

# KEY AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR EMPLOYEES.

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Even when you feel appreciated at work, there are key areas for professional development that can help you improve your personal productivity and attain valuable skills that can benefit you in all aspects of your career.

Taking time for self-improvement can help you feel more confident in your contributions at the workplace. Though it takes some effort to identify areas you could work on, development can be a worthwhile pursuit.

Here we discuss key areas of employee development that can help increase productivity and improve office morale.

## WHAT ARE KEY AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR EMPLOYEES?

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An area of development is a skill or attribute that benefits your professional life. As an employee, focusing on improvement in these development areas can help you become a more productive, empathetic and cooperative member of the team.

Managers and employers can offer support for employee development beyond technical and academic skills, creating a culture that values self-improvement and allows for personal and professional growth in key areas.

As you analyze your professional behavior, consider if any of these 10 key areas of development will help you acquire valuable skills.

1. Goal-setting
2. Communication
3. Collaboration
4. Listening
5. Conflict resolution

6. Adaptability
7. Organization
8. Accepting constructive feedback
9. Integrity
10. Productivity

## 1. GOAL-SETTING.

If you seek more direction in your professional career, setting goals may be a good first step to improve focus and work performance. Team projects often have broad and proximal goals and milestones to reach, but your own personal development is equally important to help you feel satisfaction and pride in your work.

Whether you prefer using an online application or you like to write in a notebook, setting goals for yourself is vital to advancing your development.

Goal-setting practices vary, but you can try these tips to help achieve your goals:

- Divide long-term goals into smaller, more achievable parts.
- Write down your goals in a journal, as a checklist, in a spreadsheet or an electronic document in your phone that you can refer to frequently.
- Create a vision board with a visual representation of your goals.

## 2. COMMUNICATION.

Offices and teams comprise groups of people from varying backgrounds and experiences. That diversity can help bring fresh perspectives to a project, but it can emphasize how your communication style might be different from a coworker's.

Recognizing and working with others' communication preferences is a great way to build positive relationships.

Try these tips to help improve team communication:

- Create a balance between meetings, one-on-one conferences and electronic communication to accommodate preferences.
- Establish a fixed appointment or routine that helps facilitate timely conversation.
- Assign a rotating discussion leader for in-person meetings so all members of the team have a chance to lead and facilitate discussion.

## TYPES OF COMMUNICATION.

There are several different ways we share information with one another. For example, you might use verbal communication when sharing a presentation with a group. You might use written communication when applying for a job or sending an email.

There are four main categories or communication styles including verbal, nonverbal, written and visual:

### 1. VERBAL

Verbal communication is the use of language to transfer information through speaking or sign language. It is one of the most common types, often used during presentations, video conferences and phone calls, meetings and one-on-one conversations. Verbal communication is important because it is efficient. It can be helpful to support verbal communication with both nonverbal and written communication.

Here are a few steps you can take to develop your verbal communication skills:

- **Use a strong, confident speaking voice.** Especially when presenting information to a few or a group of people, be sure to use a strong voice so that everyone can easily hear you. Be confident when speaking so that your ideas are clear and easy for others to understand.

- **Use active listening.** The other side of using verbal communication is intently listening to and hearing others. Active listening skills are key when conducting a meeting, presentation or even when participating in a one-on-one conversation. Doing so will help you grow as a communicator.
- **Avoid filler words.** It can be tempting, especially during a presentation, to use filler words such as “um,” “like,” “so” or “yeah.” While it might feel natural after completing a sentence or pausing to collect your thoughts, it can also be distracting for your audience. Try presenting to a trusted friend or colleague who can call attention to the times you use filler words. Try to replace them by taking a breath when you are tempted to use them.

## 2. NON-VERBAL

Nonverbal communication is the use of body language, gestures and facial expressions to convey information to others. It can be used both intentionally and unintentionally. For example, you might smile unintentionally when you hear a pleasing or enjoyable idea or piece of information. Nonverbal communication is helpful when trying to understand others' thoughts and feelings.

If they are displaying “closed” body language, such as crossed arms or hunched shoulders, they might be feeling anxious, angry or nervous. If they are displaying “open” body language with both feet on the floor and arms by their side or on the table, they are likely feeling positive and open to information.

Here are a few steps you can take to develop your nonverbal communication skills:

- **Notice how your emotions feel physically.** Throughout the day, as you experience a range of emotions (anything from energized, bored, happy or frustrated), try to identify where you feel that emotion within your body. For

example, if you're feeling anxious, you might notice that your stomach feels tight. Developing self-awareness around how your emotions affect your body can give you greater mastery over your external presentation.

- **Be intentional about your nonverbal communications.** Make an effort to display positive body language when you feel alert, open and positive about your surroundings. You can also use body language to support your verbal communication if you feel confused or anxious about information, like using a wrinkled forehead. Use body language alongside verbal communication such as asking follow up questions or pulling the presenter aside to give feedback.
- **Mimic nonverbal communications you find effective.** If you find certain facial expressions or body language beneficial to a certain setting, use it as a guide when improving your own nonverbal communications. For example, if you see that when someone nods their head, it communicates approval and positive feedback efficiently, use it in your next meeting when you have the same feelings.

### 3. WRITTEN

Written communication is the act of writing, typing or printing symbols like letters and numbers to convey information. It is helpful because it provides a record of information for reference. Writing is commonly used to share information through books, pamphlets, blogs, letters, memos and more. Emails and chats are a common form of written communication in the workplace.

Here are a few steps you can take to develop your written communication skills:

- **Strive for simplicity.** Written communications should be as simple and clear as possible. While it might be helpful to include lots of detail in

instructional communications, for example, you should look for areas where you can write as clearly as possible for your audience to understand.

- **Don't rely on tone.** Because you do not have the touch of verbal and nonverbal communications, be careful when you are trying to communicate a certain tone when writing. For example, attempting to communicate a joke, sarcasm or excitement might be translated differently depending on the audience. Instead, try to keep your writing as simple and plain as possible and follow up with verbal communications where you can add more personality.
- **Take time to review your written communications.** Setting time aside to re-read your emails, letters or memos can help you identify mistakes or opportunities to say something differently. For important communications or those that will be sent to a large number of people, it might be helpful to have a trusted colleague review it as well.
- **Keep a file of writing you find effective or enjoyable.** If you receive a certain pamphlet, email or memo that you find particularly helpful or interesting, save it for reference when writing your own communications. Incorporating methods or styles you like can help you to improve over time.

#### 4. VISUAL

Visual communication is the act of using photographs, art, drawings, sketches, charts and graphs to convey information. Visuals are often used as an aid during presentations to provide helpful context alongside written and/or verbal communication. Because people have different learning styles, visual communication might be more helpful for some to consume ideas and information.

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Here are a few steps you can take to develop your visual communication skills:

- **Ask others before including visuals.** If you are considering sharing a visual aid in your presentation or email, consider asking others for feedback. Adding visuals can sometimes make concepts confusing or cluttered. Getting a third-party perspective can help you decide whether the visual adds value to your communications.
- **Consider your audience.** Be sure to include visuals that are easily understood by your audience. For example, if you are displaying a chart with unfamiliar data, be sure to take time and explain what is happening in the visual and how it relates to what you are saying. You should never use sensitive, offensive, violent graphic visuals in any form.

### 3. COLLABORATION

Collaboration is a skill you learn at a young age when it is called cooperation or sharing. In the workplace, collaboration involves working with others from different backgrounds to achieve a common goal. Collaboration can inspire more productivity than when a person works alone.

Here are some tips to develop collaborative relationships:

- Build solidarity through brainstorming sessions, giving equal attention to all members' ideas and input.
- Participate in team-building activities or working retreats to learn each other's strengths and weaknesses and build a culture of supporting one another.
- In advance of a more involved project, work with various coworkers on smaller tasks to determine which partnerships will be effective for long-term success.

## 4. LISTENING

The qualities of a good listener are many, and they can be taught and developed with practice.

In the workplace, good listeners are valuable for others seeking mentorship or career advice, for sharing ideas on how to complete projects and when getting to know coworkers personally for improved collaboration.

Here are some ways to be a good listener:

- Make eye contact and avoid glancing at distractions, such as computers or cell phones.
- Allow the other person time to think by not talking or interrupting during moments of silence.
- Express emotion appropriate to the situation, such as empathy, happiness, congratulations or encouragement.
- Ask thoughtful follow-up questions for clarification or to give the other person an opportunity to provide more detail.

### WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

Active listening is the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information and respond thoughtfully.

Unlike passive listening, which is the act of hearing a speaker without retaining their message, this highly valued interpersonal communication skill ensures you're able to engage and later recall specific details without needing information repeated.



Active listeners use verbal and non-verbal techniques to show and keep their attention on the speaker. This not only supports your ability to focus, but also helps ensure the speaker can see that you are focused and engaged. Instead of thinking about and mentally rehearsing what you might say when the speaker is done, an active listener carefully considers the speaker's words and commits the information to memory.

### **Why is active listening important in the workplace?**

Whether you're seeking a new job opportunity, striving to earn a promotion or working to improve in your current role, improving your active listening skills will help you succeed. Much like critical thinking and conflict resolution, this soft skill will help increase your value as an employee.

### **Here are several benefits of being an active listener:**

- **It helps you build connections.**  
Active listening helps others feel comfortable sharing information with you. When you demonstrate your ability to sincerely listen to what others have to say, people will be more interested in communicating with you on a regular basis. This can help open up opportunities to collaborate with others, get work done quickly or start new projects. All of these things can help lead you to success in your career.
- **It helps you build trust.**  
When people know they can speak freely to you without interruptions, judgment or unwelcome interjections, they'll be more likely to confide in you. This is especially helpful when meeting a new customer or business contact with whom you want to develop a long-term working relationship.

- **It helps you identify and solve problems.**

Actively listening to others will help you detect challenges and difficulties others are facing, or problems within projects. The more quickly you're able to spot these issues, the sooner you can find a solution or create a plan to address it.

- **It helps you increase your knowledge and understanding of various topics.**

Great employees are always striving to learn something new and grow their knowledge base. Because active listening helps you retain information, it will also help you better understand new topics and remember what you've learned so you can apply it in the future.

- **It helps you avoid missing critical information.**

Because active listeners are highly engaged with the speaker, they're able to recall specific details. This is especially important when the speaker is providing instructions, training you on a new process or delivering a message you're responsible for passing along to others.

## **VERBAL ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS**

- **Paraphrase**

Summarize the main point(s) of the message the speaker shared to show you fully understand their meaning. This will also give the speaker an opportunity to clarify vague information or expand their message.

Example: "So what you're saying is....."

- **Ask open-ended questions**

Ask questions that show you've gathered the essence of what they've shared, and guide them into sharing additional information. Make sure these questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

Example: "You're right— What changes would you want to make to the process over the next six months?"

- **Ask specific probing questions**

Ask direct questions that guide the speaker to provide more details about the information they've shared or narrow down a broad subject or topic.

Example: "Tell me more about your current workload. Which of these projects is the most time consuming?"

- **Use short verbal affirmations**

Short, positive statements will help the speaker feel more comfortable and show you're engaged and able to process the information they're providing. Small verbal affirmations help you continue the conversation without interrupting the speaker or disrupting their flow.

Example: "I understand." "I see." "Yes, that makes sense." "I agree."

- **Display empathy**

Make sure the speaker understands you're able to recognize their emotions and share their feelings. By showing compassion, rather than just feeling it, you're able to connect with the speaker and begin establishing a sense of mutual trust.

Example: “I’m so sorry you’re dealing with this problem. Let’s figure out some ways I can help.”

- **Share similar experiences**

Discussing comparable situations will not only show the speaker you’ve successfully interpreted their message, but it can also assist in building relationships. If the speaker has shared a problem, providing input from how you solved similar challenges is valuable to others.

Example: “I had a tough time getting started with this program, too. But it gets much easier. After just a few weeks, I felt completely comfortable using all the features.”

- **Recall previously shared information**

Try to remember key concepts, ideas or other critical points the speaker has shared with you in the past. This demonstrates you’re not only listening to what they’re saying currently, but you’re able to retain information and recall specific details.

Example: “Last week you mentioned adding a more senior coordinator to help with this account, and I think that’s a great idea.”

## **NON-VERBAL ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS**

- **Nod**

Offering the speaker a few simple nods shows you understand what they’re saying. A nod is a helpful, supportive cue, and doesn’t necessarily communicate that you agree with the speaker—only that you’re able to process the meaning of their message.

- **Smile**

Like a nod, a small smile encourages a speaker to continue. A smile can take the place of a short verbal affirmation in helping to diffuse any tension and ensure the speaker feels comfortable.

- **Avoid distracted movements**

Being still can communicate focus. To do this, try and avoid movements like glancing at your watch or phone, audibly sighing, doodling or tapping a pen.

You should also avoid exchanging verbal or non-verbal communications with others listening to the speaker. This can make the speaker feel frustrated and uncomfortable.

- **Maintain eye contact**

Always keep your eyes on the speaker and avoid looking at other people or objects in the room. Just be sure to keep your gaze natural, using nods and smiles to ensure you're encouraging them rather than making the speaker feel intimidated or uneasy.

- By implementing the above verbal and non-verbal techniques into future conversations, you can work toward developing stronger relationships and retaining more information from your workplace interactions. Active listening takes practice to improve and maintain. The more you use these techniques, the more natural they'll feel.

## 5. CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When disagreements arise between you and a coworker, it can be challenging to find easy solutions. If you have not been able to resolve differences, you may need to seek conflict resolution advice or mediation that can help you overcome the problem.

Here are some tips to help resolve conflict:

- Participate in an organized conflict resolution training in a neutral environment before problems arise.
- Walk away from the conflict if you feel too emotional—and wait until you feel calmer to discuss your concerns.
- Avoid accusing each other. Instead, try the following phrasing: “When you [miss our morning meeting], I feel [disrespected].”

## 6. ADAPTABILITY

Even the most thorough brainstorming and planning may not anticipate the scenarios that change the scope of a project as it progresses.

A change in leadership, a client’s restructuring of their vision, a financial setback or restructuring of personnel can all affect a project’s deadlines and deliverables.

Employees who can easily adapt to the changing scope will both be more productive and happier even with fluctuating tasks and circumstances.

Here are some tips to become more adaptable in a changing work environment:

- Before a project begins, acknowledge and accept that there will likely be adjustments.
- If a project changes course, take time with your team to reassess and redefine the scope much as you would at the beginning of a project by soliciting feedback and input from all members of the team.

- Use mantras or read inspiring quotations that keep you calm and focused on outcomes, even if many aspects of your work change.

## 7. ORGANIZATION

Good organization is a habit that can positively affect every aspect of your job. When your paperwork, your electronic files or your input into a database or a task-tracking program are in order, you will probably be prepared to answer any questions that may arise and help keep yourself on task.

Here are some tips to keep your work organized:

- Devote some amount of time each workday to organization, such as filing paperwork for 30 minutes after lunch or entering progress into a spreadsheet.
- Create a functional organization system with physical file folders and backups on an external hard drive or cloud storage where documents and files are labeled clearly and consistently.
- Keep high-priority tasks at the forefront of your organization system, whether that is an inbox for paper on your desk or an electronic task-management system that helps you with reminders and alerts.

## 8. ACCEPTING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

It can be difficult to hear constructive feedback about your work or behavior. However, constructive feedback can help correct behaviors and promote good work, whether between coworkers to resolve conflict or from manager to employee.

Here are some tips to be open to constructive feedback:

- Encourage your company to foster a culture where both positive feedback and suggestions for improvement are a regular part of office communication.
- Participate in a training that teaches best practices for constructive feedback.
- When you receive constructive feedback where correction is warranted, try to be humble and assess how you can implement even a small change.

## 9. INTEGRITY

The best way to gain and keep the trust of your coworkers, managers and customers you serve is to establish yourself as honest and ethical in all your business dealings, even when it may be difficult to tell the truth or admit to a mistake.

Here are some ways to demonstrate your personal integrity:

- Be open and transparent when dealing with financial transactions like petty cash, company credit cards or turning in receipts for reimbursement. Only use company funds for allowed purchases.
- Use company time wisely by working hard on your assigned tasks during the hours you are expected to be there.
- Follow up on answers you have promised others, meet your deadlines without excuses and take responsibility for the results of your work.

## 10. PRODUCTIVITY

At the end of a workday, it can be satisfying to look back on what you have accomplished. Some days allow you to pursue your list of tasks with efficiency and



minimal distractions, and others can be filled with unexpected issues that detour your attention from your original plan. Developing your ability to be productive no matter what happens during your day is a valuable skill.

Here are some tips to increase your personal productivity:

- Try to focus on one task rather than multi-tasking. You can try closing your office door, silencing your phone or shutting down your computer for a period of time to meet a deadline. Every time you look away from the task, it may diminish your focus and increase the overall time it takes to finish.
- Create a system that you can follow every day. That might be making a list every morning, checking email only at certain times of the day or being accountable to a coworker for motivation. Find something you know will be sustainable for how you like to work.
- Take short breaks when you feel especially challenged or tired. A short walk, some desk yoga or a snack can help you feel revitalized and more able to refocus on the task.

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