

Soft Skill Development through the Agricultural Ambassador State Conference

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Introduction

For the past two years, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo has been hosting the Agriculture Ambassador State Conference. This conference provided soft skill development for students who attended the conference and for those students hosting the conference. In 2018, the Agricultural Ambassador State Conference had an emphasis on the importance of learning from industry speakers and attending college workshops that help students learn about careers, help them form goals, and help them grow as leaders (Noel, 2018).

Planning for the 2019 Agricultural Ambassador State Conference began in late spring of 2018. Throughout the duration of the planning of the conference, the author will study the soft skill development of the committee members hosting. In the past, this project has served its purpose by measuring the soft skill development of the students who attended the conference. However, in 2019 the project will evaluate the soft skill development of the committee members because they will be developing and implementing soft skills to help plan a successful conference. Through this project the author is looking to evaluate students' soft skill development through leadership positions.

Background

Soft skills are personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people (Oxford Dictionary, 2018) Soft skills are important to employers and the agricultural industry (Johnson, 2018). Johnson states employers are looking to hire people with leadership experience because; as such experiences can be an indicator of someone who has developed soft skills. He also states recruiters are looking more for soft skills, because hard skill or technical skills can be taught on the job, while soft skills are more difficult to teach. Agarwal discusses a shift in the thought that soft skills are becoming more important than technical skills. He shows how important soft skills are becoming in the work environment and how teams that have soft skills are more productive, work better together, and have more creative ideas (Agarwal, 2018).

While in college it is important for students to develop soft skills. Holmes discusses the top soft skills college students need and develop. These skills include collaboration skills, communicating and interpreting skills, problem solving skills, time management skills and leadership skills. Collaboration: students need to be able to work well with each other, because on their own, students will not have the tools needed for success. Communication and interpretation enable students to ask good questions and communicating to their peers. Problem solving skills are needed when it comes to unexpected challenges because students need to be able to overcome them. Time management: organization and the ability to complete tasks on time are all things employers look for. Leaders, are people who generally do not follow but go out and look for jobs or solutions (Holmes, 2014).

Eikenberg discusses how soft skills are not gained overnight and how they are not easy to develop. He also states soft skills are not soft and need to be viewed as needed skills not just an

afterthought. Some of these skills include being able to self-manage, acting in a strategic way, effectively communicating, being accountable and responsible, having goals and persisting to achieve them, having a vision for the future, managing complexity, being able to foster creativity, and team work (Patel, 2017).

Additionally, Eikenberg noted the environment people work in needs to be permitting to allow their soft skills to shine. When there is a work place that values these skills, people are able to make decisions and think faster without the worry they are wrong, allowing them to fail and learn from their mistakes and thus developing soft skills (Eikenberg, 2018).

Methodology

The objective of this study, was to evaluate the soft skill development of conference committee members using the LQ Method of analysis. The LQ Method is a Soft Skills Assessment instrument that will be used to test students. It uses 24 questions to determine soft skill development, which “focuses on measuring generic life skill competencies which are theoretically amenable to change, split up into 8 Categories” (Neill, 2008). These categories included time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, task management, emotional control, active initiative and self-confidence. They were evaluated from the beginning of planning the conference to the end of the conference, to see how much they had developed their soft skills over the period of planning the conference.

To start the project the researcher formed a conference planning committee; they were the target group to be studied in their soft skill development. Before any work began, the committee chairs and members were asked to complete a pre-survey that would be later compared to a post survey to help analyze their soft skill development over the course of the study. The committee chairs were asked to attend regular committee meetings hosted by the conference chairs. In these meetings, the members of the committees were asked to share what they had been working on, ask questions, and participate in leadership and team building activities.

During the planning of the conference, guidance was provided to the chairs and their ideas were shared with the group and considered. Open communication was used to help facilitate a welcoming environment and the growth of the committee members. The positive and welcoming dynamic of the group allowed for clear communication and an easy environment to work and create in (Freeman, 2019).

In order to coordinate the group, the researcher used various methods of communication; from sending out emails and Groupme text messages to using Doodle Polls to help organize people and their schedules. There was also personal communication that occurred with the advisor due to their open-door policy, that allowed the committee members to drop by as the need arose.

The Conference was held on Saturday, January 26, and Sunday January 27, 2019. The two short days were packed with exciting speakers, presenters and workshops. The 2019 Agricultural Ambassador State Conference was able to offer similar leadership development as described by Beth Noel in this statement from the 2018 Agricultural Ambassador State conference “...with an emphasis on the importance of learning from industry speakers and attending college workshops that help students learn about careers, help them form goals, and help them grow as leaders (Noel, 2018).”

After the 2019 conference concluded, the researcher sent out a post conference survey, that was later used to analyze data on the committee members’ soft skill development. The committee chairs and committee members were then asked to attend two more meetings to discuss how the conference went, suggest improvements for the next year, and bring materials to put into a binder for future committee chairs.

Results

A majority of students ($n= 11$) based on the areas surveyed, saw 59% improvement in their soft skills where 31% saw no improvement, and 10% saw a decreased improvement. Students were evaluated based on eight core ideas: time management, social competence, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, task management, emotional control, active initiative and self-confidence.

The areas that saw the most improvement were emotional control at 26%, and time management at 24%. Survey respondents reported no improvement in the area of achievement motivation. During this study, only four of the categories saw a decreased improvement in the student’s soft skills: time management decreased by 6%, intellectual flexibility decreased by 6%, task management decreased by 3%, and self-confidence saw a decrease of 9%.

In social competence, 9% reported no improvement and 21% showed improvement. In achievement motivation, there was a 21% no improvement and 9% saw an improvement. Intellectual flexibility decreased by 6%, 12% saw no change, and 15% saw improvements. In the category of task management there was a 3% decrease, 6% saw no improvement, and 21% saw an improvement. Emotional control had 6% of respondents with no improvement and a 26% improvement. Active initiative saw 18% without change and 15% improvement. In self-confidence, 9% of respondents reported decreasing confidence, 6% saw no change and 15% saw an improvement of their self-confidence.

Conclusion

The Agricultural Ambassador State Conference continues to grow from year to year, increasing the participation from new and returning schools bringing more students from more diverse backgrounds. The students who helped plan the conference had a unique opportunity to develop soft skills by actively participating in the planning of the event and reinforcing those skills at the conference by attending sessions and participating in activities. After analyzing the

data, a majority of students who participated in planning the conference had positive growth and improved their soft skills.

From the perspective of the author the overall results were positive showing most of the students saw improvements of their soft skills. However, in some of the areas the researcher felt like some of the students did not take the survey seriously which may have skewed the data slightly. This could be because the students do not see the value in the survey questions or they simply think they did not have the time to complete the survey. The skills to be gained from holding leadership position are soft skills helpful to their student needs and in their future endeavors. Overall, the results from surveying the committee members show holding leadership position in the terms of planning a conference can help students develop their soft skills if they take the opportunity to get involved.

The author recommends in the future of the State Agriculture Ambassador Conference, both attendees and committee leaders be surveyed for soft skill development. The committee members would need to be surveyed at the initial planning meeting for pre-results, and attendees prior to the start of the conference. Then both groups surveyed post conference for reflection of LQ Soft Skill development.

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