



September 2, 2023

Dear Job Seekers,

For those individuals not currently assigned to a training site, we will be allowing at-home training packets to be completed while a new training opportunity is found for you. However, after October 1, 2023 any individual without a training site will be placed on an unpaid leave of absence.

Training materials will be posted to our website at [www.vantageaging.org/indiana](http://www.vantageaging.org/indiana) for each pay. Below are the assignments for September 2- September 15. At the end of each pay period, you will need to send the completed Summary Questions sheet and training timesheet with the actual hours you worked on the packet (up to 20 per week), either by fax to 330-535-2253 or by email to [payroll@vantageaging.org](mailto:payroll@vantageaging.org)

This timesheet and summary questions are due by Monday, September 18th at 5:00 pm.

If you have any questions please call Dustin Henthorne 330-253-4597 ext. 352

**Training – Weeks 9/2/23 to 9/15/23**

**Navigate Workplace Challenges**

Sincerely,

**VANTAGE AGING SCSEP TEAM**

SOFT SKILLS SOLUTIONS

Second Edition

# Navigate Workplace Challenges!

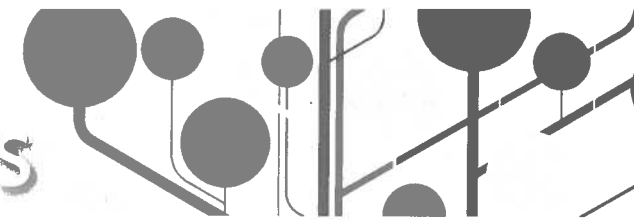
Emotional  
Intelligence  
& Critical  
Thinking



Ann Cross &  
Martha Lanaghan

CAREER SOLUTIONS  
**JIST**  
A DIVISION OF KENDALL HUNT

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ISBNs 978-1-79244-386-2 (single) 978-1-79244-400-5 (10-PK)

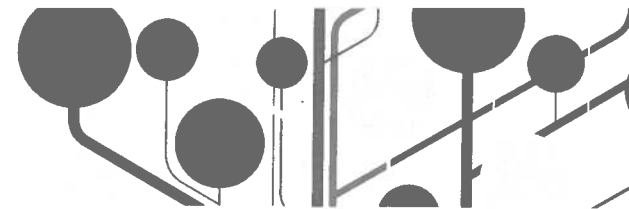
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7900 Xerxes Avenue S STE 310  
Minneapolis, MN 55431-1118  
Email: [service@jist.com](mailto:service@jist.com)  
Website: [JIST.com](http://JIST.com)

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# PREFACE



Today’s job seekers face tougher challenges than ever before. Only the most skilled job seeker can keep up with the ever-changing workplace. Technology is transforming how we work in dramatic ways, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic forced companies large and small to quickly adapt to new ways of doing business. This change contributes to what some people are calling the “fourth industrial revolution.”<sup>1</sup> Just as each of the past three industrial revolutions (the steam engine, mass production, and digitization) required workers to adapt their skills to keep up, this technological revolution is forcing us to rethink what we do and how we do it.

Having the newest computer skills or knowing how to provide remote customer service is only part of what new technology demands of workers. Employers today want more than someone with the necessary job-related skills. They are interested in your ability to do the things computers cannot do—in your uniquely human, interpersonal, “soft” skills. **Soft skills** are the personal attributes that enable you to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Simply put, they are the skills an employee needs to get along and work well with others.

A recent survey found that dependability and reliability are the soft skills employers desire most. These skills were noted by 97 percent of respondents, and professionalism was overwhelmingly listed in the top 10 skills employees need to succeed.<sup>2</sup> Professionalism encompasses multiple soft skills, including (but not limited to) communication, time management, self-management, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork skills. It is also essential to professional success to be able to excel in a diverse workplace, where people look, think, experience, and interact with the world in a wide variety of ways.

The *Soft Skills Solutions*, Second Edition program will help you learn about and practice soft skills that will set you apart from others in your field.

1. Klaus Schwab, “The Fourth Industrial Revolution: What It Means and How to Respond,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-12/fourth-industrial-revolution>.

2. Society for Human Resource Management, “SHRM/Mercer Survey Findings: Entry-Level Applicant Job Skills.” 2016. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research>

The *Soft Skills Solutions* Second Edition program includes the following books:

1. *Stepping Stones to Success! Goals & Attitude*
2. *Navigate Workplace Challenges! Emotional Intelligence & Critical Thinking*
3. *Wake Up & Work! Keys to Self-Management*
4. *Make Yourself Heard! Professional Communication Skills*
5. *How You Act & Dress Matters! Professional Etiquette & Image*
6. *Set the Tone! Equity, Diversity & Inclusion*
7. *Demonstrate Your Value through Collaboration! Teamwork & Motivation*
8. *Play Nice & Stay Employed! Workplace Relationships & Conflict Negotiations*
9. *Lead with Integrity! Leadership & Ethics*
10. *Step Up Your Game! Innovation & Creative Problem-Solving*

Each title concentrates on specific soft skills to help you reach skill mastery. Whether you are a new job seeker, a person reentering the work world, a recent college graduate, or a longtime employee, completing these exercises to master these important soft skills will help you now and for the rest of your life. Even the most seasoned professionals will benefit from refreshing their soft skills from time to time.

Try to complete one book from the *Soft Skills Solutions*, Second Edition program per week. Although it may be helpful to begin with *Stepping Stones to Success! Goals & Attitude* followed by the other titles in the program, these books are stand-alone pieces and can be used in any sequence.

## Program Features

Each *Soft Skills Solutions*, Second Edition book introduces skills necessary for success in the workplace and explains their roles in employment success. The program provides self-assessment activities to identify and address your individual needs, and application activities to challenge you and allow you to practice your skills. The text also includes margin tips and informative sidebars to point out key information.

You will encounter these interactive features:

- Thinking Breaks
- Self-Assessment activities

**Thinking Breaks** Part of learning a new skill is being able to apply it to your own experiences. These thought-provoking questions require reflection and honesty. Answering them will help you identify your personal opinions and beliefs relating to a specific aspect of employment success.



**Self-Assessment activities** The self-assessment activities help you assess your current soft skill levels and provide brief snapshots of your strengths and weaknesses. The more honest your answers, the more accurately you will be able to identify areas for improvement.

If the assessment section indicates that your skill level is high, you should still practice the workout, and challenge yourself to attain skill mastery by mentoring or teaching that skill to another person. Attempting to teach others how to successfully master a skill is the ultimate test of your knowledge.

The self-assessment tool is for your own personal use. After you have identified areas in which you would like to improve, practice these exercises and continue to seek out ways to strengthen your competencies in your daily life.



**Apply the Skills activities** After skills are introduced and explained, Apply the Skills activities challenge you to use these skills. Complete these exercises daily until you've achieved mastery of the professional skill you are studying. Some of the activities require working with a partner or mentor. For others, working with a partner or mentor is simply recommended.

When choosing a study partner, seek out a supportive person who wants to see you succeed. Above all, your partner should be honest with you about your current skill level. Your ability to do the same for your partner is essential to your partner's success as well. You will share equally in your progress and take an active role in each other's individual success, so choose wisely.

Having a mentor is ideal. Your mentor should be a professional in a position of authority with whom you have a positive relationship. For example, you might seek out a teacher, boss, friend who is a manager or executive at a company, career services advisor, student advisor, human resources manager, current employer, or parent.

Employment success largely depends on your ability to identify and address areas in which you need to improve. To accomplish this, be willing to receive feedback from others. If you are not able to receive this kind of feedback easily—and if you get upset, angry, or defensive—then seek the help of a trusted expert who can help you learn to give and receive constructive feedback before beginning the program.

## OBJECTIVES

Completing this book will allow you to

- Understand what emotional intelligence is and how it applies to your life (Section 2.1)
- Evaluate areas of weakness in your emotional intelligence (Section 2.1)
- Create pathways to improve your emotional intelligence (Section 2.2)
- Understand critical thinking and decision-making processes (Section 2.3)
- Evaluate and improve your decision-making skills (Section 2.4)

**E**motional intelligence describes a collection of skills and habits that help people function more effectively in their day-to-day lives. Your emotional intelligence helps you apply self-awareness and social awareness to everyday situations, making you more capable of managing projects and easier to work with.

Emotional intelligence is directly linked to professional success. According to *Forbes*, emotional intelligence is the strongest predictor of job performance. Emotional intelligence is considered responsible for a full 58 percent of success in any type of job; in fact, people with high emotional intelligence earn, on average, \$29,000 more per year than people whose emotional intelligence is less developed.<sup>3</sup> Whether you want to find a new job or advance in the job you already have, emotional intelligence is key.

The good news is that you can develop your emotional intelligence, as you will learn in the following pages. Doing the work to improve your emotional intelligence could be the easiest and fastest way to a better job or more exciting role with your current company.

3. Travis Bradberry, "Emotional Intelligence—EQ," January 9, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/>

## 2.1 What is Emotional Intelligence?

According to *Working with Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, **emotional intelligence**, sometimes referred to as *emotional quotient (EQ)*, “refers to the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, people with a high EQ can:

- recognize which emotions they are feeling
- recognize how others around them are feeling
- tell the difference between different feelings and label them appropriately
- use emotional information to guide behavior and decision-making
- adjust their emotions to adapt to their environment
- adjust their emotions to support the achievement of personal goals.

There is much debate about whether or not EQ is more important than intelligence quotient (IQ), which is what people generally refer to as how “smart” someone is. Goleman writes that EQ accounts for 67 percent of the abilities a person needs to be successful at work, and that EQ is twice as important as technical skills or IQ.

Your ability to recognize and manage your emotions can influence your success at everything from parenting and romantic relationships to leading and managing—it even plays a role when you’re doing day-to-day tasks like grocery shopping or waiting in line at airport security.

Your emotional intelligence determines how well you get along with others, collaborate with a team, and manage ongoing and acute stress, and can play a big role in how effective you are at your job.

### What Emotional Intelligence is Not

Don’t confuse emotional intelligence with being happy all the time. Emotionally intelligent people feel the full range of emotions, from anger to sadness, happiness to apathy. What sets them apart is their ability to respond effectively to different emotions in themselves, and to perceive and respond to the emotions of others.

## Can I Improve My EQ?

Yes! You can improve your EQ. It is not a fixed or inherited trait. Much has been written about strategies to improve EQ. But before you dive into raising your EQ, let’s take a quick assessment to determine where your emotional intelligence stands right now.



### Self-Assessment—How is Your Emotional Intelligence?

For each statement below, refer to the scale and ask, “How often is this statement true for me?” Choose the most accurate answer: Always, Sometimes, or Rarely. It’s usually best to go with your first reaction—don’t overthink the answers!

Statement	Always	Sometimes	Rarely
1. I think about how I’m feeling.			
2. When I have a strong emotion, I am able to pause for a moment before I react.			
3. I can tell when someone is trying to rile me up or manipulate my emotions.			
4. I offer to help others without an expectation of help in return.			
5. I stick to my values and principles above all else.			
6. I work hard to see things from other people’s perspectives and understand what they’re going through.			
7. I can tell if I’ve harmed someone and am willing to own up to my mistakes and apologize.			
8. I praise my peers, family, and friends with authentic compliments.			
9. I actively think about controlling or changing my emotions.			
10. When I am with other people, I can sense how they are feeling and empathize.			

11. I welcome constructive feedback and criticism.
12. I am on time to appointments and meet my deadlines.
13. I offer helpful feedback to my peers, family, and friends when it's appropriate.
14. When someone does something bad to me, I forgive and forget.
15. People would describe me as "level-headed" or "even-keeled."

Use the following scale to add up the points for each of your answers and record your total in the box that follows.

#### Tally Your Score

Always = 5 points

Sometimes = 3 points

Rarely = 1 point

Total Score:

**55 to 75 points:** You likely have a high EQ. You understand the basics of managing your emotions and recognizing the emotions of others.

**40 to 55 points:** You are on your way to achieving a high level of emotional intelligence. You understand some of your emotions and attempt to read the emotions of others.

**40 or fewer points:** You can work to improve your EQ to help you build stronger relationships and work more effectively with others.

## 2.2 How to Improve Your Emotional Intelligence

There are many authorities on emotional intelligence, and although they don't agree on every detail, the consensus is that you can and should take steps to improve your EQ. Let's take a moment to understand the components of emotional intelligence better before we explore steps you can take to improve your EQ at home and at work.

## The Four Skills of Emotional Intelligence

According to the founding fathers of emotional intelligence, Peter Salovey and John Mayer, there are four distinct groups, or branches, of skills and abilities that make up your emotional intelligence.<sup>5</sup>

The four skills of emotional intelligence are:

**1. Perceiving emotion** This skill involves your ability to read your emotions and those of others, and to observe and express emotions by evaluating verbal and nonverbal cues.

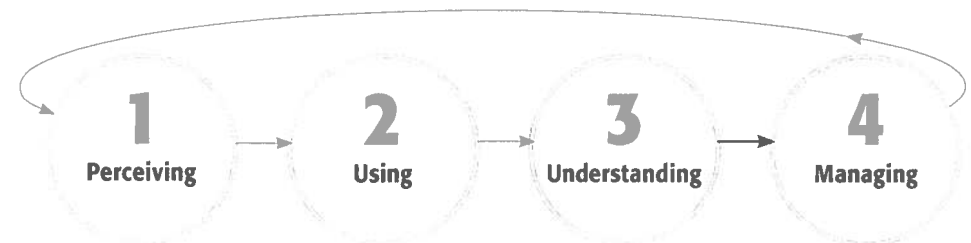
**2. Using emotions to facilitate thought** This skill involves your ability to think through your emotions, and to react—or not react—based on thinking about your emotions.

**3. Understanding emotions** This skill involves understanding the interplay between different emotions and being able to perceive the consequences of emotions as well as the cause and effect relationships and transitions between them.

**4. Managing emotions** This skill refers to your ability to welcome, control, and monitor your emotions and the emotions of others.

These four skills are interconnected: for example, if you manage emotions well, you will be more open to perceiving and expressing them. In turn, if you perceive emotion more easily, that will influence your thinking; if you use emotion effectively, you can improve your understanding; and understanding emotions more fully leads to managing emotions well.

**Figure 2.1** The Four Skills of Emotional Intelligence



Because these four skills are related, improving in one area may naturally lead to an improvement in another. This is a double-edged sword: the absence of skill in one area will negatively impact skill development and use in another area. Imagine, for example, that you struggle to recognize your own emotions and those of others—it follows that you will also struggle to use, understand, and manage them.



As you move through the cycle, it is possible to perceive an emotion and not know how to use it, or to perceive and use emotions but lack the ability to truly understand and/or manage them. When that happens, you may experience frustration or anger, or a serious bout of sadness or hopelessness. Understanding the relationships between these skills can help you grow and avoid these pitfalls.



### Self-Assessment—Where Are You on the Four Traits Continuum?

Review the list of skills below. How developed is your emotional intelligence in each area? For each skill, make a mark in the column that best describes how accomplished or confident you feel you are right now. It is realistic to be stronger in some areas and weaker in others.

Skill	Not confident at all	Not very confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
1. Perceiving emotion				
2. Using emotions to facilitate thought				
3. Understanding emotions				
4. Managing emotions				

For any skill that you marked “somewhat confident” or “very confident” for, write a sentence or two about why you think you are particularly good at that skill and how you effectively use it most of the time.

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If you evaluated yourself as being “not very confident” or “not confident at all” in any of the four skills, write a couple of sentences about how this affects your life. What would be different if you improved that skill?

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### The EQ Framework

Building on Salovey and Mayer’s four skills, in *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman proposed a model of emotional intelligence that describes five branches or components: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) self-motivation, (4) empathy and social awareness, and (5) social skills. These five elements of the EQ framework influence how you behave in all aspects of your life. If you are skilled in these areas, you are probably emotionally intelligent. If you lack these sensibilities, you may struggle to properly evaluate a situation, and you may respond in ways that undermine your relationships and/or productivity.

These two concepts, the skills and components of emotional intelligence, support one another: if you are proficient in the four skills of emotional intelligence, you will naturally be more effective at the five components of emotionally intelligent behavior. If you can effectively perceive the emotions of others, the information you gain will help you develop more empathetic and socially aware behavior.

Let’s explore the five branches of the EQ framework in greater depth.

**I am self-aware** Do you recognize your own emotions, know your strengths and limits, and have self-confidence?

**I can self-regulate** Can you control your emotions? Are you trustworthy? Do you take responsibility for your actions? Can you adapt to change and welcome new ideas?

**I can motivate myself** Are you driven to achieve excellence? Do you set goals and work toward them? Do you take initiative? Do you generally have a positive or hopeful outlook on life?

**I have empathy and social awareness** Do you sense others' feelings and perspectives, anticipate others' needs, take action to serve others, help others grow, and effectively read a group's emotions?

**I have a strong social sense** Do you communicate well, have influence over others, inspire others, manage conflict well, negotiate fairly, build strong relationships, collaborate effectively, and promote teamwork within a group?



### *Self-Assessment—Evaluating the Five Elements of Emotional Intelligence*

Reviewing these elements, can you already see areas where you think you have an opportunity to improve? Take a moment to reread the five elements of the EQ framework, and use the space below to rank them from your strongest (#1) to your weakest (#5).

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Write a few sentences about why you think you are strong at the top two elements on your list, and include evidence and/or examples of your strength in these areas:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Write a few sentences about why you think you are weak at the bottom three elements on your list, and include examples of how you could improve in these areas:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Improve Your Emotional Intelligence**

To improve your emotional intelligence, we'll focus on the five elements of the EQ framework:

1. Self-Awareness
2. Self-Regulation
3. Self-Motivation
4. Empathy and Social Awareness
5. Social Skills

If you can improve your understanding and perception in these areas, you will then be able to improve at each of the four skills of emotional intelligence: perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions.

**Improve self-awareness** The best thing you can do to improve your self-awareness is to take a pause now and again to intentionally analyze how you are feeling: not just how high your emotions are running, but also how they *feel* in your body.

We experience and express our feelings physically as well as emotionally. When you are angry, do you grit your teeth, or bunch your hands up into fists? When you're happy, are you more relaxed? Sometimes those physical sensations occur before we even realize we are experiencing an emotion.

Tuning in to your physical and emotional states helps you improve your self-awareness, which is the foundation for improving self-regulation and social skills. The practices below can help you become more aware of your emotions. Not every idea will work for every person, so choose the ideas that are the most helpful for you.

- **Meditation:** Spend five or more minutes per day clearing your mind of all thoughts and sitting still while focusing on your breathing. Meditation has been proven to reduce stress, improve self-awareness, and increase attention span, to name just a few of the benefits.<sup>6</sup> If you need more guidance, there are apps that can assist you with learning meditation.

- **Mindfulness:** Practice being aware of yourself in the present moment. Calmly acknowledge and accept how you are feeling—both your thoughts and physical sensations. You could set a notification on your phone or watch to regularly remind you to check-in with yourself and ensure that you are practicing mindfulness throughout the day.
- **Inventory:** Take an inventory of the emotions you experience the most often; think about what “sets you off” or makes you sad. Does this happen more often with specific people? Or in the same situation or location? Note those places or people, and then focus on your emotions the next time you are in those places.

**Improve self-regulation** The steps that help you improve self-awareness can also help you regulate yourself more effectively. If you are more aware of your feelings, and can have intentional thoughts about what you are feeling, you are already in a great position to regulate your reactions, give yourself a moment to pause, and/or enjoy emotions fully.

Here are a few practices that can help you regulate your emotions and reactions:

- **Name the emotion.** When you feel yourself having a strong emotion, deliberately give it a name. For example, “Hmm, I feel angry.” If you feel safe doing so, a good thing to do is name it out loud, even if you aren’t sure why you feel that way. For instance, “I notice myself getting anxious, and I’m not sure why, but I thought I’d name it so we can talk about it.”
- **Talk about it.** Talking about how you are feeling will help you understand your feelings (increasing your self-awareness), and will go a long way in helping your colleagues, teammates, and family communicate effectively with you. Start by naming your emotions, and then work with your peers to see how they are feeling. This will help you build strong, trusting relationships and keep you from reacting in the moment, which can be damaging.
- **Count to 10.** Did one of your parents used to say, “I’m going to count to 10?” You knew you were in trouble, right? In this case, though, the counting is a way to take a moment to stop and think before reacting. It’s almost always okay to say something like, “I need a moment, then I can answer your question.” Then, literally take a moment to focus on how you feel, and regulate any overly strong emotion.
- **Have a go-to response ready to give yourself time.** We all encounter tough situations. If you plan a go-to response that you

can almost always count on, you can use that response to buy yourself time when emotions are running high. Say, “This is interesting. I need a moment to think about it, so can we continue the discussion at a later date?”; “I can feel my emotions are unsettled and I want to have a productive conversation with you. Can I have five minutes?”; or “I want to talk more about this, but now is not a good time—can we talk about it later today?”

**Improve self-motivation** This area is not just about your drive to achieve. It’s also about your outlook. Maintaining a positive outlook and attitude can be a big help when things make you feel frustrated or angry.

### **Additional Information**

For more information and exercises to help you set goals and build a positive attitude, check out the *Soft Skills Solutions* text *Stepping Stones to Success! Goals & Attitude*.

To increase your drive and maintain a positive attitude, try some of these exercises:

- **Set goals with deadlines and measurable outcomes.** Track your progress and make plans to assist you with achieving your goals. If you achieve a goal, push yourself by setting a new one that’s a little harder.
- **Create to-do lists to help you track the items you need to complete and stay on target to meet deadlines.**
- **Create a gratitude journal and make a habit of writing down a few things each day or week for which you are grateful.**
- **Connect with your “why.”** Understanding what motivates you to do something and reconnecting to it can help increase your drive and passion. Perhaps it’s money or prestige, or the satisfaction of doing good work or helping others. Whatever your driver is, take time to think about why it’s important. When you feel discouraged or apathetic, you can reconnect to that “why” and get excited again.

**Improve empathy and social awareness** Empathy is related to how well you perceive what other people are experiencing. It also means considering others’ feelings before you take action. This can happen through formal market research in the workplace, or informally, by taking a moment to imagine how someone else might feel.

Think about your family. Have you recently had to make and communicate a tough decision? Maybe you had to say “no” to a child who wanted to go to a party, or you sprung an event on everyone without asking first. Strong empathy skills would remind you to take a pause before you deliver bad news to soften the message, or to add context so that another person can better understand your plans or desires, and feel heard or understood. Speaking and taking action only after you’ve considered how you might affect other people will give you better odds of building a strong, trusting relationship.

Some people naturally seem to have strong empathy skills. For others, it doesn’t come naturally at all. Here are some exercises you can try to improve your empathy:

- Ask other people how they are feeling, or how a future plan will affect their feelings. Are their answers what you thought they would be? If not, reflect on why you think you misread the situation.
- Broaden your experiences. The more understanding you gain of situations that you are not accustomed to, the more likely you will be to understand how other people feel. Try attending a new place of worship, going to a different gym or workout session, volunteering in a homeless shelter, or striking up a conversation with someone whose life is very different from yours.
- Check your biases and assumptions. Even if you don’t understand what someone else is feeling, if you become aware of your assumptions and biases and try to hold them in check, you can make good progress toward helping other people feel respected.

**Improve social skills** Your social skills tie the previous skills together in a package that includes how you communicate, how you negotiate, and how you resolve conflict. Has anyone ever told you that you “come on too strong,” or seem opinionated? Or maybe just the opposite, that you’re too quiet or shy? Being an effective communicator in and outside of the workplace is a complex process. You may be great in one situation and fall flat in another. Here are some tried-and-true tips for improving your social skills:

- When negotiating, try to find common ground first, and negotiate from there. To find common ground with someone else, you need to start the negotiation by asking a lot of questions. Don’t start with your reaction, or by making assumptions about the other person’s position.

- Improve your listening skills. Improved listening starts with improving your focus, so eliminate distractions and challenge yourself to give your full attention to others while they speak. It’s also very important that you don’t let your brain rush to your response. As long as you are thinking about what you want to say next, you are not focused on listening. The better you listen, the better you will understand and empathize.

### Additional Information

For more information and exercises to help build listening skills, check out the *Soft Skills Solutions* text *Make Yourself Heard! Professional Communication Skills*.

- Cultivate a genuine interest in other people. People feel respected and appreciated when you take an interest in things that interest them, even if they don’t interest you. Pay attention to the people you work with when they talk about what they like to do and what matters to them at work and at home. Take a moment periodically to ask them about their hobbies or families. This will not only build bridges and deepen your relationships, but also help you empathize and communicate.



### Apply the Skills—Improve Your EQ

Recall the five elements of the EQ framework. In the group below, rank these five skills from 1 (your strongest skill) to 5 (the area where you feel you have the most opportunity to improve).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Self-Awareness
- \_\_\_\_\_ Self-Regulation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Self-Motivation
- \_\_\_\_\_ Empathy and Social Awareness
- \_\_\_\_\_ Social Skills

Using the ideas in this book or others you have researched on your own, create an action plan for improving the skills you ranked third, fourth, and fifth. Include a timeline for pursuing these improvements.

My third-ranked skill: \_\_\_\_\_

Three things I will do to improve this skill:

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Timeline for improvement:

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My fourth-ranked skill:

Three things I will do to improve this skill:

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Timeline for improvement:

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My fifth-ranked skill:

Three things I will do to improve this skill:

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## 2.3 The Components of Strong Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to the process by which a person comes to a decision. Critical thinking isn't about just gathering information and listening, but also about forming a judgment and taking action. Someone with strong critical thinking skills knows how to gather enough information to form an opinion or judgment and make strong choices about what to do next.

According to LinkedIn, critical thinking is especially important when you need to understand and react to change quickly and effectively in the workplace, and one of the most important predictors of success in college and beyond is a person's "ability to think independently while being logical at the same time."<sup>7</sup>

Is that you? Or do you sometimes act too fast, before you get all the information you need? Or perhaps you suffer from "analysis paralysis," and you require too much information before you can make a decision—slowing you down and frustrating your team?

The components of strong critical thinking include:

- your ability to listen and/or conduct research to collect the information you need to make a good decision in a timely manner
- your ability to process the information you have collected and draw reasonable conclusions or judgments about what to do next
- your ability to choose an appropriate next step
- your ability to act on the information and judgment in an appropriate way.

Educators and employers around the world talk about critical thinking and problem-solving skills as being among the most important skills an employee can possess regardless of job.<sup>8</sup> Luckily, psychologists agree that we can improve these skills through practice and experience, and through making ourselves open to feedback by tracking the results of our decisions and owning up to our mistakes.

7. S. M. Rayhanul Islam, "What Are the Importance and Benefits of 'Critical Thinking Skills?'," January 27, 2015, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-importance-benefits-critical-thinking-skills-islam>.

8. "Top 11 Skills Employers Look for in Candidates," April 3, 2020, <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/assessments/skills-look-for-in-candidates>.



## Self-Assessment—Critical Thinking Skills

For each of the prompts below, read the beginning of the statement, and then select the option for finishing that statement that best describes your current approach to critical thinking.

### 1. Problems can be complex. Before I start thinking about a solution, I . . .

- 1 ask a lot of questions and bring in a few experts so I am sure I fully understand the problem.
- 2 ask some questions and read relevant data, so I have a good understanding of the problem.
- 3 have a conversation with the team about the problem so we all understand it better.
- 4 find that the problems are typically pretty straight forward, so I jump to researching a solution.

### 2. When I am confronted with a new problem, I . . .

- 1 gather all the information about possible solutions before proceeding.
- 2 believe in the 80/20 rule: I get 80 percent of the information, then make a decision.
- 3 do some research, and as soon as I see the correct answer emerging, I go for it.
- 4 typically know the right answer and move forward quickly.

### 3. When I have to convince others to support my solution to a problem, I . . .

- 1 present all of the data that was gathered, whether it was important to the decision or not, so they have all the information they need.
- 2 present the relevant data, including information that may support other solutions, so they have a well-rounded view of the problem and solution.
- 3 present all the relevant data that supports my solution so they can see that it will be a good solution.
- 4 present some data and support it with a persuasive argument based on what I know.

### 4. Most solutions have a range of consequences or outcomes. When I choose a solution to recommend, I . . .

- 1 understand every possible outcome or consequence, no matter how unlikely, and rule the solution out if there is any risk.
- 2 assess and evaluate reasonable risk by understanding the probable and likely outcomes and consequences and factoring in how likely they are and what impact they are likely to have.

*continues...*

- 3 consider the probable outcomes, factor in their impact, estimate risk, and discard unlikely outcomes.
- 4 estimate two or three potential outcomes, then review their impact and identify risk.

### 5. When a solution becomes apparent, I . . .

- 1 request additional review of relevant data, risk, and potential outcomes to ensure that the project is headed in the right direction.
- 2 work with my team to develop an action plan to implement the solution, and keep an open mind to adjustments throughout the implementation plan.
- 3 identify next steps and move carefully to continue evaluating the solution while making progress to implement it.
- 4 work with the team to develop an action plan to implement the solution as quickly as possible.

### 6. When problems come up at work or at home, I . . .

- 1 conduct a detailed review of the assumptions we all bring to the problem, and design a system to prove or debunk the assumptions that are presented.
- 2 work with the team to acknowledge our assumptions and gather data about whether they are accurate and to what degree they are true.
- 3 ask if people have assumptions, then move on.
- 4 figure we're going to do a lot of research anyway, so assumptions will naturally be proven or disproven and there's no need to specifically acknowledge them.

### 7. When there are several viable solutions to a problem, I . . .

- 1 explore every possible solution in great depth; without this level of analysis it's too difficult to know you are making the right choice.
- 2 establish clear objectives, briefly evaluate the various solutions against their ability to meet the objectives, and prioritize a couple of solutions to research more fully.
- 3 collaborate with my teammates to determine which solution we want to research.
- 4 pick the solution that's the most likely to be the right one based on my gut feeling.

### 8. Problem-solving can be influenced by asking the right questions. When I see a new problem, I . . .

- 1 gather all possible data and review it to see what questions it brings up.
- 2 explore a variety of questions and evaluate them for bias and assumptions to come up with new questions.

*continues...*

- 3 know all the right questions to ask, so we can get them written down immediately and start answering them.
- 4 typically don't see very many relevant questions, so we ask one or two, answer them, and move on.

**9. Problems always affect someone. When I see a new problem, I . . .**

- 1 imagine everyone that might possibly be affected by the problem, and conduct a detailed review what the problem means to their lives.
- 2 collect data from people that are affected by the problem through interviews and observation.
- 3 join a team brainstorm about how the people affected by the problem feel.
- 4 review the data so we can infer the effect of the problem from reports.

**10. Data and reports can be interpreted differently by different people. When I read reports, I . . .**

- 1 usually understand what they mean and how to interpret the data.
- 2 understand that most data can be interpreted in different ways and that sometimes additional viewpoints are needed to fully understand data, so I seek to gain a well-rounded perspective on the information.
- 3 find I can read the report and glean what I need from it with a quick review.
- 4 am confounded by data, and need to collaborate with others to fully understand what it means and how to interpret it.

Use the following scale to add up the points for each of your answers and record your total in the box that follows.

**Tally Your Score**

Answer 1 = 2 points

Answer 2 = 3 points

Answer 3 = 1 point

Answer 4 = 0 points

Total Score:

**22 to 30 points:** You have a balanced approach to critical thinking. You appropriately weigh the collection of information against the need to move quickly toward a solution, and you take time to eliminate bias and assumptions.

**12 to 21 points:** If you had more #1 (2-point) answers, then you likely suffer from "analysis paralysis"—you require more information than necessary to make a decision, and the additional data can sometimes cloud your judgement.

If you had more #3 (1-point) answers, you may come to challenges with preconceived notions, or let your ego cloud your judgment. You may not ask the right questions or take time to fully empathize with the people affected by the problem.

**11 or fewer points:** You have an opportunity to improve the way you approach challenges in your work and home life. You can work to improve how you gather information, the assumptions you make, and the way you understand how a solution may affect others.

The good news is that you can learn how to be a better critical thinker, and therefore a better problem solver, by making sure you have the skills needed for accurate information-gathering and then applying rational thought to that information to reach sound conclusions.

Strong critical thinkers tend to be good at facing a challenge, gathering information about it, and drawing evidence-based conclusions about how to solve the problem. They may have been told before that they're good at problem-solving. We know that strong critical thinkers frequently share these habits:

- They are **open-minded** about the challenges they face. They don't jump to conclusions before they entertain a variety of viewpoints on any challenge they face.
- They are **curious**, having the ability to ask good questions by thinking beyond the obvious to inquire more deeply.
- They remain **objective** by acknowledging their own biases and challenging the assumptions they or others bring to the problem.
- They **gather and assess relevant information**. This often means looking beyond the initial information that a routine report or questionnaire may provide to fully understand the data presented to them.
- They seek to **empathize** with the people who are affected by the problem.
- They **come to well-reasoned conclusions** by pulling information together and making logical connections between data points. They understand inductive and deductive reasoning and can distinguish between inference and actual proof.
- They are **self-aware**, and can remove ego from the equation. They maintain an awareness of themselves and how their personal viewpoints or egos could be influencing their decisions.

## 2.4 How to Improve Your Critical Thinking Skills

As with most skills, the best way to improve is through practice. Practicing is a surefire way to get better at solving problems using critical thinking skills. The more you practice a thoughtful process, the more it will come naturally to you.

There are a number of frameworks that assist people with honing their critical thinking skills. Using the components of critical thinking you just learned about, we are going to share two frameworks that you could use at work, or with your family or friends, to help you walk through a critical thinking process.

### Open-Mindedness

The enemy of open-mindedness is the tendency to immediately jump to an opinion or a conclusion. This practice can be very damaging to your relationships with coworkers and teammates, especially if you declare your views emotionally, which makes it difficult for others to present their ideas as openly. Jumping to conclusions is also the enemy of creativity—it can cause an otherwise creative process to get fixed to a one-way track.

It is especially important to maintain an open-minded position if you are a leader or a manager. Doing so will ensure that your staff feel heard and included when decisions are being made.

To maintain a clear and open mind, practice the behaviors below.

- Manage your emotions and reactions to project calmness.
- Ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that do not lead the room to a conclusion. For example, a leading question might be, “Won’t we make more money if we build it this way?” On the other hand, an open question would be, “Which technique will lead to greater profit margins?”
- Even if you think you know the answer to a question, force yourself or your team to come up with three more ideas. Weigh the pros and cons of the additional ideas.
- Expose yourself to new experiences and new people. Each new thing or person you encounter will open your eyes to new possibilities. The wider the variety of experiences you have, the more creative and open your problem-solving thinking will be.



### Apply the Skills—Open-Mindedness

Can you think of a problem you are working on today for which you’ve already made your mind up about the solution? Write your current solution below.

Ask yourself if you have been open-minded about other solutions. On the lines that follow, brainstorm new ideas or new questions to ask to challenge your decided position.

Now, think about the ways in which your experiences are limited. For example, do you always go to the same grocery store, or attend the same place of worship? Do you visit new restaurants or parks? Challenge yourself to spend time with a new group of people, or expose yourself to new culture this month. In the space below, write three goals for expanding your view of the world over the next month.

At the end of the month, come back and write some notes in the space below about how your viewpoint has changed as a result of these new experiences.



## Curiosity and Asking Good Questions

In the sections on emotional intelligence, we talked about the importance of curiosity. Critical thinkers also remain curious at all points of the problem-solving process. They understand that new information may become available that changes the way they think about a problem, and they maintain an open-minded view of that information. Great problem-solvers might even schedule checkpoints to confirm that they are remaining curious throughout the process.

Going beyond idle curiosity and actively seeking information is a next-level skill that requires knowing how to ask good questions. We can dramatically change the answer to a question by how we frame it. Here's an example. Imagine someone has come to you because they want to improve traffic in your town. Would these two questions result in different answers to the challenge?

- “What if we increase ridership on our public transportation and get more cars off the road?”
- “What if we change work schedules and rules so fewer people are commuting to work?”

You can imagine that if you asked the first question, solutions would include things like lowering fees, making trains more comfortable, or adjusting bus schedules. If you asked the second question instead, you might hear solutions like staggering work days, or increasing work-from-home options. The two different questions elicit very different solutions to the problem. This shows how important it is to frame your question carefully to keep the process open to the widest variety of solutions—or to narrow down a few possible solutions if needed.

There are some good rules to think about when asking questions. Short answer or closed-ended questions typically work best when you are seeking facts. These questions start with words like *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*:

**Question:** *When is the problem the most difficult?*

**Answer:** 8 a.m. to 10 a.m., Monday through Friday.

**Question:** *Where is traffic worst?*

**Answer:** On the turnpike and downtown.

Open-ended questions and interview prompts elicit more interesting (and sometimes more informative) answers. They also often require more thought and research. Open-ended questions and prompts typically start with words like *why*, *how*, *explain*, *tell me*, and *describe*:

**Question:** *Tell me about your morning commute.*

**Question:** *Why do you choose to live in Oakdale and commute*

You can imagine that the answers to those questions will be long, and packed with information about the personal lives, choices, and compromises of the people you are asking.



## Apply the Skills—Asking Good Questions

Let's imagine that we are working on the problem of bad traffic in your town. You want to use your critical thinking skills to help solve this problem. Can you turn the following closed-ended questions into open-ended questions in order to learn more? Remember to avoid closed question words like *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*. For instance, the question “When do you take the train to work?” could be made open-ended by asking, “What would have to change for you to take the train more often?” or “Tell me more about the reasons you don't take the train more often.”

1. What time do you have to be at work?

2. How often do you take public transportation to work?

3. Do you ever work from home?

4. What is your favorite way to get to work?

5. Where is the biggest traffic problem on your commute?

## Objectivity

Objectivity is about maintaining an impartial or unbiased view, removing judgment and personal feelings and opinions, and basing your conclusions on observable phenomena. This sounds easy, but it is not. We each bring our own history, experience, biases, and viewpoints to the decisions we make every day. What's more, as we've discussed, our egos can cloud our perspectives.

One way to ensure that a group is working objectively toward solving a problem is to acknowledge and research the assumptions or biases that may enter into the problem-solving process. You can do this individually by asking yourself, "What assumptions am I making about this problem, and what biases are influencing my feelings?" You can also work with your team to bring everyone's assumptions and biases into the room so you can address them specifically.

It's a good idea to build in "objectivity checks" throughout a problem-solving process, so you and your team can ensure objectivity over time.



### *Apply the Skills—Objectivity*

Think about a challenge that you are trying to solve right now. Answer the following questions:

What have you assumed to be true about this challenge?

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What evidence do you have that your assumptions are correct? Is it possible that your assumptions are wrong? Why or why not?

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Do you bring any biases to this challenge? If so, what are they? Why do you feel that way?

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Can you imagine what some other viewpoints are? How would they change the solution to the challenge?

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What could you do, individually or as part of a team, to be more objective in the future?

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## Gathering and Assessing Relevant Information

Gathering and assessing information relevant to your problem can easily drag you or your team down. If you insist on too much research, you'll be blocked by "analysis paralysis," but too little information can lead to poor decision-making, too.

Assuming you are building on the skills of open-mindedness, curiosity, and objectivity, you should have a good idea about what the most important questions are, and you can dive in to answering them by gathering the data that you need to reach evidence-based conclusions.

Inevitably, the answer to one question will cause you to ask new questions; you and your team will need to prioritize and balance information-gathering for the new questions against the needs of the project. For each question you create, ask, “Will the answer to this question change the course we take?” If the answer is “no,” then you probably don’t need to pursue the question!

Knowing exactly when to stop gathering information is an art, not a science. When you think you have a well-supported course of action, you should shift to questions that focus on challenging that direction. What would someone ask you if they disagreed? What are the arguments against your conclusions? Examining the question from an alternative point of view is a great way both to prepare the presentation to your leadership team or supervisor and to figure out where there are holes in your logic so that you can gather information and bolster your conclusions.

Once you’ve settled on a direction, the last step is to make sure that your process allows for moments to pause and update the data. Make sure you know what you need to know to proceed.



### *Apply the Skills—Gather and Assess: Part I*

Think back to the challenge you used in the last exercise, or identify a new challenge. Write it below, in one sentence.

When you are doing research, does all the information seem to point in one direction? If so, where would you go if you wanted to find data to support a contrasting view?

*continues...*

Now, imagine your problem from extreme perspectives. What would a 5-year-old think of it? What questions would a 70-year-old have? What would a CEO want to know, versus a front-line clerk? Would your viewpoint depend on your gender? Use your imagined responses from these or other viewpoints to help you design new questions for your information gathering. Write at least two new questions below.

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### **Additional Information**

For more information and exercises to help see problems from another perspective, check out the *Soft Skills Solutions* text *Step Up Your Game! Innovation & Creative Problem-Solving*.



### *Apply the Skills—Gather and Assess: Part II*

A great method for digging deep into issues is the “Five Whys.” To use this method, first state your problem clearly, then ask yourself, “Why?” Give an answer, but don’t stop there—ask “why” again, and give an answer that digs more deeply into some element of your previous answer. Repeat this process of asking and answering until you’ve asked “why” five times and given five answers. Complete the “Five Whys” exercise for the challenge you used in Part I.

State your problem clearly and concisely, in one sentence:

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With this problem in mind, ask yourself “Why?” Record your answers on the lines below.

1. Why? (For example, “Why is this true?” or “Why is this a problem?”)

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*continues...*

2. Why? (For example, “Why do you feel that way?”)

3. Why? (For example, “Why do you believe that?” or “Why is that an issue?”)

4. Why? (For example, “Why is that true?” or “Why did that happen?”)

5. Why? (For example, “Why is has this not been solved before?”)

Now that you have reflected more on your problem, think about what new questions you might need to ask, or what new theories you need to explore. Write at least two of these below.

## Coming to Well-Reasoned Conclusions

Being reasonable is not the same as having strong reasoning skills. For the purposes of critical thinking, coming to well-reasoned conclusions involves the processes that we go through to analyze information and draw conclusions.

Two major forms of reasoning will help us understand how to come to well-reasoned conclusions: inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning.

**Inductive reasoning** Inductive reasoning involves making specific, provable observations, which you then use to come to a general conclusion. For example, you might think, “Every quiz so far has been easy; therefore, the test tomorrow will be easy.”

Another example of inductive reasoning is using a pattern to establish a rule and predict the future. For example, if you saw the series of numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10, you could induce from it that the next number would be 12.

Inductive reasoning can be useful for drawing probable conclusions, but beware: when you use inductive reasoning, accurate observations don’t necessarily guarantee that your prediction for the future will come true. Even if every quiz has been easy so far, tomorrow’s test might prove difficult.

**Deductive reasoning** Deductive reasoning involves drawing conclusions from previously known facts and definitions. For example, you might think, “All students in this school play sports. Maria is a student in this school. Therefore, Maria plays sports.”

Deductive reasoning will always be accurate if all of the known facts are accurate.

Inductive Reasoning	Deductive Reasoning
“Bottom-up” thinking	“Top-down” thinking
Based on patterns and connections	Based on facts, truths, definitions, or rules
Starts with a conclusion	Starts with a premise
Draws from specific evidence	Draws from generalized principles
Moves from specific to general statements	Moves from general to specific statements
Probable conclusions may be incorrect even if the argument is strong and true	Conclusions are true as long as all the premises are true





## Apply the Skills—Self-Awareness and Removing Ego

**Step One:** Consider two problems at work or school, and two problems at home. Write a brief description of each problem on the lines in the sections below.

**Step Two:** Below each description of a challenge, write an honest assessment of how your ego is involved in solving that challenge. Are you deeply committed to one way of thinking about the problem? Are you afraid to be wrong? How can you shift back into open-mindedness and information-gathering? Answering these questions will help you be more self-aware about the role you are playing in the problem-solving process.

Work Challenge #1:

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Ego Involvement:

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Work Challenge #2:

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Ego Involvement:

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Home Challenge #1:

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Ego Involvement:

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Home Challenge #2:

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Ego Involvement:

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## Claim, Support, Question

Now that you have worked through the major components of critical thinking and challenged yourself to think of ways to improve your skills, here is an excellent and easy-to-implement tool you can use to assess challenges you face at work or at home. With this process, effective reasoning can be broken down into three steps: (1) claim, (2) support, and (3) question. A simple way to implement this tool is as a chart:

Claim	Support	Question
In this space, use the information you've gathered to make a statement that takes a position on a topic.	In this space, use the best evidence you have to prove that your claim is correct. Don't forget to record your sources.	In this space, figure out how someone would argue against you, and then answer their questions to support your claim.

For an example, review the chart below, which assesses a claim about reusable shopping bags:

Claim	Support	Question
We will reduce pollution if we increase the number of people using reusable grocery bags.	<p>The average American family takes home almost 1,500 plastic shopping bags a year. (sprep.org)</p> <p>Up to 80 percent of ocean plastic pollution enters the ocean from the land. (nrdc.org)</p> <p>100,000 marine animals are killed by plastic bags each year. (wmnorthwest.com)</p> <p>Number of trees cut down each year to make paper grocery bags = 14 million. (wmnorthwest.com)</p>	<p>Paper bags go in the trash, too.</p> <p><i>Paper bags decompose in a month, but plastic bags take 20 years. And paper is compostable.</i></p> <p>Reusable bags cost more money to buy, and/or I forget my reusable bags all the time.</p> <p><i>Many grocery stores have a bin at the front of the store where you can donate or collect a bag.</i></p>

You can see how using these three steps to organize your thoughts in a clear and concise manner would make it easier to make sure that you are reaching well-reasoned conclusions—and easier to convince someone else of a well-reasoned claim.



### Apply the Skills—Claim, Support, Question: Effective Reasoning

Claim	Support	Question
Fill in your claim here:	List the evidence to support your claim here:	Write a few challenges that someone might present, and answer them here:





**AT-HOME TRAINING**  
**SUMMARY QUESTIONS:**  
**September 2 -**  
**September 15**

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

COUNTY \_\_\_\_\_

**Question #1** - From my experience, I consider these to be the 3 most important takeaways:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Question #2** - I plan to implement the following changes immediately:

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**Question #3** – I feel I still need to work on the following area(s).

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**Question #4** – I plan to keep improving by doing the following:

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**This sheet and your timesheet are due by Monday, September 8 2023 at 5:00pm. Fax to 330-535-2253 or scan and email to payroll@vantageaging.org.**

