

# Tool for Applying Learning

*Employee Essential Skills Suite*



## Purpose

Training alone isn't enough to ensure high impact soft skills development. In fact, "learning" cannot be treated as a one-time event. Instead, authentic learning requires a process of continual practice and reflection. IREX's solution, the **Tool for Applying Learning**, addresses the gap that affects most soft skills training approaches by integrating an effective way to support individuals to learn how to learn. Learning know-how ensures that individuals will be able to apply new skills to their everyday work and continue to strengthen their skills beyond a training. The Tool for Applying Learning ensures that critical soft skills are put into practice and that individuals and teams are intentional about continuing to strengthen those skills.

Evidence from the research literature shows that integrating learning practices into skills training not only leads to better uptake of new skills but also better performance in the use of those skills, compared to skills training that lacks a learning component.<sup>x</sup> The Tool for Applying Learning helps learners learn how to learn by empowering them with concrete steps to follow as they apply their new skills in their daily activities and work; and continue to develop their skills through everyday practice, eventually ensuring skill mastery. Thus, this approach addresses the 'application gap' that plagues many skills development and professional development efforts: that learners do not apply what they learned during skill development programs, decreasing the effectiveness of companies' investment in professional development to improve organizational performance.

*Implementation:* The Tool for Applying learning was developed as part of **IREX's Employee Essential Skills (EES) Suite**, a tailored solution that includes training, assessment and digital learning tools for companies to strengthen the soft skills of employees and cultivate an intentional learning company culture. The Suite is customized to focus on soft skills that are most needed by employees within a given workplace from a list of 10 soft skills that IREX found to be essential for the changing world of work (communication, higher order thinking, collaboration, positive self-concept, adaptability, interdisciplinarity, resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, empathy, inclusiveness). The EES Suite unlocks productivity, collaboration and adaptability while preparing workers for the changing world of work. The Tool for Applying Learning was at the center of the skills development journey of the EES Suite. Watch the video at this link [http://bit.ly/IREX\\_EmployeeSkills](http://bit.ly/IREX_EmployeeSkills) to learn more about the EES Suite.

## Who is this tool for?

### Individual learners

Individual learners can use this tool to follow concrete steps that can help them develop and eventually master skills by integrating intentional practice and reflection habits into their lives and their work.

### Employers

Companies can implement the EES Suite with the Tool for Applied Learning to equip workers to become 'power learners' who know how to capitalize on learning opportunities, be intentional about integrating new skills into their work, and proactively drive their own learning. IREX's approach to employee soft skill development also helps companies mitigate the rising need for employee upskilling and reskilling that is widely reported to be one of the key implications of the changing nature of work.<sup>0</sup>

- 70% of employees report that they do not have mastery of the skills needed to do their jobs.<sup>1</sup>
- Only 12% of employees apply new skills learned in Learning & Development programs to their work.<sup>2</sup>
- Only 25% of respondents believe that training measurably improved performance.<sup>3</sup>

### Youth development practitioners

Youth development practitioners can integrate the Tool for Applying Learning to supplement their learning and skills development programming by supporting learners with a roadmap for applied learning, continuous learning and learning that follows through on helping youth beneficiaries make changes in their habits, behaviors and mindsets to ultimately attain skill mastery.

<sup>x</sup>. Boser, Ulrich. *Learn Better: Mastering the Skills for Success in Life, Business and School, or How to Become an...Expert in Just about Anything*. Rosdale, 2019

<sup>0</sup>. Brende, Børge. "We Need a Reskilling Revolution. Here's How to Make It Happen." World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/skills-jobs-investing-in-people-inclusive-growth>.

<sup>1</sup>. "Setting L&D Leaders Up for Success." Gartner, [www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/role/learning-development](http://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/role/learning-development).

<sup>2</sup>. Gutierrez, Karla. "10 Statistics on Corporate Training and What They Mean for Your Company's Future." 10 Statistics on Corporate Training and What They Mean for Your Company's Future, [www.shiftelearning.com/blog/statistics-on-corporate-training-and-what-they-mean-for-your-companys-future](http://www.shiftelearning.com/blog/statistics-on-corporate-training-and-what-they-mean-for-your-companys-future).

<sup>3</sup> Aaron De Smet.. "Getting More from Your Training Programs." McKinsey & Company, [www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/getting-more-from-your-training-programs](http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/getting-more-from-your-training-programs).

## Impact results from implementation

Six months after the pilot Employee Essential Skills training, evaluation results showed that 100% of employee participants reported that they were applying the communication, higher order thinking, and collaboration skills they learned during the training. Employees had become strategic and intentional about their learning and they had continued to consistently learn through practice and peer learning. IREX's approach also cultivated a strong, self-sustaining learning culture driven by individuals and within teams who engage in peer learning.

- “I now take a step-by-step approach to learning by segmenting and asking [questions]”
- “I’m used to learning differently in [the field of] engineering. Now I learn through practice. The value for me is that I am learning more and faster including through peer learning and observational learning.”
- “Now I prioritize subjects learned while at work - learning for need.”

Not only did participants in the training report that they had furthered their skill development through intentionally applying their new skills, evaluation of responses on the Tool for Applying Learning found that putting skills into practice following the training resulted in further skill development:

- 40% reported developing their understanding of the skill and how to use it after the end of the training
- 75% reported that they applied the skill to other areas of their life beyond the workplace following the training
- 50% reported connecting the skill to their goals and developing an understanding of why it matters to develop the skill

Most notably, results from the EES Suite pilot demonstrated that skill application resulted in gains in individual, team as well as company-wide performance and productivity. Employees reported:

- The application of stronger and smoother communication and collaboration skills between internal teams (e.g. between a sales team, customer services team and tech team) improved team spirit, clarity of roles, delegation, clarity about deliverables/goals strengthening responsiveness and quality of responses to customer needs.<sup>#</sup>
- Application of problem analysis and collaborative problem-solving skills resulted in stronger and faster solutions for product and customer issues<sup>#</sup>
- The application of proactivity skills resulted in greater employee empowerment and initiative while also causing an improvement in company-wide finance and operation processes.<sup>#</sup>

## Considerations for using the tool

### For employers and youth development practitioners

- For best results, introduce this tool as part of a robust professional development/training experience instead of as a stand-alone tool. This tool and IREX peer learning approaches were effective. If you are interested in integrating the tool or in the Employee Essential Skills Suite, please email [cali@irex.org](mailto:cali@irex.org).
- Learner ownership of the learning process is critical. Learners will need to feel comfortable with the ways they can use the guidance and steps provided to them to inform their individual practice.
- Personalized feedback is highly beneficial for the learning. When cultivating an authentic learning culture, there are great returns from creating space for feedback, tolerance for risk when learn & regular peer learning.

### For individual learners

- Familiarize yourself with a learning process and the concrete steps to help you learn how to learn. The ideal goal is for this process to become part of your ongoing skill development habits.
- You can use the learning process below to learn skills that are included and discussed in detail here, or as a roadmap to develop other skills. (Tip: To focus on new skills, research the definition of a skill and break it down into its smaller components or sub-skills. Then follow the process for regular skill application and reflection that out outline below.)
- Reflection prompts in this tool help you personalize your skill development journey. This kind of personalization and personal goal-setting affirms your motivation and commitment to the learning journey.

<sup>#</sup>. Qualitative analysis data showed three or more responses from employees that indicated the listed findings.

# What are your learning goals?

This tool guides you through an intentional learning process that you can adapt into your individual practice. It contains a framework with concrete steps you can follow for self-guided learning and skills development. An important step to start that learning process is identifying learning goals and priorities that motivate you to focus on your skills development. Like any goals you might set for your personal and professional growth, having SMART<sup>i</sup> (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timebound) goals is key. The specificity (we recommend focusing on 1-2 skills at a time) allows you to focus and stay committed to have an effective, introspective and active learning journey. Below is guidance on how you can set a learning goal focused on communication skills.

## Identify the skill you want to develop

### Communication

is the ability to effectively express oneself. It includes active listening, knowing how to reach your audience, storytelling, making a case, and professional communication with others. Modes of communication include listening, verbal, non-verbal, and written communication.

*(Definition adapted from USAID and IREX/EDL Badge)*

Having a strong, research-backed definition of your skill that contains details about the skill components or sub-skills which contribute to the effective application of the skill will help you determine how you want to start and where you want to focus your efforts. It will also help you enhance your knowledge about the skill.

## Write down your learning goal

Assess your competency in the skill components or sub-skills that contribute to the overall skill e.g. you might have average competency or you may be inconsistent about listening actively but you do very well when you need to present an idea to others. Be honest with yourself and select the area of improvement that you want to focus on. Write your learning goal down in the space below. You can periodically revisit this learning goal to assess your progress and determine your course of action.

### Communication



Presentation



Active Listening



Understanding the audience

### Learning Goal:

I want to \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_. In order to achieve

my goal by \_\_\_\_\_ I will

\_\_\_\_\_ times every

hour/day/week/month (circle one). I will know I

have achieved my goal when \_\_\_\_\_

i. Michele, et al. "SMART Goals: - How to Make Your Goals Achievable." Time Management Training From MindTools.com, <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/smart-goals.htm>.

# A framework to help you learn how to learn

## Learning steps to form intentional learning habits

Authentic learning happens through repeated, regular and intentional habits of learning that are applied over time. To support your skills development journey, integrate an intentional and ongoing learning process into your daily practice. The framework below serves as a guide for such a learning process with a series of learning steps you can follow when you are applying a skill that you want to develop. By following the learning steps in the framework below, work to build ongoing skill application and reflection habits to get you closer to skill mastery and help you achieve your learning goals.

The framework below draws from Bloom's Taxonomy\*, it is also a process that leverages reflective practice. To master a skill, do the learning steps below repeatedly and regularly as you are applying the skill. There is no required sequence for following these learning steps. But be sure to track which of these steps you have done more frequently, and which you would want to do more of.

Below is a description of each of the learning steps followed by a series of guiding questions for each of the steps. The learning steps checklist following the guiding questions can be used to assess which steps you have taken and which you need to put more focus on moving forward in your skills development journey.

### Reflective Practice

is a way of studying your own experiences to improve the way you work [and apply a skill]. It is the ability to reflect about your actions so as to engage in a process of continuous learning.

*(Adapted from Schön, Donald A. (1983). The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action.)*

### Understand



### Apply



### Analyze



### Reflect & Adapt



- Entails understanding the skill, what it skill looks like in practice when effectively applied, its definition and components, how it can be used, how others use the skill, the theory, concepts and knowledge about the skill.
- Entails practicing and applying a skill in your daily life. Applying a skill includes using it even when you do not feel comfortable because you are still learning to apply it. It also means focusing you use of techniques and methods for applying skill components or sub-skills. e.g focusing on active listening techniques to improve your overall communication skills. It entails applying a skill in different areas of your life and asking for and benefiting from feedback from others to improve your skill application.
- Entails taking the time to break down the skill into its smaller component parts or sub-skills and examining the techniques and step-by-step methods for effectively applying the skill and its components. It includes observing and comparing how different people apply the skill in order to identify techniques and methods used by those who have achieved skill mastery. It entails analyzing how different sub-skills and other skills support your skill application.
- Entails thinking back on your own application of the skill to evaluate how you did and to identify your areas of improvement. This includes identifying the specific skill component or sub-skill you should focus on to improve your overall skill application. It entails identifying how a skill is relevant to you and to your goals for the future in order to take action to improve your application of the skill. This involves articulating your short, medium- to long-term learning goal(s).






\*. Krathwohl, D. R., & Anderson, L. W. (2009). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. Longman.



- What do I need to know about the skill? What are the relevant theories, concepts and knowledge about the skill?  
What is the skill used for?  
What is the impact or relevance of this skill at work, at home and in my community?

Let me put this skill into practice. Let me practice this skill in different settings.
- Let me find ways to improve on my application of the techniques and methods when applying this skill?  
Who can I ask for feedback about my skill application?  
How can I use feedback about my skill application to improve my practice?
- What are the skill components and sub-skills that contribute to effective skill application?
- What specific techniques and step-by-step methods contribute to strong application of this skill?  
How do different techniques and skills support the application of this skill?  
What techniques do other people use to apply this skill - particularly those who have mastery of this skill?  
What techniques and methods do other people use when they apply this skill effectively vs when they do not?
- What were my areas of strength and improvement when I put the skill into practice?  
What was my thought process and my techniques when I was practicing the skill?  
What are my short and long term goals for using this skill?  
What actions have I taken based on this reflection framework so far? (i.e. understand, apply, analyze, reflect & adapt)  
What actions do I want to take in the future based on this reflection framework?

**Action:** Take a few minutes to reflect about which of the learning steps you did when you last applied the skill you are working on. Put a **✓** or **X** if you took the learning step for the particular skill.

Learning Step	CHECKLIST	Communication
<b>Understand</b> 	I can define and describe this skill to others	
	I know specific ways that this skill can be used	
<b>Apply</b> 	I have experience using this skill	
	I can articulate the relevance and value of this skill to myself and to others	
<b>Analyze</b> 	I have explored the smaller components and the techniques and methods for applying them that contribute to effective skill application	
	I have explored techniques and methods used by others to learn how to effectively apply this skill	
<b>Reflect &amp; Adapt</b> 	I have connected this skill to the goals I aim to achieve	
	I have identified my areas of strength and improvement with regards to this skill	

## Reflect and Adapt

To get better at a skill as broad as “Communication”, you can first focus on improving your application of specific skills components (sub-skills) that make up the larger skill. This allows you to focus your efforts while working on a piece of a larger puzzle. For example, to develop your communication skills, first focus on improving your mastery of one component of the skill - ‘active listening’. This level of focus would allow you to build a strong base for your skill application. As you improve your application of one skill component through a process of reflection and practice that follows the learning steps above, you can assess whether to continue your reflective practice or to focus on a new skill component of the skill e.g. understanding your audience. By following the intentional learning steps to practice and reflect on each of the smaller components and your techniques for skill application, you can gradually work on becoming a better overall communicator.

The ‘reflect and adapt’ step helps you identify which skills components you need to improve and invest your time working on. The guidance below is provided to help you with that learning step. In addition to your own reflections and assessments, you can engage trusted peers, educators, supervisors and colleagues who may be willing to support your growth, to provide you their feedback about how you can improve your skills. To reflect and adapt pick a skill component to focus on, examine its definition then use the space on the right to reflect and write for several minutes without stopping. This is called freewrite and it is a learning practice that is an enhancer for learning outcomes.

**Action:** Use the prompts below to start writing your reflection. We have included sub-skill definitions for communication skills that you can reflect on. We have also included sub-skills from a few more of the **10 essential skills** that IREX’s Essential Skills Suite focuses on.



### Presentation

#### What the skill looks like in action:

- Uses appropriate, vivid and memorable language to enhance the effectiveness of their central message
- Is able to communicate concisely and with clarity within the given time-limit to relay a message
- When speaking, body language (posture, gesture, eye contact) make the speaker seem compelling, composed, open and confident.
- Uses an appropriate tone of voice which makes them appear open, enthused and confident.

#### Reflecting about your skill application

I did this skill well when

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I found this skill difficult when

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I want to improve my skill of

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because

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To improve this skill this week I will

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in the next month I will

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## Active Listening

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Able to ask effective and clarifying questions to gather relevant and important information to obtain a comprehensive understanding about a problem/issue
- Can focus on and pay attention to a speaker without interrupting.
- Aware of and understands their own biases and ensures that these biases do not influence how well they listen
- Pays attention to a speaker's body language to understand what a speaker is feeling and expressing
- Asks questions or rephrases a speaker's comments to ensure that they understand what has been said.

### Reflecting about your skill application

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## Understands the audience

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Understands their audience or listener in order to communicate something that the audience can understand and connect to.
- Considers the right time and medium to communicate to engage their audience
- Aims to create a positive connection and rapport with the audience by finding and discussing shared interests or values.
- Treats other respectfully by being polite and constructive in communication.

### Reflecting about your skill application

I did this skill well when

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## Problem Analysis

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Knows how to write an actionable, concise problem statement about a specific issue.
- Can effectively consider and analyze the different and distinct issues in a particular situation.
- Thinks about what others need to know about a problem when they gather information to solve a problem.
- Considers different perspectives, choices and information before making a decision.
- Has the ability to analyze their own and others' assumptions and biases about a solution or situation
- Able to organize evidence to reveal patterns, differences, connections or similarities

### Reflecting about your skill application

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## Problem Solving

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Knows how to propose solutions that are appropriate to the situation
- Will try new ways and will generate new ideas to solve problems.
- Confident in their ability to identify multiple approaches for solving a problem

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### Reflecting about your skill application

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## Proactivity

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Maintains a positive perspective and belief that there is a solution for any problem.
- Takes initiative and is proactive to help solve any problem
- Focuses on how they can address an issue rather than what is not within their circle of influence.

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## Feedback

### What the skill looks like in action:

- Knows how to effectively provide feedback to others using a specific feedback process
- Plans the best time to say what they want to say.
- Considers others' perspectives and feelings as well as the impact of words on others
- Is able to ask for and receive feedback to inform their learning journey

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