LEADERSHIP

Why We Shouldn't Call Them "Soft Skills":

They Are the Difficult Skills

B. Kim Barnes
THE INFLUENCE GURU

The skills we use to lead, teach, comfort, confront, and inspire are among the hardest to learn, which may be why robots haven't learned them yet.

"Soft skills" have been much in the news recently. Many studies, including some recently published on LinkedIn, have noted that while AI is coming for many jobs, it will be a long while, if ever, before the robots are sophisticated enough to do the complex work of parent, leader, friend, nurse, or member of the clergy. In fact, there are many roles, jobs, and careers that require a strong set of the skills we have long termed "soft."

In English-speaking cultures, the word, "soft" tends to have a pejorative connotation – except in advertising about products that touch our bodies. It is often used to imply weakness, slipperiness of convictions, foolishness – and, of course, traditional feminine behavior (usually applied negatively to men).

As someone who has studied, written, taught, and spoken about skills such as communication, influence, conflict resolution, and leadership, I can attest to the fact that these skills are in no way "soft" – in the sense described above. In fact, they are among the most difficult to teach and to learn. (Perhaps this is why robots haven't as yet learned them.) For a long while, we (in my company, Barnes & Conti Associates) have been calling them "the difficult skills."

These skills – the ones we use to lead, to teach, to comfort, to confront, to nurture, to mentor, to include, to create, to design, to amuse, to resolve issues, to inspire – require enormous understanding, sophistication, and practice, unless we are lucky enough to have had extraordinary role models from childhood.

The "being an English major leads to a career as a taxi driver" cliché is not relevant to a world in which success will increasingly be defined by the quality of our relationships rather than the quantity of widgets we produce or the complexity of the machines we control. In this individualistic society, we will have to learn to connect as well as to differentiate, to take initiative as well as to follow others, to risk as well as to protect, to respect as well as to challenge, to see and reflect beauty that others miss, to influence and be influenced, to be open-hearted as well as open-minded. These are human skills. These are difficult skills. These are the skills that will make us unreplaceable.

These are human skills. These are difficult skills. These are the skills that will make us unreplaceable.

Originally published on LinkedIn, February 19, 2019.

B. Kim Barnes

Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

bkimbarnesconsulting.com · hello@bkimbarnesconsulting.com · linkedin.com/in/bkimbarnes

© 2026 B. Kim Barnes. All rights reserved. This article may not be reproduced without permission.