you accountable and to help you on your journey. You might ask a counselor, teacher, boss, coach, or pastor to be your mentor. You also might ask a leader in your community.