

Lesson 2 — Workplace Practices (medium skills — rules of the road)

Employees who are successful quickly learned the key “tricks of the trade” or the workplace rules of the road discussed in this Lesson.

Employees who don’t quickly learn these rules most often get in trouble.

The interesting thing about these workplace rules is that nobody ever teaches them to you before you go to the world of work. Either you learn them through trial and error, or not at all (in which case you will likely end-up failing in your job).

In any case, for most new workers, it takes a long time, as well as repeated mistakes, before they understand the value of these workplace rules. In other words, they’re most often learned the hard way: by making mistakes. That’s too bad, because these mistakes can be avoided with some basic instruction on what the key practices are. Failure to learn them before you begin your career often results in delayed advancement, lost opportunities or even getting fired. Fortunately, you can avoid most of these rookie mistakes if you study, learn and follow these workplace practices sooner rather than later.

While the listing below doesn’t cover all the workplace practices and rules you may eventually learn, they are the most important. Plus, these initial explanations are just the beginning of the process of learning about them.

Be professional at ALL times

What does “being professional” mean?

As we mentioned earlier, by “being professional,” we mean being appropriate and mature in the workplace. It means being a serious and engaged worker at all times. It means paying attention to your responsibilities. It means doing your job on-time, doing it well, and doing it in the right way. It means demonstrating a commitment to your organization and its mission. It means not letting your emotions over-ride your sense of what should be done in a business-like manner. It means being polite, proper, respectful and nice to all you meet. It means being likeable. It means being clear and specific in your communications. It means never losing your temper, even when the circumstances may seem unbearable. It means keeping a good attitude and positive outlook. It means being and staying properly dressed and presentable all day long. It means sharing information and credit with others, even when you might not want to. It means being loyal and having integrity. And, more...

Acting in a professional manner is a skill you’ll want to demonstrate at all times. It’s a skill that needs to be demonstrated by you all work-day long.

You shouldn’t act unprofessional during work for even a minute, even when you are telling a joke or having some fun with co-workers. Acting professional should always be your visible demeanor or behavior when interacting with co-workers as well as customers and others. Your company or organization will be judged by the professionalism you demonstrate inside as well as outside your

organization. If you should let your professional image, guard or demeanor down while at work, even for a minute, it can prove to be very damaging to both you and your company.

Also, you need to be professional both before and after work. Even when you're on your way to work, out to lunch or on a break, your level of professionalism is likely to be observed. If it's "not so good," it's likely to be evaluated and reported back to your organization or even your boss. Plus, a nonprofessional attitude away from the office can impact your company's public image – and, in turn, yours. So, keep your professional look in place all day long.

I can't tell you how many times, during lunch hour, workers say or do unprofessional things that get overheard by others and reported back to their bosses. If you want to tell a friend at lunch how stupid your boss is (we all may do this from time to time... except me, of course), just be sure to say it softly so no one else can hear you. If you're driving the company car irresponsibly (or unprofessionally), the general public you're speeding by or cutting in front of will develop a negative reaction to both you and your company. And it's likely to be reported back to the company and might even upset the public enough for them to take their business elsewhere. If your customers take their business elsewhere because of your unprofessional actions, you might eventually get fired or laid-off because revenues are down. So, always be professional. It's in your best interest. This doesn't mean you have to be superhuman, just a smart and professional worker at all times.

This may sound both impossible and stifling. If it's of any comfort to you, know that billions of people before you have been able to master this technique. It's not that hard to be professional at all times. It becomes natural once you've made a commitment and practice being professional. If you should feel that the idea of being professional at all times is stifling or suffocating, just remind yourself that you're being paid real money to be professional at all times.

A good general rule about being professional all the workday long is to practice your best professional behaviors from the moment you leave your home to go to work (out the front door) until the time you return and close that front door behind you. This may sound excessive, but it's really not that hard to do and the protection it gives you and your reputation is well worth it. It's an investment in being successful in your job and getting a future promotion.

Without a doubt, from time to time, work will generate negative feelings and emotions which, if displayed at the workplace, might cause your reputation or standing great harm. So, when these emotional reactions arise (and they will), wait until you close the door of your home before you vent or say what you're really feeling or thinking. Or, take a day off (call in sick). It's okay to re-group or complain to a close friend or family member – we all do that from time to time. Just be discrete and non-public about these emotional expressions or releases.

Now, there are legitimate times when you'll need to complain about something -- and that's okay, because there is a professional way to do so. Organizations know that you have both a right and duty to bring your concerns about the workplace to the attention of the proper authorities. For example, if your company just initiated a new policy or program which seems to be failing, you should offer feedback to

the right person about this concern (in many ways, it's your professional duty to do so). It might be best (professionally) to direct it to the person who is responsible for the policy or program, or to offer your feedback to your supervisor. Make sure your communication is factually based, not emotionally charged or angry. These company officials want to hear from their employees when something is wrong. There's a big difference between ranting with emotion about a bad situation and calmly and rationally explaining to the right person at your workplace the observed negative impact of an effort or policy. That's the difference between being unprofessional and being professional.

Be professional at all times.

Leadership

Every worker, not just leaders, needs to learn the importance and techniques of leadership. And they should know key leadership concepts even before they begin their first job.

What if you neither want to nor expect to become a leader? Is it still important to learn about leadership? "Yes," it is. It's important because it means more than just being a boss or supervisor. It also describes both a vital personal and professional skill and a quality that all successful workers must be ready to demonstrate. Leadership is demonstrating industry, creditability, competence and potential. Leadership is prioritizing, constant learning and problem solving. Leadership is finding a way for everyone to work together.

So, leadership is an important skill for everyone to cultivate and master.

There are hundreds of self-help books written about leadership which define, describe, and explore it far more completely than we will here. You can read them later and you should. However, for now, let's just establish the essential concepts around leadership so you can begin to understand its importance and you can begin to practice it in order to become a more complete professional.

The essence of leadership begins by understanding that it happens in four (4) different ways.

The first type or example of leadership is internal or within you (lead yourself). It's singular or personal. It's about you alone. It's how you direct yourself. Think about leadership as the "boss" inside of you. It's that inner voice of responsibility which tells you to turn off the video game or TV and get to your homework.

Leadership, in this first form, is practiced and demonstrated by your capability to manage your time and what you do responsibly or professionally. It's purposeful self-development. It's self-management. Can you lead yourself to do what must be done? Can you lead yourself away from distractions and over to the desk to study? If you are weak in this area of leadership (and to some extent we all are), you need to start your leadership development here. Begin to think about this type of leadership and develop and practice it. Understand that you'll first need to be able to lead yourself before the next three types of leadership will be possible. Lead yourself first!

The second type of leadership is your ability to lead by knowing what you're supposed to know. In other words, do you have command of the facts or information which you are responsible for knowing? If you're in school, do you know your lessons? If you're an auto mechanic, do you know the latest technical facts about auto repair? If you a lawyer, do you know the latest legal interpretations or case law in your field? Do people come to you for your leadership around the knowledge you're supposed to have? Are you viewed as a leader around knowledge? If not, embrace this type of leadership and keep learning.

The third type of leadership is an informal type of leadership. It's when a group of people or workers come together for a common purpose or task and have no assigned leader. It's when your teacher gives your project team or study group an assignment to complete. When you first gather with your group, who speaks up about how to best proceed and get the activity started? Who helps the group move forward? Who manages the group's discussions, keeps the group on task and supports real progress? Who reports the results of the team's effort? It's the group's emerging informal or natural leader. That can be you, if you choose to develop this skill. The key time to act as a leader is when the group or team first meets and there's that silent moment when each team member is wondering: "who has the leadership skills necessary to get us started?" That person will likely be the one who speaks up first and says, "Where shall we begin?" And that most often ends up becoming the group's natural or informal leader. That can be you, if you want to develop your leadership further.

The fourth type of leadership is the one most people think about when this subject comes up. It's the situation where one person has been placed in charge of a group, team or unit. An assigned leader has been given the rightful authority to lead the group. This type of leader is the traditional authority figure whose orders or direction are expected to be followed. Others in the group recognize this rightful authority and are prepared to follow the leader's direction. Unfortunately, not all leaders give good direction. Not all leaders know what to do next. What happens then?

That brings us to a definition of leadership. What makes a good leader?

My favorite definition or description of good leadership comes from a former general in the U.S. Army. His name was General H. Norman Schwarzkopf. General Schwarzkopf was the leader of the coalition forces that removed Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991. In 100 hours, in command of 750,000 troops from dozens of nations, he completely defeated the Iraqi forces, and with very low casualties. This was an enormously impressive accomplishment given the complexity and scope of the effort. I heard him speak once about his understanding of good leadership. It was short and sweet, just like a general would be. General Schwarzkopf said that there are many books, theories, and complex definitions about leadership; however, they all boil down to a simple definition which epitomizes the concept of good leadership. It's not only simple, it's easy to remember. In the words of the General, good leadership is defined by these words:

"Fill the void and do the right thing."

What the General meant by this definition is that when a situation arises where you recognize that something or some action is needed – that is the “void.” The void is begging for action to be taken. A leader is alert for “voids” and, when seeing them, seeks to take action or “fill the void.”

At this point, you are probably wondering, “when I see a void, what action or response should I take?” Well, it’s “do the right thing.”

In other words, do what the conditions or circumstances indicate need to be done. Act with loyalty and integrity. Search your mind and heart to determine what the right action should be. Then, go for it. Do it. Sure, as time allows, get the good counsel of others, but act when action is needed. Another military commander once said, “If you’re not making mistakes, you’re not moving fast enough.” So, leadership is a balancing act. Taking action, when needed, may not allow you time to get the opinion of others. So, mistakes are possible and inevitable. Good leaders who are filling the void and doing the right thing still make mistakes, but when they do, they correct them as soon as possible.

That’s the essence of good leadership.

“Fill the void and do the right thing.”

A potential leader sounds like one (is self-confident or courageous), looks like one (is dressed for success), and follows the basic concepts around leadership offered above. So, learn more and practice your leadership skills. It will give you a competitive edge.

It’s also interesting to note that there’s a perception or image associated with being a leader. If you act and look like a leader, you’ll begin to be viewed as one. So, taking on the role of a leader in the four areas or dimensions of leadership described above will help to move you up the leadership ladder. Knowing these elementary principles around leadership is a great start. They will help you both develop your leadership skills and better recognize good leaders with whom you’ll want to follow.

“Leadership” also includes the idea of coaching or helping other people become better by helping them to see more clearly how they might perform better. Taking the time to coach a person is sometimes a hard thing to do, especially if you can more easily do it yourself and save the time teaching or coaching someone. While this might seem easier, you will actually find it far more time-consuming because the next time you may find yourself doing their task again. Good leaders know they can’t do (and should not try to do) everything themselves, so time coaching is time well spent.

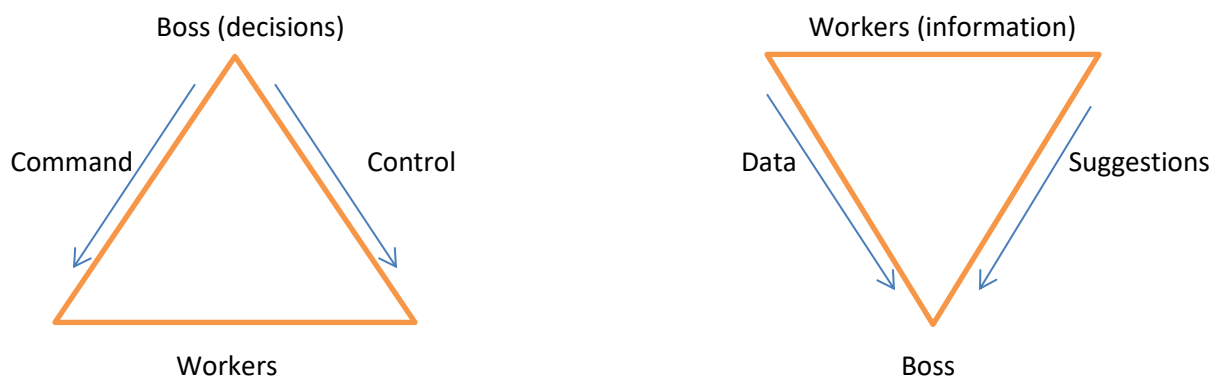
Now that we understand the core principle of leadership, how does it effectively operate in the world of work?

Good organizations and bosses most often practice their leadership responsibilities in the manner described in the two triangle charts below. Look for these traits when considering where you want to work. Organizations that follow these principles of leadership may be the better and more successful places to work.

In the first triangle or pyramid on the left below, the group leader sits the top. This is the classic or traditional way that leadership is practiced in organizations. The leader sits at the top of the organization and, from on-high, makes the decisions and gives the commands to the subordinates below, often through a chain of command and control. This is fine for getting things done, but to make the right decisions, it must be fueled or informed by the second, upside-down pyramid on the right below.

In this second up-side-down pyramid, the boss is at the bottom of the organization. The organization is turned upside down so the top boss can collect facts, data and suggestions on what problems need some attention. In organizations where this inverted triangle is practiced, bosses are smart enough to know that they don't know everything that is going on – but their workers do. So, in order to take advantage of this reality, smart leaders set up their organizations so that the flow or movement of vital information easily flows to them.

Most good leaders know that the quality of their decisions and commands is only as good as the information they are getting from their workers (and customers). An organization will quickly suffer and perform poorly (or worse) if it doesn't have a smooth and effective movement of information to the boss. This second, informational pyramid balances leadership. It tells the effective leader who is sitting on top of the decision pyramid, that he or she can't perform well or "do the right thing" without everyone's participation and support. In order to render the best or correct decisions from on-high, good leaders know that they need accurate data, information and facts to trickle down to them from those who know, first hand, what is going on. In order to be a good leader, successful leaders know that they must blend both the decision pyramid and the upside-down information pyramid below.



In addition to having a balance between the decision pyramid and the information pyramid, all good leaders (at all levels of leadership) strive to follow these guiding principles:

- ✓ Keep a focus on the important goals – don't get distracted by the small stuff.
- ✓ Collect everyone's opinions – listen carefully to all and know what's being said about the field, the company, and especially about your ideas.
- ✓ Create friendships as well as partnerships with people – if people like you, they'll want you to be successful.

- ✓ Not all people will agree with your decisions – so acknowledge creditable contrary opinions. Never dismiss them as wrong. Try to explain how your decisions respond to them.
- ✓ Don't try to win every argument, situation or battle. It's okay to lose a few points – just concentrate on winning the big ones.
- ✓ Understand that people may need time to appreciate and accept your ideas and leadership – let them evolve, don't overly fight them or force them to do it your way immediately. Good ideas get stronger with time, if you have time.
- ✓ Always let opponents talk (and listen attentively), as you may learn something new which will help your decisions to become better.
- ✓ The most important trait to demonstrate as a good leader is humility – if you are perceived as humble and not arrogant, you will be a more attractive leader. Being humble is to never brag that you've won the argument or debate or that you have the best idea. Demonstrate humility by showing that you are working for a common cause and not yourself.

Also, when you eventually get promoted from the lower ranks and are asked to become a team or group leader, understand the shift in your work skills that this new assignment entails. Most newly-minted leaders are chosen for promotions because they've demonstrated that they are the best performers in their job skill-set. For example, the best and most productive accountant or lawyer may be selected to be the leader of the accounting or law group. It's classic or traditional for an organization to reward (with power and more money) their best workers or performers. Since high-level promotions are most often tied to leading the group, those workers who were great accountants or lawyers may become the leader.

The danger here is that the new leader, while a great accountant or lawyer, may not be knowledgeable or skillful at being a leader of accountants or lawyers. This is true because, as we've just discussed, leadership is its own skill set. In addition, since the new leader was promoted to this higher job because they were great at their job, they often want to keep on doing accounting or legal briefs because they're good at it. It's their comfort zone.

However, as the department's new supervisor or leader, they must now shift or change their role and learn and practice new leadership skills. And this is a whole other set of job skills. The danger for our newly promoted leaders is that they might not fully embrace their responsibilities to lead and, as a result, may not be successful in their new role. So, just because you're a great accountant, it doesn't mean you'll be a great manager or leader of the accounting department.

Start now, with a commitment to learn and practice leadership skills. Someday, if you do a good job, the next promotion may require these higher-end leadership skills. So, keep learning and practicing leadership skills and you will be prepared when this honor comes your way.

Conversely, some "worker bees" may rightfully say "no thank you" to an offer of a promotion to become the group's leader because they love what they're doing and understand that they may not be good leaders. Be aware of your desire and ability to perform as a leader or supervisor – and when the offer is made, be prepared with the answer that's right for you.

Lastly, today's good leaders know they are only as effective as those they lead. They're not individual performers anymore. Their success or failure flows from the effectiveness or performance of those they lead. Smart leaders understand that they're more of a coach, resource gatherer and consensus builder, than a worker or a tyrant. And we know from the sports world that good coaches nurture, encourage, teach and support those they lead. Good leaders are welcoming, attentive and open to team members' comments. Good leaders are both passionate and optimistic about the work being performed. They genuinely care about the well-being of their workers. Build up these traits within yourself and search for these traits wherever you look for work.

Chain of command

We've already mentioned the term "chain of command" a few times. If that's an unfamiliar term, here's more on what that means in the world of work.

A definition is: "the order in which authority and power in an organization is used and delegated from top management to every employee at every level of the organization." Instructions flow downward along the chain of command and accountability flows upward.

The clearer the chain of command, the more effective the unit or organization becomes. Military forces are an example of a straight-line chain of command that extends in unbroken line from the top ranking officer to the lowest one. Everyone in the organization is listed and know exactly where they fit in (who's their immediate boss and who reports to them as their boss).

It's really important for you to know and follow your organization's chain of command.

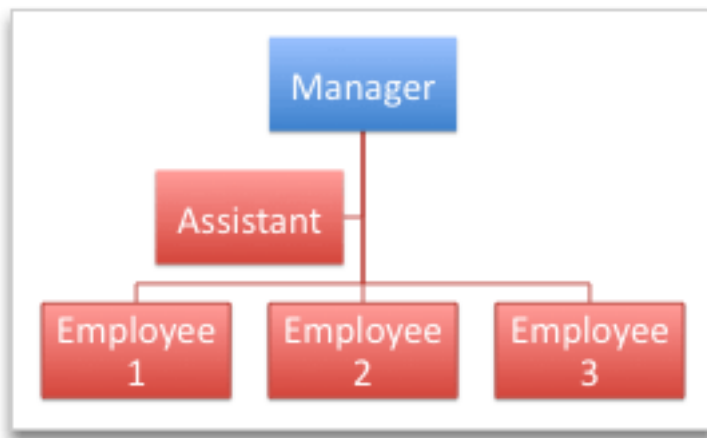
It starts with your immediate boss. Next up the line of command will be your boss' boss, all the way to the top. In the other direction, after (or reporting to) you will be the person or persons you supervise.

The organization chart is a diagram showing graphically or giving a picture of the chain of command for a specific organization. It shows the relationship and command of one official, unit or division to another. The organizational chart is valuable in that it enables one to visualize the flow of authority and responsibility both up and down the chain of command.

When an organization chart grows too large, it can be split into smaller charts for separate departments within the organization.

Here's a basic organization chart that is often used to show an organization's chain of command. It's also called an "org chart." When you arrive to your new place of employment or get transferred to a new unit, ask someone where your org chart might be found so you can learn it.

Sample "org. chart" on next page:



You should always take things up the chain of command in the correct order and not cut anyone out of it. Don't cut someone out of your chain of command unless there is a very good reason to do as they may take it out on you in the future.

Teamwork

What is teamwork?

It's the collective effort (or working together) of two or more people dedicated to a shared objective or goal. A sports team is a group that wants to beat the opponent and win the game. When you're a member of a team, you must accept the idea that an individual team member's success is less important than the team's success. If you score 40 points and the team loses, you lose too. The goal of the "game" is to win, not score 40 points. So, as the high scorer, you might have to pass the ball to the other team members in order to help the team win.

Why are teams considered so important?

Teams are important because they most often prove to be stronger, smarter and more efficient than individuals. There are some wonderful experiments which prove this point. For example, when you give an individual a complex task or problem to solve, give the same problem to a team. Then, compare their respective solutions. Given the various experiences, knowledge and perspectives of the team members, nine times out of ten, the team's answer will be better than the individual's answer. It just stands to reason that two (or more) heads are better than one.

So, teams are a proven way to develop better solutions to an employer's challenges and problems. Hence, when you go to work, you're likely to be involved on work teams – so it's a good idea to get ready for this experience now. Plus, when you seek employment, high on the list of skills that the employer interviewing you will want to see you have is both your appreciation for and potential to work in teams.

In order to be able to further demonstrate your understanding and knowledge about how to work effectively in teams, consider these tips about successful teams.

- All team members understand and are dedicated to the team's goal.
- All team members honor and respect each person's contributions to the team effort.
- All team members support open and honest communications.

- All team members play by agreed-upon rules of team behavior.
- All team members respect the richness of each member's background and unique perspective.
- All team members keep their minds open to everyone's ideas (even when they sound bad, at first).
- All team members support the full team's success and avoid creating internal divisions or factions.
- All team members share in leadership roles and other group duties.
- All team members support the team's final decisions.

Now, these are the general principles of teamwork, but, there's more to consider. Not all teams are successful – so remember, if you are a member of a team planning a company mutiny or if your team is clearly about to lose the game, your sense of team loyalty should be tempered by your higher duty to the organization or supervisor in charge of the team. It's usually advisable to first reveal your opinion about the team's poor performance or dangerous course to your team's members. Give your team a chance to either convince you that you are wrong about your observations (if you are) or an opportunity to use your caution to get them back on-track. However, if after this discussion, nothing significant changes, and you still feel a duty to report the team's problems to the supervisor, you must do so. So, team loyalty or integrity is not without a higher sense of loyalty and integrity to the team's organization or supervisor.

Loyalty and integrity

The words "loyalty" and "integrity" have been mentioned a number of times already. What exactly are these qualities and why are they so important to the world of work?

Well, they're important because employers tell us that loyalty and integrity are the two most valued qualities they look for and need from a worker.

Loyalty is devotion to the organization's mission. Loyalty is an employee's dependability and support of the organization's leadership. Loyalty means you value, above all else, what's best for the organization and its leadership. Loyalty is keeping your boss well informed. Loyalty is supporting their will in an unselfish and consistent manner. And, to be more specific, loyalty to your boss (the person who hired you, pays you, approves your leave, rates your performance, gives you your assignments, may promote you and can fire you) is a smart professional practice. Be loyal to the person you're working for because they need you and you need them. You're on the same team.

That being said, you should also have loyalty to others in your organization, such as your fellow team members or co-workers as well as your organization's customers or clients. But, in a hierarchy of loyalty, your first loyalty is to your boss and your organization's chain of command (your boss's bosses).

In addition, a lack of loyalty will cause an organization to quickly fall apart. Think of your company or place of work as a ship at sea. If the crew doesn't remain loyal to the ship's captain, the whole structure starts to fall apart. And in the first storm, the ship can sink for lack of loyalty to the boss's (captain's) orders to perform certain tasks which can save a sinking ship. A lack of loyalty in any organization is an

early sign of group or organization's ultimate failure. If you see a lack of loyalty in your organization, you might want to find another job because the end may be near.

There are some exceptions to loyalty, as it is not always absolute.

While it should always be a cherished value, if someone that you are loyal to (your boss) happens to violate their loyalty to either that person's boss or the organization, then your loyalty might better be re-directed to a higher authority. For example, if you notice that your boss is mismanaging money or practicing illegal accounting practices, you have an obligation (another form of loyalty) to go up the chain of command to the next-level supervisor or boss and re-focus your loyalty there by reporting the transgression. In other words, once someone you should be loyal to does something illegal or clearly wrong, your loyalty should shift to another rightful leader or authority figure. You must report what you have found out to them. If you remain loyal to a boss who has illegally shifted company funds to their personal checking account in the Bahamas, failure to report this may cause you to share in the blame and even make you an accomplice to the crime. So, loyalty may have to be withdrawn.

Also, the concept of loyalty means you should trust your boss with both the good news and the bad news. And there's an art to delivering bad news to your boss.

First of all, bad news doesn't get any better with age. The longer you wait to tell it, the worse the bad news situation becomes, and the greater the chance that someone outside the organization or unit will report it to your boss before you do. If that should happen, you may look like someone who was hiding the bad news from your boss (that's neither a good look nor being loyal).

One other tip about handling bad news is that you should always try to think about possible solutions or actions to pursue in order to correct or improve the situation. As we now know, bosses really value employees who report what's wrong as soon as possible while, at the same time, offering them promising ideas or possible solutions. This approach around the art of delivering bad news both softens the blow and makes you "shine" as a valued employee. So, do your best to report bad news swiftly and serve it up with a "side order" of your proposed solution.

Lastly, loyalty should work both ways (up and down the chain of command). If you are finding that your boss is not loyal to you, or that the organization is not loyal to its employees, you might start looking for a new job. Not all organizations are loyal to their employees. When you find yourself in an organization that lacks either loyalty or concern about their workers, it's often an early sign of an organization's possible downturn or failure.

What about the second word in the title of this section – "integrity"? What exactly does that mean in the world of work?

It's doing your job in the right way with honesty. It's not wasting time or goofing off. It's not shying away from what you're supposed to be doing or hiding what you haven't done. It's being attentive, hardworking and responsible – not "stealing" or "cheating" with your work time. That's stealing money and that's dishonest.

Demonstrating workplace integrity or honesty means you tell the truth to your boss. A good boss knows that they cannot perform well or accomplish their mission without the truth being revealed to them. They want you to give them accurate information. They'll be relying on you to tell them what you believe to be true, and will be very disappointed if you should do otherwise. If you should attempt to mislead, cover-up, or deceive your boss on an important work matter, they will consider you untrustworthy and maybe dishonest. When you demonstrate these negative traits, the working relationship between you and your boss will probably never be the same – or it may simply end a good working relationship and even your job.

“Loyalty” and “integrity” are the two most important traits an employer is looking for and must have in an employee. It's what they are looking for first when interviewing job candidates.

One additional way to better appreciate the value of showing both loyalty and integrity in your job is the idea that you can't always be the best performing employee in the company. You can't always have the best ideas, make the most sales, or fix the most problems. However, you can excel, all the time, by always demonstrating loyalty and integrity. If you do, you are on your way to an excellent performance in the two most valued traits for an employer. Following these principles will help you to become successful in your job and career.

Before we end this topic, let's consider a word of caution about the important subjects of “loyalty” and “integrity.” Practicing both virtues doesn't mean you act without regard to the impact the truth is likely to have on other workers, including your boss. For example, if you work with someone who has not been doing their job effectively and you go straight to the boss and tell on them, ask yourself the question: “what are the consequences of my report on the other person?” Since the other person's reputation is at stake, such a report might create an office enemy. So, how do you balance the values of “loyalty and integrity” with office politics and good relationships?

Time permitting (that is to say, things won't blow up if you wait a short time to report on the co-worker's performance), think about the possibility of first approaching the co-worker and asking about your observation or concern. Ask them a question rather than accuse them. For example, ask them, “I noticed that our money or accounting reports have some problems with them, before I report this can you add any information about it?” Ask the person first to explain the situation. If the person has made an honest mistake, they will most likely correct it right away and be forever grateful to you for saving them a serious embarrassment. If this is true, you've made a grateful friend who owes you a favor for the one you just did for them. If they have been stealing the money, you'll be able to tell by the embarrassing reaction they may give you. If they don't give you a good and believable answer or if they start to lie and cover it up, now you know it's time to report what you have learned to the appropriate authorities. Again, consider the first step of asking the employee you are thinking about reporting for their explanation only if time permits. And, if you have any doubts about their answers, go head and make your report.

Professional communications

The way we communicate in the workplace is an important part of our “workplace presences” or professional stature. Earlier, we discussed some of the basic principles of effective communications. We discussed the need to be specific, clear and impactful in all our workplace communications. But, there’s more. Let’s add on to these earlier style points a few additional professional practices which will make you a better professional communicator.

E-mailing & texting: Since e-mailing and texting are often the dominant method of communicating in the workplace today, let’s consider a few important points about professional electronic communications.

To begin with, please understand that how you currently write your personal e-mails and text messages should not be the way you write your professional electronic messages. Too often, new workers fail to understand the need to carefully write and edit their workplace electronic messages and, as a result, show a poor, casual or even an unprofessional level of writing skills. So, in addition to making your electronic communications specific, clear and be impactful, be sure to use your best writing skills (correct grammar, syntax and spelling). Write your messages carefully, edit them and re-read them with an objective and fresh, or first-time, point of view (as someone might first read them). Be sure to ask yourself this important question, “is this my best writing and does this make sense to the reader?” So, when you think you’ve finished writing your electronic business communications, before you hit the “send” button, be sure to stop, step back and re-read the message as the person receiving it might. Remember the old saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

A second mistake people often make when they’re writing their professional communications is they assume the reader knows what they know, and then fail to give the reader sufficient background, details or explanations necessary to fully understand the point of the message. It’s always a good idea to start your e-mail with a brief statement about the subject’s background. For example, you might start by saying, “The purpose of this message is to answer your questions about...” or, “In follow-up to our meeting on March 2nd, I want to...” Remember, all good messages, just like good stories, have a beginning, middle and an end.

Also, remember that e-mails are both irretrievable and last forever. Once you hit the send button, you can’t take them back or destroy them. Your e-mails or electronic messages will never disappear as long as there is electricity on this planet. They can be shared with others you never imagined would see them. They can be searched, found and used as evidence in a disciplinary matter or in a legal proceeding. So, be careful with what you write. Nothing on the internet is completely private.

In addition, electronic messages are read in a vacuum. How the message is received and understood depends solely on the words contained in the message, not on the sender’s tone of voice or with further explanations. Since the person sending the message is not going to be present to explain what they meant by a particular word or phrase, extra care should be taken with your written electronic messages. If you’re not careful with your words, the reader may take what you’ve written the wrong way. Have you ever read an e-mail which gave you one meaning, only to later learn from the sender that

he or she meant another? In order to be clear and specific about what you intend to say, especially in your professional messages, take extra care writing and reviewing them before sending. And if you receive an unclear or aggravating e-mail, avoid the temptation to immediately fire back an angry reply. It might prove more productive to pick up the phone and speak directly to the person before you decide to send back an emotional response which might start an unnecessary dispute. My favorite example is the time a person in my office got very angry e-mail (or so he thought) from a person who had typed the message all in CAPITAL LETTERS! The receiver thought the sender was “hollering” or “shouting” angrily at him and read the message with that meaning. Based on this interpretation, the person receiving the “angry” message sent back an angry reply. Of course, an electronic fight soon followed. As the office supervisor, I had to calm everyone down and get to the bottom of it. During my interview with the sender, I learned that he always sends his e-mails in all CAPITAL LETTERS because he can see them better. The argument turned out to be a total misunderstanding.

So, be sure to think about the fact that electronic messages are one-dimensional or incomplete communications and if you worry that a message you want to send might be misinterpreted, don't send it. Rather, call or visit the person to discuss the subject. When people are face-to-face, better communications and better results are more likely to happen. As a general rule, before you send any potential confrontational or communications, set them aside for 24 hours, then read them once more, after a good night's sleep, before sending.

Verbal comments: What you say, just like what you write, is always a reflection of your professional skills. As a result, you should always be careful about speaking out in professional settings. In general, you should be far more careful and considered about what you say at work than you are in non-work or social situations.

One key professional verbal communication strategy is to simply think about what you are going to say before you say it. Follow the practice of consciously self-evaluating your comments before you speak them. Here are some questions to ponder before you speak: Are my comments directly relevant to what is being discussed? Do they advance the conversation in a positive way? Are they sensitive to what others have said? Are my words the right ones to use to say what I mean? Are they clear and do they make sense?

The “think before you speak” rule is also a great workplace rule. And being silent is not a bad thing. You can often show strength in silence, especially if you're not sure what to say. It's easier to explain silence (you're being thoughtful and listening carefully – everybody admires these qualities) than it is to explain a bad or inappropriate remark. So, don't be afraid to hold back your comments until you feel confident in what you are about to say. Don't feel compelled to speak up just for the sake of saying something. If you feel you need more information or time – get it and take it with your silence. When you hold back or reserve your opinion because there may be more to learn about the subject, you seem more attentive, reflective and, of course, more professional. If you say meaningless things or incorrect things, you soon will be not listened to as well (even when you have something valuable to say). So, silence is a powerful ally, especially for a novice or new worker.

In addition, if you're the type of person who tends to talk out loud about how you feel about things, that may be something you'll want to carefully manage in the workplace. In general, how you feel is not something you want to broadcast to others at work. Feelings are emotions which, while valid in human beings, are often considered weaknesses in the workplace. So, it's a good general rule to manage your emotions carefully at work. Thoughtful comments (reasoned and logical as opposed to emotional) are valued more. Plus, work is a more matter-of-fact situation. Good business decisions are more thoughtful, considered and planned than feelings or emotions would seem to allow. Plus, your release of emotions in the workplace may give other workers clues about how they can manipulate or undermine you (for example, by getting you mad and looking out of control).

We can learn much about this subject by watching successful poker card players. Have you ever seen someone gambling or betting on their playing card hands? No matter how good or bad their poker hand or cards are, they always show the same expressionless face. The reason for this is they don't want to give their positions away to their opponents by showing joy over a good hand, or despair over a bad one. If the poker player shows any emotion, their opponents gain an insight on what the other person's hand is and will have an advantage. That could cost the emotion-showing poker player their money. Even when good poker players win, they are often expressionless. That's a good professional look for us all to keep in mind. Emotions tend to give away information that you may not want to be known.

Also, an expression of emotions in the workplace often tends to commit you to a particular point of view or position. By holding in or hiding your true emotions as the conversation or meeting goes on, you have more flexibility in hearing more information or data – and, in turn, are in a better position to change your mind without looking like you're flip-flopping your opinion or decision (which is not a good professional look).

So, as a general rule, be extra careful about showing your emotions at work. You can display them when you go home. It's safer there.

Red flag words: In a highly-charged atmosphere like the workplace (with all its deadlines and pressures), the words we choose to use in our communications will either help or hurt our working relationships. It's important to understand that conflict can be either started or avoided depending on the words we use when expressing ourselves.

One secret to successful workplace communications is to understand the concept and power of "red flag words." Red flag words are those common (and seemingly innocent) words which take on a different connotation when a disagreement is possible. When this starts to happen, these innocent words tend to promote conflict rather than foster cooperation and understanding. Knowing about the power of red flag words in confrontational situation is an important professional skill which can promote positive professional communications and relationships.

This is also an important subject for your personal relationships.

Did you ever get in a fight with a family member or close friend and found yourself saying “well, you said...,” only to get an angry or confrontational reply back? Did things start to get worse when you said, “you said”? It’s likely that it did. And, the reason for this reaction was that you put the other person on the defensive by saying “you said.” With that big red flag word (you) in the air, the other person likely goes on the defensive because they believe you were using their own words to challenge their position. And thus, the argument has begun. Therefore, it’s important to understand the impact of red flag words during tense conversations, be they professional or personal. With this knowledge and skill to manage your use of “red flag” words, you will greatly improve your ability to be positive even when tempers might flare. This will make you both more effective and professional.

What are the red flag words?

Again, by themselves they are quite innocent until they’re introduced into tense, emotionally charged conversations. These innocent words quickly lose their innocence when the situation becomes an argument. In fact, these red flag words can start an argument where one might have not happened. Red flag words can act like a red cap in front of a bull (as in bull fight) urging the other party to “charge”.

And, the biggest red flag word of all is the word “you.”

Here are the more common red flag words to be on the lookout for and avoid when you can:

1. You
2. Need
3. Must
4. Can’t
5. Easy
6. Just
7. Only
8. Fast
9. Listen
10. Look

Let’s say these red flag words in a sentence in order to better understand their potential impact on creating or escalating conflict. Also, notice the **alternative statements (in bold italics)** which offer a more positive and less confrontational way of saying the same thing. Being aware and alert around red flag words can work to your advantage.

1. I need you to tell me. – ***Help me to understand.***
2. You must wait. – ***I’ll try to help you as soon as I can.***
3. I can’t help you. – ***Here’s where you can get the help you need.***
4. Oh, that’s easy for you to do. – ***Can you help me get this done?***
5. If you would just do this. – ***Can I help you do this?***
6. I only want this. – ***Can we do this?***
7. We need this fast. – ***How soon can we do this? How can I help?***

8. I need you to listen. – What ***about these points? How could we respond?***
9. Look, I'm not finish talking to you. – Please, ***can I add one more thing?***

Did you notice how less confrontational asking a question can be instead of making a statement? And, did you notice how putting the both words “I” and “you” into the sentence made it seem more like a joint or shared problem rather than the other person’s fault or responsibility?

Practice your recognition of red flag words or statements and try to develop your skill to avoid conflict by communicating your points in a softer and more objective, professional manner.

How to set priorities and manage time

Work is often busy, pressure packed and sometimes overwhelming. Your list of “things to do” can often expand well beyond the time available to get them done. Moreover, it may be hard to know which things to do first, second or third. Your ability to prioritize and set deadlines may get blurred as everything seems due immediately. Moreover, you’re likely to get more direction on setting priorities and establishing deadlines from your teachers in school, rather than from your boss at work. The reason for this lack of clarity in the workplace is the fact that your boss has his or her own work to do and may not have the time necessary to give you the direction you need to set priorities or properly manage your work. At the workplace, you simply get assignments or tasks with the only direction being “hey, get this done right away.”

So, how do you organize yourself and manage chaos at the workplace? There are a few simple tips or rules to follow which can help you. The first is to have a basic framework for setting priorities.

In school, your sense of priorities (what should be done first, second or third) is very often different from what it needs to be at work. For example, in school, your sense of priorities is probably defined for you by teachers who have carefully planned the semester’s work and already set deadlines and time frames for each part of the instructional program (syllabus) – which include reasonable dates for papers, quizzes and tests. In other words, there’s already a well-considered schedule to guide you as you plan your time and effort.

As we’ve discussed, what your teachers do in school will probably not be what your boss will do in the workplace. Your boss will give you work and will not define for you any well-planned timeframes or schedules to follow. As we enter the workplace, we will need a new strategy for setting priorities and managing our time.

Plus, at work, you will be getting assignments from many sources. For example, you will have work goals or things you want to accomplish. The company will have things it needs you to do. Your customers or clients will be asking you to get other things done for them. And your boss will be giving you assignments. If all four give you an assignment at the same time, how would you prioritize them? Which source of work holds the highest priority for you to consider as you plan your work on your own?

Given the four possible sources of work described above, a good general rule for you to follow in the setting of your priorities is:

- ✓ Priority #1 = do what the boss needs you to do
- ✓ Priority #2 = do what your company or organization needs you to do
- ✓ Priority #3 = do what your customers/clients need
- ✓ Priority #4 = do what you want to accomplish in your job

Your boss' needs should almost always be your first priority. Remember, your boss hired you and pays you to help him or her get the job done. Be sure to watch and listen to the boss for what their priorities are and attempt to address and respond to them first. For example, your boss might tell you that they're working on a report that's due next week and they need some data or information from you. Make that need or assignment your highest priority. Serve the boss well and they will both appreciate and reward you. Nothing warms the boss's heart more than an employee who pays close attention and gives the highest priority to what they need to get done.

After you serve the boss as your first priority, next address the other priorities on the list above. If you keep this general sense or rank order of priorities ever-present in your mind, you'll be well on your way to properly managing your work and becoming a valued employee.

What if you follow this general rule of setting priorities and there still is too much work to get done in the time available? What should you do now? First, sort out all your work assignments or tasks into the four categories based on the model above (#1 = boss; #2 = company; #3 = customer/client; and #4 = your goals). Then, create priorities within each of these four categories. With this sorting or arranging of your work, go to your boss and present the work list to them and ask, "What do you want me to do 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.?" Have your boss help you confirm (or not) how you should prioritize your work. This gesture acknowledges your understanding that the boss is the top priority in setting your work priorities. If the boss changes your priorities, then you're still doing what the boss wants you to do first.

While we're on the subject of how to set priorities in the workplace, let's discuss two dangerous workplace trends that can derail your performance at work. The first is the ever-so-fashionable technique called "multi-tasking." Multi-tasking gives us a rush. It makes us feel important, busy and productive. It seems like the only way to respond to being over-worked and not having enough time to do your work. And, we feel good about ourselves when we simultaneously talk on the phone, while reading and responding to an e-mail. Everybody seems to be doing it and even bragging about it. It's a workplace craze. But, that doesn't mean it's productive or effective. In fact, studies have shown it's not. Studies show that you do not perform at your best while multi-tasking. In fact, multi-tasking almost always negatively impacts the quality of the work you perform.

The merits and positive beliefs about multi-tasking is a fallacy of our modern high-tech culture. While most people think it's good for them, research shows that it actually decreases productivity. Some studies have shown that while multitasking, your IQ or ability to perform at your best is reduced by 5 points for women and (women, you'll love this) 15 points for men. So, in either case, you're losing an amount of your brain power to the fashionable lure of multi-tasking. Now, that may not sound like much of a loss, but think about it this way: it's enough of a loss that most States are banning talking on your cell phone while driving. Why? Driving requires 100% of your attention in order to minimize your risks of

having a crash. Some studies have equated talking on your cell phone while driving to be as dangerous as driving drunk. Wow, that's a big drop in performance! And always remember: just because something is fashionable, it doesn't mean it's good for you. Not too long ago, it was considered fashionable and sophisticated to smoke cigars, pipes and cigarettes at work. Well, that didn't turn out so well, did it?

The second dangerous technique born of the technology revolution is "internet surfing" or the time-drain associated with the constant checking of your emails, browsing social network sites, online shopping, checking the news, or just roaming the infinite virtual universe. Talk about a bunch of "black holes" where even light can't escape! Don't fall into that temptation, because before you know it, your productive time will seem to mysteriously disappear.

It's worth noting that science tells us that the brain gets a boost from "internet surfing." It gets stimulated by the distraction of constantly having new things to see. The brain is enticed and pulled by a craving for new and constantly stimulating information. There is an excitement and anticipation that results from web surfing. If you study the definition of "addiction," web surfing can become an addiction for your brain and that's not good for you. So, beware and be careful.

If the practices of multi-tasking and web surfing aren't the best way to get your work done, what should you do?

With regards to multi-tasking, start practicing single tasking and following the prioritizing strategy mentioned above. In addition, there is always the old fashion idea of starting your work earlier and/or working longer to get it all done. Sure, that's not as exciting as multi-tasking, but it will prove to be more exciting when you get that bonus or promotion.

With regards to internet surfing at work or when you should be doing work, watch yourself for warning signs that you're wasting time aimlessly web surfing. If you find yourself sliding into this black hole, pull yourself out of it by employing your internal leadership skills to get back to what you should be doing.

Along these lines, one of the biggest workplace pitfalls facing workers today is the idea that while they are getting paid for 8 hours a day, they're often given work which cannot be performed in that amount of time. How you respond to this challenge may spell the difference between your success and failure. If this happens to you, here are some important strategies or ways to work through this challenge.

First, be sure that you are setting your priorities correctly. Maybe the less important work is holding you back from finishing the more important work. Sometimes the less important work is more fun to do than the more important work. Remember, work isn't always fun, and it's the more important work that the boss will notice is not getting done (or is getting done well). Examine your priorities carefully – and if you need guidance prioritizing work, it's usually okay to ask your supervisor what's most important or has the tightest timeframe.

Second, understand that there are probably few workers in the world who go home every night and say to themselves, "I got everything done today." Some nights that might be true, but for the vast majority of time, workers go home feeling that they didn't get everything done. Try to accept that feeling and not

let it disturb you too much (especially once you are off the clock and need to relax or take care of errands). Recognize that it's both natural and normal to feel that way. When you think about it, that's why you're needed at work the next day (to do what didn't get done). Still, if this feeling is overly worrying or distracting to the point where you're frustrated or worse, go back to the strategy of re-setting your priorities, consulting with your boss on how to get it all done on-time if needed. Sometimes, these discussions will lead the boss to either share your work with others or even hire another person to help you and your team.

Next, look at your time allotment for getting your work done. Are you taking too many breaks? Are you overly distracted by other things? Are you operating as efficiently as you could be? The truth is, workers spend much of the day doing things that may not be productive – like socializing with others, surfing the web, taking long breaks and long lunches, or day-dreaming about the weekend. So, study your workplace practices as well as your level of concentration. Nobody works 8 straight hours without a break. Everyone takes a few minutes to stop working and take a much-needed rest. Some amount of break time is necessary to keep your performance high all day long. That's why sports teams have timeouts, periods and half-time breaks. Many offices even have policies allowing or requiring a short break every several hours, which can help employees stay healthy and focused. So, don't give-up those refreshing stoppages to your work routine. You'll need them in order to keep going strong.

If time is still too short for you to get your work done and you're new at the job, remember that your efficiency will improve as you become more familiar with the work. So, find a way to feel at-ease with the situation and see if your frustration melts away as your experience grows.

You may also consider if more training might help. Training can be either formal (a special class) or on-the-job (a more seasoned worker who coaches or teaches you more about a task or set of tasks). Employers understand and tend to support employee training when needed to help with performance. It just makes sense as an "investment" in employee quality. Keep the need for training in mind and request it when it seems necessary. Your boss may find an on-the-job mentor or even pay for training outside of the office, which will help your performance in the short term and the long run.

Another skill to practice around time management is to make sure you're always following this very important rule about work, work assignments and meetings. The rule is:

"Show up – on-time – and prepared."

Make this your motto. Consider this rule essential and vital for workplace success.

Let's break down the "show up – on-time – and prepared" rule into its basic parts.

First, "show up." So much workplace success comes from just being where you're supposed to be. Your physical presence at work, at an appointment or meeting sets the stage for your success. Conversely, if you're not there, failure becomes a real possibility. Too many workers cut corners around this essential rule. They call in "sick" more than they should. They miss meetings or events that are important for

them to attend. Let's be frank: they might be lazy or even afraid of an event and, as a result, let themselves miss it. Don't let yourself fall into this trap. Commit yourself to the practice of always "showing up." Only violate this rule when you have a very real excuse, like you are too sick to work (nobody wants you to show up when you have a fever and are sneezing or coughing), or are in a real emergency, like if someone close to you needs your help.

If you need to be absent from your job for any kind of appointment, schedule in advance and also ask for permission from your supervisor before you make the appointment. For example, there may be an important meeting that would conflict with the appointment, there may be a major deadline that will need your attention that day, or it just might be impossible to find somebody to "fill your shift" – so your boss may need you to find another time to meet with your doctor or dentist. It will cause problems if they don't know in advance and you don't "show up" by simply calling out the same day.

If you are thinking about not showing up where you are supposed to be because you might be afraid of a meeting or event, remember fear gives you two choices. The first is "flight" (running away and not showing-up as required). The second is "fight" (being courageous and doing the right thing). The sad truth about running away or not showing up is that when you eventually show up, you will likely have far more to fear than the work or meeting you missed.

The reason why showing up is so critical is that not showing up makes an employee look seriously undependable and not dedicated to the job and, perhaps, afraid of taking on necessary or difficult tasks. Also, you miss so much important information when you're not present, so you may fall behind those who showed up. With that in mind, commit yourself to always showing up where you're supposed to be.

After showing up where you're supposed to be, the second rule is to be "on time." This is just as important – and may even be more important, depending on the situation. When you are late to a meeting, other attendees may think negatively of your performance. Plus, being late can be rude and is often viewed as disrespectful to those who showed up on time. In its own way, being late to work or a meeting is like stealing money from the company (because time is money – for your salary, the paychecks of other attendees, and any logistics or supplies for the meeting itself).

Now, sometimes we're all late to meetings. In such a situation, it is important to express your regret for being late and offer a short explanation for why. For example, you might say (if true) "I'm very sorry to be late, there was an accident and heavy traffic on my way here." Whatever the reason, make sure that it is true and genuine – and also commit to being on time in the future.

Even if you always have a good excuse for being late, being late too much can easily become dangerous to your reputation. Understand, that in a competitive working environment co-workers love to gossip about other co-workers. And, being late gives your coworkers an opportunity to gossip about you.

Also, both "showing-up" and being "on-time" are powerful practices which create opportunities to gain both knowledge as well as respect. If you don't practice these skills, you'll reduce your chances of being seen in a favorable light. The boss is far more likely to give good assignments and extra consideration to

those employees who are dependable in these ways. Missing meetings and being late can quickly take you out of consideration for career enhancing opportunities. On the other hand, being reliable and on-time – and contributing well to meetings and work products – can put you in front of the line for developing your career, being promoted, and even getting a raise.

The third part of this rule is “to be prepared”.

Since you’re making the effort to show up and be on time, you might as well go all the way and “be prepared” for the meeting or event. Being prepared means anticipating what will happen or be discussed and having something to contribute to the proceedings. All it takes is study, reflection, consideration, and – if needed – producing materials for yourself or your team. Sometimes this means just taking the time needed to read the meeting’s agenda (when there is one), going through any extra links or documents, and noting what you can add to the discussions. If you are asked to bring anything “to the table” – such as a presentation or handout – make sure to prepare it in advance and practice your speech or talking points. After all, why invest all that energy into attending the meeting or event without being prepared and making the most of it?

Now that you know and understand the significance of “showing up” – “on-time” – and “being prepared,” start practicing those work skills as soon as possible (even while you’re still in school). It’s amazing how easy habits (both good and bad ones) are to follow once you practice them for a while. Make these workplace rules a regular set of habits now, and before you know it, it will be easier to follow them than to break them.

Lastly, let’s admit that sometimes a boss or organization will give their workers too much work to perform – and even when we follow all these techniques around setting priorities and managing time effectively, there still might be a problem. In today’s competitive workplace, the practice of doing more with less (doing more work with fewer resources or workers) has made this a harsh reality. If you’ve tried all these techniques and it’s still impossible to get it all the work done, simply go to your boss and tell them that you’ve set your priorities effectively, managed your time, taken work home (as needed), and dependably showed up on-time and prepared. A good boss will be sympathetic to the conversation because you’ve done all you should have done, and they may adjust your workload or give you more supports to finish tasks. In such cases, the act of reporting your inability to get the job done is not a sign of failure. It’s an act of duty. It’s also important to take this step before you’ve missed key deadlines. You will be more creditable by having this conversation with your boss before any negative outcomes or poor performance has happened. By raising this subject with the boss, after taking the actions suggested above, you will have been proactive and responsible (both admirable qualities).

Remember, the boss has a responsibility to manage you. That means helping you to perform successfully. If you ask the boss for help, before poor performance happens, they’ll want to act (do their job) to help you improve your performance. Understand that your boss also has a boss and they don’t want to have to report to their boss the fact they knew you were running late with a key project or miss a deadline and they did nothing to help you.

As mentioned, your boss may respond with additional training, moving some of your duties to others, assigning others to help, extend deadlines, give you strategies or ideas on how to most efficiently go forward to meet the deadline or even take you with them to meet their boss for further counsel and advice on how best to proceed.

So, if you ever find yourself in this situation, and you've done all the other things recommended above, feel confident about asking for help. Do not delay or avoid implementing this strategy. If you delay, you may hear those dreaded and chilling words from your boss: "Why didn't you tell me earlier!"

If you are consistently overwhelmed and your boss will not make the effort to adjust your workload or provide accommodations, you may want to consult with other managers or human resources (HR) staff. This is especially true if your boss expects you to work extra hours without pay or somehow references your disability as a reason you "cannot perform" the job at-hand. However, if your job involves projects and timely deliverables – like many office jobs do – you may occasionally run into a hard deadline that is difficult to meet in a regular 8-hour day or 40-hour week. Unfortunately, this happens to people with and without disabilities in the modern economy. It shouldn't happen all the time, so just keep track of your "deliverables" and communicate with your boss to make sure you aren't over-worked.

Let's say, though, that you run into an urgent deadline and just can't get the task done in a regular workday or work-week. You may need to stay in the office after-hours or bring unfinished work home and take extra time to finish a project. If you are a "salaried" employee, like many people in offices are, it's within the law to work more than 8 hours if it gets your tasks done. If you are an hourly employee, you may be able to ask your boss if you can log some overtime in the office, at a café or on your home computer. Some people will also work after-hours to make up for a doctor's appointment instead of logging sick time, if it helps them get tasks done on-time. Always make sure to get written approval from your boss if you need to work extra, mark down the hours you work, and check any rules around "overtime pay" (such as getting paid time-and-a-half for anything over 8 hours in a day). And again, if you are consistently given more work than you can get done in a regular day or week, consult with your boss to adjust your workload or accommodations so you don't get overwhelmed.

There are some things you can do outside of the office that will improve your performance, but might not necessarily count as time "worked." For example, reading a book that's related to your job (like an advertising guide if you are in a marketing department) will make you a more knowledgeable and effective employee – and is a better use of time at home than playing cell-phone games or watching TV. It can help you gain information to perform better in the office, and if you mention the book in a conversation with your boss, it can also show them you are investing time in your work and organization. That will reflect well on you as an employee, and may even lead to a raise or promotion in the long term. Since this book is about being a professional competitive worker who happens to have a disability, one final thought.

Through this book, we've discussed the reality that disability often means that some things take "extra time, resources and expenses" to do. As a result, consider the potential impact that a disability may have on your ability to meet workplace deadlines. This means considering or re-considering your

workplace accommodations. Be smart about this subject, especially if performance is lagging and your need to have new disability-related accommodations or adjustments to your current ones. As work changes or your disability evolves, you may need a new assessment. Contact someone who can help. You can always call the Job Accommodation Network (1-800-JAN-7234) for a free and confidential consultation on how to increase performance through possible changes or additions to your disability accommodations. If you identify new or additional accommodation needs that will help you improve your work performance, be sure to discuss this with your boss.

Also, if you are a new worker and just out of school, remember that your former education-based accommodations may not be effective – or possible – in your job. For example, in school, you may have received extra time for assignments or a reduced course load (i.e. taking 3 courses per semester instead of the usual 4). In the workplace, employers usually do not consider adjusting workload or timelines as a first resort. If you feel like you need extra time due to a disability, take efforts on your own or with management to identify other types of disability-related accommodations which are designed to increase your productivity. These could include, for example, voice-dictation computer software for someone who has difficulty typing, or a new ergonomic chair for someone with back pain who would otherwise need to take frequent breaks. For help, remember JAN and your area’s vocational rehabilitation agency (see Lesson 6 below for more on these resources).

Always, keep learning

If you’re in school now, you probably can’t wait until it’s over and you get that degree or diploma. When you reach that milestone, you’re probably dreaming about finally putting the books, learning and studying behind you. Well, let go of that dream because successful professionals know that studying and learning never end.

If you want to be successful in your career, learning new ideas and information is going to be an on-going and continuous process. A big reason for lifelong learning is that the “state-of-the-art” in your field – no matter what it is – will continue to expand and grow, with new facts, figures, knowledge, practices and technologies. When employees decide to stop studying and learning about the latest advances relative to their job and profession, their fellow co-workers or competition for that next promotion are likely to pass them by. As industries advance, so do the expectations and requirements for jobs – so not keeping up may leave an employee unable to do their core, evolving responsibilities. The results can easily be the same as they are in school when a student fails to open their books and learn. It can mean getting the “F” grade – and at work, an “F” can stand for “fired.”

On the other hand, if you take the effort to constantly learn by keeping up with your industry’s changes, including the latest skills and technologies, you will get the “A” grade. At work, that “A” can stand for “advancing” – in your organization, your career, your salary, and more.

One important way to keep up-to-date with your profession’s evolution is to stay connected with a related professional society or trade association. For example, if you’re in communications or public relations, you might want to join the Public Relations Society of America and keep up with the latest developments in the field through their newsletters, meetings and journals. Just about every job

category has a related professional society or trade group to follow. A simple online search, chatting with managers or coworkers, or networking at events can help you find the best groups to follow.

As we mentioned earlier, reading books related to your profession is a great way of keeping in-the-know and supporting your career. E-books for your computer, tablet or E-reader (like an Amazon Kindle) are also a convenient way to get new information, especially if you have a hard time holding a regular paper book. Audiobooks can be another great option and tend to work well for people with certain physical or learning disabilities: a close acquaintance of mine even listens to audiobooks and podcasts related to his field while rolling around town in his wheelchair. If you find that money for books is an issue, consider going to your local library – and many libraries also offer subscriptions to e-book and audiobook services once you get a library card!

In addition to keeping up with your profession's news, you should also keep up with the general news. For example, knowing how the economy is doing in your locality, state, nation and the world can help to inform and guide you in your daily workplace and even career decisions. Keeping current on the latest news will also help to keep you up-to-date with new developments, opportunities and risks that can help you do a better job. Being well informed about current events and being able to contribute to workplace conversations, even if they are un-related to your specific field, makes you a more impressive professional. We live in a global economy and it has become increasingly important for every thoughtful and successful worker to know what's going on all over the world. So, read or listen to the news daily.

One tremendous learning tool at your finger-tips is, of course, the internet. Not only will surfing it routinely afford you instant access to the latest and greatest news sources, but it's also a tremendous asset in learning things that can make you a better-performing professional. For example, if in a business meeting, someone uses a word that you don't know or mentions a fact unfamiliar to you, be sure to look up the word or fact after the meeting and learn what it means. Just don't search on your phone during the meeting and miss what's going on in the moment!

Here's a word of caution about the subject of "always keep learning." Sometimes (more than you might imagine), moderately successful people get a "big head" or think they're too smart to keep learning. They think they know it all and arrogantly let the world of facts and information pass them by. All of a sudden, it's like learning is beneath them. When this happens, "know-it-alls" very quickly find themselves becoming obsolete. It's the continuous learners who pass them by. So, when you become successful (hopefully by seeking out new information) avoid this ego trap and keep learning.

It's not just learning new things that make for a great professional: it's also about "reflection." After you find new information, reflect on what you've read and heard. Take time either after or before work to just sit down and think about it all. You will find that your best ideas and thoughts come during quiet reflection, so set aside time for thinking back upon what you've read and learned. Consider how it might tie into the rest of your knowledge, work and career. This will help to make you a strong and always improving professional.

Even after school ends, always keep learning and reflecting. The truth of the matter is that school is the practice field for your life-long, continuing professional education. The skills you develop in school around learning, reflecting and getting tasks done are the same ones you'll need to use in your working career. So, if you are in school, take advantage of the full experience now and that will make you a stronger working professional. If you are out of school, think back to your studies and consider how the skills you learned will help you today and in the future.

Learning never ends.

Think and act strategically (the big picture)

Whenever companies or other work organizations have two or more employees (as most places do), the employees split or divide their duties between or among them. This division of labor allows for each employee to specialize in a particular set of subjects or tasks. As companies get larger and larger, their workers tend to become even more specialized in their duties. In the process of becoming more focused, though, individual employees may become further removed from the organization's overall sense of direction. It's a difficult dynamic that leaders, managers, and other employees need to navigate to both get work done and meet organizational goals.

Imagine that you get an entry-level job with a company of about 100 to 200 people (this workforce is generally considered a small- to medium-sized business). It's likely that your duties will be specialized and you will be far down the chain of command. For example, you might get a researching job which requires you to routinely review relevant journals, reports and data for individual projects. This may sound like a straightforward job: just read and report what you learn to your boss. However, in order to do your best, it is important for you to learn as much as you can about the company's current issues, challenges and goals. If you have a good working knowledge of these overarching facts (the "big picture" stuff), you can do your job more effectively by being more alert for information which best serves the "big picture" concerns of your company.

Having a sense and strategy about the big picture will always make you a smarter employee in whatever role or task you have. That's true because it's the sum of the parts that make the whole: the quality of each employee's individual work adds up to the company's success.

So, let's say that you are an entry-level employee with specialized tasks – but you want to include the big picture in your work. By performing your work in a strategic way, you will be most effective.

Suppose you have an assignment that is a seemingly minor one. You've been asked to prepare nametags for guests at a company meeting or event. That sounds simple enough: just greet each guest when they arrive at your registration desk and ask for their name so you can create a nametag for them. At least, that's how most employees might approach this assignment. They might not take the time to think about the strategy of the event within the context of the company's goals. If they did, they might decide to adapt or expand their effort to include other key elements which better serve the company's overall strategy.

Let's say, for example, the purpose of this meeting is to secure new customers (the attendees). You might take the initiative and modify your assignment by deciding that, in order to help the company with its goal of getting new customers, you are going to make sure that each attendee feels especially welcomed. You realize that you are likely to be the first person from your company they meet – and you know how important first impressions are. So, on your own, you enhance the assignment. For starters, you make an extra effort to warmly and enthusiastically welcome the conference's attendees. After you greet each person, you ask them how their trip was and thank them for coming. Instead of just asking for a name and writing it on a name tag, you help to build a connection between the attendees and the company itself. Hopefully that connection will continue long-term and grow to a strong business relationship.

In addition, you may expand the basic assignment – so instead of creating name tags when attendees show up, you've decided to create them before they arrive. This way, you can both speed up the process and make them feel more important to the company. Also, you recognize that on the meeting's attendee list, there is a mix of different customer types (prior, existing and potential new customers). In order to help your co-workers tell the difference, you go ahead and prepare their nametags in different colors which show these differences.

Of course, be sure to check-in with your boss on these ideas to be sure they are welcomed. If your boss likes the idea, they will almost certainly be grateful – and keep your quality work in mind for the future.

The point is that no matter how routine your work tasks seems to be, it's very likely that you can make your work more meaningful to your organization when you think and act strategically. By doing so, you will get both greater results and well-earned recognition. When you contribute to your organization's success, the organization becomes more stable, which also means that your job is that much more secure.

Knowing how you're doing

The full picture of how you are doing in the workplace is often difficult to see. It's hard for workers to assess themselves and their work objectively, including identifying areas for improvement. It's hard to because self-assessments, no matter how positive, often brings up a few shortcomings that can hurt our feelings – and nobody wants to feel badly about themselves. So, the tendency for most workers is to ignore self-assessment and just look away.

While looking away is a natural and understandable reaction, to be successful in your job, you must learn how to take both a realistic and continuous look at your job performance. You should make the effort to objectively determine if you're performing well or not. For better or worse, others are going to see your work and make judgments about you. By doing this for yourself, you can stay ahead of others' negativity by recognizing any weaknesses early on and correcting them even before others notice them.

It's always to your advantage to be aware of your weaknesses and, in turn, to start dealing with them before they become a serious issue or worse. Developing the willingness and skills to recognize your weaknesses before others do will give you a greater chance for workplace success, since early self-

corrections and adjustments will be easier to make than having corrections imposed upon you. Plus, it's better and even easier to make minor self-corrections to your performance as soon as possible before missteps become bad habits or affect the quality of your work for a long time. Following a personal self-assessment strategy will not only help you coach yourself to improved performance, it will greatly impress both your co-workers and boss. Learn and adopt the practice of making self-improvement techniques a part of your professional practice.

Here's how to self-assess your work performance.

One key strategy to practice is to ask yourself the question, "How often have I successfully completed an assignment, on-time, that my boss has asked me to do?" If your answer is "not always" or "sometimes," you may be in trouble. Remember, your top priority should be to get done what your boss wants you to do. If you find yourself lacking on this count, don't panic: just honestly think about why this may be happening.

Start by making a list of the times when your boss asked you to do something and you didn't get it done within the expected timeframe or to their satisfaction (or to your own satisfaction). Review the list and see if you can understand why this might be so. If you can't make sense of it, take the list to someone you can trust and ask them for some help with your understanding of what might be going wrong. See if you or a friend can identify or determine the reasons why you have come up short.

Then, develop a plan of action to improve your performance. If you need help beyond either yourself or a friend, consider asking your boss for help. Your boss will likely be pleased that you're trying hard to improve your performance and will usually take steps to assist you. In all likelihood, your boss has already noticed any shortcomings and is thinking about when to bring up the subject. Make it easier on the both of you by bringing it up first – in a thoughtful and professional way.

Another way to determine how well you're doing at work is revealed in the answer to the question, "How often is my boss asking me to take on new and increasingly more responsible assignments?" If this is happening, it probably means that your performance is good. Awarding of better and more work assignments is a sign of building trust in your abilities. It is often an early indication of possible advancement or promotion.

That's how the promotion process often begins. You rarely get the promotion first, then are given greater responsibilities and more advanced work. An employer will usually want to first try you out at this next level of performance, to see if you can handle it, before the formal promotion is considered. The employer wants to be sure you can perform at this next higher level before you're deemed qualified for it. Thank your boss for trusting you with those responsibilities and consult with them as needed to ensure you are completing the tasks up to their expectations. They will appreciate that you want to give them high-quality work (especially because they likely have a boss too, so they want to provide quality products up the chain-of-command).

If you are simply given the same level tasks and are not getting these types of growth opportunities, you might begin to consider the possibility that you have room for improvement. Maybe you are providing decent work, but not high enough quality that your boss would trust you with increasing responsibilities (and opportunities for career growth, including a promotion and raise). If that's happening, take a close and objective look at what is going on and be alert to work on your any performance issues that you might identify. Again, don't be shy about asking your boss for some feedback on how you can provide better quality work. That act alone can save the situation by showing your boss that, while your performance might need improving, you have a desire and commitment to improving it. Always strive to be proactive. Take self-directed positive steps before your boss takes any negative ones.

Another way to get good feedback on your performance is to ask your boss about it often and routinely. Believe it or not, bosses may withhold their negative impressions about their workers longer than they should. Since their goal is to get the most out of their workers, they often steer clear of telling an employee every time they might fumble the ball (fail to do the job correctly or successfully) because they worry that the employee might get demoralized and perform even worse. As a result, bosses want to encourage employees to do better with regular praise, while holding back negative comments – which could be turned into constructive feedback and teaching moments. Unfortunately, by avoiding constructive feedback, a supervisor may allow an employee's negative performance to truly affect their work and develop into a long-term habit. When that happens, things become even worse.

To avoid this natural tendency of withholding negative comments or feedback until it's too late, make it easier on the both you and your boss by asking, "How am I doing?" Even let them know that you are interested in finding "areas for improvement" where you can build better habits. By practicing this skill, you're more likely to get earlier and gentler alerts that improve things before they become a major issue. In addition to making your boss' job easier by initiating this conversation, you will show your desire to perform better and keep improving. These "bonus points" for dedication can often counteract any negative performance issues that would cause concern. Once you correct any negative habits, those bonus points turn into a double-win!

The performance evaluation

Once or twice per year, an employee usually gets a formal "performance evaluation." These are official and written documents that go on your record. Performance evaluation time is tough for everyone involved. Regarding the dreaded "performance evaluation" process, it's important that you understand how they generally work.

Typically, your overall performance is evaluated in two categories. The two classic performance evaluation considerations are:

1. What have you done?
2. How did you do it?

Most new workers believe a performance evaluation just includes the first category, and they avoiding the second category, which can get them into trouble. The truth is that they work together and the "how" is a vital component. Let's look at both pieces. "What" means the actual work performed,

including its quality, quantity, and impact. “How” means the way in which you did it, including the timeframe, technique and teamwork. Most workplaces estimate that about half of your performance grade or score will be based on what you accomplished and half of your grade or rating will be based on how you did it.

To say it another way, if an employee is a great worker in the sense that they get things done and achieve great results, but they are unfriendly or uncooperative with coworkers and make people angry (at either themselves or the company), the employee is not likely to score well on a performance evaluation because of “how” they go about their work. It’s not enough to get the job done effectively: it’s equally important to get the job done in a way which promotes good relationships and teamwork.

Most often, before your supervisor or boss gives you a performance appraisal on how well you did during a particular time frame, he or she will ask you to submit a statement about what you think you accomplished during this time frame. In other words, they’ll want your input. This is not the time to be shy. It’s the time to be good bragger (or “self-promoter”) as described in Lesson 1 above.

Paving the way to a good performance evaluation should start when the period begins, not when it ends. Give your boss the best possible statement on your performance by starting right after the last performance review keep a diary or log of your accomplishments during your performance period. Don’t wait until the end of it to try to remember what you did. Write your accomplishments down as they happen. Be sure to offer specifics (including positive outcomes and results) about your accomplishments for your boss to read when they write your evaluation.

Here’s a typical performance evaluation outline which lists both the “what” and “how” qualities to be rated.

“What” outcomes did you achieved around your major assigned duties or tasks?

This section of a performance evaluation is directly related to your job description duties and what your boss instructed you to do. Sometimes, the “work goals” are part of your job description, sometimes they are tasks given to you along the way, and sometimes they are specific goals laid out at the end of the last performance review. Each goal will come with a “measure of success” that serves as a measuring stick for weather the goal was met to an ideal degree – or even done beyond expectations. Then, the review will allow the employee and supervisor to put in undervaluation about whether the goal was met and any other comments about its quality. Here are three sample work goals being evaluated, though it’s likely that you’ll have more than three in a performance review.

- ✓ Work goal 1: Develop a brochure about the organization’s new product.
Measure of success: Brochure is written in 3 months and published in 6 months.
Comment or evaluation statement: Brochure was developed ahead of schedule and was both accurate and attractive.

- ✓ Work goal 2: Make five (5) presentations about our new product to key organizations.

Measure of success: These five (5) presentations are to reach over 500 potential customers

Comment or evaluation statement: Employee made seven (7) presentations which reached over 1,000 potential customers.

- ✓ Work goal 3: Survey customers' feedback on the impact of the brochure.

Measure of success: Collect and report the results of 100 customer completed surveys.

Comment or Evaluation Statement: Collected over 300 customer surveys, with the average rating for the brochure's impact as 90% effective.

"How" did you do these tasks?

Your employer will further rate you on how well you perform around the following professional skills.

- ✓ Good interpersonal skills – respect for supervisor, co-workers & customers
- ✓ Follows workplace rules
- ✓ Problem solving and decision-making skills
- ✓ Effective communication skills
- ✓ Leadership – leads by example
- ✓ Teamwork – shares credit with others and helps others perform better
- ✓ General knowledge about his or her field

After your boss writes his or hers comments about how well you performed in both areas of performance, they will give you an overall rating. Here's a typical performance rating sheet for a sample completed performance evaluation (the scale ranks 1 as best and 5 as worst, although some scales will go the other way).

Scoring: The scoring will be based on a five-point scale.

1) Outstanding: Performance exceeds standard performance by an exceptional degree and clearly is superior to above standard performance. This high level of performance is consistent throughout the appraisal period and contributes heavily to the achievement of company goals and objectives. (Eligible for 5% Raise)

2) Exceeds Expectations: Performance consistently exceeds expectations for the position. Performance contributes to the achievement of company goals and objectives. (Eligible for 3% Raise)

3) Meets Expectations: Performance meets expectations for the position and occasionally exceeds them. Efforts are consistent with what is routinely expected for satisfactory performance.

4) Needs Improvement: Performance falls below established standards (i.e. what is routinely expected of the employee in the position) but is not totally unacceptable. Improvement is needed.

5) Unacceptable: Performance fails to meet the work requirements of the position. Performance fails to significantly contribute to departmental work goals or objectives. Substantial improvement and immediate corrective action are needed.

If this performance rating scale looks familiar to you, you might be right. It does look like the grading system in school. At work, you're likely to have these five sample levels of performance. In school, you have five grading levels. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the performance Level #1 in our sample grading scale above is like an "A" grade in school and so forth (just to complete the comparison, level #5 is an "F"). Some things never change.

Now, when your performance evaluation overall score is in either the "meets expectations" or "satisfactory" scoring range, you may think that this means you're doing a great job. What it really means is you are performing at a basic level of performance: you're doing your job at the required level of performance necessary to stay out of trouble. This may be fine for the first evaluation or two; however, as your employment continues, if you don't see your scores moving higher, you may want to study your performance more closely and make extra effort to improve. This is because continuing to be scored at the "meets expectations" level may mean promotions will pass you by, and in the worst case may put your job in danger if your employer makes staffing changes.

With that in mind, strive to score higher than "satisfactory" whenever you can. And always be sure to ask openly and honestly of yourself, a trusted friend or even your boss: "What can I do to become a better performer?"

Another subject related to "knowing how you're doing" is being sure to take a good and honest look at your "methods of working" or "biases about working" (your true and deep feelings about working). In short, what are your attitudes about both working in general and your current job specifically? If you have negative feelings about either of these, it may dramatically affect the quality of your work efforts and, in turn, your performance. Successful workers know the importance of monitoring these deeper factors or feelings within themselves, because they understand the importance of being in the right frame-of-mind about work.

Your "methods of working" – or your attitude about working – is the foundation upon which performance either goes up or down. It's like school. Whenever you were unhappy or had negative feelings about school, the quality of your work probably went down (if you still kept those grades up, then well done). So, look even deeper than the "what" and "how" you're performing at work to your deeper feelings about it all. If you are feeling negatively about work, you must deal with it before bad things happen. Consult with a friend or coworker, have a talk with your boss, or maybe even find a professional job coach – but take actions to improve your attitude so that you can more easily make a high-quality work product.

Some questions to ask yourself about your "methods of working" are:

- ✓ Do I always show up, on time and prepared for the day?
- ✓ Do I take too much leave because I'm not happy with my job?
- ✓ Am I rested and energized for work?
- ✓ Am I clean and properly dressed for work each day?
- ✓ Do I greet people when I arrive at work?

- ✓ Do people like to talk with me?
- ✓ Do I show a good attitude?
- ✓ Do I keep my effort high all day?
- ✓ Do I communicate well?
- ✓ Am I positive, even when things aren't going well?
- ✓ Do I take reasonable (not too many or too long) breaks, including lunch time?
- ✓ Do I complain about work to others (at work, at home, or both)?
- ✓ If I say I'm going to do something, do I make sure I do it, or do I pretend I did it?
- ✓ Do I always treat others with respect?
- ✓ Do I obey the golden rule, "Do unto others as you wish they would do unto you"?

Your answers to these questions will help you understand your mental readiness or attitude about either (or both) working in general or your job specifically.

So, it's time to ask yourself: are you engaged, interested, and committed to your job – or are you feeling lazy, bored, or not that excited about the idea of getting up each morning to go to work? Don't be afraid of your answers. If you're not that interested, engaged or committed to the idea of working, deal with it now before it becomes a negative experience or a bad mark on your record.

One way to deal with negative feelings about work is to identify why these feelings may be so. Maybe you dislike working because of a general fear about failure, or because you feel not accepted or even rejected in the workplace, or because you feel you're not doing a good job, or because accommodating your disability doesn't seem adequate or right. If your feelings seem more general than these reasons – like work is a drag or working is tiring – dig deeper. Usually, if the workplace is a positive experience, then these types of more general negative feelings won't be there. In other words, try and get to the bottom of any negative feeling you might be having. You can deal with your concerns by reflecting on your own or discussing them with someone you trust.

Every worker, at one time or another, has had these negative feelings and thoughts. So, don't despair or give up. There are solutions and answers to all of these bad feelings and, perhaps, many answers to these questions or concerns can be found in this book.

The key or important point here is to get these questions out of your subconscious so they can be explored and answered thoughtfully. There are always answers to be found which can change the whole situation. If not, it may be time to find a new job.

Let's be further honest with ourselves and recognize that work is called "work" for a reason: it's work. It takes time, focus, energy, effort – and can become tiring after a while. Even the most exciting and meaningful jobs can leave people drained at the end of the day, but given the right opportunity, the good outweighs the bad.

However, the answer to negative fears or feeling around work is to find work that you like or love to do. It's really true to say, "work can be fun if you love what you're doing." For example, if you love being around young people and helping them grow, maybe being a teacher is the way to go. If you love

animals, maybe working at an animal shelter or becoming a veterinarian would be rewarding and fulfilling careers. To avoid negative feelings about your line of work, try to match your interest and abilities to jobs and careers which give you what you like or love to do. It might be hard to imagine having a job you love to do, but it can happen if you try. And, should you find such work, it will both make work easier and enrich your life.

If you already have a job and find yourself unhappy where you work, you have two options. First, you can change your career and find new employment. This takes time and energy, just like any job hunt, and you will need to balance working with sending out resumes and doing interviews. You could choose to quit and then apply for jobs while unemployed, but this can be risky for your finances since you won't have income for an unknown amount of time; and because generally, unemployed job applicants are less appealing to potential employers, who often wonder why a person is currently unemployed.

The second choice is to discover a way to find happiness at your current job. You could talk with friends, coworkers, family or a counselor to identify the good in your job and focus on that through your day. In some cases, you may be able to talk with your boss and see if you can tweak your job to do more of what you actually enjoy at work. If things remain tough, it's also possible to view your work as a long-term investment. A stressful job can still be a "stepping stone" to a more fulfilling career – for example, a position filing paperwork in an office can be a starting point toward working on projects, then managing those projects, then becoming part of upper-management, and so on. If you think that the sacrifice of a demanding position is worth doing what you love long-term, you may want to look to the future to stay motivated during tough days. If work is really a drag and you don't see things getting better, though, sometimes the first option of changing things up is the way to go.

Now, let's say that you are looking for a job (either right out of school or after leaving another job) and really want to make sure you choose the right one. The first step is to understand your own skills and what you want out of work. As you self-evaluate or assess yourself around the subject of working, there's a technique which might be useful. It's called the SWOT method.

SWOT stands for "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats." This management technique was developed by Dr. Robert Humphrey of Stanford University in the 1960s to help organizations better analyze their risks and then develop a plan to respond. And although it was developed for organizations, it can be helpful to individuals when managing their barriers to performance and reaching their goals.

The SWOT analysis works this way. When analyzing their situations, individuals ask, "What are my own strengths and weaknesses – and what are the opportunities and threats in front of me?" The person using SWOT then uses compares those 4 factors and builds a strategy for achieving their goals.

As we mentioned above, this tool can be applied to either organizations or individuals. For our purposes here, let's use the SWOT as an individual self-assessment tool. First off, look inside: what are your strengths (pluses) and weaknesses (minuses) as you seek to better understand your current employment performance, feelings about working or even finding or holding job? In any case or

situation, look at the world around you: what are the opportunities (pluses) and threats (minuses) for the job market in general, as well as any specific jobs that you may be looking at?

In this example, we're looking to find a job.

The following SWOT example documents a person's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats in the job market around them. (For a blank personal SWOT analysis form to use for the job market in general, specific positions, or other parts of your life, see Appendix B in the *Make It Work* book at <https://wid.org/wid-e3/employment-empowerment/>.)

The chart below lists two areas for you to consider regarding your strengths and weaknesses. These are: your personal situation and outside or external forces.

"My SWOT analysis for getting a job"

	<u>Strengths (Pluses)</u>	<u>Weaknesses (Minuses)</u>
Your Personal Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I want a job• I have worked before• I have my "brag bites," elevator speech, and resume ready	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm not sure what work I want• I don't know where to look• I'm not good at job interviews
	<u>Opportunities (Pluses)</u>	<u>Threats (Minuses)</u>
Outside or External Forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are plenty of job openings• My parents and friends want to help• I have good references	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accessible transportation is limited• There are no employment agencies that can help me

Having done this review, you're now in a better place to define what actions or plans you need to follow in order to find solutions. In fact, just by doing this assessment, you're beginning to take action. Keep moving forward. If helpful, take what you wrote in your SWOT analysis to a trusted friend and talk further with them about it. With your SWOT analysis, you have some facts to begin a good conversation.

And, use this SWOT formula to help you see the various factors that need to be understood in order to best approach a situation.

It's important for you to understand and continually think about self-assessing your work place performance. If you take the initiative to self-assess regularly you're far more likely to have a successful and rewarding career.

Be in control of your future.

Making mistakes

Make no mistake: in the world of work, you'll make plenty of mistakes. We're all human – and mistakes are a routine part of being human. So don't feel like you're a failure if you make them. If you feel down after a slip-up, just remind yourself: everybody makes mistakes.

The trick about making mistakes is to strive to learn from them and to be sure not to make the same mistake twice. As a general rule, the first time you make a mistake, it can be called a "learning experience" and people (including your boss) will usually understand and be forgiving. It's often said that you learn more from your mistakes than from your successes. The key word here is "learn," so take an effort to reflect on your mistake and understand how to avoid it in the future. A good boss who saw what happened may appreciate it if you explain what you learned and how you plan to improve. Many will also provide advice on exactly what to do moving forward.

However, if you make the same mistake a second time, it might be viewed in a worse light (this is why it's important to learn and improve the first time). Your boss may believe that that you failed to learn from your first mistake, and the "failure to learn" impacted or hurt your job performance. Because your boss is responsible for supervising you and your work, *their* boss may also hold them responsible for your mistakes. Your boss may become concerned that it will happen again, which can affect your working relationship. If you should make the same mistake a third time (or more), they likely aren't going to be at all happy. They will begin to think that you're just not thinking, learning, being careful, or taking the effort to improve your job performance. If this happens, you may be demoted (moved to a lower-paying position) or even fired. This is, again, why it's so important to reflect on your work and take the necessary steps to improve.

Another rule around making mistakes is to learn NOT to let it undermine your confidence. Self-confidence is vital to you and your performance. Don't be overly upset or shaken by a mistake. Rather, be professional – which means being calm, taking responsibility and fixing any problems that your action caused as soon as possible. Try to stay positive: in fact, sometimes the fix to a mistake can be better than the original idea, if you learned from it. That's how we improve.

So, don't be afraid or feel devastated when you make mistakes. Don't obsess about what might happen if the same thing happens in the future. Just correct any consequences and change your own habits that led to the mistake itself. And don't repeat them.

Finally, think about what causes mistakes. Sometimes it's because we don't know the correct way to do things, sometimes it's because we aren't paying attention closely enough, and sometimes it's because we simply slipped up. But sometimes it's because we are working so hard and putting in so much effort, that too much is happening at once and we miss a detail. In this last case, some leaders believe that if you're not making mistakes, you're not moving fast enough.

Just be sure you move even faster to fix them.

Being innovative and excelling

Okay, it's "extra credit" time.

If you follow the advice above, you'll become a valued employee. You'll get a "C" or "B" and maybe some "A"s in your job. Now, you're beginning to learn what it takes to ensure that you'll perform well in a job and career. You know how to continuously evaluate yourself in order to be sure you're doing your job in a manner that keeps both you and your boss happy regarding your performance.

However, you have the ambition and drive to do more. You want to excel. You want to get all "A"s, even "A+"s. Being good is fine, but being great is best. You want to be more than a good employee. You want to be a great employee who is heading for the top of your department or organization. Using our example earlier, you want to move from filing papers to working on projects to managing those projects to being upper-level management. You want to lead (and get paid more as you do).

What's the edge needed to excel to the top? What else do you need to know in order to be more than just a fine employee? What does it take to be "great"?

In a word, it takes being an innovator. Becoming that trusted employee who not only gets their job done effectively but is always looking at everything from 30,000 feet high up in the air, where you can see the "big picture" more clearly. Up in the sky, you can see more. You will be looking at where the company has been, where it is now and where it needs to go next. With this perspective, you can become an innovator and an outstanding employee heading for the top ranks.

Practice these additional skills if you want to become a top performer. Here are even more secrets to maximum success in your career. And don't forget: all that has been said in this book and which lies ahead must be included in your performance for you to reach the top.

This is the extra credit stuff – and here are those extra lessons.

1. Stay Positive

Don't complain about things that aren't right. See these things as golden opportunities for you to excel by finding solutions. It's easy to find faults and problems. It's harder to create solutions. See the silver lining in the dark clouds. Always be positive. Positive people attract other positive people and that's where innovation occurs.

2. Observe, notice and ask the deeper questions.

Strive to understand why things are the way they are. Dig deeper and develop an insight into what's going on and why. Look for patterns or deep underlying causes. Learn more than others just notice. Be curious. Most people focus on the getting the job at hand done correctly, while not paying close attention to the deeper meanings or insights regarding what's happening. Ask questions, think beyond the surface reality. Don't just do your job well; understand your job in the context of the whole operation – of your organization and even the industry it operates in. In addition, always try to find the things that are a little bit off or not quite right. And listen to everyone, especially those who may disagree with you or see things differently. They may provide insight into what's really going on – or show you the viewpoints that are holding things back.

3. Think, ponder and dream

Most people think that daydreaming or reflecting isn't working. "Let's stop day dreaming and get to work," someone might say. Well, research has shown us that daydreaming or stepping back from the "pressing business" and wondering about things is a great way to remain innovative and productive. Daydreaming, in this example, is recalling information without distractions – so simply taking a break to reflect on a meeting or task you completed (or are working on). Many top organizations give their employees free time to engage in experiments or just to think about what's going on in the workplace around them. Great performers need this "quiet time" or "time out" to more completely reflect and analyze the true meanings of their daily routine, ways to improve their performance, the direction of their organization, and more. Reflection can also happen off the job. Think, ponder and dream about work even when you're not there – not all the time, but for some of the time (and try to keep it positive and constructive). While you're doing housework, just before you go to sleep, or while you're at home getting ready for work, let your mind reflect or ponder it all. It's amazing how much more insightful your mind will be when you reflect away from the hustle and bustle of work.

4. Pay attention to everything

Don't dismiss minor details or points by explaining them away so you can stay in your comfort zone. Be alert and look to identify inconsistencies, anomalies, and unexplained outcomes. Try to capture and pay attention to all the minor details or "dots" of the company's operation. Be innovative by connecting those random dots in new and not-previously-understood ways. Obviously, without all the dots identified, you won't get the correct picture when you connect them all. So, don't dismiss anything you notice. It might be the key to developing a deeper understanding of what's actually happening – which can help you be more innovative for making things better.

5. Look closely at contradictions

Deep and important insights most often occur when we notice things that don't make sense to us. Here's where you dig deeper. If your instincts tell you that something doesn't make sense, dig until it does. These are the situations where innovation most often occurs. Humans (especially average workers) have a tendency to shrug our shoulders when we identify contradictions or inconsistencies. We want to move on, not stop and ponder why these may exist. It takes time and energy to ask questions, and our instincts often tell us it's not worth the effort to investigate farther. Sure, sometimes there is

not meaning in these “not quite right” facts; however, many times that’s where the gold is to be mined by the outstanding innovative employee on their way to the top.

6. Do something

If you’re going to take the time and invest the energy to follow the steps above, it is without value unless you take the step of “doing something.” Taking action is where your leadership skills kick in. This means getting needed data or evidence, defining the challenge, developing a plan of action or response, as well as speaking out on about what you’ve observed and recommend. This is the payoff point and the crowning achievement of your innovative spirit. So, don’t present to your boss or team just a “hunch” around a “problem” – instead, offer a complete proposal.

Lastly, there are often great opportunities for innovative workers when there is great crisis.

Too many times, when a company or organization is in crisis, most of its workers run and hide under their desks. This is not the time to lay low. This is the time for you, as an innovative and high performing leader, to seize and rise to the challenge. Great leaders are born when defeat is near. Some examples are Lee Iacocca at Chrysler, Steve Jobs at Apple, Winston Churchill during World War II, and the list goes on. The reason for this rise to the top during a time of crisis is that unusual opportunities become available which would not be possible if everything was under control. Safe or stable times are times of routine performance, steady expectations and slow promotions. However, during a company crisis, innovation is needed. It’s time to “fill the void and do the right thing”. Here’s your opening. Here’s your chance to run to the fire (crisis), not from it. During a crisis, with your new skills around leadership and innovation, you can accelerate yourself forward with recognition, admiration and promotions.

Workplace relationships (office politics)

Appropriate or proper workplace relationships are often described as “office politics.” Office politics are the “dos” and “don’ts” of proper behavior in the workplace. They can vary from workplace to workplace, so be alert for local variations to the rules or advice below. Being smart and performing well around office politics is every bit as important as your actual job performance. In fact, it’s a vital part of your job performance. You’ll be more likely to be successful if you learn the strategies of office politics and practice them to your advantage.

If you’re new to the world of work, understand that workplace rules or office politics are quite different from either those in school or in the community. One of the key differences is the fact that money and power are the very powerful forces behind them. And, it’s interesting to see how people change when they are competing for either or both (money and power).

Another important thing to know is that no two workplaces are the same, and neither are their politics. Some organizations have a strong sense of teamwork and equality, some have more strict power structures, and some are hyper-competitive. Individual employees also vary: certain people are friendly and others are more cut-throat in their search for money, power and promotions. Politics are different among industries and within them, too. The way things work in a factory are different than they do in a restaurant, while a start-up business is different than a large corporation which is different than a

charitable non-profit. At the same time, one startup may be up-beat and supportive, but another could be strict with a set of managers that is very critical of employees. Whenever you get a new job (or are choosing between jobs), understand exactly how the politics operate and work to succeed within them.

In order not to get tripped up by office politics, be alert for and follow these basic rules or 11 commandments.

1. **Learn how things actually work** – Each workplace has its own peculiarities on how things get done or who really wields power. An organization’s actual power structure may even vary or change over time. And, it can be quite different from what the formal office organizational chart (or “management structure”) shows. For example, when I reported to my first job, someone hinted that the real position of power in the office was not the top manager, but his administrative officer. If I wanted to get something done or accomplished, my coworker told me that smart workers went to her because she was the center-point around which things got done. So, guess who the first friend was I tried to make? (Hint: it wasn’t the manager). And in the end, befriending the administrative officer was the smartest move I made during my early career. So observe, ask, study, learn, and adapt to the political landscape where you work.
2. **Guard against being manipulated or controlled** – Unfortunately, some employees are unprofessional and manipulative in the world of office politics: they try to pit other people against each other in their own search for money and power. So be wary of the co-worker who comes up to you soon after you report for work and tells you a “friendly secret” about your boss or another co-worker (especially if the “secret” is something negative). That friendliness may be an attempt to manipulate you to do or say something which either supports their agenda or serves to discredit you in front of your boss or others. Always be wary of advice or gossip which seems to suggest you say something or do something which appears wrong, as it likely is wrong. The temptation for a new worker is that they’re anxious to make new friends whom they can trust. Remember, the people you can trust often don’t tell you something that seems negative or even destructive. It’s not professional behavior. In such cases, just file the information away and seek to learn more about this group’s office politics before you act. As you learn more, you’re likely to learn that this new “friend” is involved in a feud or fight with the person they were talking trash about.
3. **Talk to people** – You can safeguard your reputation and practice great office political skills if you make it a practice to leave your work-station (desk or otherwise) and go to talk to the other people you work with in person. Key reasons for this suggested practice is that it helps to build better relationships with your co-workers (it shows a respect for them by showing up at their work-station). It also helps you to get to know what they’re doing and thinking, and vice versa. You’ll learn more and more quickly by interacting with coworkers than simply by doing the tasks you are given. Of course, always get your job done well and don’t spend too much time socializing, otherwise your boss may think you are not putting in enough effort.
4. **Don’t be a complainer** – Nobody enjoys being around someone who’s complaining. Watch yourself and when things are going badly or unfairly: don’t give into temptation and complain about it in the workplace. People do not want to hear others venting at work (they have their

own things to deal with). More than that, complainers are viewed as both trouble-makers and drags on progress; people viewed negatively in these ways are not likely to move ahead in an organization. Obviously, things will go wrong for you at your job at some point – and people, even your boss, may do you an injustice or two. If that happens, go home and vent, but don't do it at work. When you are on the job, be proactive instead. Think of ways to positively respond to the injustice. If someone else got the task or job you wanted and you feel like it should have been given to you, talk to your boss about what you can do to improve your chances next time. Then, take the actions they recommend and make sure they see you doing so. This positive response is more likely to lead to you getting the job you want next time. Complaining, on the other hand, will likely move you down the list rather than up. And no matter what, don't retaliate against the person who got the job over you. In fact, go out of your way to help them. This will impress everyone involved.

5. **Gossip in the workplace** – Most often, the person gossiping is a weak performer or malcontent. Strong performers don't have to resort to this negative tactic, especially if the gossip is designed to undermine another worker's reputation. If you hear gossip, just listen for the shortest amount of time socially acceptable, so as not to upset the gossipers, and don't reply or join in. Just nod your head and then say, "Oh, really? I'm sorry but I've got to get back to work." And don't pass the gossip on. Gossip is manipulation. It's designed to get you to join one office faction or another.
6. **Be a peace-keeper** – When tempers flare or arguments rage, try to position yourself as someone who is more interested in finding a solution than giving blame. This not only keeps you above the fray, it marks you as a peace-keeper or a leader. Think of fights in the workplace as fights on a sinking ship. You're all in it together, so the better action is not to wage war among yourselves, but to find an agreeable solution in order to maintain the peace and stay afloat (alive).
7. **Thou shalt not be an "apple-polisher"** – This is someone who tries to win favor by extra compliments, being overly solicitous of a boss or key member of the office, or by being a "yes" person with the idea that if you agree to everything a boss says, he or she will favor you. Well, this is often so transparent that it will always backfire on you. A good boss is smart enough to know when an employee is trying to manipulate them by always agreeing with them and overly complementing them. And the only conclusion they'll likely draw is that the "apple-polisher" lacks self-confidence in your ability to win respect the old fashion way: through good performance. Simply avoid being overly-enthusiastic and instead interact with supervisors in a professional and balanced way.
8. **Take your enemies to lunch** – Invariably, someone will oppose you in the workplace at some point in your career. It's just the nature of the beast. Don't be shaken or upset when it happens. However, be sure to deal with it effectively. First, recognize when this happens and begin to learn as much as you can as to why a person is against you. Is it because they dislike your ideas, think you did something to hurt them, feel competitive when you are both going for the same promotion, or maybe just are having a bad day and need someone to lash out at? Depending on the situation, you can try to understand what happened on your own or you can ask them to

explain why they are frustrated. Once you begin to understand why they are against you, develop your response. Next, try to respond to the issues they are concerned about. Put yourself in their shoes and be ready to give in a little or more in order to help solve the situation. Be humble and remember that you're not always right. Maybe you did do something to anger them. Try to make it right, if you can. If you understand that you made a mistake, let them know that you are sorry and will do your best to correct it. That may end the situation. If you hear their frustration and realize they misunderstood your actions, explain yourself calmly and carefully. Not everything is 100% right or 100% wrong, so you might find middle ground if you talk through the situation. However, if you have a rival who, no matter what you say or do, is determined to be against you, keep as close to them as possible. Be sociable with them. Regularly say "hello" and ask them how they're doing. Talk with them about things which they might be interested in discussing. Don't show either your anger or fear. Maintain a professional relationship. Whenever possible, meet with them and get their advice on neutral matters. Even take them to lunch. There's an old politics saying that advises, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." This saying ultimately suggests that you try to find a way forward and strive to end the feud peacefully, rather than battle it out. No one wins a feud through conflict without harming themselves. Even if the feud doesn't go away, the closer your enemies are, the less likely they'll be to launch a surprise attack. Remember, "take your enemies to lunch" – understand their frustrations, apologize or explain your position, work to end conflict, and in the worst cases just keep your enemies close. In these ways, you will be holding the higher ground, which is the next item below.

9. **Seek and hold the higher ground** – In general politics as well as office politics, you're stronger and more professional if you seek to take and hold the higher ground in all your positions, arguments or efforts. The higher ground is the place where "right" or moral authority exists. It's the truth, best practice, and best solution for the organization. It's not only the right place to be, but it also makes your ideas and positions harder to discredit or take down. That's why the general advice about leadership mentioned earlier ("Fill the void and do the right thing") is so powerful. If you can explain to people that what you're proposing to do or recommending is the truth or the right thing to do, you're on your way to honor, victory and professional success.
10. **Know the difference between "persevering" and being "stubborn"** – There's a saying which says, "The best group or team decisions are compromises which no individual team member totally loves." What that means is whenever you're debating different positions, a good compromise is one that allows both sides to win a little while not completely losing. So in times of conflict or when there is an argument, know when it's time to let go. Persevering is different from being stubborn. The former is keeping up your effort when the goal or objective remains possible. Being stubborn is continuing to fight when there is no possible "victory," or even when the war is over and the peace treaty has been signed. Know when it's time to let go.
11. **Social relationships at work** – Lastly, it probably is NOT a good idea to either make close personal friends or to date someone with whom you work. This is a tough subject. So, be very careful with this one. If you get in a romantic relationship with a coworker and are obviously affectionate in the workplace, it is unprofessional and others will likely notice. If you get into a

personal argument at home, it can also spill over to your relationship at work – and should things end, nothing can poison your workplace more than having a former angry lover in your office. It will make everyone uncomfortable, especially you. And never, if at all possible, get into a romantic relationship with your boss. When it's over, there will be real misery at the workplace. It's a good idea to always avoid these temptations, if you can. If you can't, be prepared to find a new job elsewhere no matter how it turns out. If it's perfect and turns out well, there can still be problems as many places won't let you work in the same office as your partner. With regard to friendships, these are less dangerous. However, your co-worker – now your new close friend – will be seeing the “unprofessional” version of you, and that can lead to harming your workplace reputation, especially if you have some not so good habits (housekeeping, unusual collections, drinking, eating habits, etc.) that they'll get to observe up-close. One safeguard might be to keep a certain level of professionalism in such a friendship – so occasional coffee outside the office is fine, but “hitting the town” regularly can be a problem. As a general rule, it's better if you find a partner and close friends elsewhere.

Being polite

Let's finish this Lesson by observing that being professional is also being polite.

It's the polite or right thing to do when sharing credit for an accomplishment at work by saying “thank you” to others. It demonstrates your sense of loyalty, integrity, teamwork and humility. It attracts people to you as they come to admire your unselfish spirit. It's contagious and contributes to a healthy workplace environment.

The fact of the matter is no one exists alone on an island. You could not have been successful or achieved a major accomplishment in your workplace without the support of others. For example, if you are an attorney and you win a big case, the office law librarian probably helped you by finding the research materials you needed to win. The office IT staff's support was helpful to you in winning the case. Certainly, your boss helped by letting you take the case on in the first place. Even an intern may have also helped you in a small but important way. So acknowledge them all, share the credit and thank them for helping to make your success possible.

It's curious that this subject of being polite can benefit from reminding ourselves of what we were taught as young children by our parents and kindergarten teachers.

There's a wonderful book called, *“All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten”* by Robert Fulghum. Read it. In this book are great fundamental truths about good “Workplace Practices.” While they sound elementary and for children, they're really good tips for professional working adults, as well. Consider these basic rules and remember to always:

- Say “please” and “thank you.”
- Share.
- Play fair.
- Don't hit people (literally or figuratively).

- Put things back where you found them.
- Clean up your mess.
- Don't take things that aren't yours.
- Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

In short, always be polite.



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