

Assessing Soft Skills at the Cal Poly State Agriculture Ambassador Conference

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Introduction

In today's society, there is a disconnect with the agriculture industry, agriculture schools, and the public. Students need to acquire soft skills to aid in furthering the agriculture industry through their careers. Overall, hiring managers found soft skills such as communication, leadership, ownership, and teamwork were missing in this new crop of workers (Payscale/Future Workplace, 2016).

College Agriculture Ambassadors advocate for agriculture, higher education, and their respective schools all across the United States. The Cal Poly Agriculture Ambassadors club provides leadership, communication, and personal development to its members through meetings, activities and responsibilities.

The Cal Poly Agriculture Ambassador club hosted the State Agriculture Ambassador Conference in January, 2017. This event aimed to bridge the gap and invite colleges to come together and unite as students. Throughout the event, ambassador groups presented workshops on areas to help other ambassador groups be more successful. A rotation process allowed participants to watch other schools present workshops. Participants completed a pre-event and post-event Soft Skills Assessment regarding personal growth. The LEQ-H Soft Skills Assessment instrument was used which has 24 questions to determine skill development. The results affirm the necessity of soft skills in successful individuals. The purpose of this project is to both show the importance and measure soft skills gained as a result of participating in the 2017 State Agriculture Ambassador Conference. The formative assessment will include a pre-assessment on their soft skill ability. Summative assessment evaluation will be the final results of the perceived skills learned. The result of this project should validate the reason and outcomes for future years of Agriculture Ambassadors conference success.

Hypothesis

The hypothesis of the project is that a majority of students will improve soft skills measured by the LEQ-H Soft Skills Assessment. After the conference, participants will be more proficient in skills such as leadership, task management and other soft skills. Attendees will then use soft skills gained in their future endeavors as students and professionals.

How the Soft Skill Assessment Works

Many studies of measuring soft skills for certain functions exist. One assessment method is the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire, the LEQ-H method. The LEQ-H assessment “focuses on measuring generic life skill competencies which are theoretically amenable to change” according to James Neill, co-developer of this method (Neill, 2008; Neill, Marsh, & Richards, 2003). It is ideally used to measure key life proficiency domains which include personal development programs, such as measuring soft skills.

To date, about 20 documented studies exist which used this assessment for soft skills measurement. LEQ-H utilizes several guiding principles including being short and simple, sensitive to change and balance, and is designed in a way to be utilized as an educational tool. The questionnaire has 24 items which relate to the eight soft skills seen below.

LEQ Factor	Description
Time Management	The extent that an individual perceives that he/she makes optimum use of time.
Social Competence	The degree of personal confidence and self-perceived ability in social interactions.
Achievement Motivation	The extent to which the individual is motivated to achieve excellence and put the required effort into action to attain it.
Intellectual Flexibility	The extent to which the individual perceives he/she can adapt his/her thinking and accommodate new information from changing conditions and different perspectives.
Task Leadership	The extent to which the individual perceives he/she can lead other people effectively when a task needs to be done and productivity is the primary requirement.
Emotional Control	The extent to which the individual perceives he/she maintains emotional control when he/she is faced with potentially stressful situations.
Active Initiative	The extent to which the individual likes to initiate action in new situations.
Self Confidence	The degree of confidence the individual has in his/her abilities and the success of their actions.

Figure 1: LEQ-H Soft Skill Factors, 2000

Literature Review

The LEQ-H assessment was used in the Measuring and Assessment of Soft Skills (MASS) Project for six European countries representing over two years of hard work. Originally designed to determine the soft skills gained from educational camping experiences, MASS measures soft skills in the classroom as well. “All of our partners have a commitment to improving the quality of vocational education and training experiences for their learners and all were willing to try something new in order to achieve this,” said Iverene Bromfield, Project Manager. The results were measurable and positive with varying outcomes in the different countries. The goal of the study was to introduce a psychometric self-assessment culture in the school and to evaluate the appropriateness of the particular test in the MASS context (Kechagias, 2011).

The MASS project was validated in a Nigerian study of 1,200 participants. The study, *Validation of Modified Soft Skills Assessment Instrument (MOSSAI) for Use in Nigeria*, showed results that soft skills needed to enhance performances in workplaces are teachable and examinable in Nigeria. It was recommended that examining bodies should consider adopting or adapting the instrument for use in the Sub-Saharan Africa (Aworanti, 2015). Validation of this study carries over in measuring soft skills in the United States.

The LEQ-H assessment is proved to be accurate and helpful as seen in the examined study. Soft skills can be measured in outdoor education, school education systems internationally, and outside the classroom. This method is validated and endorsed by respected groups.

Methodology

The Agriculture Ambassador club hosted over 80 ambassadors from seven colleges for the three-day State Agriculture Ambassador Conference. To assess soft skill development, a pre-event assessment took place at the beginning of the conference and after all the presentations, workshops, and activities, students completed the same assessment for a second time at the end of the conference. A total of 35 students completed both pre and post assessment. With the data, a composite score was created for each participant by averaging the responses for each question correlating with a soft skill. The average mean difference was taken from the pre and post survey to find the results.

Results

For each of the eight soft skills, improvement, no improvement, and decreased improvement was computed for each of the 35 participants. Overall, a majority of students improved for each soft skill. The following chart shows the data summary.

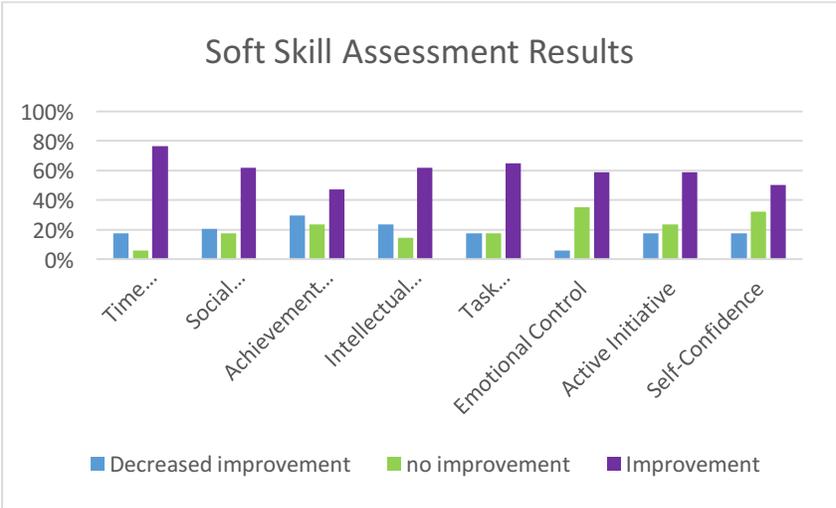


Figure 1: Results of Assessment

The data indicates the greatest improvement in time management by 78 percent. The most area for most growth is achievement motivation at 47 percent. The overall average improvement of the eight soft skills was 60 percent (chart not shown).

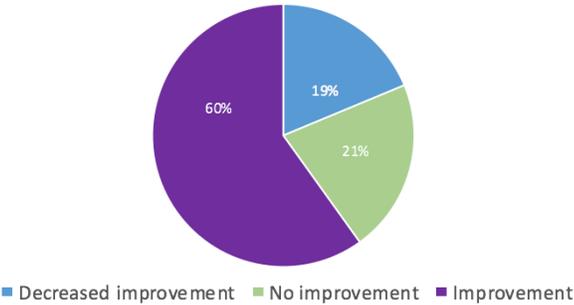


Figure 2 Data Results

The results show the impact of the conference in encouraging the development of soft skills. Cal Poly Agriculture Ambassadors are committed to holding the State Conference annually provides leadership opportunities for the ambassadors and allows attendees to improve soft skills to be measured each year. To gain more data and validation, it is recommended to continue to take the soft skills assessment for the next five years to measure growth and to show the areas of need.

To help students grow at the conference, workshops should be catered to the improvement of soft skills within their topic area. For example, a produce company should explain the tasks required of certain employees and then proceed to explain how to accomplish such duties, therefore encouraging task management. With additional data, more recommendations can be concluded and the data set can validate further soft skill measurement and understanding.

Conclusion

Conferences are an avenue for students to grow in knowledge, experience and skills. The Agriculture Ambassadors have an opportunity to capitalize on gaining and refining soft skills during the State Agriculture Ambassador event. The preparation, time, and effort into the event highlights the importance and value of such a project.

After analyzing the results, it can be concluded that the hypothesis was proven true because a majority of students improved their soft skills at the conference. The attendees left the conference more proficient in leadership, task management, and other soft skills. These skills will not only help in future endeavors but in career development.

The advisor, members and all contributing to the event need a measurability factor to indicate success and value of the project. The pre and post event assessment provided measurable results. The results after only one year are encouraging and indicate the opportunity to improve soft skills among agriculture ambassadors in the state.

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