

# Why Organizations Should Invest More in Soft Skills Development



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SEPTEMBER 2020

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# Executive Summary

Employee development can be grouped into two broad categories: hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are tangible and relatively easy to assess, including competencies such as the ability to use a piece of equipment or perform a procedure. Soft skills are less easily defined and include things such as communication skills, teamwork and adaptability.

In this study, the HR Research Institute partnered with Fierce Conversations, a global leadership development and training company, to investigate how human resources (HR) professionals and organizations think about soft and hard skills. Which are more important? Which are harder to develop? Which should you invest in? We then take a deep dive into one of the most important soft skills: communication.

This study is intended to provide HR professionals with the latest information on hard-and-soft skill trends, insights, tactics, strategies and benchmarks.

## About this Survey

The survey, called “Developing Hard and Soft Skills in Today’s Workplace,” ran in the Q3 of 2020. There are responses from 261 participants, 187 of whom responded to every question.

The participants are HR professionals from organizations of all sizes. Over half (53%) represent organizations with 500 or more employees. Virtually all industries are included in the sample. Most organizations are based in North America, especially the United States.

Fierce Conversations, the company that partnered with HR.com on this research, is a global leadership development and training company that changes the way people communicate with each other.



## Overview of some key findings:

### Major Finding 1

#### **Soft skills matter more than hard skills, but organizations focus more on hard skills training.**

- Fully 86% of respondents feel soft skills are more important than hard skills when it comes to long-term organizational success.
- About four-fifths say soft skills are more difficult to develop than hard skills.
- Organizations are more than twice as likely to focus on hard skill training as on soft skill training.

### Major Finding 2

#### **More respondents believe that soft skills training provides a higher return on investment (ROI) than does hard skills training, but metrics are scarce.**

- Most organizations (61%) perform little or no measurement of the ROI of learning and development (L&D) programs.
- Most respondents (60%) believe soft skills training has an equal or higher ROI when compared with hard skills training.
- Organizations that have good communication practices are even more likely than organizations in general to believe that soft skills training has a higher ROI than hard skills training.

### Major Finding 3

#### **Employee communication is problematic in most organizations.**

- Only one-third of respondents say employee communication is good or excellent in their organization.
- Honesty is the skill most frequently cited as being "very valuable" for communication (67% say so). However, only 22% say honesty is very prevalent.

## Major Finding 4

### **Managers are struggling with communication.**

- Only one-third of respondents say their leaders are good or excellent at having productive conversations with their direct reports.
- Fewer than half of respondents agree or strongly agree that managers demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports.
- Only about one in five managers is good or excellent at having difficult conversations. Even when it comes to simply having friendly conversations, only half of respondents say their managers are good or excellent.
- Fewer than one-tenth of respondents say two-sided conversations that build trust and relationships are very common.

## Major Finding 5

### **There are many different effective modes of learning; the best ones for soft skills are different from the best ones for hard skills.**

- On-the-job training and job shadowing are excellent methods for teaching hard skills but poor methods for training soft skills.
- Manager-employee conversations, on the other hand, are good for teaching soft skills and not as good for teaching hard ones.

## Major Finding 6

### **Organizations that are good at employee communication are more likely to measure learning ROI and get better results from their managers.**

- Respondents who rate their organizations as good or excellent on employee communication are three times as likely to do a high or very high degree of measurement of learning ROI.
- Respondents with good or excellent employee communication are also much more likely to rate their managers highly on demonstrating the behaviors they desire of direct reports and being excellent coaches.

# Comparing Hard and Soft Skills

For the purpose of the survey on which this study is based, we defined "hard skills" and "soft skills" as follows:

- **Hard Skills:** These are abilities that tend to fit specific occupations. Examples include how to restock shelves in retail, how to conduct account analysis in accountancy or how to code in a specific computer language for software development.
- **Soft Skills:** These skills do not tend to be unique to any specific job. They often include skills that facilitate interpersonal relationships and collaboration, but they may also include skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, work ethic, leadership and attention to detail.

Hard skills are often easier to assess than soft skills. You can easily see if someone has stocked retail shelves correctly, but it's harder to know if someone has demonstrated appropriate adaptability. Some have argued that these difficult-to-assess soft skills are more important than ever at this point in history. According to the [World Economic Forum](#), the five top skills needed today are communication, problem solving, analytical skills, customer service and leadership.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of analytics skills, these are all soft skills.

Our study examines these issues in much greater depth.



## Finding: Fully 86% of respondents feel soft skills are more important than hard skills

No one would say that hard skills do not matter. However, when asked to decide between soft and hard skills, there is a virtual consensus that soft skills are more important to the long-term success of organizations. Fully 86% chose soft skills, compared with just 14% for hard skills.

The greater perceived impact of soft skills makes sense when you consider the sorts of skills prevalent at different levels in the

<sup>1</sup> Kretchmer, H. (2020). *Here Are 5 Skills Researchers Say Employers Are Looking For Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/covid-19-jobs-key-skills/>



organization. Many lower level jobs are characterized by hard skills such as knowing how to use a certain machine or carry out a well-defined series of tasks. Many leadership jobs, however, depend heavily on soft skills. This is not meant to imply that lower level jobs do not need soft skills as well. Certainly the success of employees in customer service jobs depends on soft skills. It is just that, on balance, soft skills play a larger role as you move up higher in the organization.

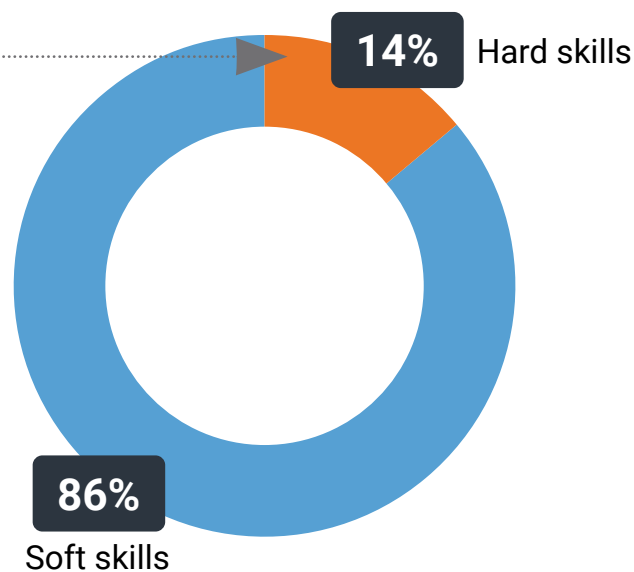
The implication for organizations is that they need to be capable of assessing soft skills when hiring and of continually developing soft skills once they have made those hires.

The size of the organization has some impact on this issue; larger organizations value soft skills even more than smaller organizations do. This is likely because organizational dynamics become more complex in larger organizations. There are more stakeholders involved, and stakeholders may not know one another as well as in smaller organizations—hence a need for superior communication skills.



**Only 14% feel hard skills matter more than soft ones in their organization**

**Survey Question:** If you had to choose, which skills set do you think is more important for employees to have when it comes to the long-term success of your organization?







## Finding: About four-fifths of respondents say that soft skills are more difficult to develop than hard skills

Although there is broad agreement on the importance of soft skills, there is also broad agreement that soft skills are harder to develop than hard skills. Only 4% of respondents say that hard skills are more difficult to develop than soft ones, while 81% say it is harder to develop soft skills. The remaining 15% say it is equally difficult.

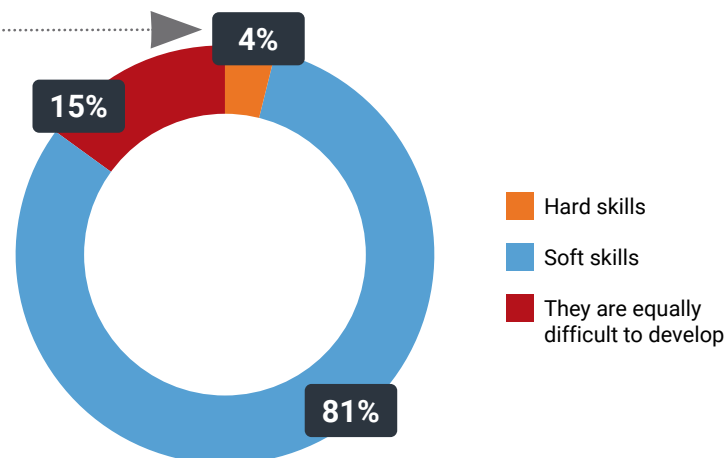
These findings suggest organizations ought to put a good deal of effort into soft skills training since it is both important and difficult to do. The underlying reason soft skills are difficult to develop is that they are difficult to define precisely, difficult to measure and difficult to observe. They tend to be highly situational. Someone with good leadership skills might behave quite differently in two different situations depending on subtle aspects of the context. It can be difficult to tease out all the reasons why the leader's behavior differed and why the tactics they chose represent good leadership skills.

Organizations often do have programs that successfully teach soft skills. It is, however, generally more difficult to design these programs than for hard skills where the right actions are easier to define.



**Only 4% of respondents say that hard skills are more difficult to develop than soft ones**

**Survey Question:** Generally speaking, which skills do you think are harder to develop in an employee?







## Finding: Organizations are more than twice as likely to focus on hard skills training than on soft skills training

We asked respondents about the degree to which they provide formal training for hard and soft skills. Whereas nearly half (46%) say they provide formal training for hard skills to a high or very high degree, the proportion is only 18% for soft skills.

The emphasis on hard skills is likely driven by two factors. One is that the hard skills are necessary to achieve a minimally acceptable level of performance. A cashier, for example, needs to know how to use a cash register (a hard skill). Even though their communication with customers (a soft skill) will matter more to the business in the long run, it is not typically something you need to train for on day one.

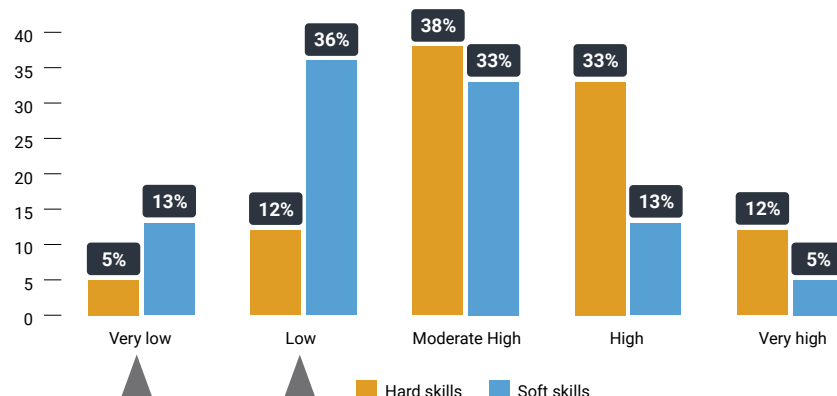
The other factor is that it's easier for leaders to see the results of hard skills training. They can see that the investment they made has paid off. When it comes to soft skills, leaders may believe these skills matter more and yet remain reluctant to invest in training because the outcome is less visible, especially in the short term.

Large organizations are somewhat more likely than smaller ones to back up their belief that soft skills matter with a high degree of investment in soft skills training.



About half of the respondents say they provide a low or very low degree of training on soft skills

**Survey Question:** To what degree does your organization provide formal training and development for these categories of skills?



# The ROI of Skills Development

A widely-used framework for assessing training was developed more than 60 years ago by Professor Donald Kirkpatrick. He established that there were four levels of assessment, each increasingly better than the last. The four levels are as follows:

- Reaction: learners' reaction to training (positive or negative)
- Learning: the degree to which the learners acquire the content (this could, for example, be measured by giving a test)
- Behavior: the degree to which learners apply what they learned when they return to their jobs (this means you need some way to observe or measure behavior once employees have returned to work)
- Results: the degree to which the training leads to better outcomes for the organization (for example, higher customer satisfaction)<sup>2</sup>

When you get to the highest level, results, one can potentially calculate a return on investment (ROI) based on the value of the outcomes relative to the cost of the training. Sometimes L&D professionals can use a specific calculation to determine a relatively precise ROI estimate. In other cases, when they talk about ROI, they mean that there is a clear case that there is a payoff, even if they do not have a precise calculation of that payoff.

It can be so difficult to get objective measures of the higher levels in Kirkpatrick's model that many organizations do not try—or only do it for a minority of L&D programs. More sophisticated organizations often gather whatever evidence they can. They don't always expect to have perfectly objective results, but they do expect to gather evidence—such as survey data gathered after trainees have returned to work, interviews with managers on what they have observed, productivity or customer satisfaction metrics, etc.—so that they can make a reasonable assessment about whether the training is delivering results.



<sup>2</sup> Kirkpatrick Partners. (2020). *The Kirkpatrick Model*. Retrieved from <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model>



## Finding: Most organizations (61%) do little or no measurement of ROI of L&D programs

Although experts often advocate for more and better measurement of L&D success, it can be difficult to achieve. This is especially the case when it comes to ROI. One potential problem is that there is often a lot of time between a learning intervention and the financial return on that intervention. Another common problem is that L&D professionals find it hard to establish a causal link between an intervention and a monetary payoff because many other factors may influence the financial outcome.

Given the range of difficulties, perhaps it is understandable that few organizations (just 17%) measure the ROI of all or most L&D programs. But what can we learn from these organizations that do measure ROI intensively? We look at several interesting differences in the graphic below.

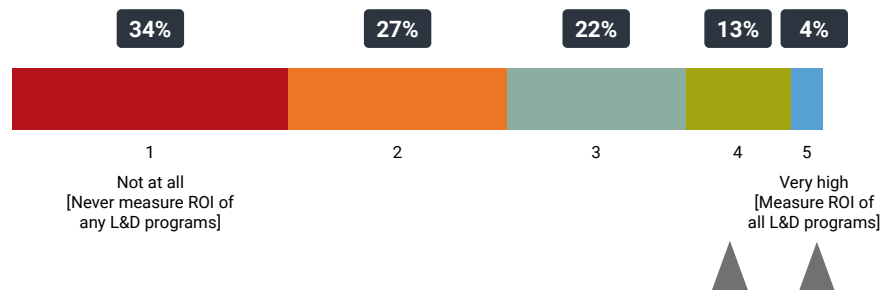
### How L&D “Metrics Masters” differ from other firms

- They engage in more training and development overall, suggesting that L&D programs have a worthwhile payoff for them
- They generally concur that soft skills are more important than hard skills
- They are more likely to say that soft skills rather than hard skills result in a higher ROI



**Only 17% of organizations do a high or very high level of ROI measurement on training**

**Survey Question:** To what extent does your organization measure the return-on-investment (ROI) of learning and development programs? (select one)





## Finding: Only 17% of organizations say hard skills training has a higher ROI than soft skills training

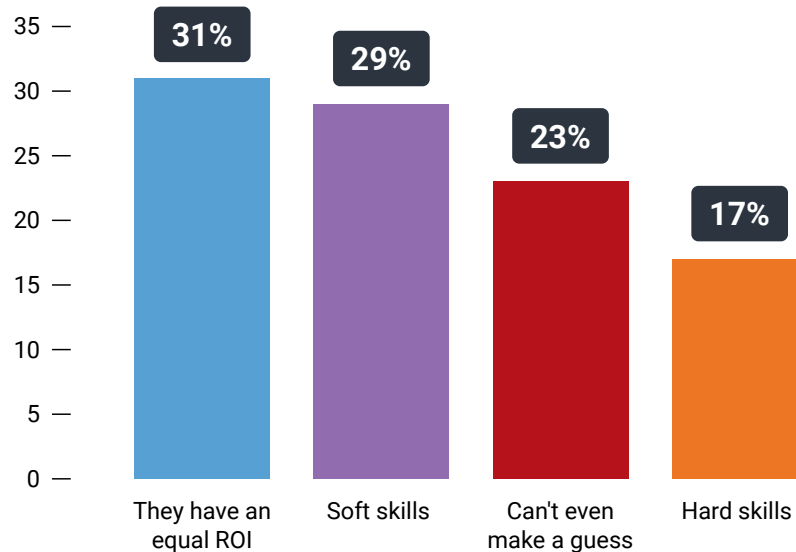
Soft skills training is seen as more important than hard skills training but it also harder to do. When you combine those two factors, does it mean soft skills training has a higher or lower ROI than hard skills training? All things considered, this study suggests it has a higher ROI. Although 31% say these two skill sets have an equal ROI, more respondents say that soft skills training has a higher ROI (29%) than say hard skills training does (17%).

Soft skills training has the potential to have a high ROI because soft skills can have an outsized impact on outcomes. For example, superior communication skills may be crucial for a team to finish a project on time and on budget. If an organization has the ability to teach superior communication skills, then it can reap these outsized benefits.



Nearly a third of organizations get equal ROI from both hard and soft skills training

**Survey Question:** What do you think has a higher ROI when it comes to formal training within your organization?



# Communication Skills



**Finding: The biggest gaps between how *valuable* a skill is and how *common* it is are in the categories of listening and the ability to give constructive feedback**

This survey gathered data on how valuable a skill is as well as how common (“prevalent”) the skill is in the organization. The biggest gaps between importance and commonality are in these areas:

- Listening
- Ability to give constructive feedback
- Openness
- Reflection

It is worth noting there were gaps for all communication skills, even for brevity, which was only rated as valuable by 50% of respondents. Note that the threshold for being considered valuable or common is a 4 or 5 rating on a 5-point scale.

The three skills rated as most valuable are:

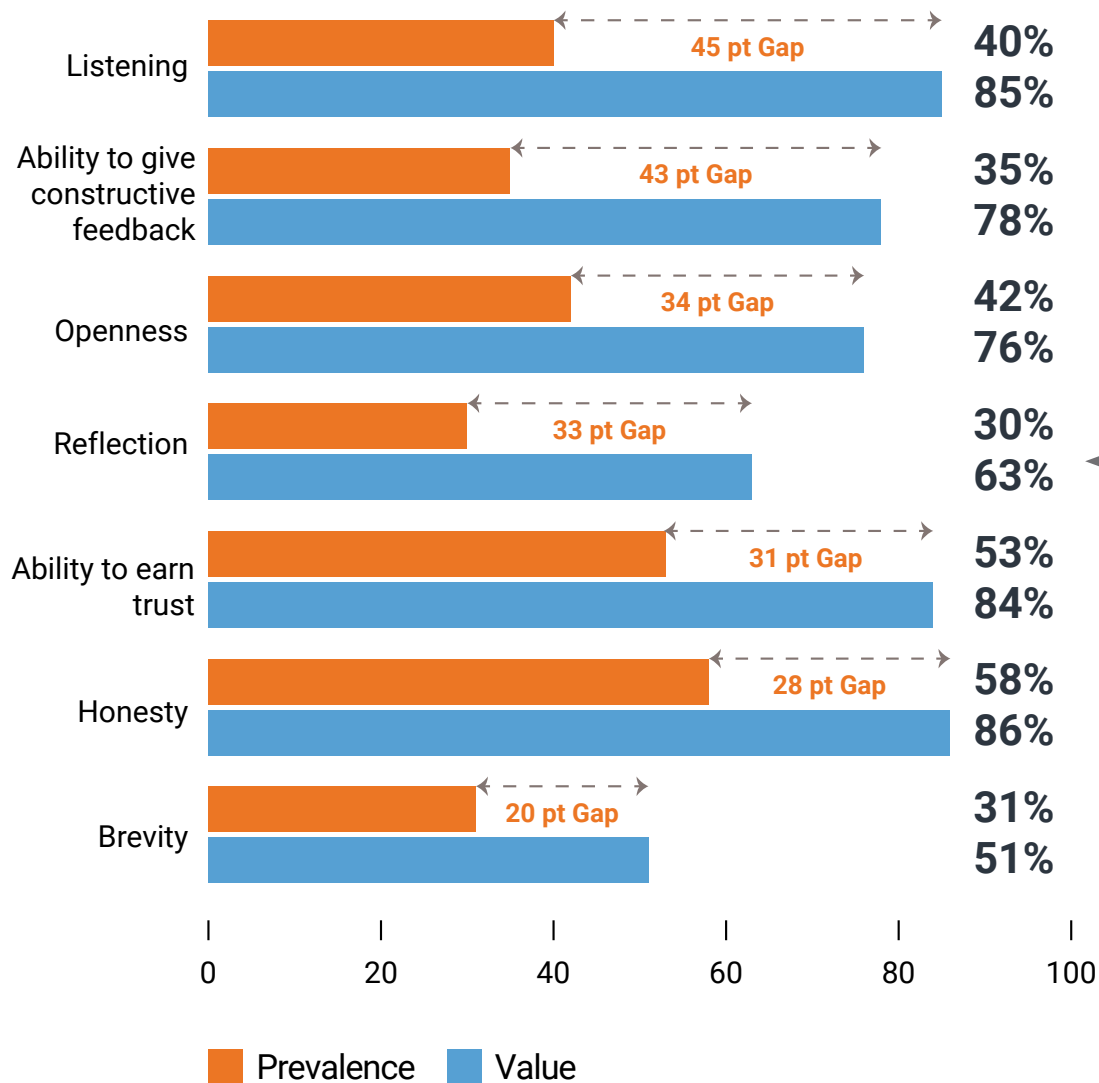
- Honesty
- Listening
- Ability to earn trust

While organizations of all sizes say that the ability to earn trust is very valuable, this facet of communication is particularly emphasized in large organizations. Again, this is likely due to the complex organizational dynamics that occur in large organizations. There is less common context (i.e., different stakeholders see the world quite differently), and there is less likelihood that there is a social bond between stakeholders at different locations. This means that large organizations can’t take trust for granted and can’t presume it will arise organically. They often must teach employees the skills needed to build trust.



## Gaps Between the Value and Prevalence of Seven Communication Skills

% rating this skill as 4 or 5 in being valuable/prevalent on a 5-point scale



Note: Includes data from two survey questions: "How valuable are the following communication skills to your organization?" and "How prevalent are the following communication skills in your organization?"



**Only 30% of respondents believe that "reflection" is a common communication skill in their organization**



## Finding: Only a third describe employee communication as good or excellent in their organizations

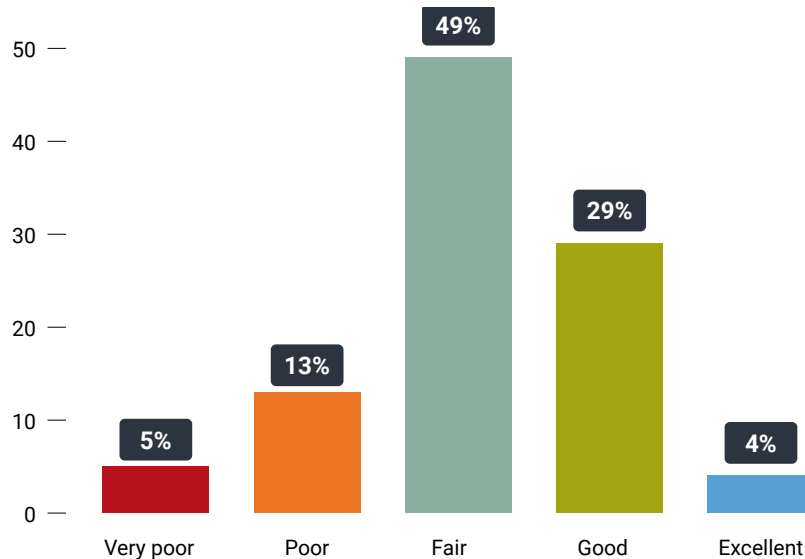
Only a small proportion of respondents rate employee communication as excellent (4%) or good (29%) in their organizations. This result aligns well with the previous chart that showed significant gaps between how *valuable* a skill is and how *common* it is for each of the seven aspects of communication skills covered.

The most common rating of communication skill was “fair.” We believe that few senior leaders will consider that an adequate degree of communication in today’s era. All in all, the results remind management and L&D departments of the ongoing need to help improve communication skills in their organization.



**Nearly a fifth describe employee communication as poor or very poor**

**Survey Question:** On average, how good is employee communication in your organization?





# Level of Managers' Skills



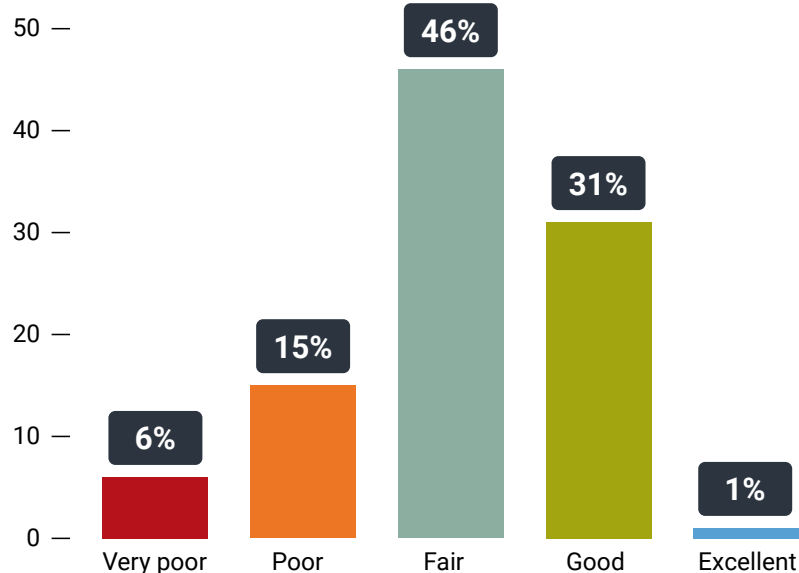
**Finding: Just under one-third of respondents say their leaders are good or excellent at having productive conversations with their direct reports**

When it comes to having productive conversations with direct reports, 32% of respondents say their leaders are good or excellent, 46% say they are fair, and 21% say they are poor or very poor. Given the importance of these conversations, organizations should be paying attention to what the leaders skilled in productive conversations do differently than the others and then teach that to all leaders.



**Most respondents say their leaders are only fair or worse at having productive conversations with their direct reports**

**Survey Question:** On average, how good are your leaders at having productive conversations with their direct reports?





## Finding: Fewer than half of respondents agree or strongly agree that managers demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports

Nothing undermines a culture faster than managers who fail to demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports. Unfortunately, fewer than half of the respondents agree or strongly agree that managers demonstrate these behaviors.

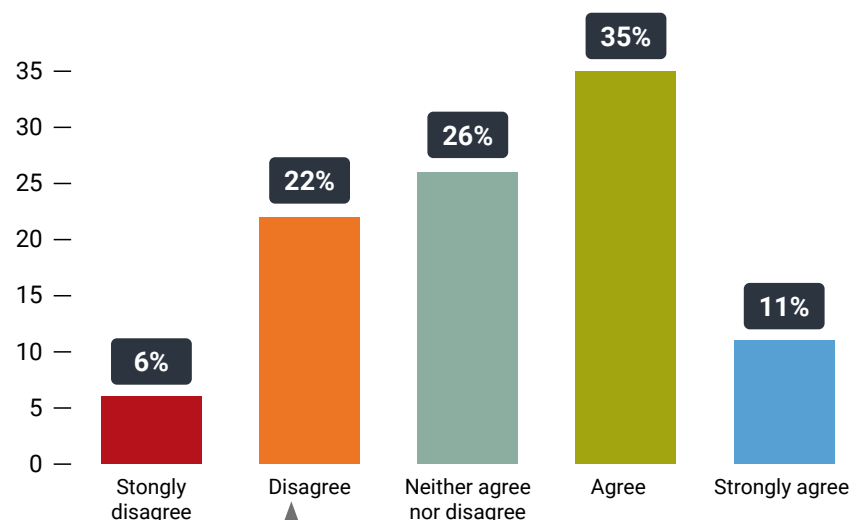
This is an important issue that organizations need to face up to. Any organization where managers don't lead by example is not going to get the behaviors they desire from employees. Addressing managerial behavior will need to be the first priority.

It's worth noting that managers demonstrating the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports will probably be viewed as having a high degree of "honesty" and "ability to earn trust." These two skills are both rated in the top three of most important communication skills. This relationship underlines how important it is to give managers feedback on whether they are acting in a way that aligns with their words.



**More than a quarter of respondents actively disagree that managers demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct report**

**Survey Question:** To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Managers in my organization demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports.





## Finding: Only about one in five managers is good or excellent at holding difficult conversations

The data on managers' conversation skills are fascinating. Managers are viewed as most effective in two skills areas: "having friendly conversations" and "holding effective team and meeting conversations." They are viewed as least effective in the areas of "coaching" and "having difficult conversations."

Although it is the area in which managers are seen as most effective, we find it unsettling that only 58% of respondents say their managers are good or excellent at having friendly conversations. This is the easiest of the conversation skills so one would expect a large majority of managers to be good or excellent at it.

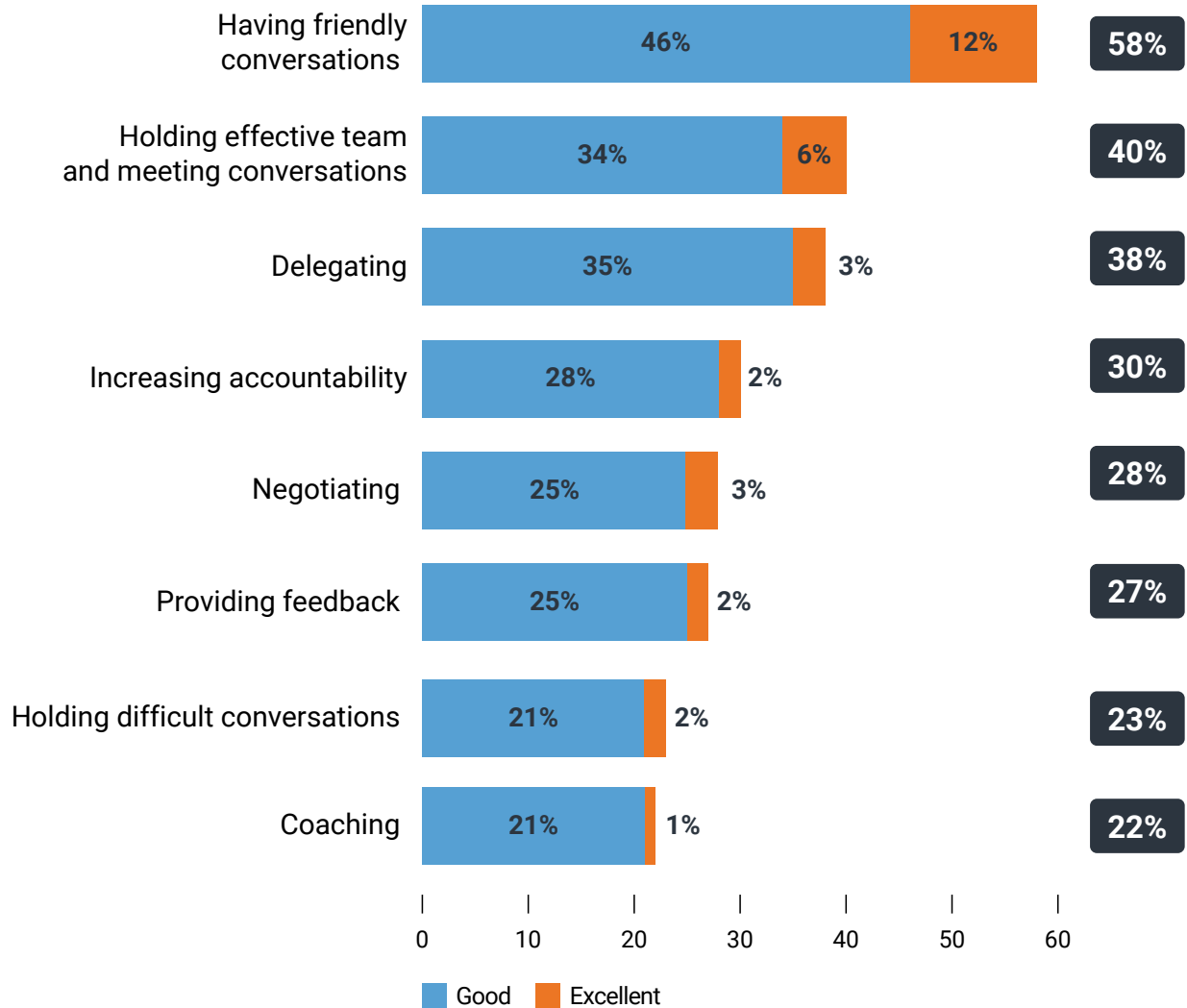
At the other end of the spectrum, only about one in five respondents say their managers are good or excellent at having difficult conversations. This finding echoes an earlier research report by HR.com, "[Coaching As a Management Must](#)" (2017), which found that the most-widely cited coaching weakness of leaders is their inability to have difficult but necessary conversations with employees.<sup>3</sup> This was true for all sizes of organizations. The report reminds us that difficult conversations are not just about delivering bad news. Any conversation that is important but challenging for some reason is a difficult one.

There is no easy fix to the gap in leadership's ability to have difficult conversations. It's a skill that must be developed over time with training, coaching and working with good role models.



<sup>3</sup> HR.com. (2017). *Coaching As a Management Must: What's at stake when managers don't coach their teams well—and how to turn the tide*. Retrieved from [https://www.hr.com/en/resources/free\\_research\\_white\\_papers/insideout-coaching-as-a-management-must-oct2017\\_j8p2ebmh.html](https://www.hr.com/en/resources/free_research_white_papers/insideout-coaching-as-a-management-must-oct2017_j8p2ebmh.html)

**Survey Question:** On average, how effective do you believe your organization's managers are in the following skills?



**Over half of respondents say their managers are good or excellent at having friendly conversations**

# Most Common Methods of Communication



## Finding: The most common methods of communication *between employees* are email and face-to-face conversations

Respondents are more likely to cite email as a common means of communication between employees than any other method (88% did so). Face-to-face in-person communication is not far behind at 72%. It is interesting to see how mobile phones are cited more than twice as often as landline phones (57% vs. 26%). This is probably why some organizations are abandoning the traditional office desk phone systems altogether.

It's also interesting to note the relatively new technology of face-to-face video technology and collaboration platforms like Slack are rated as among the most common methods by a third of respondents.

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and the results probably reflect a mix of "what was common in normal times" and "what is common today." That might account for the relatively high ranking of 'face-to-face' communication, even though a lot less of that is happening today.

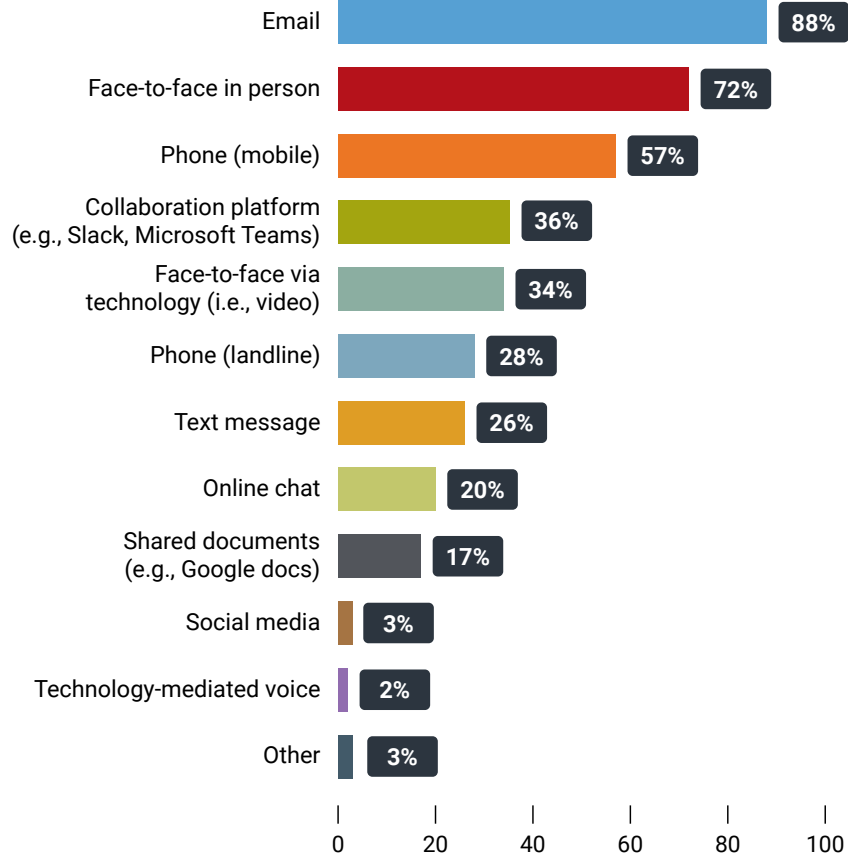
The other insight of note from the survey data is that employees communicate with each other using many different methods and it would be worth considering if general training on communication skills will be sufficient or whether employees need some separate training on each method.





**One-third of respondents cite collaboration platforms as one of the most common ways employees communicate with each other**

**Survey Question:** What are the top four ways employees communicate with one another in your organization? (select up to four)





## Finding: The most common methods of communication *between managers and their direct reports* are also email and face-to-face conversations

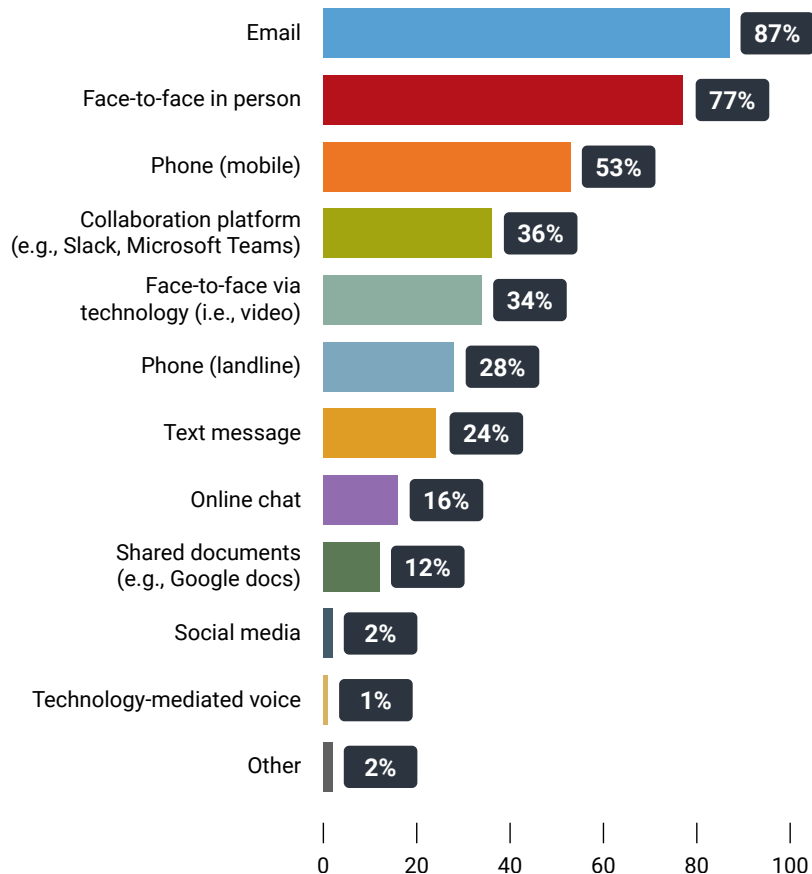
The data on how managers communicate with their direct reports mirrors the data on how employees communicate with each other. Email and face-to-face conversations are the most common methods. Collaboration platforms and face-to-face video technology are both cited by about a third of respondents.

As with employee to employee communication, the question for learning and development professionals is whether managers need specialized advice on how best to use each communication method.



**Collaboration platforms are cited by one-third of respondents as one of the most common ways managers communicate with their direct reports**

**Survey Question:** What are the top four ways managers carry out conversations with their direct reports in your organization? (select up to four)







## Finding: Two-sided conversations that build trust and relationships are infrequent

The data shows that the most desirable types conversations—which we consider two-sided conversations—are fairly common or very frequent in fewer than half of organizations. What *is* common is one-sided, top-down conversations that focus on tasks or results. These are fairly or very frequent in two-thirds of organizations.

This top-down focus may explain why communication skills are seen as lacking. In top-down conversations, a skill such as listening isn't even on the agenda. This reminds us despite the widely-held assumption that organizations are becoming flatter and more democratic, the reality for most organizations is that a top-down, hierarchical communication style remains dominant.

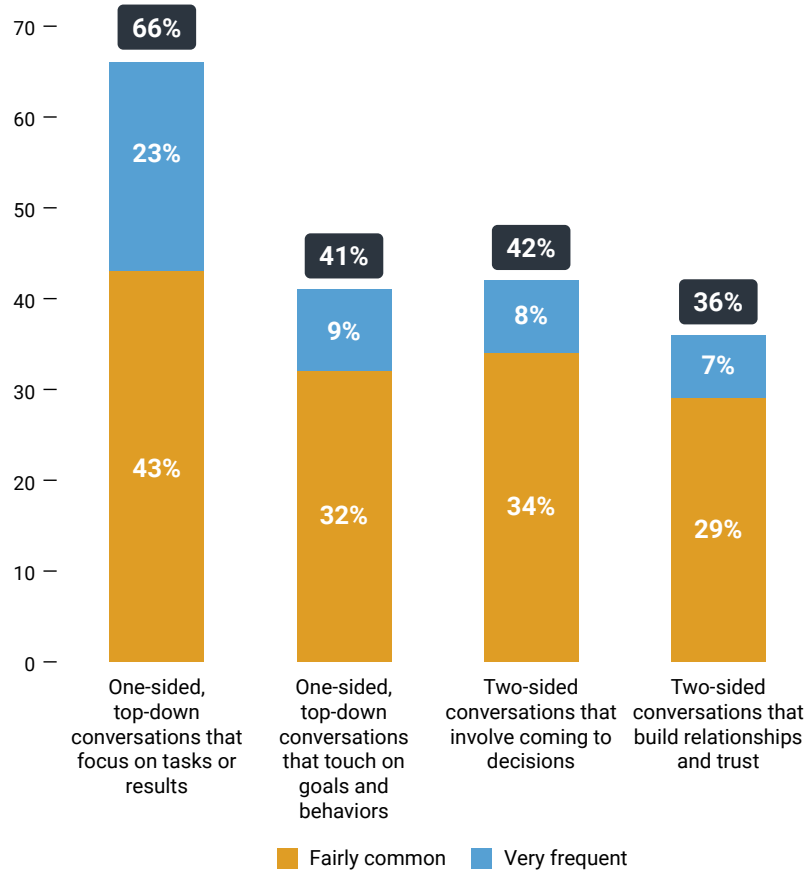
We noted earlier that large organizations are more likely to invest heavily in soft skills training. That seems to pay off. Respondents from large organizations are much more likely than those from smaller organizations to say their managers frequently have two-sided conversations.





**In many organizations, one-sided conversations that focus on tasks or results are the most common form of conversation**

**Survey Question:** In your organization, how common are the following kinds of conversations?



# Learning Methods



## Finding: On-the-job training and job shadowing are excellent methods for teaching hard skills but poor methods for training soft skills

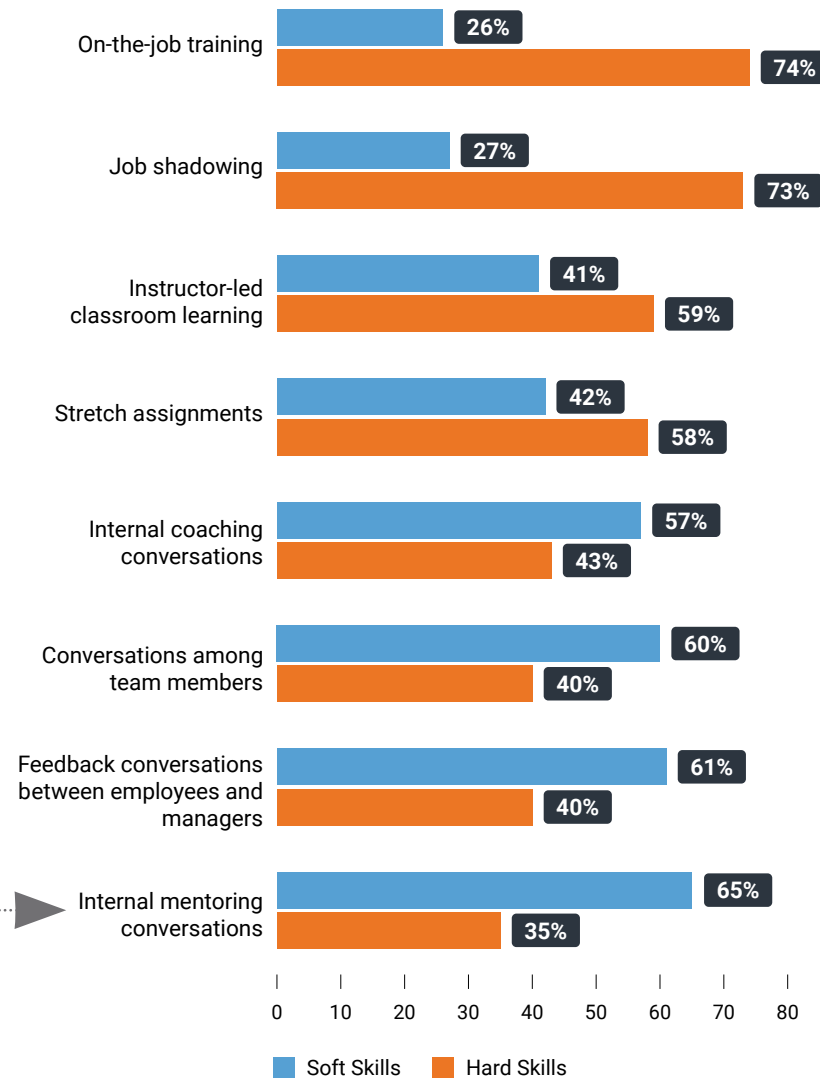
For non-technology-based training, we see some dramatic differences in the methods that are best for hard skills and those that are best for soft skills. The two most favored methods for teaching hard skills are on-the-job training and job shadowing. These are cited as being effective by almost three-quarters of respondents. Yet these same two methods are considered the least effective ones for soft skills training, with only about one-quarter of respondents citing them as effective.

For soft skills training, the most effective methods are internal mentoring conversations and feedback conversations between managers and employees (cited by 65% and 60% of respondents respectively). Interestingly, these are the least favored methods for hard skills training (cited by only 35% and 40% respectively).

The takeaway is to be thoughtful in the choice of training method and recognize the large differences between learning soft and hard skills. Another issue HR should be tracking is whether there will be a permanent shift towards technological-based training. Staples such as direct on-the-job training and job shadowing might decline in coming years. It's likely that the increased experimentation in technology-based training will lead some organizations to decide it is a legitimate method in more and more situations.



**Survey Question:** Of the following non-technology-based learning methods, which do you consider effective for developing hard and soft skills?



**Internal mentoring is a good training method for soft skills but relatively poor for teaching hard skills**

# What Leads to Great Communication

To better understand what makes a difference in HR effectiveness, we divided respondents into two cohorts:

- **Communication leaders:** Those answering “Good” or “Excellent” to the question “On average, how good is employee communication in your organization?”
- **Communication laggards:** Those answering, “Very Poor,” “Poor” or “Fair” to that same question.

Correlation does not necessarily indicate causation, of course, but these relationships may provide clues about possible best practices related to HR tech stacks.



## Finding: Good communicators are more likely to measure ROI and are less likely to think hard skills have a higher ROI

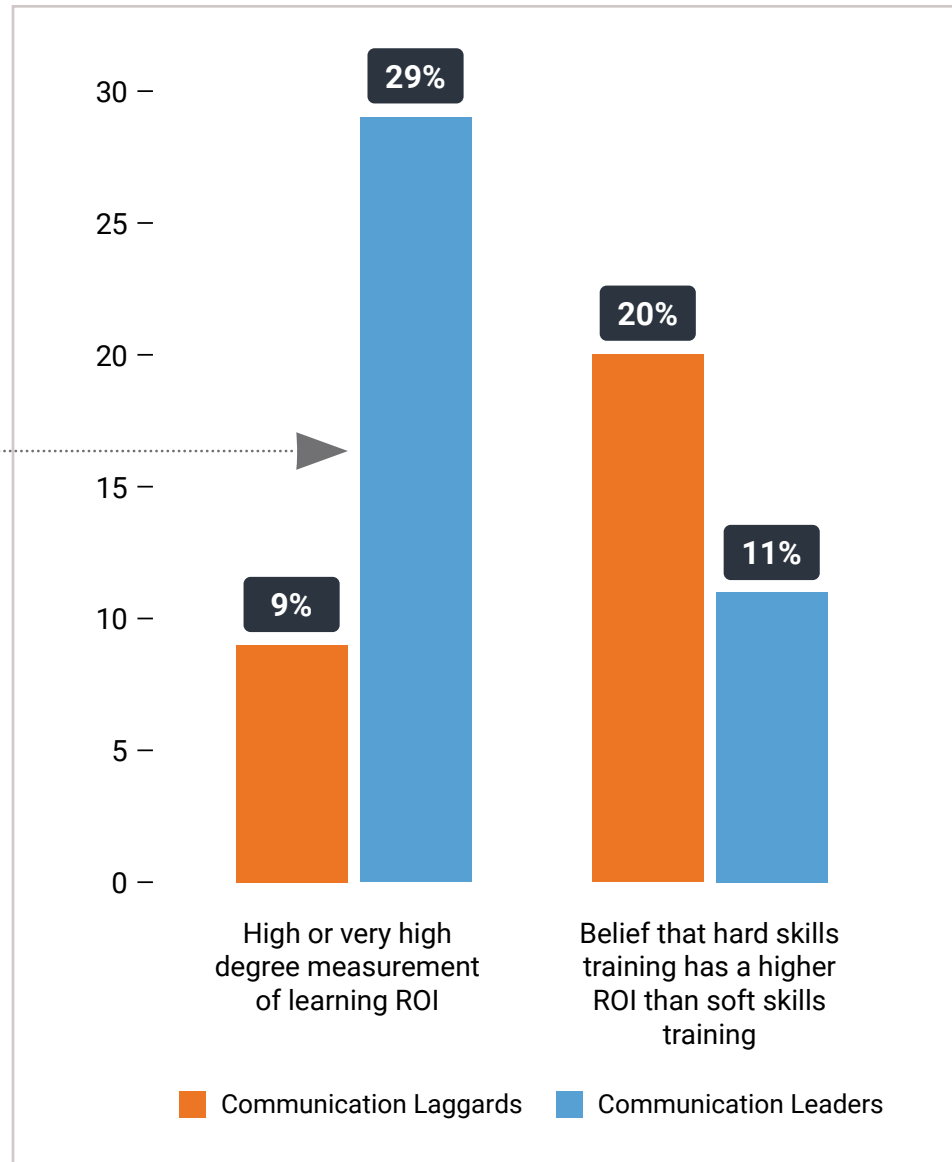
Communication leaders are much more likely than communication laggards to measure learning ROI to a high or very high degree (29% vs. 9%). They are also *less* likely to believe hard skills training has a higher ROI (11% vs. 20%).

This finding adds weight to the consensus that soft skills training has a higher ROI. Furthermore, it suggests that many communication leader organizations have achieved that status by being serious enough about training that they make a real effort to measure learning ROI.





**Communication leaders are over three times more likely to say they measure learning ROI to a high or very high degree**



Note: Includes data from two survey questions: "To what extent does your organization measure the return-on-investment (ROI) of learning and development programs?" and "What do you think has a higher ROI when it comes to formal training within your organization?"



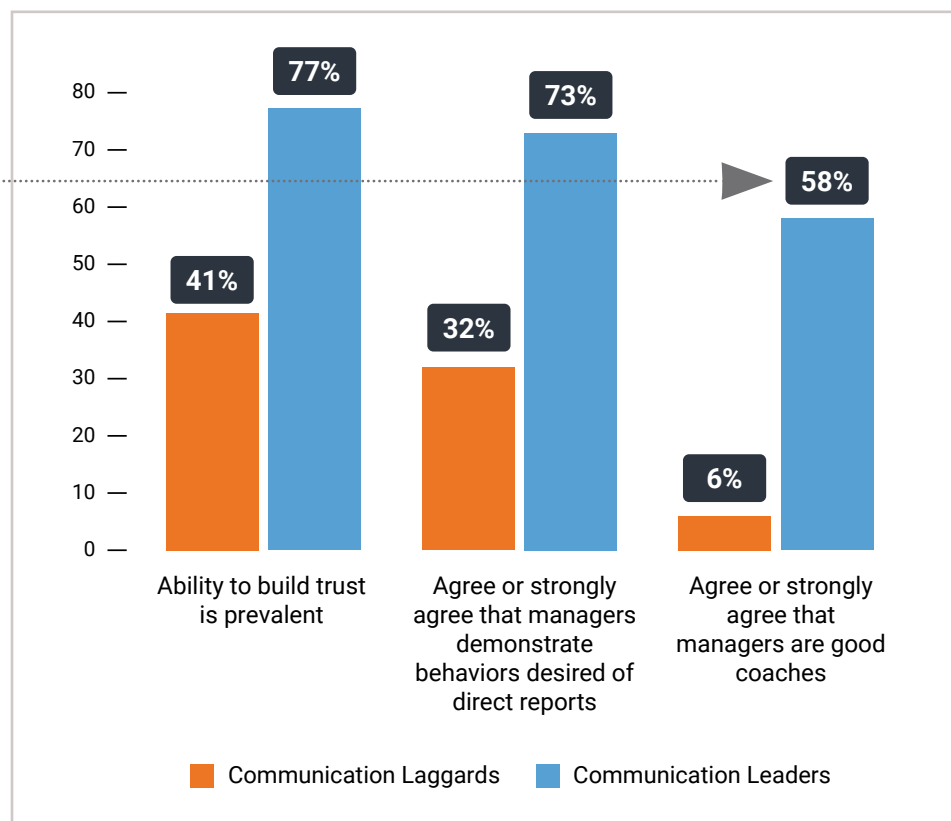
## Finding: Among communication leader organizations, managers are much more effective at several leadership skills

There are very large differences in how communication leader organizations and communication laggard organizations perceive their managers and employees. Communication leaders are much more likely to report that the ability to build trust is a prevalent skill in the organization (77% vs. 41%). They are more than twice as likely to have managers who demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in direct reports (73% vs. 32%). And, they are almost ten times as likely as laggards to say their managers are good or excellent coaches (58% vs. 6%).

The results are encouraging in that they show it is possible for skills such as the ability to build trust to be prevalent. It also suggests that the serious approach communication leaders take to training and development pays off in a number of communication skills.



**Communication leaders are almost ten times more likely to say managers are good or excellent at coaching**



Note: Includes data from three survey questions: "How prevalent are the following communication skills in your organization?", "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Managers in my organization demonstrate the behaviors they wish to see in their direct reports," and "On average, how effective do you believe your organization's managers are in the following skills?"



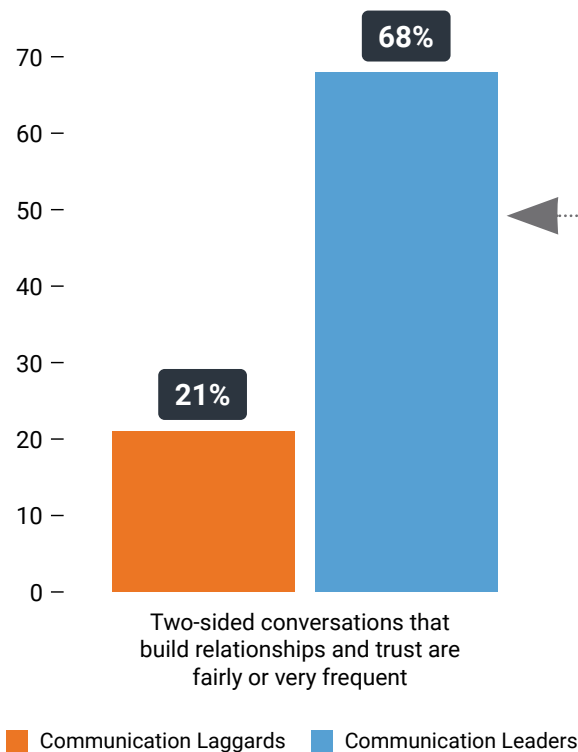
## Finding: Managers and employees in communication leader organizations have different approaches to conversations than those in communication laggard organizations

Managers in organizations that are communication leaders are more than three times as likely as their laggard counterparts to fairly or very frequently have two-sided conversations that build relationships and trust (68% vs. 21%). This may be one of the most fundamental differences that drives the success of communication leaders.



**More than two-thirds of communication leaders say that two-sided conversations to build relationships and trust are fairly or very frequent**

**Survey Question:** In your organization, how common are the following kinds of conversations?



# Key Takeaways



What follows are some ideas and tips for improving your organization's ability to teach and leverage hard and soft skills.

## Key Takeaway 1

**Embrace the distinction between soft and hard skills.** The idea that there should be a distinction between hard and soft skills is supported by this study. They are viewed as having different values and ROIs. Training entails different levels of difficulties, and teaching methods may vary as well. We believe they should be viewed as different so that employers can effectively accommodate those distinctions.

## Key Takeaway 2

**Consider working harder at measuring ROI.** Most companies do a poor job of measuring training ROI, but those that do it well seem to reap the benefits. Try making the effort to calculate L&D ROI to see if it makes a difference in quality over time. Consider starting with a few programs and then eventually expand such calculations to other programs. Try to be rigorous but don't allow perfectionism to bog you down. Gather whatever evidence is available to make an informed estimate.

## Key Takeaway 3

**Measure management skills.** This study shows most respondents rate their managers' communication skills rather poorly. The first step in correcting this is to gather data in your own organization on communication skills. Once such data is available, address the most pressing shortcomings through whatever methodologies are most effective. Once such training is complete, look for ways to measure effectiveness.

## Key Takeaway 4

**Invest in soft skills.** While a majority of organizations report that soft skills are crucial, too often that is not backed up with much of an investment in soft skills training. Start by determining where there are soft skills gaps in your organization. One place to start may be management's communication skills. Once gaps are identified, formulate an L&D response to close those gaps, then measure the success of the intervention.

## Key Takeaway 5

**Take advantage of various training modalities.** It is notable how many different training modalities are seen as useful in this study, and different modalities are useful for different things. Considering both internal and external L&D providers, offer training in various modalities and match those to the learner's needs. Over time, invest most heavily on the ones that are successful.

## Key Takeaway 6

**Remember leadership behavior is a powerful form of communication.**

It is natural for managers to think of communication as being about what they say. In fact, it is more about how they act. Communication training needs to address leadership behaviors and actions *as well as* communication styles. Honesty and trust are key. Among other actions that leaders must demonstrate are:

- ▶ Openness
- ▶ Listening
- ▶ Ability to give constructive feedback
- ▶ Reflection

Our research indicates that these foundational skills and characteristics are relatively weak in most organizations.

## Key Takeaway 7

**Emphasize two-side conversations.** Two-sided conversations intended to build relationships and trust remain rare. Ensure that managers have the skills to engage in such conversations and that they occur with enough frequency.

## Key Takeaway 8

**Teach coaching skills.** Organizations that are good at employee communications also tend to have managers who are excellent coaches. Ensure that managers are coached well so that they in turn can become good coaches.



## About Fierce Conversations

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