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# How to Develop a Strong Work Ethic

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Have you ever wondered about how to behave appropriately at work? Throughout your career, and especially in the early years, it's challenging to figure out what behaviors and attitudes are and are not acceptable in different professional environments. The more you traverse companies and industries, the clearer your understanding will become. When you're just starting out, though, it can be hard to pin down these behaviors.

Even so, employers are now [expecting more of entry-level workers](#). Degrees from prestigious institutions aren't enough. A [2022 Job Outlook survey](#) found that 87% of employers say professionalism is very important, but only 44% of new grads are proficient in it. Companies and hiring managers want to see your motivation, can-do attitude, and commitment or dedication. In other words, they want to see that you have good work ethic.

As an early career professional, this is foundational to your long-term success. So, how can you develop good work ethic, faster?

## What is work ethic? What are qualities of good and poor work ethic?

[Work ethic](#) refers to a set of moral principles, values, and attitudes around how to act at work. While this may vary depending on your organization and company culture, there are a few universal qualities of both good and poor work ethic. Throughout my 22 years in tech, and now, as an executive coach who teaches leaders how to scale their teams, I've identified four qualities that exemplify good work ethic:

- **Reliability and dependability:** You need to meet deadlines on time, act appropriately in virtual and in-person meetings, and navigate different communication styles. You need to regularly deliver on these behaviors.
- **Productivity:** You need to consistently navigate your priorities and find smart ways to use your time, complete important the tasks, and deliver high-quality results.

- **Ownership and autonomy:** You need to exercise initiative, and show that you can take direction from others, learn, and improve.
- **Collaboration and team support:** You need to have the foresight to look beyond your individual role and establish positive working relationships with others. Support the responsibilities of your team and act as a team player.

All four qualities demonstrate professional integrity, or the practice of showing a strong commitment to ethical behavior at work.

In contrast, examples of bad work ethic include:

- Low work quality
- Consistent tardiness
- Lack of attention to deadlines
- Focusing on your own goals at the expense of the greater team or company goals
- Abuse and harassment, whether of the most explicit variety or the unconscious, micro-aggressions and sabotaging of others.

## How to Build Strong Work Ethic

Although many traits reflective of strong work ethic may come naturally to us, they *can* also be learned, developed, and sharpened. Here's some tips on how to start.

### Follow the lead of peers, mentors, and bosses.

When you're the "new person" at work, the best way to learn is to observe. Pay attention to how your coworkers behave in meetings to gain a better understanding of their "etiquette," as well as the communication styles of different people and teams.

Some workplaces, for instance, require employees to prepare agendas before meetings and are strict about punctuality. Others are more casual. Some companies have formal communication practices around status updates, whereas others just ask that you send a quick Slack message. Likewise, depending on where you work, deadlines may be rigid or flexible. Observing others and following their lead will help you pick up on what the company and managers consider good work ethic.

In addition, you can be proactive and reach out to your manager or an onboarding buddy during your first few days on the job. Ask them "how things are done" at your company. You could say: "Would it be helpful for us to have a daily catch-up for the first two weeks? Since I'm new to this organization, I'd love for you to guide me on what's appropriate and what expectations you have of me when it comes to how work gets done." This interaction will show your team that you have a positive attitude and are open to following the lead of others.

## **Develop self-discipline.**

To be reliable, dependable, and productive in the workplace, you need self-discipline. Of course, we all have periods where we're less productive, [procrastinate more](#), and are working through stress. However, self-discipline is the process of understanding how we work, including knowing our work rhythms and where we can push ourselves. Self-discipline is a skill that will make you appear more professional to your coworkers and bosses.

Developing self-discipline involves [understanding self-control](#), as well as how to maintain your energy. Think about what tasks feel easy for you to do (the ones that give you energy) and what tasks feel harder (the ones that drain you). Then, think about what tasks have the greatest impact on the company, what tasks will help you reach your goals, and what tasks are lower priority. Allocate most of your time to the tasks that both give you energy and are also impactful for the company or are contributing to your goals.

When evaluating the tasks that are harder for you to accomplish, consider making some simple tweaks to optimize your energy — such as collaborating with a co-worker or giving yourself a reward when they're completed.

## **Re-prioritize each day, and start it strong.**

If you consistently manage your time wisely, you'll develop a reputation of professionalism and integrity. It's a skill that will help you deliver high-quality work, even among rapidly shifting priorities and in fast-paced work environments.

At the start of each day, spend a few minutes identifying what items you need to get done. The trick is to find a balance between tasks that are urgent and must be finished today and tasks that are contributing to longer term, but equally important, projects. Use strategies like [time-boxing](#) to organize your schedule. Make sure you're allocating enough time to hit your immediate deadlines, but also allocating some time to making progress on those bigger projects — even 30 minutes each morning can make a difference.

Too many of us make the mistake of procrastinating our hardest work. If this is the case for you, try to map out a few milestones you need to hit and by when to deliver results in a timely manner. The more you exercise this muscle by doing small, important tasks every day, the stronger your mental rigor will become.

## **Think like an owner.**

An essential part of building good work ethic is adopting a “do it like you own it” attitude. You can do this by being proactive in small, but powerful, ways.

For instance, if something doesn't make sense to you — the purpose of an assignment, the execution of a task, or an unclear goal — ask questions to gain clarity. You might say: “I think I understand how this project will help us meet our initial goal, but I'm having a hard time understating how it contributes to the larger goals of the organization. I think knowing this will help me do

better work and deliver stronger results for you and the team. Can you provide some guidance?” Similarly, if you have a suggestion for another way to do things, [speak up](#), but do so with respect.

Keep pushing to understand the [right amount of autonomy](#) that feels good for both you and your boss.

### **Hold the team interests higher than your own.**

It’s easy to get focused on your day-to-day tasks and what it takes to get you promoted or rewarded at work. But don’t be the lone wolf who comes in, [gets their work done](#), and berates others when they fail to meet deadlines.

Instead, consider a different approach. When someone lets you down, think about how you can support them so that the entire team will benefit. Embrace your inner team player and try different [strategies for working smoothly with your peers](#), such as having a courageous conversation to understand their differing perspective, or recognizing that if your idea wasn’t adopted, it doesn’t mean it wasn’t valuable, it’s probably that it wasn’t right for the time.

Ultimately, your goals should be to adopt a positive attitude. Remember that collaboration will greatly increase the impact of the work you do. You’ll also develop a reputation for reliability. When you hold the team interests higher than your own, you show the team and the company that you care about the big picture and are a team player.

Practicing these five strategies will develop a strong work ethic, setting you up to be more easily hireable for future jobs. It develops your reputation and creates the foundation for a successful career.