



Leadership Soft Skills that Affect Organizational Climate of District Health Offices in Khon Kaen, Thailand

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Abstract

This cross-sectional survey research aimed to study leadership soft skills that affect organizational climate of district health offices in Khon Kaen province, Thailand. Two research instruments were a self-administered questionnaire and an in-depth interview guideline. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of the questionnaire ranges from 0.88 to 0.96. After approved for ethical review, the data collection took place in late 2012 and early 2013. Out of 144 questionnaires distributed, a total of 121 questionnaires were valid for data analysis (response rate = 84.03%). Eight key informants were then appointed for interview. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and stepwise multiple linear regression were performed for quantitative data analysis. The findings from the in-depth interview were evaluated by content analysis approach. The findings revealed that the level of leadership soft skills employed by district health officers is high (4.10 ± 0.50). Likewise, the level of organizational climate was high (3.89 ± 0.46). There was moderate positive relationship between leadership soft skills and organizational climate at significant level ($r = 0.569$, p -value < 0.001). Two leadership soft skills; personal mastery and planning & organizing, were significant predictors towards organizational climate ($r^2 = 0.321$, p -value < 0.001). The findings from the in-depth interview suggested that district health officers should pay attention on the dynamic of organizational climate. Additionally, leadership soft skills development can be done through practices.

Keywords: leadership soft skills, organizational climate, district health office

1. Introduction

Having underestimated for decades, leadership soft skills have now become more popular as emotional and inter-human sensitivity is more required in workplaces (1, 2). While hard skills, also known as

technical knowledge and abilities, are directly used to complete the tasks, soft skills assist leaders in completing

the tasks more effectively. Leadership scholars believe that soft skills are vital part of being a successful leader (3). To extend, soft skills differentiate between effective and ineffective leaders (4). Without soft skills, even

those leaders qualified with high academic profiles may not fit in the organization (5). Typically, soft skills are known as social skills, human skills, interpersonal skills and generic skills (6, 7). To illustrate, soft skills are not only used in understanding and responding people properly, but also used in regulating oneself towards desired goals. A study done in the United Kingdom pointed that people issue is a contributing factor in task complexity. The findings also highlighted the importance of soft skills in managing complicated tasks (8). Thus, leaders, who must lead the organization under complex conditions, are expected to be good at soft skills (9). Leadership soft skills can be classified as teamwork skill, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, planning & organizing, personal mastery, coaching, and presentation skills (10). In other words, leadership soft skills reflect an attempt of the leaders to facilitate and humanize working conditions. Leadership soft skills contribute substantially to both career advancement and organization achievement, (7, 11, 12) and it makes

the difference between an effective and an ineffective organization (5).

Tero International Incorporation's leadership model, as shown in Figure 1, demonstrates the importance of leadership soft skills in the organization (10). It portrays the dynamic connection between leader, followers, strategy and goal. At the center of the model, the question mark refers to a continuous improvement process which can be done by continuously asking how to improve the performance of followers, the relationship between leader and followers, the progress of goal, and the results of strategy. The dashed horizontal line represents soft skills which are required for the performance and the relationship. On the other hand, solid vertical line represents hard skills which are required for the progress and the results. Each component also influences others simultaneously. The improvement of all components moves organization towards desired direction.

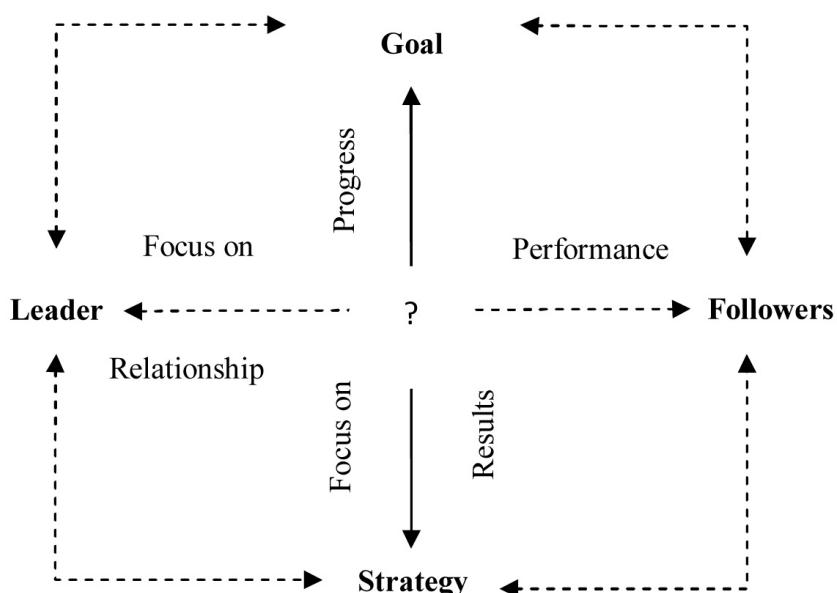


Figure 1. Tero International Incorporation's leadership model adapted from Crosbie (2005)

While the model implies the importance of soft skills on organization achievement, poor performance of organization members can be a result of poor perception of workplace environment (13). It is widely believed that organizational climate is one of crucial factors account for organization success. Organizational climate is defined as shared perception of members on the internal environment of their workplaces and it includes a set of perceptions on freedoms, satisfaction and threats (14). In addition, organizational climate can be defined as a set of dimensions such as structure, responsibility, rewards, warmth, support, identity and risk (13). Recent research indicated that there is significant relationship between organizational climates and leadership soft skills (15, 16).

This present research aims to gather more empirical evidence to support the connection between leadership soft skills and organizational climate. Three research objectives are 1) to study the levels of leadership soft skills and organizational climate, 2) to identify the relationship between two mentioned variables, and 3) to specify the predictor of leadership soft skills towards organizational climate. The conceptual framework of this study is based on Crosbie's six leadership soft skills (10) and Gray's organizational climate (14) as shown in Figure 2. The study focuses on district health offices because of their outstandingly administrative roles. The findings in this study can be used by healthcare administrators in term of human resource management and organization development.

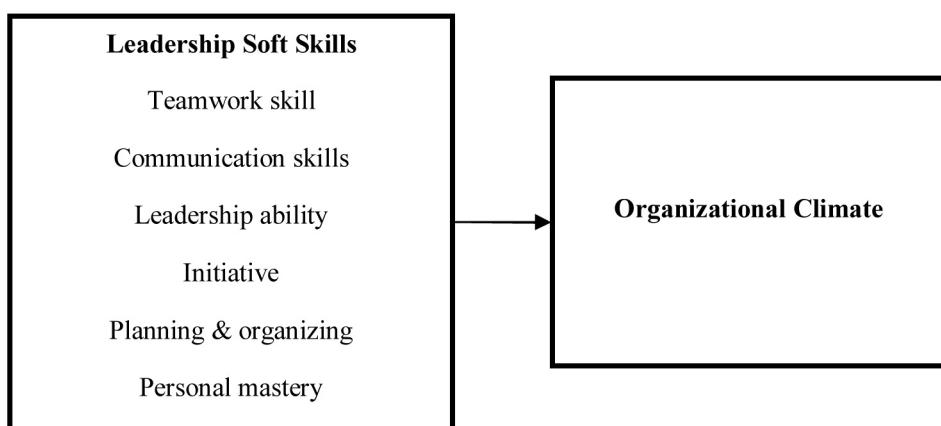


Figure 2. Research conceptual framework

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Volunteers

This study attempted to use a census approach to collect the data. The study population was composed of two separated groups. The first group was 144 personnel working in 26 district health offices in Khon Kaen. They were district health officers, nurses, public health technical officers, public health officers and general

service officers. Of the 144 personnel, 128 volunteered in the study. Since seven of the 128 lacked sufficient data and willingness, they were excluded. Therefore, the volunteers of this group contained 121 personnel representing about 84.03% of the total population. After benchmarking with the sample size calculated by Chirawatkul's formula (17), the number of the volunteers provides sufficient statistical power. The second group comprised 24 key informants who are able to provide

in-depth information, about district health officers and district health offices, according to their positions, knowledge and experiences. They were Khon Kaen provincial health officer, the deputy Khon Kaen provincial health officer, 20 community hospital directors, the chairperson of district health officer committee, and the deputy chairperson of district health officer committee. Eight key informants willingly participated in this study.

2.2 Measurement

A Likert-type scale method was used to measure leadership soft skills and organizational climate. The volunteers rated the extents to which they agreed with each statement on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Then, the numbers of one to five were assigned to this five-point continuum. This process allows the researchers to transform ordinal scale into interval scale (18, 19, 20, 21). The weighted mean score was then calculated and interpreted. The interpretation of mean score is shown in Table 1 (22).

Table 1. Interpretation of mean score

Mean score	Interpretation
4.51 – 5.00	Highest level
3.51 – 4.50	High level
2.51 – 3.50	Moderate level
1.51 – 2.50	Low level
1.00 – 1.50	Lowest level

2.3 Research instruments

There were two research instruments in this study. The first one was a self-administered questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data from the personnel working in district health offices. The second one was an in-depth interview guideline designed to collect qualitative data from the key informants.

A self-administered questionnaire

This structural questionnaire comprised three parts. The first part collected seven personal attributes of the questionnaire respondents, namely, gender, age, marital status, education, work experience, monthly income and position. The second part contained 30 five-point-scale items about six leadership soft skills; teamwork skill, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, planning & organizing, and personal mastery, employed by district health officers. To extend, there were five items for each leadership soft skill. The third part contained 24 five-point-scale items collecting data about organizational climate in district health offices. After being examined for content validity by three experts, the questionnaire was then tested for reliability in a group of similar population ($n=32$) in Udon Thani, a neighbor province. The internal consistency reliabilities of the total questionnaire, the second part and the third part were 0.96, 0.96 and 0.86 respectively. These Cronbach's alpha coefficients surpassed the 0.7 threshold indicating acceptable reliability (18).

An in-depth interview guideline

After examined for content validity, the guideline was also tested in a pilot study. It contained eight open-ended questions designed to collect in-depth information corresponding to the findings from the questionnaire. First six items were about six leadership soft skills while another two items were about organizational climate. A portable audio recorder was used to record the interview.

2.4 Data collection

A two-phase data collection was carried out from December 19, 2012 to January 30, 2013. In the first phase, 144 packages, each containing a self-administered questionnaire, an informed consent, and a preaddressed stamped envelope, were sent to the personnel in 26 district health offices in Khon Kaen by mailing system.

In the second phase, a qualitative research approach was undertaken by conducting the interview administered to eight key informants. They were informed about research objectives, volunteer rights and expected outcomes. The appointments were then scheduled upon the availability of the key informants. The researchers asked for the permission of using audio recorder during the interview. Each interview was supposed to take about 40 minutes; however, the exact time was varied according to the interviewees.

2.5 Data analysis

SPSS version 17 for Windows was used to analyze quantitative data whereas content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data. Frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, maximum value and minimum value were used to analyze characteristics of the questionnaire respondents, leadership soft skills, and organizational climate. Two inferential statistics were performed. Pearson product moment correlation was used to determine whether the leadership soft skills and organizational climate were significantly associated. The interpretation of correlation coefficient is shown in Table 2. Stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was then used to identify if there was any significant predictors of leadership soft skills towards organizational climate. The audio files of the in-depth interview were carefully transcribed into text. The data was then used to support the findings from the questionnaire.

Table 2. Interpretation of correlation coefficient

Correlations coefficient (r)	Interpretation
- 1	Perfect negative relationship
- 0.99 to - 0.60	Strong negative relationship
- 0.59 to - 0.30	Moderate negative relationship
- 0.29 to - 0.01	Weak negative relationship
0	No (linear) relationship
0.01 to 0.29	Weak positive relationship
0.30 to 0.59	Moderate positive relationship
0.60 to 0.99	Strong positive relationship
+ 1	Perfect positive relationship

2.6 Ethical considerations

This study was reviewed for ethical considerations by Khon Kaen University Ethics Committee for Human Research based on the Declaration of Helsinki and the ICH Good Clinical Practice Guidelines. It was approved on November 26, 2012. The reference code was HE552237.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics of the questionnaire respondents

About 55.4% of the respondents were male. The average age was approximately 43 years old (S.D. = 8.00) with more than half being over 40 years (51.2%). The youngest respondent was 25 years old while the oldest one was 59 years old. Most of them were married (76.9%). About 94.7% of the respondents held at least a Bachelor's degree. Approximately 45.6% of the respondents had work experience ranged from 31 to 40 years. The average monthly income was 30,489.25 Baht (S.D. = 9,526.23). Most of the respondents were public health technical officers (34.2%).

3.2 Leadership soft skills

The total level of leadership soft skills was high (4.10 ± 0.50) as shown in Table 3. The finding from this study was not in line with the one done in Malaysia which found that the level of leadership soft skills of public university deans was moderate (15). One reason responsible for this difference may lie in the roles of district health officers. Four primary roles of district health officers are being an assistant to the district chief officer, administrating public health activities in the area, supporting other healthcare facilities, and coordinating local organizations (23). These roles mostly involve activities that require soft skills; therefore, the level of leadership soft skills of district health officers is prominent.

When looking closely at the levels of each leadership soft skill, the highest one was communication skills (4.21 ± 0.47). It was followed by planning & organizing (4.19 ± 0.58), teamwork skill (4.14 ± 0.57), personal mastery (4.09 ± 0.59), leadership ability (4.02 ± 0.61), and initiative (3.96 ± 0.62) respectively. However, the levels of all six leadership soft skills were still classified as high level. Communication skills appear to be a vital soft skill for effective leaders (7, 24). In addition, it should be noted here that planning & organizing emerges among the top skills. This finding supported the notion that planning & organizing is the task on which top administrators spend most of their time (25). The findings were in line with previous studies in term of the district health officers exhibit strong interpersonal skills especially teamwork skill and communication skills (26, 27, 28, 29). The findings also supported a Delphi study, in 2006, which identifies 11 core competencies of district health officers including leadership ability, teamwork skill, and communica-

tion skills (30). Found to be the lowest one among six skills, initiative is yet crucial. Self-initiate, for example, willing to look after problems and willing to do beyond requirements, seems to be found in a good person-job fit (9). This proactive effort can help leaders recognize what needs to be done, prevent upcoming problems, and open new opportunities.

The in-depth interview provided many interesting perspectives on leadership soft skills improvement. The findings indicated that district health officers should focus more on body language as it is essential for better communication, for example, nodding head or turning face to the speaker can show a strong attention. In addition, observing professional speakers, preparing massage before writing and rehearsing before giving speech can improve communication skills. Besides, planning & organizing is required for multifaceted tasks as it can prevent conflicts. Certain techniques, such as resource allocation and task prioritization, can be used when there are limited resources. To be a better team builder, district health officers should support group agreements as long as those agreements are right and fair. Besides, solution of disagreement can be achieved through seeking opinions from experts or the higher authorities. To maximize potential of oneself, district health officer should strengthen the strong points and correct the weaknesses. It should be long life process including formal and informal learning. Besides, under risk situations, gain and loss must be carefully weighted before making any decision. Bias always plays its role in decision making thus sound decision should be made with less emotional influence but more critical thoughts. Lastly, district health officers should spend time reviewing previous incidents the same as practicing in simulated situations.

Table 3. Leadership soft skills

Leadership soft skills	Mean	S.D.	Level
Teamwork skill	4.14	0.57	High
Communication skills	4.21	0.47	High
Initiative	3.96	0.62	High
Leadership ability	4.02	0.61	High
Planning & organizing	4.19	0.58	High
Personal mastery	4.09	0.59	High
Total	4.10	0.50	High

3.3 Organizational climate

The total level of organizational climate was high (3.89 ± 0.46) as shown in Table 4. It was in line with two previous studies done in Khon Kaen (31) and in Nakorn Ratchasima (32). In addition, it was also in line with the studies done in other health organizations; primary care units and one community hospital (33, 34, 35, 36). Nevertheless, it was not in line with the study done in a tertiary care hospital which found that the level of organizational climate was moderate (37). This can be explained through the difference of the organization size which has significant effect on the organizational climate (38). The perception of personnel in smaller organization is far more superior to that in larger organization.

When looking closely on organizational climate, it was found out that the level of positive climate (3.99 ± 0.49) was higher than that of negative climate (3.58 ± 0.57). It implied that the personnel in district health offices perceive healthy environment of their workplace than unhealthy circumstance. The higher level of positive climate also indicates an effective climate in the organization (39). Among six dimensions of positive climate, the highest one was freedom to participate (4.14 ± 0.66). It was followed by freedom to question (4.12 ± 0.56), innovation (3.98 ± 0.55), freedom to express ideas (3.94 ± 0.59), intrinsic satisfaction

(3.92 ± 0.55) and freedom to express concerns (3.84 ± 0.66) respectively. The high level of positive climate is definitely favorable because it reflects the high levels of autonomy, responsibility and control of the personnel in the organization (14). Positive climate also has a strong direct relationship with organization moral, yet has a strong negative relationship with organization stress (40). Consequently, the high perception of positive climate is likely to encourage the personnel to achieve high performance. When looking at negative climate, it was composed of two dimensions of threat. The level of environmental threat was high (3.72 ± 0.71) while the level of purposive threat was moderate (3.44 ± 0.95). This implied that the personnel in district health offices still suffer from uncontrollable harms or losses. In addition, the personnel also felt insecure about purposive threats which are intentionally directed at individuals or groups. The high level of negative climate must not be overlooked because the perception of threat functions as a change agent causing the organization to a less favorable state (39).

The in-depth interview drew two conclusions. Firstly, freedom to express concerns was crucial part for working in district health offices. The personnel should be able to express their concerns, especially those worry and anxiety about work. Worry can be a warning sign of detecting error or mistake. Therefore, freedom to express concerns might help in preventing damages or losses in the organization. Moreover, it can help the personnel relieve their emotional stress. Secondly, environmental threats, for example, urgent tasks assigned by the provincial health office, must be taken seriously. When personnel perceive themselves as being subjected to these tasks, they are likely to feel anxious. To solve this, certain supports, for example, information, approval, encouragement, and resources, should be provided.

Table 4. Organizational climate

Organizational climate	Mean	S.D.	Level
Positive climate	3.99	0.49	High
Freedom to express ideas	3.94	0.59	High
Freedom to express concerns	3.84	0.66	High
Freedom to ask questions	4.12	0.56	High
Freedom to participate	4.14	0.66	High
Freedom to innovate	3.98	0.55	High
Intrinsic satisfaction	3.92	0.55	High
Negative climate	3.58	0.57	High
Environmental threats	3.72	0.71	High
Individual threats	3.44	0.95	Moderate
Total	3.89	0.46	High

3.4 Relationship between leadership soft skills and organizational climate

Pearson product moment correlation was performed to examine the relationship between leadership soft skills and organizational climate. As shown in Table 5, the results indicated that there is a moderate positive correlation between leadership soft skills and organizational climate at statistically significant level ($r = 0.569$, p -value < 0.001). Personal mastery ($r = 0.537$, p -value < 0.001) demonstrated the highest correlation followed by leadership ability ($r = 0.533$, p -value < 0.001), planning & organizing ($r = 0.517$, p -value < 0.001), teamwork skill ($r = 0.514$, p -value < 0.001), initiative ($r = 0.467$, p -value < 0.001), and communication skills ($r = 0.391$, p -value < 0.001) respectively. To extend, the increase of leadership soft skills directly correlates to the increase of organizational climate.

In general, this study confirmed the results of previous studies. Koene, Vogelaar and Soeters (2002) found that there is a significant relationship between leadership and organizational climate of the superstores in the Netherlands (41). Holloway (2012) found that leadership behaviors significantly relate with the perception of the personnel of non-profit organizations in southeast Georgia (42). Similarly, Tang, Ariratana and Treputharan (2013) found that leadership soft skills of three Malaysian public university deans significantly relate to the trustworthiness perception of university staffs (15). Likewise, Alipour (2011) concluded that communication skills of administrative staff have moderate positive relationship with organizational climate in Iranian education institutes (16). The findings of current study also confirmed Litwin and Stringer's conclusion that organizational climate can be formed by leadership styles (43). Additionally, this study provided empirical evidence to Tero International Incorporation's leadership model. Although organizational climate is not portrayed in the model, this present study suggests that leadership soft skills function through the followers' perception of workplace environment. According to the findings here, district health officers should be aware of the relationship between six leadership soft skills and organizational climate. In addition, personal mastery reveals its meaning and value as it is found to be soft skill with the highest correlation. To develop this skill, district health officers should focus on keeping good relationship with others, continuously improving oneself, and adjusting attitude and behaviors. Found to be the lowest in the correlation table, communication skills should not be underrated because it is an integral part of most activities.

Table 5. Relationship between leadership soft skills and organizational climate

Leadership soft skills	Organizational climate		
	Correlation coefficient (r)	p-value	Relationship level
Teamwork skill	0.514*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Communication skill	0.391*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Initiative	0.467*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Leadership ability	0.533*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Planning & organizing	0.517*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Personal mastery	0.537*	0.0005	Moderate positive
Total	0.569*	0.0005	Moderate positive

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

3.5 Predictors of leadership soft skills towards organizational climate

Stepwise multiple linear regression analysis was performed to find if there was any significant predictor of leadership soft skills towards organizational climate. Six leadership soft skills were entered and removed to fit the predict model. From the total of six skills, there were only two significant skills fitting the model. With the highest standardized coefficient, personal mastery was the first skill chosen into the predict model ($b = 0.341$) followed by the second one, planning & organizing ($b = 0.266$) at significant level less than 0.05 as shown in Table 6. Teamwork skill ($b = 0.188$, p -value = 0.122), leadership ability ($b = 0.181$, p -value = 0.227), initiative ($b = 0.069$, p -value = 0.571) and communication skills ($b = -0.10$, p -value = 0.929) demonstrated lower standardized coefficients and were not significant; therefore, they were eventually excluded. The predict model is shown as follow.

$$\text{Organizational climate} = 1.912 + 0.267(\text{Personal mastery}) + 0.211(\text{Planning & organizing})$$

In illustrate, this regression model can predict organizational climate based on the values of personal mastery and planning & organizing. The level of

organizational climate will increase 0.267 when the level of personal mastery increases one unit and the level of planning & organizing is constant. Likewise, it will increase 0.211 when the level of planning & organizing increases one unit and the level of personal mastery is constant. With the personal mastery's level of 4.20 and the planning & organizing's level of 4.40, the model can predict that the organizational climate will be 3.96.

A similar study done in Malaysia also found that three leadership soft skills; communication skills, planning & organizing, and presentation skills were significant predictors towards the perception of trustworthiness (15). For this study, personal mastery and planning & organizing were found to be significant predictors towards organizational climate with predict ability of 32.1% ($r^2 = 0.321$, p -value < 0.001). This implies that district health officers should concentrate on these two leadership soft skills if they expect the personnel to perceive high level of organizational climate. To illustrate, they should concentrate on keeping good relationship with others, continuously improving one self, working with adaptive style, delivering clear objectives, focusing on work, and assigning tasks effectively. This finding supported the notion that the

nature of interpersonal relationship among member is a crucial part of organizational climate (44). It also implied that leadership soft skills can be used to influence the personnel perception on workplace environment.

Table 6. Predictors of leadership soft skills towards organizational climate

Leadership soft skills	b	beta	r ² change	t	p-value
Personal mastery	0.267	0.341	0.288	3.055	0.003
Planning & organizing	0.211	0.266	0.033	2.382	0.019

r = 0.566, r² = 0.321, Adjusted r² = 0.309, Constant = 1.912, F = 27.864, p-value = 0.0005

4. Conclusion

This study proposes that strong soft skills exhibited by leaders reflect the importance of the skills required for their duties. Contributing to individual and organization success, leadership soft skills are worth learning and possessing for nowadays leaders. The current study also suggests that organizational climate can be composed of positive and negative climates. Furthermore, a success climate can be created by 1) promoting autonomy, responsibility and control of the personnel, and 2) reducing harm, loss, uncertainty and unfairness in the workplace. Therefore, leaders should pay a close attention to the dynamic between these positive and negative climates. Besides, the findings also support the notion that the climate in small organizations, such as district health offices, tends to be prominent. To closing, this study reports a significant positive correlation between leadership soft skills and organizational climate. This provides an evidence-based support to Tero International Incorporation's leadership model by shedding light on the function of leadership soft skills through organizational climate. Certain leadership soft skills are found to be significant predictors towards organizational climate. Thus, leaders may take these specific leadership soft skills into account when they expect the personnel in the office to perceive organizational climate.

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