

# Learn Continuously

Many leaders get so busy that they neglect to make time for conscious learning. It's amazing how fast information becomes out of date. Unless you make a decision to incorporate continuous learning into your daily life, you'll soon find yourself out of touch with what your competitors know and what new generations of employees bring to the market.

Even spending small amounts of time learning, if you do it regularly, can help you develop yourself professionally and personally—and give you the satisfaction of knowing that you are keeping up with trends, information, and current discussions in the industry.



In this chapter, we will cover the following areas:

- ▶ Identify your core values and motivators
- ▶ Convey a clear sense of your core values and motivators
- ▶ Keep current on changing work expectations
- ▶ Demonstrate awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ Set development priorities
- ▶ Pursue learning and self-development
- ▶ Make your learning more efficient
- ▶ Get the most out of readings and seminars
- ▶ View mistakes as learning opportunities
- ▶ Anticipate roadblocks that could sidetrack your development
- ▶ Involve others in your development efforts
- ▶ Seek out and learn from others who are different from you
- ▶ Seek feedback to enhance your performance
- ▶ Accept criticism openly and nondefensively
- ▶ Work to understand and resolve conflicting feedback from multiple sources
- ▶ Work to understand feedback that conflicts with your self-perception
- ▶ Demonstrate willingness to try new things, even at the risk of failure
- ▶ Willingly accept challenging assignments and new career opportunities
- ▶ Know the job
- ▶ Keep up to date on professional/technical development
- ▶ Increase your knowledge of specific processes
- ▶ Increase your knowledge of functional areas
- ▶ Stay informed about industry practices



## Identify your core values and motivators

Effective leaders know who they are and what they value. They recognize that values are at the heart of their being and hold the purpose for what they do. Effective leaders do not just hold the title of leader or manager; they have a leadership purpose and a vision they are trying to achieve. Consider the following suggestions:

*Ask people what gives them the most satisfaction at work. Discuss accomplishments they are most proud of and why.*

- ▶ Reflect on the values and motives that drive you as an individual and as a leader. Regularly set aside time to think about, identify, and clarify your values, motives, and priorities:
  - ▷ What brings you the greatest satisfaction?
  - ▷ What do you want to accomplish?
  - ▷ How would you describe your life mission? How can you most powerfully express your life mission in your work?
  - ▷ What sparks your interest and energizes you?
  - ▷ How can you best serve others and make a meaningful contribution in their lives?
  - ▷ What truly motivates you to do your best work?
- ▶ Write down your values and beliefs. The process of writing them will help you clarify them further.
- ▶ Determine for each of the following:

	I try to avoid this	This would be nice to have	This is essential to me
Achievement or sense of accomplishment			
Financial security			
Recognition from others			
Professional growth			
Family			
Spirituality			
Adventure			
Other:			
Which would you give up first?			
Which would you give up last?			



- ▶ List your current age at the top of the page. Then list your age in five-year increments down the left-hand side. Write what you would like to accomplish in each five-year period. Include professional, personal, family, and community aspirations, priorities, and goals. Then answer the following questions about your list:
  - ▷ How can you accomplish each objective?
  - ▷ What sacrifices or trade-offs are you willing to make?
  - ▷ Whose support do you need in order to get where you want to go?
  - ▷ Are you satisfied with the work and life balance represented on your list?

### Convey a clear sense of your core values and motivators



Personal integrity is the foundation of trust. Your actions must flow naturally from who you are. It is important to have a strong core of guiding principles and to make a consistent and well-intentioned effort to demonstrate them. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Be aware of your motives. If you are honest with yourself about what you really want and need, you will act more consistently.
- ▶ Audit your personal consistency. If the following statements apply to you, people probably trust you and count on you to protect their interests.
  - ▷ You keep your promises.
  - ▷ You take responsibility for your mistakes and limitations, and you avoid making excuses.
  - ▷ You respond appropriately to constructive criticism.
  - ▷ You treat confidences with respect and discretion.
  - ▷ You don't routinely shortcut procedures and policies in the name of expediency.
  - ▷ You don't placate people by giving in to their demands or complaints.
  - ▷ You put the interests of others on the same level as your own.
  - ▷ You say no when you know you cannot deliver.

*Observe people to see if their actions are consistent with their values.*



- ▶ Share your values and motivators with people you trust, and who have opportunities to see your behavior in a range of situations. Discuss whether your behavior is consistent or inconsistent with your values and beliefs. You may find that your intentions are not translating into actions.
- ▶ Realize that actions speak louder than words. Even if you share your values and motivators with others, it is your actions that will truly convey to them what you deem most important both at work and at home.
- ▶ Regularly assess how much time you're spending on issues and activities that support your most important values and priorities, both at work and outside of work. Plan how to close up inconsistencies between your actions and your values.
- ▶ Talk with someone whose actions are consistent with his or her values to learn more about aligning values with actions.
- ▶ Make an agreement with your peers that you will challenge each other when you don't act according to your expressed beliefs or keep your commitments. Peer accountability can be a powerful motivator.

### Keep current on changing work expectations

▼  
 Help people identify learning opportunities when work expectations change. Tell people what you believe they will learn from an opportunity.

Changes in organizations, in industries, in the marketplace, and in roles mean new and different expectations. It makes sense to regularly review and update the expectations for your current role and those in which you are interested for the future. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Review the expectations for your current role. Have they changed recently? How have they changed within the past two years? If you do not believe the expectations have changed, talk with others and see what they think. Expectations for most roles continue to increase over time.
- ▶ Talk with your manager about current and anticipated future expectations of you.



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- ▶ Find out who has a similar role in the organization. Periodically exchange information regarding expectations for your roles. This will help you stay on track with your peers in other areas in the organization.
- ▶ Note which individuals are most valued and respected in your unit and the organization. Determine the skills and characteristics that they bring to their jobs and the organization.
- ▶ Given what you know about the goals and strategies of the organization, how do you see expectations changing?
- ▶ If you want to be in a critical role in the organization in the future, what knowledge, skills, and abilities will be valued? Consider increasing your competency in these areas.

## Demonstrate awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses



Before you can decide the priorities for your learning and development, you need to demonstrate awareness of your goals, strengths, and development needs. A GAPS grid can help you make informed decisions about your development by comparing (1) your perceptions with the perceptions of others, (2) your goals with your abilities, and (3) your goals with the perceptions of others and the future direction of the organization.

*At least once a year, ask people to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Provide your feedback, too.*

A GAPS grid illustrates how you see yourself, how others see you, what matters to you, and what matters to others.

- ▶ The left side of the grid shows where you are now; the right side of the grid shows where you want to go.
- ▶ The top half shows your perceptions and goals; the bottom half shows other people's perceptions and expectations.



## GAPS Grid

Where you are	Where you are going	
<p><b>Abilities:</b> <i>How you see yourself.</i></p> <p>What I already know:</p> <p>What I need to learn:</p>	<p><b>Goals and Values:</b> <i>What matters to you.</i></p> <p>What I already know:</p> <p>What I need to learn:</p>	<b>Your view</b>
<p><b>Perceptions:</b> <i>How others see you.</i></p> <p>What I already know:</p> <p>What I need to learn:</p>	<p><b>Success Factors:</b> <i>What matters to others.</i></p> <p>What I already know:</p> <p>What I need to learn:</p>	<b>Others' views</b>

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To complete your GAPS grid, gather data from as many sources as you can. Then fill in the boxes as follows:

Identify your **Goals and Values**. You can do this through career discussions, value clarification exercises, meditation, and discussions with friends.

- ▶ What opportunities or experiences do you want to have in your work?
- ▶ What are your career goals?
- ▶ What are your important goals, values, and interests?
- ▶ What do you care about most in your work and your life?

Identify your **Abilities** and performance.

- ▶ How do you see your strengths and development needs?
- ▶ Where have you been successful? What skills have contributed to that success?



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- ▶ Where do you believe you need to increase your knowledge or abilities?
- ▶ In what areas do others turn to you?

Look at the *Perceptions* of others. You can get this information from feedback you have received, performance appraisals, 360-degree feedback, assessments, and customer feedback.

- ▶ Based on feedback, how do others view your skills?
- ▶ What do others see as your strengths?
- ▶ What do they see as your development needs?

List the *Success Factors* for your role and your organization. Get this information from your manager, the organization's strategy, industry trends, and competency models.

- ▶ What are the criteria for success in your current job or position?
- ▶ What are the expectations for roles you are interested in?
- ▶ How are expectations in the organization or for your role going to change?
- ▶ Who is most valued and respected in your organization? Why?
- ▶ Which competencies are in greatest demand in your organization right now? Which will be in the future?

To interpret your GAPS grid:

- ▶ Look for common themes and patterns. For example, all groups may agree that you have strong interpersonal abilities, which will help you achieve your goals.
- ▶ Try to make sense of discrepancies, or "gaps," between the four boxes. Ask yourself the following questions to better understand your gaps:
  - ▷ *Abilities and Goals*: Do you have the abilities you need to reach your goals?
  - ▷ *Goals and Success Factors*: Will your goals get you to where you want to go in the organization?
  - ▷ *Perceptions and Success Factors*: Do other people have confidence in your capability to succeed?



- ▷ *Abilities and Perceptions*: Do you have a blind spot? Do you need to do something more frequently? Do you need to market your skills better?
- ▶ Realize that both you and your environment will change over time. Update your GAPS grid and reevaluate your portfolio regularly, especially after you complete a major development goal or when significant changes occur in the organization, your profession, or the industry.

### Set development priorities

▼ Skill development and continuous learning are essential to your success as a leader. While it might be comfortable to focus only on your strengths, most jobs require that you also use skills that aren't your strengths. You can increase your effectiveness by improving your skills. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Look at your current work goals along with an accurate assessment of your skills and capabilities. How could you improve your effectiveness through development? Which improved skills would help you achieve your goals better, faster, or with more buy-in from others?
- ▶ Focus first on developing skills for your current job; then focus on the future.
- ▶ Consider putting a high priority on development needs that affect your ability to get results and to work effectively with others. For example, if direct reports do not believe you listen to their ideas, address this need. It will have a great impact on your success.
- ▶ Ask your manager to list one or two areas in which he or she believes you should concentrate your development efforts.
- ▶ Ensure that your development efforts are focused on what you believe will make a difference.
- ▶ After you establish your priorities, be aware of your behavior. If you're not actually working on your development, you need to reset your priorities, because development does not appear to be important to you.

*If you are concerned about a lack of skill, say something about it. The sooner people are aware of an issue, the sooner they can change.*



## Pursue learning and self-development

▼ The most effective way to develop your skills is to make it a part of your daily routine. You are more likely to succeed if you pursue learning and development with a series of activities than if you attend one intensive training program a year. Even five minutes a day, used wisely, can make a tremendous difference. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Link your learning goals with something you are already doing. Take a moment each day to examine the development opportunities that are right in front of you.
- ▶ Each day, identify where you can practice new skills and behaviors.
- ▶ Compile a list of people who can support your development. Share your development plans and goals with them and ask for feedback. This will make you more accountable for attaining the goals and will involve others in your development.
- ▶ Ask for support when you get frustrated or feel discouraged. Find two or three people who can act as a sounding board for you when you face barriers or when your progress is slowed.
- ▶ Test your assumptions and conclusions to ensure that you are on the right track. Involve other people in this exercise. Choose people who will give you candid feedback and encourage you to take risks.
- ▶ Observe people who are skilled in the areas you are trying to improve. As you observe their behavior, note what they do well and what they emphasize. Follow their example.
- ▶ Expect to feel discomfort from time to time. As you go through change and development, you may feel uncertain or ambiguous at times. Be patient and realize that real change takes time. Change will feel natural and easy only with persistence and practice.
- ▶ Redefine failure and success by separating what you are learning from how you are performing. Ask “What did I learn?” rather than “What did I do?”

*Treat development goals as seriously as you do work results. Review progress regularly. Hold people accountable for learning and development.*



## Make your learning more efficient

To move forward in an organization, you need to continue learning. Sometimes the not-so-obvious experiences turn out to offer the most powerful learning opportunities. Training yourself to take advantage of a broad variety of experiences can accelerate your learning and development. To increase your learning quotient, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Get involved in a variety of experiences to maximize your development. High-quality learning most often comes from a wide range of life activities, not just a few.
- ▶ Admit your weaknesses and compensate for them by surrounding yourself with people who are skilled in those areas. For example, hire people who have strengths that you lack. Not only can you learn from them, your team will become more synergistic and well rounded.
- ▶ View your strengths as development opportunities. Typically, your greatest successes will come from leveraging your strengths. Broaden and improve your strengths by finding new ways to use these skills, by teaching them to others, and by pursuing assignments that stretch them even further.
- ▶ Experiment and take intelligent risks each day. Seek out high-voltage situations, such as projects that are highly visible to others or ones that give you an opportunity to work with new people.
- ▶ Determine how effectively you handle your emotions. Successful learners tune in to their emotions and use them to help guide their decisions and enhance their effectiveness. Answer these questions:
  - ▷ Do you worry too much about what others think and, as a result, allow your actions to be unduly influenced by their opinions?
  - ▷ Do you tend to be out of touch with your emotions and take action without tuning in to your feelings or considering the feelings of others?
  - ▷ Do you express too little or too much emotion?
  - ▷ Do you learn new information quickly? Managers must pick up new skills and information rapidly. This increases your capability as a manager and your value to the company.

*Let people know if they are overusing any strengths, which turns those skills into weaknesses.*



### Get the most out of readings and seminars

While the most powerful development experiences often occur on the job, readings and seminars are also good ways to gain knowledge and skills for your current and future job responsibilities. Consider the following suggestions to ensure that you get the most out of readings and seminars:

- ▶ When you are reading or are attending a seminar, take notes. Highlight ideas you might want to use and changes you could potentially make.
- ▶ After the course is over or you finish a book, decide what you will do differently.
- ▶ Rather than reading an entire book, scan the table of contents to determine which sections are most relevant. Then read just those sections. Look for downloads of free chapters and excerpts.
- ▶ Search for one insight or application in everything you read. It is more beneficial to read one article and learn from it than to skim five articles and take away nothing of substance. Work hard when you are reading by drawing conclusions and searching for meanings that are relevant to your development.
- ▶ Choose learning experiences that are relevant to your learning objectives. Be open to new ideas and innovations. When you learn something, determine how you can apply it.
- ▶ Build in time to reflect on what you learned and how to apply it to your job. Your behavior will not change simply because you have learned something from a book or a training program. You need to decide what you will do differently.

*Frequently ask people  
"What did you learn?"*

### View mistakes as learning opportunities

Mistakes often prompt people to look inward and evaluate their limitations and shortcomings, helping them learn more about themselves in the process. Mistakes are a problem if you repeat them or don't learn from them. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Even if a mistake has not been made, get into the habit of thinking "How could I improve or do something better?"



- ▶ When you make a mistake, ask yourself what you can learn from it.
- ▶ Consider talking about your mistake with others to increase your understanding of the situation. Solicit ideas about what you might do differently in the future. Sharing your mistakes with others will help them become more comfortable about sharing their mistakes with you, which will give you opportunities to learn valuable lessons from their mistakes as well.
- ▶ Focus on your role in the mistake instead of looking at what others did or didn't do. Avoid the temptation to blame others. Instead, examine what you did or failed to do so that you can learn from your actions to create more success in the future.
- ▶ When you make a mistake, ask yourself (and others, if it is appropriate) if you made a similar mistake in the past. You can gain powerful insights by studying patterns of behavior that result in repeated mistakes, miscalculations, or misreadings of a situation. For example, you may consistently underestimate how long it takes to do something.
- ▶ If you have not made a mistake lately, ask yourself:
  - ▷ Am I challenging myself in my job and outside of work?
  - ▷ Am I requesting feedback and hearing feedback from others?
  - ▷ Am I taking any risks?

### Anticipate roadblocks that could sidetrack your development

▼ People have a natural tendency to learn, yet there are many roadblocks that can derail progress. If you anticipate possible barriers to your development, you will be better prepared to address them. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ List the obstacles you are likely to face as you pursue development. Beside each one, write down one or two actions you could take to counteract the obstacle.
- ▶ Show your development plans and goals to others. This will increase your commitment to attaining the goals and involve others in your development. Specifically, ask for support and feedback in the areas you find toughest to master.

Help people determine how they will handle potential roadblocks that keep them from growing or taking risks.

When people make mistakes, ask them to reflect on what they learned from the experience and what they could do differently next time.



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- ▶ Keep the development process simple. Complexity can make development feel intimidating rather than motivational.
- ▶ Lean into your discomfort. Accept that change and development may feel frightening or ambiguous at times. Remind yourself that this feeling is temporary.
- ▶ Be patient and realize that change takes time. Real behavioral change feels natural and easy only with persistence and practice.
- ▶ Be aware of what happens when your progress begins to slip. Keep track of situations that cause you difficulty and figure out how to address them.

## Involve others in your development efforts

▼ Effective development rarely happens in isolation. Instead, successful learning occurs through a continuous process of feedback and support from others. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Ask others for feedback on your progress. Choose people who have opportunities to see you practicing new skills.
- ▶ Tell people what you are trying to do differently. Ask them to watch for the new behavior and let you know how it is working.
- ▶ Involve other people in testing your assumptions and conclusions to ensure that you are on the right track. Choose people who will give you candid feedback and encourage you to take risks.
- ▶ Realize that no single person will fill all of your development and feedback needs. Colleagues, direct reports, managers, team leaders, HR staff, role models and mentors, and family and friends can all support you in various ways.
- ▶ Learn from people outside of work. Leaders from other professions and organizations as well as community leaders can serve as effective coaches and role models. They may be able to introduce you to skills, styles, and techniques that you have not found in your current situation.

*Involve your people in your development. It sends a powerful message about the priority of development and how you value their involvement.*



You need support to sustain your learning progress, to stay committed when your enthusiasm fades, and to persist when the going gets tough. A development support network can keep your learning pursuits alive. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Choose development partners who can help you learn and who care about your development. Actively search for partners you trust who:
  - ▷ Are willing to help you.
  - ▷ Are willing to be candid with you.
  - ▷ Understand what you're trying to do differently.
  - ▷ Are good at something you struggle with.
  - ▷ Can help keep you on track.
- ▶ Share your development strategies and activities with your development partners. Talk about the support you want.
- ▶ Find ways to provide mutual encouragement and to be accountable to each other.
- ▶ Consult your development partners when you find yourself straying off course.

### **Seek out and learn from others who are different from you**

Getting input and advice from a wide range of people will provide you with new ideas. Consider the following suggestions for seeking out and learning from others who are different from you:

- ▶ Develop a habit of identifying what you can learn from each person you meet.
- ▶ Realize that to keep learning, you need to put yourself into unfamiliar situations. People who view problems and issues differently than you do open up your mind to a new range of possibilities.
- ▶ Be open to learning from people at all levels and from all types of organizations. Always have your antennae up. Learn from direct reports, managers, colleagues, team leaders, support staff, family and friends, and role models and mentors.



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*Talk about what you have learned from others and from whom you have learned.*

- ▶ Put yourself into situations in which you are the “odd man out.” For example, look for situations in which you are the only person from your department or organization. Pay attention to what the issues are, people’s attitudes toward those issues, proposed solutions, and how they work as a group.
- ▶ Set a goal for learning from others, or it won’t happen. It’s easier to stick with your current routine than to break out of it.
- ▶ Determine how you will approach the people from whom you want to learn. Depending on the situation, it may range from a single conversation to asking someone to consult with your team.
- ▶ If you’re hesitant to learn from people who seem different from you, examine why you’re reluctant. You may be afraid to test your assumptions, or you may fear that your methods are wrong. Instead of viewing a situation as right or wrong, think of it as a chance to add dimensions to your thinking.

## Seek feedback to enhance your performance



Getting feedback is like finding your location on a map. While you need to know where you’ve been and what your destination is, it’s also critical to have an accurate picture of where you are now. But many people are reluctant to give feedback, especially negative feedback. It’s up to you to actively solicit the feedback you need in order to grow and develop. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Seek feedback from your manager regularly. Ask for specific comments, suggestions, and feedback in areas you are attempting to improve or enhance.
- ▶ When your boss gives little feedback or feedback that is too general, ask specific questions: How did the new agenda work? What do you think I did better in the presentation? How could I improve?
- ▶ Encourage your employees and peers to provide feedback. Ask them how you can be more effective in your job. Also ask what you might change to help them be more effective in their jobs.



- ▶ Solicit feedback at the end of projects. Ask others what you did that was effective and not effective. Decide how you'd like to do things differently the next time. Ask people to observe you in this specific area on a future project and provide you with additional feedback.
- ▶ When someone gives you vague feedback, either positive or negative (for example, "nice job"), ask for specifics.
- ▶ Express your appreciation to those who give you feedback. Then put relevant feedback to visible use. If others see that you act on the feedback you receive, they will be more willing to give you constructive, honest feedback in the future.
- ▶ Obtain comprehensive feedback on your skills using multi-rater or 360-degree feedback instruments available through Personnel Decisions International or through your organization.
- ▶ How you ask for feedback can determine whether you receive honest, useful information. Tell people why you're asking and what you intend to do with the information. Make sure your tone of voice and body language convey your sincerity and your desire to put the information to good use.
- ▶ When you solicit feedback, ask specific questions so people can give you relevant answers. Examples include:
  - ▷ How would you describe my leadership style?
  - ▷ What do you think I do particularly well? What areas do I need to develop?
  - ▷ Think of situations in which you have observed my behavior and performance. What can I do more effectively (for example, motivate others, manage meetings or groups, coach coworkers, delegate, handle crises)?
  - ▷ What could I do to influence people more effectively?
- ▶ Seek constructive criticism instead of waiting for others to give it to you. More often than not, people are reluctant to provide negative or controversial information. You need to solicit this information.
- ▶ Guard against asking too many follow-up questions at one time, especially "why" questions. People may perceive your behavior as defensive instead of inquisitive.

*Give people specific, positive feedback so that they understand which actions and behaviors are effective.*



## Accept criticism openly and nondefensively

▼ Criticism can evoke an automatically defensive response. Defensiveness interferes with your ability to hear and understand the information others give you. More important, it can cause others to stop giving you the honest feedback and information that you need to learn and grow. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ View defensiveness as your worst enemy. Don't argue, don't explain, and don't debate the criticism. If you become defensive, others will be reluctant to give you feedback in the future, and you will cut off a critical information source.
- ▶ Check your response patterns for phrases such as "Yes, but . . ." and eliminate them. Whenever you catch yourself explaining why, stop talking and listen. Explanations are often perceived as a defensive response.

*Identify the area people feel most defensive about and monitor them carefully when they hear feedback about it.*

- ▶ When you are feeling defensive, stop and ask yourself a fixed set of rational-analytical questions, such as the following, to help diminish your defensiveness:
  - ▷ Do I understand what is being said?
  - ▷ Is the criticism about a situation or behavior I could change if I wanted to?
  - ▷ What would happen if I acted on the feedback?
- ▶ Avoid seeking feedback when you are emotionally on edge, when you are upset with the feedback giver, or when you do not intend to use the feedback.
- ▶ Use discretion when you respond. Summarize the feedback to ensure that you fully heard and understood it. State your point of view only if the other person has expressed an interest in hearing it.
- ▶ Ask trusted colleagues to tell you when you are being defensive. Eliminate or change the behavior they have labeled defensive, even if you do not agree with their point of view. Their perception of your behavior is reality; it is what they believe to be true.
- ▶ When someone disagrees with you:



- ▷ Wait until the person has finished speaking.
- ▷ Restate the person's main points and try to understand his or her perspective.
- ▷ Ask the person to verify or clarify the accuracy of your understanding.
- ▷ Identify the points with which you sincerely agree.
- ▷ Then, and only then, state specifically which points you disagree with, and why.

### Work to understand and resolve conflicting feedback from multiple sources

Individuals often interpret the same events in different ways as a result of their unique perspectives. This can affect the type of feedback they give you. While your goal is not to get everyone to see your behavior in exactly the same way, it can be helpful to understand differences. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Assess the degree to which you behave differently in various situations. Most people vary their approach according to the situation and the person. You may find that you are altering yours to an unusual degree.
- ▶ Realize that people from different functions, business units, and levels may observe different aspects of your performance. As a result, their feedback may not completely match. For example, your direct reports may frequently observe you leading meetings while your peers may frequently observe you participating in meetings.
- ▶ Consider personalities and attitudes when you assess conflicting feedback. An extrovert is likely to size up a situation differently than an introvert, for example.
- ▶ Sort conflicting feedback into areas that you understand and areas that you don't. For example, you may understand why your direct reports would like you to delegate more and give them more autonomy but not understand why your manager wants you to be more hands off. This will help you pinpoint areas where it may be helpful to get clarification.
- ▶ Ask yourself if the feedback is important enough for you to seek clarification. Asking for more feedback creates an expectation that you will do something with the information.

*Encourage people to ask clarifying questions when they receive feedback.*



- ▶ Find people who can help you make sense of conflicting feedback. Choose people who meet one or more of the following criteria:
  - ▷ People you respect and trust.
  - ▷ People who hold a point of view different from yours.
  - ▷ People who have a vested interest in your success.
  - ▷ People who know your work.
  - ▷ People who are good at giving feedback.
- ▶ Find ways to ask people for more information without putting them on the spot. For example, you might say to your direct reports, "I am trying to improve my ability to operate as a team member and there are some aspects of my behavior that I do not fully understand. I would like your assistance so I can improve in this area."

### **Work to understand feedback that conflicts with your self-perception**



One of the reasons feedback is so valuable is that it allows you to see yourself as others see you. Sometimes the message is not what you expected or hoped to hear. You may hear information that is inconsistent with how you view yourself. When this happens, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Remember that people can observe your behaviors, but they cannot see your intentions. Reflect on the situation and determine whether you truly did something or just intended to do it. Maybe you had grand plans but executed only 10 percent of them. People can judge only the 10 percent.
- ▶ Determine the amount of energy that you want to expend to resolve the conflicting feedback. Ask the following questions:
  - ▷ Is the feedback important? Is this information tied to the critical success factors of your job?
  - ▷ Are the feedback givers' perspectives and opinions valued by the organization?
  - ▷ Is the feedback valid and accurate? Have the feedback givers had a chance to observe your behavior? (If not, it may be a public relations issue rather than a skill deficit.)



- ▷ Do you plan to do anything with the information once you understand it? (If not, it may not be worth your time and energy to understand it.)
- ▶ Realize that people often go through the SARA process when receiving feedback: shock or surprise, anger, resistance to or rejection of the feedback, and acceptance. In general, wait until you are in the last phase before you seek clarification.
- ▶ If you are upset by the information, wait until your emotions settle before you attempt to resolve the differences. Your emotions are likely to get in the way of your ability to be objective, and it is difficult to talk with others in a constructive way when your emotions are not in check.
- ▶ Once you have decided that the feedback discrepancies are worth resolving, consider the following questions:
  - ▷ When and where is a good time for you to solicit this information?
  - ▷ Who is able to observe your behavior in this area?
  - ▷ What specific information do you need to help you improve your behavior?
  - ▷ What information is not necessary?
- ▶ Realize that if you seek clarification on feedback that others have provided to you, you are sending a message to them that you intend to do something in response to the feedback.

### **Demonstrate willingness to try new things, even at the risk of failure**

▼ Doing new things and taking risks does not come easily for many people because they fear the potential consequences. If this describes you, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Determine what you would like to try at work but haven't done. Discover what prevents you from trying. Then figure out how to minimize your concerns. For example, if you know you need to take stronger stands but don't because you are concerned about conflict, find someone who can help you learn additional influence skills.
- ▶ When you are concerned about doing something new, find a way to practice. For example, you could rehearse what you want to say by



## Learn Continuously

role-playing with a colleague. You could also discuss your approach with someone and ask for feedback.

- ▶ Assess how well you recover from mistakes. You may be able to take greater risks if you are good at recovery.

- ▶ Reflect on how you generally view risks and failure. Some people immediately view a situation in terms of what could go wrong instead of what they could learn.

- ▶ Identify your personal and organizational obstacles to trying new things and taking risks. For example, you may fear that you will lose hard-won ground, be singled out in case of failure, have an inadequate contingency plan, or lose credibility.

*Encourage people to see possibilities for themselves. Express your confidence and trust in them.*

- ▶ Look for patterns in situations in which it is most difficult for you to take risks. For example, you may readily take risks having to do with people issues but hesitate to take risks that might affect the bottom line of the business.

- ▶ If you work in a risk-averse organization, take smaller risks at first to create a positive track record, then move on to larger risks.

- ▶ Try to learn the right lessons from failure. Otherwise, you might simply learn that you don't ever want to take another chance again. Talk about the failure situation with a more experienced colleague. This will help you get past your immediate reactions and see the situation in context.

- ▶ If you failed in a similar circumstance, analyze what happened. Compare the situation to the one you're currently facing. Chances are that there is some learning you can take advantage of.

- ▶ Model risk taking. Describe to your team how you arrived at your decisions in various situations. Discuss the risks involved and the issues you considered as you made your decisions.

- ▶ Talk to people within and outside of your organization who regularly try new things and take risks. Find out how they prepare, how they handle discomfort, and what they have gained from these experiences.



### Willingly accept challenging assignments and new career opportunities

Taking the initiative to seek out new work challenges demonstrates your commitment to the organization and increases the variety and scope of your job. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Talk with your manager about your willingness to take on challenging assignments and your desire to expand your career. Indicate your interests and ideas, and discuss possible action steps.
- ▶ When you identify an assignment you would like, interview people who are currently doing that work. Learn what is required in terms of knowledge, time, and skills.
- ▶ Watch for opportunities to help out in other functions or areas, such as participating in special projects or task forces. This will broaden your skills, build your cross-functional knowledge, and help you learn about further opportunities.
- ▶ Identify issues critical to your organization's success and develop expertise in those areas. Watch for opportunities to share your knowledge and skills and demonstrate their usefulness.
- ▶ As you take on additional assignments, make sure that you still manage your current job capably. Your manager, direct reports, and coworkers depend on you to continue to do your current job as you take on new responsibilities.
- ▶ Be realistic about your commitments. You may become so enthusiastic about taking on a new challenge that you take on more than you can handle. Set challenging goals, but don't set yourself up for failure.
- ▶ Identify obstacles (lack of time, fear of failure) that would keep you from seeking new work challenges. Weigh the obstacles against what you will gain by expanding your skills. Look at your time and effort as an investment in your future.
- ▶ Realize that new situations may make you feel uncomfortable or cause you to question your ability to succeed. These are natural reactions to growth. If necessary, ask for additional help or support. Be persistent.

*Tell people what is needed for advancement to other roles.*



### Know the job



To perform at your best, you need to clearly understand the requirements and objectives of your position and the unspoken expectations of your manager and others. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Discuss the expectations for your role with your manager. Talk about nuances of the role as well as broad responsibilities. Check in every six months to ensure that the expectations are current and on track.
- ▶ Describe the purpose of your current role in the organization. You may want to discuss this with your manager. The following are helpful questions to ask:
  - ▷ Why does your position exist?
  - ▷ How does it fit into the broader leadership structure of your group and business unit?
  - ▷ How do you see your role changing over the next year?
- ▶ Look for three to five key result areas in which effective performance is critical. Determine how you will measure performance in each area. Clarify with your manager if you are uncertain how to measure your performance.
- ▶ Set specific objectives for each indicator. For example, "Our group will respond to 95 percent of customer complaints within 24 hours, and 100 percent within 48 hours." Share your objectives with your employees and others in the organization with whom you work closely.
- ▶ Periodically review your performance against your objectives. Ask your manager for feedback on your performance and for input on how to achieve objectives more effectively.

*Ensure that people periodically review the requirements and objectives of their positions. Discuss new expectations.*

### Keep up to date on professional/technical development



Although successful managers do not need the same amount of professional/technical development as their employees, they do need some. The amount of expertise and knowledge you need depends on your role in the organization, the level of your position, and the expertise available from others. Consider the following suggestions:



- ▶ Assess the level of professional/technical knowledge and expertise you need in your position. In general, the more expertise that is available from others, the less you need yourself. Leaders at high levels in an organization often need less technical expertise because they have many others on whom they can rely.
  - ▶ Understand why you need the technical information. Reasons may include identifying and addressing strategic issues, making sound decisions and investment choices, hiring the right people, or developing others. This will help you determine (and potentially limit) what and how much you need to monitor in order to stay up-to-date.
  - ▶ Identify the resources for professional expertise available to you. These may include your team members, cross-functional team members, other managers and peers, and trusted external consultants.
  - ▶ Look for areas in which you don't personally have knowledge and you also don't have the technical resources you need. Gain the expertise you need by finding resources in other areas of the organization or by charting a path for increasing your knowledge.
  - ▶ Look to company and industry best practices to quickly provide a basic level of standard information, knowledge, and practices.
  - ▶ Network with others to learn needed information.
  - ▶ Use resources available through professional associations, Web sites, marketing information, and so forth.
- Keeping up-to-date with the technical advances in your field is important for your own and your organization's continued growth and development.
- ▶ Ask your management staff and their teams to keep you updated about the trends and developments in their areas of expertise. Discuss the implications of these new developments.
  - ▶ Build an informal network of peers in your own organization and from similar organizations for exchanging ideas and discussing relevant technical advances and changes in your field.
  - ▶ Ensure that you and your employees attend conferences and take advantage of educational opportunities to learn about new technology and technical developments.

*Hold a regular discussion time to review current trends and information on issues relevant to your business.*



- ▶ If your strategy team has identified potential competitors from other industries, make a point of learning about the technical foundation of those industries and potential new developments in them.
- ▶ Ask customers to educate you and your team about technical developments they see in their industries.
- ▶ Support funding for team members to develop their skills and become acquainted with new developments.
- ▶ Aim to take on at least one new project each year that will challenge you to search out new ideas and information.
- ▶ Hire people from outside the organization to build capabilities quickly in a particular area.
- ▶ Remember that as you advance in your career, you will need to move from a position of highly defined expertise to one that encompasses a broader view of a functional area. Learn from others in your function who have expertise different from your own. Try to gain a working knowledge of how each function in your area works so you get a broader view.

### **Increase your knowledge of specific processes**

▼  
*Have people draw a flow chart of a process as they understand it and review it with them.*

Because of specific strategic issues, limited resources, or employee shortages, you may find yourself needing to gain knowledge and expertise outside your own area. You may need to learn about other functions or develop expertise about particular processes. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Arrange for a coach in the content or process area who can help you on an as-needed basis.
- ▶ When you know what expertise you need, ask the leader of that area to recommend activities that will help you learn efficiently, including what you should read, observe, and do.
- ▶ Ask to see process flow maps or documentation. This will help you learn what exists now.



- ▶ Find out whether a colleague can lend you a resource for a short period of time to cover the need. Express your willingness to reciprocate in the future.
- ▶ Read about best practices in this area so you will become familiar with them and can understand why they are recommended.
- ▶ Seek opportunities to observe, work with, and get feedback from individuals who are highly skilled in the process, such as your supervisor, a colleague, or someone from another part of the company.

### Increase your knowledge of functional areas

Today's business environment demands that organizations work and think more and more across functional areas. Increasingly, managers need to know how their function fits with others in the organization and how each adds value to the organization's core business processes. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Talk with individuals inside and outside your organization who have expertise in functional areas. View committees, task forces, and department meetings as chances to increase your understanding of functional areas.
- ▶ Observe the actions and practices of people in positions similar to or related to yours. You may want to ask them if you can work with them on tasks, interview them formally or informally to learn their secrets for success, or check in with them regularly.
- ▶ Read reports and documents that describe procedures, practices, and other information related to your area and other functional areas.
- ▶ Attend courses and seminars that can give you a broader perspective of how your position fits into the functional area and how your functional area fits into the process.
- ▶ Join professional organizations. For example, a materials manager might want to get involved in a professional organization that includes additional areas of manufacturing.

*Have people meet with peers in other functional areas to learn about their key priorities for the year.*



### Stay informed about industry practices

▼ Beyond the specific technical aspects of your work, which could apply to several industries, you also need to keep up-to-date on developments in the industry in which you work. Industry practices and standards can change. What was considered the norm as you started your career may be outdated. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Visit other companies and talk with people in similar functions. Also talk with their customers. After each visit, detail what you have learned and how it adds to your knowledge of the industry.
- ▶ Attend industry or professional meetings, conferences, and seminars. Work on program committees. Actively involve yourself in the group.
- ▶ Read professional newsletters and trade journals to stay up-to-date on new developments in your industry.
- ▶ Join (or form) an informal group of professionals from other organizations who get together to discuss technical advances and other issues of common interest. Affiliations can be based on type of business, organization size, manufacturing processes, market, or other common bonds.
- ▶ Attend university and industry association educational events to keep abreast of developments.

*Encourage people to ask seasoned colleagues in your industry to describe how things have changed and what they see for the future.*