
How to Decide What Skill to Work on Next

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Most of us know that success in today's work world requires continuous growth and learning. You can't just rely on your current knowledge and expertise if you expect to keep up, let alone advance. But how do you identify the areas in which development efforts will yield the best return on your investment?

In our years coaching executives, my colleagues and I have noticed that people who improve in ways that best support their success look for the overlap between what their organization needs and what will give them the most satisfaction. We've discovered that using a version of Jim Collins's "hedgehog idea", from *Good to Great*, helps clients think it through. Collins found that great organizations focus on three things: what will drive their economic engine, what they can be best in the world at, and what they are most passionate about. The approach, he has noted, is just as good for figuring out how to become "great" individually. Here's how it works:

Driving the economic engine: We encourage executives to focus on this element first. How can you grow in a way that will help the organization succeed? For example, if you're in operations, you might identify several business-critical areas for improvement. By learning to better manage large custom client projects, you could significantly reduce cycle and delivery times. By becoming more knowledgeable about sourcing materials, you could reduce expenses. And by improving your communication skills and setting clearer direction for your employees, you could boost productivity. All three could positively impact the bottom line.

Best at: Once you've surfaced useful capabilities you might develop, think about whether you could become really excellent at them. One way to do that is to consider whether you're good at doing similar things. For instance, if you're already quite organized and sequential when you approach your tasks, that bodes well for being able to learn complex project management. And if you're already clear in your own mind about what needs to be done and who's best to do it, you could probably learn to more effectively share that thinking with your team. On the other hand, if you're just OK at research, getting really good at sourcing materials might be difficult.

Passionate about: As soon as you've gotten a sense of where your potential strengths match up with useful areas for development, honestly assess how interested you are in those areas. Let's say, for example, that of the two skills you believe you could get quite good at — project management and providing clearer direction — you're much more interested in and excited about the former. As an ops person, the idea of taking a formal course on process architecture really appeals to you; working on your "soft skills" does not. So go ahead and sign up for the process seminar. But also recognize that you have more control over this element of the "hedgehog" model than any other. You can, in fact, increase your desire to learn particular skills simply by identifying the personal benefits of doing so and then envisioning a future in which you're reaping those benefits. For example, getting better at talking to employees about goals and timelines and giving them balanced feedback might create a

more positive team culture and demonstrate that you're worthy of being promoted to a more senior management role. Picture your team proud and happy and your boss congratulating you on those accomplishments. Chances are you'll now be more interested in working to improve those skills.

Given all the ways in which organizations and jobs are changing, figuring out which new skills to develop and when to develop them can be hard. The key is to focus on skills that will propel your organization forward, that play to your strengths, and that you feel passionate about learning.