55 Competency-Based Ideas for Professional Development

Lack of professional development is a major driver of turnover at nonprofit organizations. Many nonprofit leaders and managers believe that going elsewhere will help them grow faster than staying where they are.

Luckily, you can provide great professional development for your staff right now, on the job. The 70-20-10 approach[1] indicates that 70 percent of learning and development comes from on-the-job training; 20 percent from coaching and mentoring; and 10 percent from formal training through conferences, classes, etc.

By creating the right customized plan with your direct reports, you can both develop the individual and help your organization meet its strategic goals.

To start, be sure you know the competencies, both core and leadership, that you want your direct report to develop:

- **Core competencies** are those that everybody in the organization needs to build in order to do their work.

- **Leadership competencies** enable current and future leaders to take on greater responsibility and perhaps, eventually, lead the organization.

The pages that follow contain 10 example core and leadership competencies; for each competency, we make suggestions for ways you can engage direct reports in developing that particular competency while on the job.

Learn more about competencies in "How to Create Competency-Based Professional Development Plans."

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1 First introduced by the Center for Creative Leadership.

Example Core & Leadership Competencies

	COMPETENCY	DEFINITION	SUB-COMPETENCIES
CORE	**Adaptability**	Adapts and responds to change effectively; proactively seeks opportunities to be supportive of change and serve our mission	• Ability to adjust • Openness
	Collaboration	Helps colleagues as needed, views responsibilities as shared	• Team-orientation • Collaboration
	Critical thinking	Consistently identifies, gathers, and applies relevant information to their work	• Gathering information • Applying information
	Cultural humility	Demonstrates the values of diversity and inclusion; fosters an inclusive environment that facilitates diversity	• Awareness • Advancing diversity and inclusion
	Ownership	Effectively manages own work, and work of teams when relevant, ensuring delivery of high-quality work	• Taking ownership • Quality of work products
LEADERSHIP	**Deals with uncertainty**	Identifies and assesses potential risks of a situation, and acts accordingly to mitigate them	• Identifying risks • Managing risks
	Decision-making	Effectively structures and facilitates decision-making processes; makes decisions effectively and responsibly to improve organizational health and impact	• Gathering and interpreting data • Executing decisions
	Develops and motivates others	Motivates others and supports their development through strong coaching and mentoring	• Motivating/inspiring • Coaching and mentoring
	External relationship builder	Invests in and builds strong, trusted relationships with all stakeholders	• Building individual network • Building Agency influence
	Values and prioritizes inclusivity	Consistently sees, learns from, and takes strategic action related to diverse perspectives; demonstrates the self-awareness and behaviors to work with stakeholders (of various identities and levels of power) respectfully and effectively. Actively seeks to build and retain a diverse workforce and fosters an equitable, inclusive workplace	• Valuing diverse perspectives and seeking to further learn from them • Building and advancing diversity and inclusion

Please note that this list is not exhaustive, but rather a selection of competencies we frequently see as development priorities for the organizations with which we work.

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CORE

Adaptability

Adapts and responds to change effectively; proactively seeks opportunities to be supportive of change and serve our mission

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Ability to adjust	• Take a current project or decision that you are considering; identify worst-case scenarios and contingency plans as an exercise to build awareness that a change in plans can still lead to a successful outcome. • Seek out peers or mentors with experience in change management and conduct an interview about navigating change; learn their strategy and approach and attempt to apply it to a change or challenge happening in your own organization.
Openness	• Solicit feedback and ideas from peers and team members through brainstorming sessions focused on how to address a specific change or challenge in your organization. • Have a conversation with a senior team member on how they deal with uncertainty. • Identify the boundaries of your project or task to find areas where you can be flexible; identify what is truly "non-negotiable" and why.

CORE

Collaboration

Helps colleagues as needed, views responsibilities as shared

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Team-orientation	• Spend time with your team face-to-face (if possible). Ask questions about work styles and preferences to understand and manage team dynamics. • Use a personality instrument (e.g., Myers-Briggs) to start conversations about skills, mindsets, and attitudes. This will help team members to leverage the diverse approaches and perspectives of the team. • Conduct a personal histories exercise to provide an opportunity for an exchange of personal information. • Make the time to have impromptu, less formal conversations with people in common spaces such as hallways or the kitchen, or by stopping by their desk briefly. Find out about personal interests, family matters, hobbies, and goals. Follow up showing care and attention to details you remember about them, asking about their current concerns.
Collaboration	• Plan and execute a cross-departmental project. • Join a committee or work on a special project that includes members from different levels of your organization. • Ask for someone's help to think through a problem you may be experiencing. Be thoughtful of their time by preparing in advance, and then (as appropriate) incorporate the input they provide as you craft a resolution.

CORE Critical Thinking

Consistently identifies, gathers, and applies relevant information to their work

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Gathering information	• Conduct a client or community survey/questionnaire to collect information for a program evaluation or other project. Design the survey, test it, and launch it to gather a variety of perspectives. Analyze the data to find trends or themes. • Conduct interviews or focus groups with stakeholders to gather qualitative data. • Perform a benchmarking analysis to compare some element of your organization's work (e.g., your programmatic impact or administrative costs) to that of other organizations.
Applying information	• Use data or research (e.g., from survey data or benchmark research) to identify potential program or organizational improvements. • Build out criteria you would use to make a decision; use these criteria to pressure test options or recommendations against these criteria. • Design an "experiment" to test a recommendation.

CORE Cultural Humility

Consistently identifies, gathers, and applies relevant information to their work

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Awareness	• Organize community conversations to bring together diverse team members to share what their cultural identity means to them. Ask about traditions, cultural norms, and sensitivities. • Cultivate cultural appreciation by creating learning opportunities tied to cultural events to discuss significance and history. Invite team members to share their experiences with the event. • Reflect on your own identity and how that has impacted both you personally and the way you show up in your work. • In interactions with others, acknowledge differences and what you don't know. Express gratitude to those who share their knowledge and experiences. • Reflect on aspects of diversity that make you uncomfortable, and then actively seek out information to better understand other perspectives.
Advancing diversity and inclusion	• Form or join a committee to address issues of inclusion and diversity. Involve people from diverse backgrounds, functions, and levels of experience. • Take the time to get to know someone from a different background and ask about their traditions, interests, and experiences. Share your own story with candor. • Learn about the diversity issues affecting your organization and work toward solving them.

CORE

Ownership

Effectively manages own work, and work of teams when relevant, ensuring delivery of high-quality work

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Taking ownership	• Create a work plan that outlines how you will own a piece of work from start to finish; share with your supervisor to get input and feedback. • Track how you are spending your time, taking note of how long you estimate a task will take and how long it actually takes. Identify what distractions can be reduced and what enhancements are working to boost productivity for certain activities that could be applied to other tasks.
Quality of work products	• Ask a trusted colleague to review your work and provide feedback, encourage your colleague to suggest edits or areas for improvement. • Before doing any project, explicitly state (and confirm with your manager) what success will look like for that project; after the project, compare your results with that desired success statement.

LEADERSHIP

Deals With Uncertainty

Identifies and assesses potential risks of a situation, and acts accordingly to mitigate them

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Identifying risks	• Develop a list of risk assessment criteria for use when evaluating an activity or initiative; review and refine with input from relevant team members. • Have conversations with tenured staff to ask what went wrong in the past, and what were missed opportunities that they would have benefited from capturing.
Managing risks	• Prepare a contingency plan for use in case challenges occur; review and refine with input from relevant team members. • Build a risk register to capture any risks or opportunities that may come up over the course of a program/event/year and update frequently as new information becomes available.

Decision-Making

Effectively structures and facilitates decision-making processes; makes decisions effectively and responsibly to improve organizational health and impact

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Gathering and interpreting data	• Determine key factors to take into account when making a decision (e.g., orientation to mission, budget, and organizational priorities). If helpful or necessary, create a set of criteria that is specific enough to be unique for your organization and context, but not so specific to be constraining. • Develop a decision-making matrix to systematically and analytically judge decisions against a set of criteria that works for your organization.
Executing decisions	• Make sure to allow space for dissenting opinions. Engage in conversations as a team to flesh out the merits of each. Once you've reached a conclusion, make sure to get buy in from the team tasked with carrying out the decision, even if an individual did not initially support the decision. • Ensure that those tasked with carrying out the decision can articulate the value of the plan to others

Develops and Motivates Others

Motivates others and supports their development through strong coaching and mentoring

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Motivating/ inspiring	• Demonstrate vulnerability to others by sharing your own past or current development goals with your direct report and the steps you took to reach them. • Create space to listen to team members and ask about their anxieties and aspirations—for example, set up a monthly professional development chat with each of your direct reports, focused on growth and learning (and not just on task execution or performance).
Coaching and mentoring	• Be a sounding board to teammates as they think about their career aspirations and decisions. • Focus on asking good questions to help teammates identify the motivations behind their goals and find ways to incorporate some of these into their work. • Find someone in the organization who is learning a skill that you have; meet with them regularly to support them on a project they are completing; provide regular feedback and support.

External Relationship Builder

Invests in and builds strong, trusted relationships with all stakeholders

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Building individual network	• Take the time to have one-on-one conversations with important organizational stakeholders such as board members, funders, or institutional partners. Identify what connects them to the work of the organization and begin looking for avenues to expand your network though them. • Research connections through your existing network and ask to be introduced to individuals who may be interested in your organization's mission, or in your own personal passions. • Seek out prominent individuals in your field and work backward to identify connections.
Building agency influence	• Seek an opportunity to present about your role and/or your organization at a conference or local event. • Seek out an organizational partnership to strengthen the credibility and value of your message and programs—reach out to a potential organization to start developing this relationships. • Reach out to a smaller organization in your field and offer to support them, e.g., through doing a brown-bag lunch at their office, or by having one-on-one conversations with peer staff.

Values and Prioritizes Inclusivity

Consistently sees, learns from, and takes strategic action related to diverse perspectives; demonstrates the self-awareness and behaviors to work with stakeholders (of various identities and levels of power) respectfully and effectively. Actively seeks to build and retain a diverse workforce and fosters an equitable, inclusive workplace

Sub-competency	Potential activities
Valuing diverse perspectives and seeking to further learn from them	• Conduct focus groups or interviews with staff and/or external stakeholders; ensure that voices that may not typically be heard, or are underrepresented, are included and elevated. • Create an opportunity to collect feedback from all parts of your organization in a safe way (which may mean anonymously, like in a Google doc). • Build authentic relationships across lines of difference. • Design agendas for meetings that enable more voices to be heard (e.g., silent time for five minutes before speaking, Post-it® activities).
Building and advancing diversity and inclusion	• Conduct a survey to identify the elements of an inclusive culture in your organization. Assess your organization on these dimensions; identify one (or more) for improvement, and develop a task force to identify solutions or recommendations to address this area. • Lead a process to identify goals related to diversity and representation at your organization; keep track of progress towards these goals.