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It's Never Too Early To Learn Vital Leadership Skills – So Why Not Start In Elementary School?

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Soft skills are critical in preparing young pupils for their personal and professional destiny, ... [+] SHUTTERSTOCK

When former CEO Hubert Joly [transformed the ailing fortunes of Best Buy](#) in the 2010s, he used what was deemed unorthodox methods at the time: putting wellbeing at the heart of the company's strategy, consulting the workers on the frontline,

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offering them financial perks, providing unique care for the 100,000 employees (including their mental health or general skills acquisition). Basically, Joly put meaningful purpose above profits and shareholder's growth. Many of these tactics boiled down to non-cognitive capabilities which include cooperation, motivation, creativity and interpersonal exchanges.

The results at Best Buy were [unequivocal](#) and unanimously applauded. Joly retired from his chief executive post in 2019 to [concentrate on an academic career](#) at Harvard Business School and is finance a [program on purposeful leadership](#) in his alma mater, HEC Paris.

Start Learning Social Skills At Elementary School

Ironically, the foundational soft skills the former French CEO used to pave his way to success are rarely acquired before entering the job market. They are rarely taught in academic institutions like business schools - let alone elementary institutions. Yet it's never too early to start forging these non-cognitive tools, including in the 7-9 age range. Bear with me.

A growing body of [research](#) is showing that integrating social skills into school programs for children can set the foundations for a successful career as a manager or leader. Soft skills are critical in preparing young pupils for their personal and professional destiny, cultivating democratic citizenship and other non-academic objectives. This is the conclusion of a groundbreaking research experiment in Canada spanning the better part of three decades which has revealed just how life-changing these non-cognitive skills are. Beginning in the 1980s, six researchers in the fields of psychology, statistics and economics (Elizabeth Beasley, Sylvana Cote, Jungwee Park, Richard Tremblay and myself, [Yann Algan](#)) followed 250 young boys chosen by their teachers from schools in

the worst neighborhoods of Montreal, Canada. For two years, half of these 7-9 year olds received weekly coaching in social skills like self-control and societal interaction. The other 125 were merely observed from a distance. They were seen to be treated like all the other disruptive and at-risk children at the time - for example, being punished or humiliated for trouble they might cause in class.

This experiment, called the [Montreal Longitudinal Experimental Study \(MLES\)](#) is unprecedented: until now, no study has been able to disentangle the influence of non-cognitive, social skills, from cognitive, academic know-how. The training sessions addressed a different topic each week: for example how to invite someone to play or react to teasing. Participants discussed perspective-taking, developed action plans, modeled behavior, and were coached through scenarios using role-playing exercises. They learnt the value of cooperation over competition and dialogue over violence. The two groups were then monitored over a period of decades by a team of psychologists led by [Richard E. Tremblay](#), who has been awarded the equivalent of a Nobel prize for his work on early childhood origins of violent behavior.

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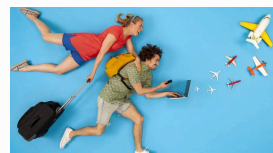
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The Benefits For Society As A Whole

The results of the MLES are unambiguous and startling: the program brought down average yearly social support by almost 40

percent. It cut rates of social dependency and criminality by double-digit numbers. It increased positive outcomes like employment, household composition, group membership, tuition expenditure, education, charitable donations - and even the likelihood of marriage!

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Finally, our figures show that for every \$1 CAD invested in this two-year skills training program at age 7, \$11 CAD in benefits were reaped by age 39. In terms of economics, the participants in the experimental group saw their annual income from employment rise by an average of \$5,708 CAD between the ages of 20 and 39. This trained group received benefits for 2.8 years on average, compared to the 3.9 years for the control group participants. This translated as \$1,507 CAD in annual value for the former, versus \$2,436 CAD for the latter.

Our calculations integrated a wide range of social (and hence economic) metrics. For instance, we considered the cost savings arising from a reduction in the boys flunking classes or a decrease in special education provisions allocations. Bringing down dependence on the welfare system helped to lower benefits paid by the state. Reduced crime meant fewer arrests, lower policing and administrative costs. It certainly reduced direct cost of crimes to victims, although we were unable to assign an economic value to this last expense due to a lack of data. Our final return on

investment figure is therefore likely to be on the conservative side! We can conclude with confidence that a social skills program, implemented on a large scale by successive governments would pay for itself by the time the children reach 24 years old.

Linking Elementary Knowhow And Leadership Qualities

In terms of leadership, the non-cognitive skills instilled at a youngest age clearly reflects the positive links between cooperation at a social level and building an environment of mutual trust. Learning about the benefits of perseverance, initiative and responsibility when under 10 feeds directly into successful entrepreneurial and business careers.

Such qualities encourage a less vertical hierarchy and an invitation for all employees to engage, innovate and trust the values incarnated by the companies they work for. Overcoming the challenges that self-confidence poses at an early age also allows adults to accept failure as a building process – something we in France have a hard time accepting! By developing your self-confidence as a child, you can enhance the ways you manage your company, which often results in a shared feeling of wellbeing at work – and a hike in the firm's productivity and economic growth.

Non-cognitive Skills To Prepare For A Brave New World

Despite the increasing digitalization of the economy – direct human contact is becoming less needed for everyday living – there are still many roles and jobs that require high-level social skills, such as in management or negotiation. These roles are unlikely to be replaced, even by artificial intelligence or computers. Yes, the world is undergoing profound changes as a 2017 McKinsey [report](#) suggests: up to 14% of the global force will have to shift to other occupational categories as a result of increasing automation. The World

Economic Forum [believes](#) that, by the end 2020s, 65% of children in primary school will eventually work in jobs that don't exist just now.

The adaptation needed for such a transition will require social, creative and emotional skills that only non-cognitive teaching at a young age can adequately provide. Personal social aptitudes remain at the core of commerce, cooperation and human interconnectedness. Our long-term study underlines the need for our education systems to evolve to answer this transition. Supporting children to develop these skills early will lend resilience to democratic states and civil societies in these times of divisiveness and rising populism.

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