

**A PERCEÇÃO DA LIDERANÇA EM RELAÇÃO ÀS SOFT SKILLS NA
INDÚSTRIA FARMACÊUTICA**

*THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP IN RELATION TO SOFT SKILLS IN THE
PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY*

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Objetivo do estudo

O objetivo geral de analisar os desafios enfrentados pelos líderes e como as Soft Skills podem contribuir com a gestão de suas equipes de vendas na indústria farmacêutica do Rio Grande do Sul no Brasil (RS).

Relevância/originalidade

O texto aborda os desafios enfrentados pelos líderes na indústria farmacêutica, enfocando a importância das habilidades interpessoais (Soft Skills) em um cenário tecnológico em constante mudança e durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Destacando a necessidade de liderança eficaz para enfrentar tais desafios.

Metodologia/abordagem

Foi adotada uma abordagem qualitativa, com metodologia exploratória e descritiva de estudo de caso. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas com dez gerentes de vendas da indústria farmacêutica. A análise de conteúdo foi utilizada para interpretar os dados

Principais resultados

Foram identificadas as habilidades sociais essenciais para liderança efetiva, como empatia, habilidades interpessoais e inteligência emocional. Destacou a importância das habilidades sociais durante a pandemia COVID-19 e a necessidade de maior atenção e investimento nelas pela indústria farmacêutica.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas

As contribuições desta pesquisa residem na análise dos desafios enfrentados por líderes no setor farmacêutico, destacando a importância das Soft Skills na gestão de equipes de vendas. A investigação pode fornecer insights para aprimorar a liderança e a competitividade no mercado farmacêutico.

Contribuições sociais/para a gestão

As contribuições na gestão estão identificação das Soft Skills para líderes no setor farmacêutico. Ao compreender e desenvolver essas habilidades interpessoais, os gestores podem aprimorar a comunicação, fortalecer as relações de equipe e enfrentar desafios levando a uma maior eficiência operacional.

Palavras-chave: Liderança, soft skills, Gestão de Equipes, indústria farmacêutica, Equipes de vendas

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Study purpose

The general objective of analyzing the challenges faced by leaders and how Soft Skills can contribute to the management of their sales teams in the pharmaceutical industry of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil (RS).

Relevance / originality

This text addresses the challenges faced by leaders in the pharmaceutical industry, focusing on the importance of soft skills in an ever-changing technological landscape and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses the need for effective leadership to meet such challenges.

Methodology / approach

The research adopted a qualitative approach, employing an exploratory and descriptive case study methodology. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten sales managers from the pharmaceutical industry in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. Content analysis was utilized to interpret the data.

Main results

This text addresses the challenges faced by leaders in the pharmaceutical industry, focusing on the importance of soft skills in an ever-changing technological landscape and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses the need for effective leadership to meet such challenges.

Theoretical / methodological contributions

The contributions of this research reside in the analysis of the challenges faced by leaders in the pharmaceutical sector, highlighting the importance of Soft Skills in the management of sales teams. Research provides insights to enhance leadership and competitiveness in pharmaceutical market.

Social / management contributions

Management contributions are identification of Soft Skills for leaders in the pharmaceutical sector. By understanding and developing these soft skills, managers can improve communication, strengthen team relationships, and address challenges leading to greater operational efficiency.

Keywords: Leadership, soft skills, team management, pharmaceutical industry, sales teams

THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP IN RELATION TO SOFT SKILLS IN THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

1 INTRODUCTION

We live in a century characterized by megatrends, related to demographic changes, displacement of the center of economic power, an intense process of urbanization, alarming climate change, and major technological advances (Price Waterhouse Coopers [PWC], 2015), which impact and will continue to impact labor markets in the coming years, leading to a liquid loss of more than 5 million jobs in 15 large developed and emerging economies. (Klaus, 2016). This context makes humanity more broadly reflect, how to deal with this new present scenario.

In today's times, where technology has a deep impact on the skills that organizations seek for their business (Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010), the performance of professionals gains new contours, extrapolating what were once the prevalent skills, the then-known Hard Skills (HS), for a more holistic-looking professional, now also with an emphasis on social skills such as analytical thinking, problem-solving, communication and presentation, lifelong learning, information management, integrity, and innovation. (Wallapha, 2012).

In this current technology-based scenario, called the fourth industrial revolution, accentuated by the comprehensive effects of the pandemic of Covid-19, Soft Skills have become an even more valuable product: Layoffs personal suffering, severe reductions and continued economic uncertainty, have reinforced the need for leaders who have Soft Skills top-notch, as for example empathy, resilience, compassion, and agility. Leaders regardless of the theory that follows, have a higher chance of leading their organizations and people during times of crisis as the one.

In a profit-oriented society and with the accumulation of wealth, based on the private ownership of the means of production, the industry has every right to seek to increase its market share, maximize its profits, and use the most appropriate strategies possible, with the aim of achieving these objectives. The pharmaceutical industry is no different from the other ones, where even acting with human health, seeks to increase achievement of its profits, aimed at convincing doctors to prescribe the most expensive medicines. (Brody, 2005).

In the pharmaceutical industry, an agile sector with direct investment dynamics in research and development (R&D), global companies, achieved a significant US\$ 1,1 trillion in 2015, according to data from the QuintilesIMS Institute. (Associação Brasileira das Indústrias de Química Fina, Biotecnologia e suas Especialidades [ABIFINA], 2018). Constituted in a highly competitive market, strong investments in marketing areas and sales, knowing, understanding, and applying - through the leader - more attentive management to relational aspects, can be the key for differentiation in a very competitive market.

For Chopra (2002), a leader needs to understand the hierarchy of the needs of the followers to give the right answers that can satisfy them. Still, according to Chopra (2002), it is crucial to learn how to identify people's needs - as psychologist Abraham Maslow already pointed out in the mid-twentieth century - and know how to answer each of them. A leader who understands the hierarchies of needs and responses will succeed. Therefore, transversal skills, non-academic and not related to training or technical duties, personality traits, preferences, and motivations (Swiatkiewicz, 2014), gain greater relevance.

According to Phillips, J. and Phillips, P. (2015), Soft Skills promote agile and innovative organizations, and have the best and most admired places to work. These skills bring out the best in people in as much as their behaviors and competences are shaped to suit the organization's strategy, the desired work climate and the unpredictable and ever-changing landscape. In an increasingly information and technology-focused society, Soft Skills are shaping the structure of the workplace. (Kandra, Sewell & Nyamari, 2011).

From the aspects presented here, when we consider the role of the professional, leader of people, in the broadest corporate sectors, essentially in the pharmaceutical sales sector, briefly featured in the previous paragraphs, we see that it gains challenging aspects due to the complexity involved. In situations that increasingly call for more agility, creativity, empathy, resilience, dynamism and high level of competition, the ability to interpret and respond appropriately to these various scenarios is a difficult but crucial feature, for modern leaders.

Considering all of the above, the overall objective is to analyze the challenges faced by leaders and how Soft Skills can contribute to the management of their sales teams in the pharmaceutical industry in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (RS). For this, a field survey was carried out with sales leaders of the pharmaceutical industry in RS and will be presented throughout this article. Next, there is the theoretical foundation, followed by the method, and in section 4 the analysis and discussion of the results. Finally, the final considerations bring the contributions and limitations of the study.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1 Leadership

Leadership, a term used and studied for over two hundred years in the English language, Stogdill (1974) believes that the term appeared around the year 1300 of the Christian era. This allows us to say that leadership has been investigated for a long time and, as such, it is fair that it presents the most varied interpretations. Chronologically, according to Bryman (1992), the historical sequence of the leadership study shows several steps:

- a) the theory of traits originated from available research on leadership within the periods between 1904-1948, where the main names studying the subject were Stogdill and Mann, Lewin, Flesherman, Coons and Likert;
- b) the focus of leadership approaches appears early in the 1950s, where a great research effort was mobilized with the aim of seeking to know how good leaders must act, led by researchers such as McClellan and Minner, endeavoring to understand the motivation for leadership.
- c) in a third moment, aspects related to the environmental circumstances involving the leader-follower bond emerge. But the works are criticized for trying to distinguish leaders as special people, apart from the rest of the mere mortals.
- d) and lastly, imprinting strong influence on current concepts, according to Hampton, Summer and Weber, with a more comprehensive positioning than the previous one, situational theories arise, whose main focus of interest is the organizational environment and the study of behavior.

If, for the initial theoretical placements, the leadership trait was innate, with contingency theorists, this characteristic can be developed. From this last perspective, the belief that anyone can be a good leader can be strengthened, if you are prepared for it. According to Jack Welch who, aged 45, became the eighth and youngest president of General Electric, the essence of leadership lies in creating a vision and motivating others to execute it. There are many views and positions on the concept of leadership in the conception of different authors, as is presented below (Chart 1):

Chart 1 - leadership concepts

Author	Concept
Maxwell (2011, p. 13)	“It’s the willingness to take risks; it’s feeling uncomfortable with reality; it’s seeing the possibilities of a situation when others can only see the difficulties; it’s the power to potentialize many lives.”
Hunter (2004, p. 25)	“It’s the ability to influence people to work enthusiastically towards achieving goals identified as being for the common good.”
Gonçalves (2008, p. 14)	“It’s the process of stimulation by which, through successful reciprocal actions, individual differences are directed towards the benefit of a common cause.”
Gramigna (2002)	“It’s the ability to catalyze group efforts in order to achieve or exceed organizational objectives, establishing a motivating climate, forming partnerships and stimulating team development.”
Maximiano (2007, p. 25)	“The process of conducting and influencing actions to achieve the objectives stipulated by organizations.”
Blanchard et al. (2007, p. 15)	“Ability to influence others to unleash their power and potential in ways that impact the greater good.”

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Thus, it is observed that leadership is an art because the leader leads people and manages processes. The concept of leadership can be differentiated from author to author, but what is noted in essence is that to lead is to have the ability to guide people to achieve a collective goal and achieve positive results through these. Leadership can also be seen as a “process of influence by which individuals, with their actions, facilitate the movement of a group of people towards goals common or shared”. (Robbins, 2005, p. 14).

2.2 Leadership e Soft Skills

In the 1990s, productive restructuring and total quality highlighted the need for organizations to find new ways to empower their leaders and followers, mobilizing resources for technical, social, and cultural skills. The trend of actions was centered on courses both for the development of technical knowledge and for the development of behavior such as leadership, communication, or decision-making. (Larangeira, 1997).

Training areas began to use the term (T&D) considering the behavioral aspect of their attribution, empowering or developing specific skills according to individual and organizational needs. (Eboli, 2002). In the XXI century, we have reached a phase marked by many technological and social changes, where in the organizational context, the need for quick answers in order to ensure competitiveness, directly impacts the profile of employees, causing a more latent need, the so-called Soft Skills.

In this evolutionary chronology of the professional profile of organizations, the role of the leader gains deep prominence. Leadership and Soft Skills are very beneficial for managing the organization effectively and efficiently. This statement was supported by researchers such as Tang (2012) and Wallapha (2012). Wijan (2012) stated that leaders in this century need to integrate their hard skills and Soft Skills in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of working practices. The author further emphasized that leadership through Soft Skills was an important predictor to develop and learn the innovation to occur through cooperation.

This is further supported by Tang’s argument (2012), justifying that leadership and Soft Skills are integrated aspects, consisting of teamwork, communication, personal mastery, personal development, initiative, leadership skills, planning and organization, and presentation skills. Soft Skills can be defined as skills related to human skills with a focus on competence in

working with other individuals. This was supported by Wilaipan's (2013) statement, in which he sees in Soft Skills, basic factors for humans to perform better in their workplace.

2.3 Soft Skills

Since the earliest times, people have been trained in the areas of occupational and personal development. For example, people have received hard skills training from their masters since the Middle Ages. But what about the soft skills? The first articulation appeared in a 1968 U.S. Army document in a military training regulation for key tasks. In December 1972, U.S. Army Continental Command held a CONARC Soft Skills Training Conference. The conference marked the first use of the term Soft Skills, outlining the difference between hard skills and Soft Skills.

When we talk about skills that can be credited, we refer to something that opens a gap for assessment, to aspects that open the possibility of comparison when we think of one professional against another in a moment of hiring for example. On the other hand, social skills are more difficult to accredit and can only be obtained partially through certificates and proven professional experience. (Herrera & Torres, 2020). Technical skills are very easy to certify and play an important role in the process of employees joining organizations.

Soft Skills, on the other hand, refer to the skills that give the person the ability to motivate and work in a team and, also, in a broader sense, to the character traits that constitute a person. Usually, personal skills can be divided into three categories: interpersonal skills, social skills, and methodical skills. (Guerra-Baez, 2019). Essentially, these three categories answer the following questions: How do you act as an independent individual? How do you act as a social individual? and how do you face the challenges?

Maximiano (2019) defines soft skills as a group of personal qualities that individuals possess, which contribute to and considerably favor the activities of organizations. Discusses that are essential for managers and represent a fundamental role in relationships. Deepa and Seth (2013) point out that in the current scenario, soft skills are essential in the workplace as activities and work become more efficient in the search of results, and when they include relationships with others, whether in the workplace, in personal life, or in society.

Soft Skills are the skills that serve to measure the level of specialization of the professional, that is, the way the individual performs the tasks, and the way of preparation and competence for efficient performance, in which the ability to work as a team and the mastery of knowledge, such as knowing how to act in situations of conflict, tension and pressure are important domains. Andrade (2016) defines Soft Skills as a set of skills that encompass characteristics of communication, interpersonal, leadership and problem-solving skills.

It is noticed that the balance between technical and behavioral skills gains greater prominence, being, therefore, the desirable symbiosis necessary, present in the profile of current leaders. Soft Skills are just as important as cognitive skills. (John, 2009; Zehr, 1998). Developing Soft Skills can make a difference in hiring for a job in a particular area (Evenson, 1999), and the lack of Soft Skills can sink the promising career of someone who has technical skills and professional experience, but without interpersonal qualities. (Klaus, 2016).

2.3.1 Essential Soft Skills

As the workplace evolves to reflect the changing needs of today's workers, Soft Skills learning programs are expanding to include mindfulness, work-life balance (or, more precisely, professional life integration), unconscious bias, mental health and well-being. Deepa and Seth (2013, p. 1), argue that Soft Skills is a generic term – “umbrella term” – which encompass

communication skills, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, leadership, teamwork, negotiation, time management, stress and etiquette. Chart 2 shows a set of skills and behaviors of attitudes related to the theme, from the point of view of different authors.

Chart 2 - List of Essential Soft Skills compiled from different authors

<i>Essential Soft Skills</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Total</i>
Team Work	MINTZBERG (2004) CARNEVALE, GAINER and MELTZER (1990) HARVEY, MOON and GEALL (1997) OBLINGER and VERVILLE (1998) TULGAN (2012)	5
Communication	MINTZBERG (2004) HARVEY, MOON and GEALL (1997) CAUDRON (1999)	3
Interpersonal Skills	CARNEVALE, GAINER and MELTZER (1990) HARVEY, MOON and GEALL (1997) CAUDRON (1999)	3
Problem Solving	CARNEVALE, GAINER and MELTZER (1990) OBLINGER and VERVILLE (1998) TULGAN (2012)	3
Proactive Learning	OBLINGER and VERVILLE (1998) TULGAN (2012)	2
Skills with People	CARNEVALE, GAINER and MELTZER (1990) TULGAN (2012)	2
Decision Making	OBLINGER and VERVILLE (1998) TULGAN (2012)	2
Positive Attitude	TULGAN (2012)	1
Emotional Intelligence	CAUDRON (1999)	1
Leadership	MINTZBERG (2004)	1

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Robles (2012), after carrying out a study with 49 North American executives on the main Soft Skills demanded by the labor market for a new employee, created a list of 490 Soft Skills. After a process of coding terms and themes, this set was reduced to a list of 26 skills. Of these 26, 10 of those that were more often chosen during the responses of the executives were selected. Thus Robles (2012, p. 455) arrived at the following relationship:

- a) Communication: oral, written, presentation, and listening skills;
- b) Courtesy: posture, business etiquette, good manners, ability to say good morning and thank you (“says please and thank you”).
- c) Flexibility: adaptability, dynamism, ease of change, eternal learner (“lifelong learner”);
- d) Integrity: honest, ethical, high moral, has personal values.
- e) Interpersonal Skills: pleasant, kind, sense of humor, friendly, affectionate, self-control, patient, sociable.
- f) Positive Attitude: optimistic, enthusiastic, excited, self-motivated, happy, confident;
- g) Professionalism: efficient, professional appearance, balanced
- h) Responsibility: responsible, reliable, inventive, self-disciplined, wants to do good.
- i) Teamwork: cooperative, diplomatic, supportive, collaborative.
- j) Work Ethics: willing to work, faithful, motivated, and punctual.

The study of Swiatkiewicz (2014) found a range of Soft Skills (transversal competencies) listed as necessary for the professional's performance in the face of the complexity of the 21st century. However, some were cited as the most relevant and most demanded by the labor market. They are: "availability, responsibility, capacity for taking initiative, punctuality, motivation, organization, flexibility, zeal for quality, social relations and communication capacity". (Swiatkiewicz, 2014, p. 679).

2.4 Pharmaceutical industry

Obviously, many things have changed since the early beginnings, when plant-based medicines were prepared by doctors, and later apothecaries, until today, where the development of medicines through combinatorial chemistry and recombinant DNA technology depends on the collaboration and effort of scientists in universities and private companies. However, the essence of this activity remains: To provide health and well-being through healing. It is from this need for healing and quality of life that medicine and medicines(products) have been developing over time. (Aguar, 2009).

The pharmaceutical sector is one of the most important innovation fronts in today's global context, on average 20.9% of the revenues of companies in the sector are applied in R&D for the development of new medicines. (EvaluatePharma, 2018). According to Gadelha (2002, 2003, 2006), the health productive system corresponds to one of the most dynamic areas, involving high innovative activity due to the existence of a productive base of great relevance in goods and services, being responsible for a significant portion of the GDP of developed and emerging economies.

For the first time, the Brazilian pharmaceutical market, which includes sales of all laboratories established in Brazil, surpassed the mark of R\$ 145 billion in 2021, reaching R\$ 146.7 billion. This represented an increase of 13.6% compared to the previous year. The most significant increase occurred in the so-called institutional market, formed by governments, clinics and hospitals, growing 74.1% since 2017. In retail, where 75% of purchases are made by the final public, the increase was 55.1% in the last four years. (Associação da Indústria Farmacêutica de Pesquisa [INTERFARMA], 2022).

Among 132 countries, Brazil ranks 57th in the world innovation ranking, according to the Global Innovation Index 2021 (GII) (INTERFARMA, 2022), which is one of the most important reports in the segment. Compared to 2020, the country rose five positions. In the modern economy, investments in R&D by the private or public sectors are a way of measuring a country's potential. The more the State encourages the production of innovation and the discovery of new knowledge, the more attractive the country becomes to receive investments.

By 2020, the ten countries with the most applications for patent registration add up to 3 million potential innovations. Brazil, however, registered just over 24,000 applications in the year, while China leads patent applications worldwide, with just under 1.5 million registrations in 2020. (INTERFARMA, 2022). By 2021, China was the country with the largest total spending on research and development in the world, with spending in excess of \$621 billion. Brazil was estimated to have a total expenditure of US\$38.2 billion, being the 10th country with the largest R&D spending in the world.

The production of medicines occupies an essential place in the process of accumulation of international capital, being one of the most profitable industrial branches. (Schweitzer, 2007). However, it seems to mean better results for those countries that stimulate and enable conditions for innovation to be at the center of the process, which is a reality that still belongs to a concentrated group of countries. As the implementation of the technological innovation process

is still a reality of few nations, the process of capital accumulation in the sector ends up becoming restricted. (Schweitzer, 2007).

3 METHODOLOGY

For the present research, qualitative research was chosen, given that the qualitative is more flexible than the quantitative in terms of discovering new phenomena and situations not previously thought of. (Bryman, 1984). The methodology used in this research was the exploratory and descriptive case study. Concerning descriptive research, according to Malhotra (2001), descriptive research is marked by a clear statement of the problem, specific hypotheses and detailed needs of information. On exploratory research, according to Gil (2008, p. 27), exploratory research “has the main purpose of developing, clarifying and modifying concepts and ideas, with a view to formulating more precise problems or researchable hypotheses for further studies”.

Regarding the approach, this research used the field research that according to Marconi and Lakatos (2010), aims to obtain information and knowledge in relation to the problem which is being studied. The research also involved the collection of data and information in a bibliographical and documental way. For Gil (2008), the main advantage of bibliographical research lies in the fact that it allows the researcher to access information more widely than would be possible by searching directly. According to Gil (2010), documentary research is very similar to bibliographical research. The documentary uses materials that have not yet received an analytical treatment or that can be reworked according to the research objectives.

The main data collection procedure was semi-structured interviews. Prodanov and Freitas (2013) describe them as a resource for obtaining information from someone about a certain subject or problem, where its exploratory character will require a certain structure. The instrument that can support conducting an interview is called a script. In order to collect qualitative data, ten sales managers from the pharmaceutical industry in RS were interviewed through semi-structured interviews, nine conducted in loco using the Transcribe Live application and one via MS Teams.

To achieve this, telephone contacts were made, and messages were sent through the application. WhatsApp the ten sales managers of the pharmaceutical industry, informing them about the research object and inviting them to schedule the interview. The choice of professionals was made at random, only respecting the criterion of having a more heterogeneous sample, with several female leaders in the same number as male leaders. The same rationale was used in relation of leaders in an equal number of national and multinational companies.

The analysis was carried out using the content analysis technique, with the interpretation of the data collected through the applied theoretical foundation. According to Prodanov and Freitas (2013), the analysis and interpretation develop from observed evidence, according to the methodology, with connections made through the theoretical framework and complemented with the researcher’s positioning. Before the conclusions and final considerations, it becomes necessary to group the data, synthesizing them, ordering them in a logical way so that they can provide clear and objective answers to the research problem.

4 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of qualitative research data, resulting from interviews with sales managers of the pharmaceutical industry in RS. For the qualitative analysis, content analysis of the interviews was carried out with the help of the software Transcribe Live, MS Teams, and MS Word, observing the following topics, created based on the theoretical framework, as well as the analysis of sociodemographic data:

- a) understanding of the leadership theme and the challenges of the sales leader in the pharmaceutical industry.
- b) understanding of and perceptions of leaders on soft skills and the importance given this by their organizations.
- c) the vision about Soft Skills and the possible contribution to the management of their teams.
- d) managerial and theoretical contributions of this work.

Regarding the sociodemographic data of the interviewed managers, five male and five female leaders were brought to this work. There was also a plurality in relation to the professions of these professionals, being a pharmacist, a lawyer, and administrators with different emphases such as hospital and people leadership. It is also noteworthy that nine out of ten leaders interviewed had a postgraduate or MBA degree. In order to give more breadth to the theme, five leaders from national pharmaceutical companies and another five from multinational pharmaceutical companies were brought into the work. Some of these data, among others, are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1 - Sociodemographic data of pharmaceutical industry managers

PARTICIPANT	AGE	GENDER	CURRENT POSITION	GRADUATION LEVEL	LEADERSHIP TIME	COMPANY TIME
E1	35	M	District Sales Manager	Postgraduate	from 3 to 4 years	from 5 to 10 years
E2	48	M	Regional Sales Manager	MBA	up to 5 years	from 5 to 10 years
E3	48	M	District Sales Manager	MBA	up to 20 years	2 years
E4	41	F	Demand Manager	MBA	up to 5 years	2 years
E5	39	F	District Sales Manager	High School	up to 10 years	from 2 to 5 years
E6	44	M	District Sales Manager	MBA	up to 10 years	from 2 to 5 years
E7	42	F	District Sales Manager	MBA	up to 5 years	2 years
E8	41	F	District Sales Manager	Postgraduate	from 3 to 4 years	2 years
E9	47	M	District Sales Manager	Postgraduate	up to 10 years	20 years
E10	37	F	District Sales Manager	MBA	from 3 to 4 years	from 5 to 10 years
					42,2	7,4

Source: Prepared by the authors.

4.1 Understanding the theme leadership and the management challenges of the sales leader in the pharmaceutical industry

According to the respondents, in general, it is understood that the leadership profile in the sales area of the pharmaceutical industry has a unique role in the relationship between the objectives established by organizations and how they will be achieved through people, regardless of the specialty in which it is inserted, the size of the company in which it is analyzed or even the operation characteristic, and if there is national or foreign capital. For Jucá et al. (2013, p. 12), “leadership is a skill that is built, cultivated, and that needs to be well managed like any other intangible asset that organizations have”.

From the interviewees’ statements, leadership is understood as “a natural movement of influence, a striving to implement ideas and make its point of view more often discussed, being obtained through general recognition, for skills such as being a reference, a positive influence, determination, good relationship and strong communication”. Such a vision agrees with Yukl (2013), which describes leadership as a process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how to do it. It is the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to achieve shared goals.

As for the theories of leadership, it was observed that not all of them follow an approach determined by their companies, but rather actions arising from previous experiences, which in some statements it was possible to observe a concern on the part of these leaders, understanding that this may result in conflicts between peers due to very different self-directions within the

same organization and disorientation for those led by the need for team changes due to organizational relocations, implemented by business strategy.

In the study, it was possible to make an inference through the interviewees' statements and, therefore, identify a series of different constructs, which shows how diverse and democratic the theme is, when we think of leadership approaches in sales within the pharmaceutical industry. There were six theories which stand out of the managers based on their statements, with the situational theory being the most used by 4 leaders, the theories of authentic and democratic leadership by 2 leaders and the theories of transactional, autocratic and transformational leadership, mentioned by 1 leader each.

In the aspect that aimed to address the management challenges of the interviewees with their teams, the representativeness of the soft skills theme in their routines, ended up becoming evident in a natural way as, most of the answers presented, were associated with social skills and very few with technical skills in their job or any other area. From there, based on chart 2, a correlation of these answers was made, of the list of essential soft skills compiled by several authors. This correlation is shown in chart 3 below.

Chart 3 - Relation between management challenges and essential Soft Skills

Participant	Challenges Indicated	Essential Soft Skills (Chart 2)
E1	Keep Focus / Trusted Environment / Self-Esteem	Skill with People
E3 / E4 / E7	Flexibility / Adaptable to Profiles	Skill with People
E6	Stimulate Self Knowledge	Skill with People
E9	Teamwork	Ability to Work in a Team
E2	Customize the Communication	Communication
E10	Interpersonal Skill / Empathic / Balanced	Interpersonal Skill
E5	Resilient	Emotional Intelligence
E8	Be a Reference / Motivator	Positive Attitude / Leadership

Source: Prepared by the authors.

It is noted that the challenges mentioned by the leaders of the pharmaceutical industry have several characteristics linked to different soft skills, with emphasis on people skills, the ability to work in a team, communication skills and interpersonal skills. These challenges pointed out in the actions of these professionals with their teams, establish an intuitive, non-directed connection with the soft skills identified in the literature as being essential for a leader in his/her role, although these are not specific to the pharmaceutical industry, being the segment addressed in this work.

All the different positions brought in the aforementioned statements are in line with (Gonzaga & Rodrigues, 2008), where the author elaborates that leadership positions demand more and more postures that come to reconcile a more adequate management of the different variables that may interfere in the performance and well-being at work, requiring recognition of one's own feelings and emotions in having greater flexibility to act with different situations and people.

4.2 The understanding and perceptions of leaders on soft skills

With innovations and continuous changes, managers need to be able to solve challenges in a different way, to remain competitive and achieve the success of the organization; being flexible and adaptable to obstacles that arise. (Moscovici, 1981; Llop, Grasas, Paassen & Araújo 2017). However, although increasingly important, soft skills remain quite ambiguous, mainly because they are difficult to measure. White (2005), states that, in the environment of organizations, although a portion of the budget is dedicated to training managers, most of the time little attention is paid to Soft Skills.

Based on the placements of the interviewees' perceptions, confronted with different authors, it is possible to assume that there is a good level of knowledge about soft skills. From the interviewees' statements, soft skills are understood as a "Behavioral profile tooling, of amplitude between Intra and Interpersonal Skills, focusing on how you deal with people, generating results through them, from which they gain recognized importance, characteristics such as sensitivity, empathy, flexibility, communication, emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability, these being worked on by companies with a modern concept of management".

As for the perception of the importance given by their companies, guided by the investments made in soft skills, there is a relative balance in the theme, according to the statements. The statements presented by six interviewees positively demonstrate the attention and investment of their organizations regarding the importance of soft skills in their businesses. This attitude finds support in Moad (1995), which justifies increases in training budgets driven by changes in client/server technologies and the need for Soft Skills in business.

However, four out of ten respondents reported no investment from their companies in Soft Skills, perhaps guided by the market view that measuring the impact of Soft Skills training on return on investment (ROI) versus the impact of Hard Skills training is a challenge. (Georges, 1996; Redford, 2007). Therefore, as already mentioned, there is a positive balance in this small sample, with six companies that visualize value and invest resources in this important theme, against four that transmit the message of an opportunity gap to be thought about.

4.3 The vision on the essential Soft Skills for the management of sales teams in the pharmaceutical industry

In this item, which essentially reports the vision of managers regarding the importance of the topic in their daily actions, it is worth first contextualizing that in the pharmaceutical industry, characterized "by the carrying out of important investments in R&D and by its scientific base" (Vieira & Santos, 2020), the necessity for increasingly qualified and up-to-date professionals, so that the investments made revert to maintaining the health and competitiveness of the organization (Kobayashi, 2010), is fundamental.

In this context, which brings out the need for leadership with differentiated awareness, a broader vision, and attention to developing skills beyond the technical, the level of importance of soft skills was understood through some distinct signs. First by pointing out what would be the essential soft skills for sales leaders in the pharmaceutical industry in Rio Grande do Sul, an action observed in the literature by different authors such as Swiatkiewicz (2014), which found a range of Soft Skills (transversal competencies) listed as necessary for the professional's performance in the face of the complexity of the 21st century.

This first perspective reinforces the fact that it is key to understanding the topic and its importance through the clear identification of which essential social skills are fundamental in a particular area and a particular position. This action can help in custom management of a given activity. Such skills were pointed out, according to the point of view of the interviewed pharmaceutical industry sales leaders and are shown next in table 2, essential soft skills:

Table 2 - Essential Soft Skills in Practice for Pharmaceutical Industry Leaders



Participant	Soft Skill Mentioned	Number of Different Soft Skills Mentioned	Number of Times Soft Skill has been Mentioned	
E1/E6/E7/E8/E9	Empathy	1	5	17%
E3/E4/E5/E7	Interpersonal Skill	2	4	13%
E6/E9/E10	Emotional Intelligence	3	3	10%
E1/E3/E8	Resilience	4	3	10%
E5/E7/E8	Reliability	5	3	10%
E2/E10	Leadership	6	2	7%
E2/E8	Flexibility	7	2	7%
E10	Adaptability	8	1	3%
E3	Proactive	9	1	3%
E9	Respect	10	1	3%
E8	Encourage	11	1	3%
E9	Ethic	12	1	3%
E9	Be Human	13	1	3%
E2	Teamwork	14	1	3%
E2	Critical Thinking	15	1	3%

Source: Prepared by the authors.

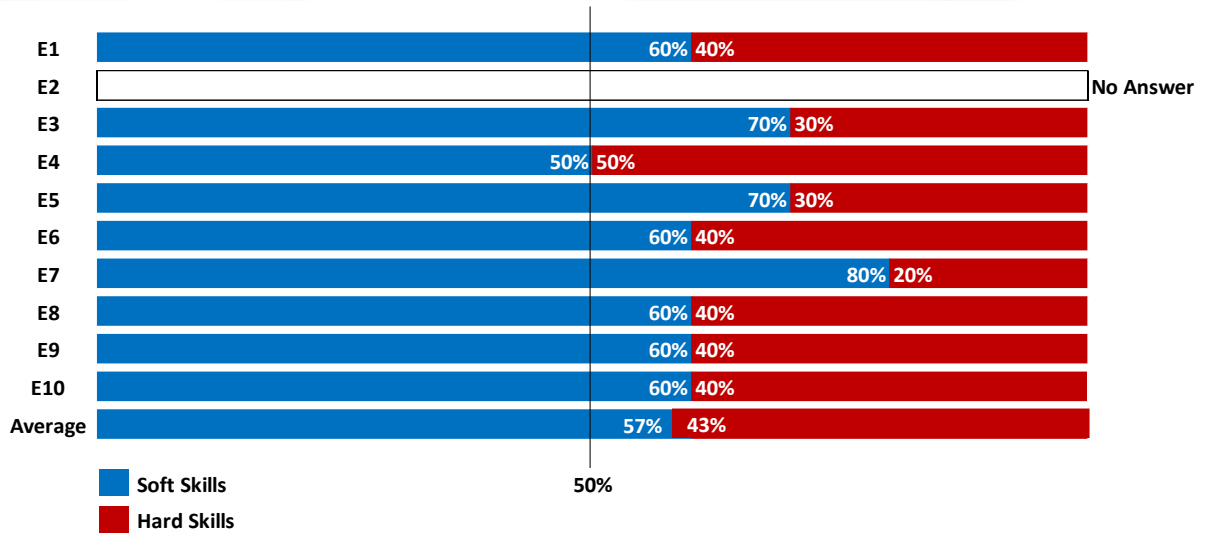
The interviews aimed at determining the essential soft skills, according to sales leaders of the chosen pharmaceutical companies, spontaneously pointed out thirty skills among the ten interviewees; therefore, on average, 3 soft skills for each interviewee. Of these thirty soft skills remembered, fifteen appear in common among the responses collected. The most mentioned soft skills, in order of appearance, were: empathy (17%), interpersonal skills (13%), emotional intelligence, resilience and confidence (10%) each, leadership and flexibility, all with (7%), composing (74%) of the total skills determined.

The other (24%) of the spontaneous responses brought to research by managers, indicate the same percentage of (3%), important skills such as adaptability, respect for people, ethics, proactivity, humanity, teamwork, critical thinking, etc. (Tomaz, 2020), mentions that developing a new scenario with more specific and effective Soft Skills is much more prodigious and generates more humanized behaviors, such as: empathy, resilience, ethics, integral vision, flexibility and team engagement. This is in line with the answers found.

Although Katz's skills model is widely disseminated, today, given the unpredictability of the 21st century (Fleury, M. T. L. & Fleury, A., 2001; Le Boterf, 2001; Zarifian, 2001), Vergara and Ramos (2008) warn that it is uncertain when the presence of one or another set of skills is most necessary. This placement is in dialogue with the practical findings on the so-called essential skills, from the perspective of the leaders interviewed in this work, confirming a wide range of soft skills related to the pharmaceutical industry, important for the work of these managers and their teams.

The second note characterizing the perception and evidencing the importance of soft skills in the management work of sales leaders in the pharmaceutical industry with their teams, was due to the direct questioning about how they perceived the weight of the contribution of both soft skills and hard skills. In this respect, it was found that nine of the ten managers are able to establish very clearly the role or the weight of behavioral skills in the daily relationships with their teams. The result of this calculation is shown in Graph 1 below:

Graph 1 - The weight of soft skills in the work of a Pharmaceutical Industry leader



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The data obtained in the interviews with the ten managers of different pharmaceutical companies shows a greater weight of importance for soft skills versus hard skills, specifically in the area of activity of these professionals. Eight of these managers, with an average score of 65% for soft skills, believe that these have a greater weight for them, being above the average of this research, which was 57% against 43% for hard skills. Interviewee E4 was the only one to understand that weights should be equal to both skills. E2 did not know how to answer percentage.

The information obtained through this question with the ten sales managers of the pharmaceutical industry of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), seems to corroborate with a recent survey of the Harris Poll, which pointed out that having Soft Skills without having the necessary experience seems to be more desirable than having the right experience or qualifications for a job, but without social skills. Still, in the same Harris Poll, 75% of Americans would be likely to hire a candidate who has social skills, and not necessarily the experience or qualifications needed for a given position.

The third indication denoting the importance of soft skills in the management of the interviewed leaders came through the correlation established between the theme and the Covid-19 Pandemic. In addition to the affirmative finding through the managers' statements that Covid-19 drastically accelerated the need for new skills in the workforce, bringing greater relevance to social skills, which is in line with what is seen in the market in general, the observation of the relevance of a group of specific soft skills according to the moment lived, shows a complete closure of this understanding.

To this end, respondents were encouraged to share their views regarding the perception of soft skills during the pandemic. Ten soft skills were pointed out by the leaders interviewed, where adaptability was mentioned by five of the ten leaders, empathy and resilience by three leaders, flexibility, strategic thinking and team spirit were mentioned by two leaders and improvement in communication, discipline, self-management and professionalism, were mentioned by each leader.

Thus, based on the findings in this point, which reports the vision of sales leaders in the pharmaceutical industry regarding their perception of essential soft skills in their work practice - with more than 30 soft skills having been determined - and added to the positive percentage measurement on the weight of contribution between soft skills through hard skills and the feeling of managers on the subject in relation to the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is believed that the

objective of understanding the vision of these leaders regarding the importance of soft skills in their management work with their sales teams has been achieved. .

4.4 Managerial and theoretical contributions of the work

With regard to the understanding of the topic of leadership, a well-aligned understanding on the part of the managers is noted with what different authors conceptualize, shown in Chart 1 - Collection of leadership concepts. This understanding also gains evidence through the concept of leadership expressed through the statements of the participants, as shown on page 10 of this work. Despite extensive literature that deals with the theme of leadership, there is no consensus in academia about which is the best or most appropriate approach. This connects in a practical way with the findings of this study.

Concerning soft skills, this study highlights the importance of the theme in relation to the theoretical basis applied and the practical approach obtained through the positions of the interviewed leaders. Due to the different and constant needs of companies and including the event of Covid-19 in the world, which changed thought, attitudes, and relationships, scholars such as Deepa and Seth (2013) mention that soft skills are essential in the workplace, as activities and work become more efficient in the pursuit of results when they include relationships with others.

Within the managerial scope, there are opportunities for intensifying more in-depth study in relation to the subject, because, as seen in this study, there is little attention given and consequent low investment regarding soft skills in the pharmaceutical industry of RS and its leadership. It is necessary to increase the understanding that behavioral skills, added to the technical knowledge that continues to be valued, can be the great differential in the development of more effective and complete leaders, and more productive and synergistic teams for more consistent results.

5 CONCLUSION

This dissertation was concerned with addressing the topic of the perception of sales leaders on soft skills in the context of the pharmaceutical industry in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil), and the relationship between social skills and the work of their teams. It was devised through three specific objectives, to achieve the general objective of analyzing the challenges of the leaders and how Soft Skills can contribute to the management of their sales teams in the pharmaceutical industry in RS.

Regarding the understanding and perceptions of leadership and soft skill themes, the managers' statements on the themes, mirrored by different scholars and the literature, show the quality and knowledge of both contents. The notes on the challenges, converging on the central theme of the work, highlight the importance of the soft skills agenda for the interviewed leaders. It was observed that, although some companies already look more closely at the soft skills agenda with their leaders, it was possible to perceive that there is a gap of opportunity for the expansion of the subject with organizations that seem averse to a mature reality.

The third objective is understood to have been covered, as the study was able to give due connotation of importance to soft skills, through the design of more than thirty soft skills essential for the function of leader a in the pharmaceutical sector. Likewise regarding the connection of the theme with the pandemic, which not only ratified the importance, but also signaled opportunities for growth and development of soft skills. The weight of soft skills in the work relationships of these leaders, with a percentage (60%) above the average found in the survey, also categorically demonstrates the contribution of these skills in the role of management.

In terms of limitation of the work, the realization of this study occurred in a very challenging period of the Covid-19 pandemic, with robust impacts on a professional and personal level for the development of this research work. It is also understood that giving greater amplitude with a larger number of respondents in a study with this theme, and with the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, more significant findings could be brought to light for the analysis of the phenomenon.

As a suggestion for future study, it is worth considering deepening the understanding of the influence of soft skills in the sales segment of the pharmaceutical industry in other regions of the country, in order to understand if the different cultures can influence the result. Perhaps the research can be individualized by company characteristic, whether national or multinational, relating possible influences by this distinction, or the research could even be conducted with other sectors beyond sales, maintaining leadership; however, at the center of the discussion.

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