PRECEPTOR SERIES:

The Most Important Skill to Pass On: It's Not as Hard as You Think

by Josh Welch, PharmD

It's obvious to most people that pharmacists need to have a high aptitude for math and science and a passion for precision. Hard skills, such as a firm understanding of pharmacotherapy, kinetics, and the ability to count by 5, are things we value in pharmacy. This knowledge is precious to us and we hold it in high regard. However, drawing out the coagulation cascade won't make a disgruntled patient's Xarelto® any more affordable, nor will it ensure they come back to your pharmacy next month.

There is an increasingly important set of personal abilities known as soft skills that are critical for success in the pharmacy environment. Soft skills have been described in the literature as a combination of interpersonal and social abilities, as well as manifestations of emotional intelligence.[1,2] Hard skills include technical or administrative abilities and are indicators of cognitive intelligence.[1,2] It is helpful to classify soft skills into four categories: personal (self-awareness), interpersonal (communication), group (collaboration), and organizational (leadership).[1] In this article we will discuss the importance of soft skills, determine why so many people lack them, and examine some ways we can help learners develop their own soft skills.

How important are soft skills vs. hard skills?

In other words, is it more important to know all the side effects and interactions of a drug that is being dispensed, or is it more important for a patient's cues to be read and information communicated in a clear, easy to understand manner? That's a difficult question to answer, but the literature suggests that soft skills are very important in many disciplines, including health care.[1-3] One qualitative study of project management professionals determined that the key to managing complex projects is soft skills.[4] Even at Google, a company that presumably values hard skills, data suggest that "the human touch" ranked above technical skills when characterizing the company's best managers.[5]

Why do so many people lack soft skills?

Answering this question is akin to trying to determine if leaders are born or made. According to the literature, hard skills are generally either innate or leaned through education or training: think medicinal chemistry.[6] Conversely, soft skills tend to develop as a result of interpersonal interaction and self-reflection: think communications lab.[6] Unfortunately, we can't just learn how to communicate well one time and be good for the rest of our lives. Personal, interpersonal, group, and organizational skills are continually being developed and strengthened. We may never arrive at perfection, but our trajectory should be upward. If a person does not make a concerted effort to improve these skills, it is unlikely they will progress.

Considering these skills need to be continually honed and sharpened in the presence of others, coupled with the fact that our pharmacy school education is focused on learning facts, it is clear why many learners have a strong knowledge base with a weak set of soft skills. This is where preceptors come in. The preceptor-student relationship provides the platform on which we can cultivate a culture of learning. What better opportunity do preceptors have to pass on the skills they have refined over the years to future pharmacy professionals? A rotation experience outside the classroom is a great time for learners to be immersed in an environment that promotes the growth of these attributes.

How are soft skills developed?

In order to answer that, one must first examine human behavior. Previous research has suggested that behavior is the result of interaction between a person (P) and their environment (E).[7] Since skills are essentially developed behaviors, it can be proposed that skill development is dependent on a person's interaction with their environment:

Skill development = f (P,E).

Having a strong desire to acquire a skill is necessary, but not adequate, for its development. For example, a person may want to learn how to downhill ski, but without access to a snow-covered hill, they will not be able to develop that skill. When this thinking is applied to pharmacy, it becomes apparent that there will be learners who are very interested in developing their soft skills, but have not had the appropriate environment to do so. As a preceptor, it is important to provide an environment that facilitates skill development, not one that relies on personal desire.

Developing soft skills in practice is not an easy task. Pharmacy schools do indeed teach them, but because of time constraints and the necessary group setting, there are limited opportunities for putting them into practice. Generally, pharmacy school can only initiate the process of soft skill development. The real development comes from continually practicing these skills, processing performance feedback, self-reflection, and accepting constructive criticism from others. When a learner's atmosphere facilitates and encourages these things, only then can they mature and advance this coveted skillset. So how do preceptors create this environment and help learners develop those intangible skills needed to practice at the top of their license? We will take a look at each of the four categories of soft skills defined above, determine how they each are best developed, and outline some strategies that

may be useful to aid in their development.

Personal skills. Self-awareness is critical for improving individual behavior. It involves a person knowing how their values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and preferences affect their behavior. It has been found that self-reflection and coaching are approaches that work well in developing a person's self-awareness.[8] Self-reflection allows the learner to examine their own behavior with regard to causes and effects while coaching provides the ongoing interaction needed to achieve an acceptable level of aptitude. Preceptors are uniquely positioned to provide real-time coaching to learners. In my practice, these are known as teaching moments. Sometimes a learner may complete an interaction with a patient and everyone involved realizes it could have gone better than it did. Depending on the gravity of the situation, I may stop and take a few moments to discuss what happened and why. The goal of the discussion is for the learner to realize that their behavior had a cause and effect on someone else and that they understand an adjustment on their part may lead to a different and perhaps better outcome in the future.

Interpersonal skills. Effective communication should be both demonstrated and taught. In my practice, I stress that communication must be clear, concise, professional, and correct. Be sure to explain to learners the importance of spelling words correctly when typing a prescription label, or how using complete sentences in a note to a prescriber can make a message far better received. Explain to students that they must communicate well in every situation. I have found in my own practice that some learners might not realize the importance of this, nor do they understand that generational and cultural gaps must be bridged during these times. I make an effort to show them that superior communication can help cross that gap with the way I communicate both with them and others. When writing out messages to prescribers, I take the time to work through my thought process with them and I explain why I am writing in such a manner. The same goes with other interactions. It is important that preceptors take every opportunity to teach their learners WHY they do what they do.

Group skills. The ability to facilitate collaborative group interaction or work with others as a team member is an important skill every pharmacist must develop. Collaboration is considered an advanced soft skill and often times takes a more sophisticated approach as self-study and training may not be sufficient. Coaching learners to work well with others may prove difficult, especially with a small pharmacy team or if the learner is the only one at the site. In a site fortunate enough to enjoy multiple students at once, learners should be encouraged to get to know each other if they don't already. Projects that require a group effort should be assigned. This will help them learn to work together and grow both as leaders and team members. If a site is like mine where numbers are limited, creativity needs to be used for all learners to develop these skills. I have found that some advanced learners are well suited for leading pharmacy technicians. This helps them learn how to lead a team and take on a manager role.

For example, one student's project at my site was to implement a Med Sync program for a group of patients. To complete this, the student needed to come up with a plan and execute it, using the help of the staff. The student was able to learn how to lead a team and saw firsthand how their ideas were implemented. Throughout the process I was available for consultation, but I stressed that the goal was for the student to learn how to complete the project with minimal intervention. When a learner finishes a rotation with me, I make sure they understand that even though they might not want to be a manager or a "boss" they will likely end up being one by default. Whether or not they want to be in charge may be irrelevant in the future, so we make sure to work on developing those skills and then when it happens, they are prepared.

Organizational skills. Organizational leadership is the most advanced soft skill to develop. It will often take years to develop and sustain, but should not be dismissed when precepting students. This involves creating a shared vision, working collaboratively to achieve it, and sustaining that state by continuing to develop the people, groups, and the organization itself. Learners need to see that there is more going on than what meets the eye.

They need to see what goes on behind the scenes and why or how decisions are made. One day, they will find themselves in a leadership position and when they do, they need to be well-equipped to handle whatever situation is thrown their way. Learners may not be able to learn how to manage a pharmacy department in only six weeks of rotation time, but preceptors can help them build the foundational skillset required to do so.

Conclusion

We have examined the nature of soft skills, their importance to success, why many of us lack them, and how to develop them. It is my hope that this knowledge will help preceptors facilitate the development of self-awareness, communication, collaboration, and leadership in their students. These skills are essential for our future pharmacists to safely care for patients, work effectively as a member of the health care team, and practice at the top of their license.

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