

“Working Smart”

Soft Skills for Workplace Success
Work and life skills that enhance employee productivity

Instructor Guide



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Updated materials will be made available for access by certified “Working Smart” instructors on the website.

To access restricted webpage for Working Smart Instructors:

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A. Course Rationale

This course is designed for individuals with barriers to employment, providing them with opportunities to learn critical, work-related interpersonal skills and insights. Each lesson teaches a specific soft skill or insight in-demand with Charlotte, NC area employers and job developers. Two decades of research indicates that individuals with soft skills such as these are more attractive to employers and more successful in the workplace.

B. Soft Skill Categories

Vital soft skill categories revealed during meetings and focus groups included:

1. **Self-Awareness skills** needed to portray a confident and authentic sense of self. Examples include (a) identifying one’s core values and goals, (b) avoiding a victim mentality, and (c) understanding the process of change.
2. **Employer-Awareness skills** needed to separate one’s personal and professional selves. Examples include (a) understanding employer unspoken behavioral expectations, (b) managing competing home vs. work demands, (c) taking initiative/pulling your weight, and (d) using professional judgment regarding personal vs professional boundaries (clothing, language, relationships, texting) while at work.
3. **Self-Management skills** needed to de-escalate oneself in highly stressful situations which could put jobs at risk. Examples include (a) understanding the impact of stress on body and behavior (fight, flight, and freeze), (b) recognizing triggering situations, and (c) using de-escalation strategies when angry or anxious.
4. **Communication skills** needed to handle everyday interactions with supervisors and co-workers in the workplace. Examples include (a) how to listen effectively, (b) how to ask for clarification, (c) how to express oneself in writing including written cyber communication, and (d) how to understand the impact of non-verbal/para-verbal communication (e.g., tone of voice, body gestures, street versus standard language).
5. **Conflict Resolution skills** (aka Teamwork or Interpersonal skills) needed to handle more stressful interactions with supervisors and co-workers in the workplace. Examples include (a) how to deal with feedback or constructive criticism, (b) how to express feelings/concerns, and (c) how to reach compromise during a disagreement.

6. **Problem Solving/Critical Thinking skills** needed to work through complicated work-related interpersonal problems. Examples include (a) how to identify a problem quickly and focus on a goal rather than blame, (b) how to gather factual information about a work-related problem rather than making assumptions, and (c) how to analyze pros and cons of various options when making decisions.

C. Failure to Use Soft Skills

There are many reasons why participants with multiple barriers might fail to use these skills, including:

1. **Skill Deficits**, meaning that participants simply don't know how to use them confidently or competently (e.g., become rude because they are unskilled at managing emotions).
2. **Motivation Deficits**, meaning that participants are not interested in using these skills, often because they do not perceive the value or struggle with competing motivations (e.g., skip work because they place demands of family or friends over those of work).
3. **Cognitive (or Cultural) Conflicts**, meaning that participants judge the appropriateness of their behavior in one setting using the rules of another (e.g., responding defensively at work because "that's how I was raised" at home).

D. Effective Intervention Strategies

Given the presence of these three co-existing reasons for "inappropriate" workplace behavior, an effective soft skills curriculum should:

1. **Address skill deficits.** It must teach essential skills in an engaging and educational manner, using sound cognitive-behavioral principles of instruction and various teaching strategies which appeal to participants' varied learning styles. It should include bright, eye-catching visuals; user-friendly written materials; dramatic, relevant role plays; fun and energizing activities.
2. **Address motivation deficits.** It must incorporate elements of values clarification such as exploration of participants' goals and values and understanding of change, while training instructors to use motivational interviewing strategies designed to lessen resistance and improve collaboration.
3. **Address cognitive/cultural conflicts.** It must acknowledge the value of participants' personal/survival mindsets while at home/street, yet teach them to code-switch to a professional/employment-centered mindset while at work.

E. Typical Soft Skills Lesson Outline

A large body of research and practice in cognitive-behavioral skills offers an effective direct-instruction approach for teaching these skills, which is embedded in each lesson. A typical “Working Smart” lesson requires 90 minutes (1.5 hours) for a group of 10-16 participants.

Part 1: OPENING (10-15 min)

- Welcome, inspirational quote
- Brief team building or warm up activity
- Homework review &/or review of previous lesson
- Introduction to new content, vocabulary & learning objectives

Part 2: CONTENT (75-90 min)

A. Dramatically introduce content

1. Present attention-getting story, vignette, video, or role play (often a negative example of what NOT to do in a relevant situation)

B. Clearly explain/teach content

1. For a CONCEPT LESSON: Clearly describe critical insight (e.g., personal vs. professional boundaries) with a detailed example from your own experience
2. For a SKILLS LESSON: Break down skill (e.g., how to listen) into component steps with positive examples of what to do

C. Apply content

1. For a CONCEPT LESSON:
 - a. Apply to characters: How does this concept apply to various fictitious scenarios (workbook examples, grab-bag problems, video vignettes)?
 - b. Apply to self: How can it apply to your own past (reflective) or future (projective) problems? When will it NOT apply?
2. For a SKILLS LESSON:
 - a. Apply to characters: What exactly could various fictitious characters do to use each step of the skill in given situations (workbook examples, grab-bag problems, video vignettes)?
 - b. Apply to self: Role play this skill as it applies to a chosen situation of your own, either past (reflective) or future (projective). When will it NOT apply?

Part 3: CLOSING (10-15 min)

- Summary of lesson
- Overview of next lesson
- Quiz
- Feedback (what did you get out of this?)
- Homework assignment

F. Lesson-by-Lesson Objectives

Module 1: Self-Awareness skills, needed to portray a confident and authentic sense of self.

Lesson 1: Personal Branding

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Learn what company branding is
- ✓ Describe your personal brand (how you want to identify yourself and be seen by others), driven by your personal values
- ✓ Identify changes necessary to rebrand yourself, including limiting people and behaviors inconsistent with your new brand

Lesson 2: Self-Change

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Describe one behavior change which would significantly improve your life and enhance your personal brand
- ✓ Learn about five stages of successful and lasting change
- ✓ Describe strategies for transitioning between each stage of change

Lesson 3: Cognitive Cycle

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Learn about the Cognitive Cycle, a model illustrating how your beliefs drive your behaviors in difficult situations, and how these influence your ultimate outcomes
- ✓ Understand the connection between your values, your beliefs, and your behavior
- ✓ Separate helpful beliefs in your life (which help you reach your goals) from harmful beliefs in your life (which distract or keep you from your goals)

Module 2: Self-Management skills, needed to de-escalate oneself in high stress work-related situations which could put jobs at risk.

Lesson 4: Dealing with Stress

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Understand three survival responses to high stress/threats (fight, flight, and freeze)
- ✓ Identify three kinds of stress which can cause you to overreact to challenging situations, including examples of each stress in your own life
- ✓ Use the Cognitive Cycle to see how stress contributes to your own problems
- ✓ Describe several coping strategies for each type of stress

Lesson 5: Warning Signs

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Describe three types of warning signs (intense thoughts, strong emotions, and sudden physical changes) in stressful situations
- ✓ Identify examples of each type of warning sign in both fictional situations, and in your own work-related scenarios
- ✓ Use the Cognitive Cycle to analyze beliefs contributing to your own stressful problems

Lesson 6: Personal Reactions

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Identify four categories of personal reactions to stressful situations (aggressive, passive-aggressive, dependent and avoidant), including specific problems each can cause in the workplace
- ✓ Categorize your own dominant impulse style in challenging home and work situations
- ✓ Recognize and generate examples of an alternative professional style (assertive)
- ✓ Use the Cognitive Cycle to contrast personal and professional behaviors in both fictional situations, and in your own stressful work-related situations

Lesson 7: Staying Calm & Clear

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Identify four “feeling families” and name various emotions which fit within each
- ✓ Learn a 3-step method for counteracting strong feelings (anger, worry, and sadness)
- ✓ Understand the influence of our thoughts upon our feelings in any given situation
- ✓ Apply this content to fictional situations and role-play the skills of emotional self-management in various work-related situations

Module 3: Work Ethics, needed to understand and mentally adjust to the workplace culture.

Lesson 8: Employer Expectations

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Discuss four specific motivations for working
- ✓ Identify positive and negative traits of employees for your own made-up company
- ✓ Know where to find common written expectations of employers
- ✓ Understand eight common but unwritten expectations of employers, along with specific meanings or examples of each

Lesson 9: Code-Switching

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Take and discuss a survey of beliefs which drive our personal decisions at home
- ✓ Contrast acceptable home behavior with expected professional responses at work
- ✓ Comprehend the concept of “code-switching” between different environments
- ✓ Analyze both fictional and real workplace problems from home and work perspectives, then use three “code-switchers” to mentally shift your point of view

Module 4: Communication Skills, needed to communicate clearly with others and effectively handle stressful workplace discussions.

Lesson 10: Active Listening

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- √ Assess your own communication skills, and identify areas of need
- √ Improve three levels of listening skills to be a better listener at work
- √ Apply this knowledge to fictitious and to your own scenarios

Lesson 11: Four C's of Communication

In this lesson, you/participants will: In this lesson, you/participants will:

- √ Judge the appropriateness of numerous modes of communication (face-to-face, phone, written, electronic) in various work situations
- √ Understand the four C's of communication (clear, concise, correct, and courteous)
- √ Apply this knowledge to fictitious and your own scenarios

Lesson 12: Expressing Concerns

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- √ Learn a structured, step-by-step method for staying calm and professionally expressing a concern or complaint to supervisors or co-workers
- √ Practice the vital step of assertively “explaining your side” during a dispute
- √ Observe and judge an instructor demonstration of this skill, then apply the skill in a role play with fictional characters and/or your own work-related situations

Lesson 13: Handling Feedback

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- √ Learn a structured, step-by-step method for staying calm and professionally handling feedback from supervisors or dealing with complaints from co-workers/customers
- √ Practice the vital step of skillfully calming and listening to others during a dispute
- √ Observe and judge an instructor demonstration of this skill, then apply the skill in a role play with fictional characters and/or your own work-related situations

Module 5: Problem Solving Skills, needed to analyze and resolve interpersonal and procedural problems effectively.

Lesson 14: Problems and Goals

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Learn a five-step approach to logical problem solving
- ✓ Create clear and logical problem statements in emotional work-related situations
- ✓ Create reasonable goal statements which resolve these problems
- ✓ Apply these insights and skills to fictional situations and to your own work-related situations

Lesson 15: Gathering Relevant Facts

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Define and separate facts and opinions
- ✓ Describe eight methods of getting relevant facts in work-related situations
- ✓ Describe several ways you can fall into false assumptions, and understand the problems this can cause
- ✓ Apply these insights and skills to fictional situations and to your own work-related situations

Lesson 16: Examining Options and Outcomes

In this lesson, you/participants will:

- ✓ Brainstorm a variety of alternatives for possible problem situations, and predict likely outcomes for each
- ✓ Utilize a goal-driven process to select and implement the best option
- ✓ Analyze several work-related situations with no clear right or wrong answer and discuss the pros and cons of various options
- ✓ Apply these insights and skills to your own work-related situations

Each Module ends with a Summary session

In this session, you/participants will:

- ✓ Review the module's content
- ✓ Demonstrate content mastery on a 10-question test of knowledge
- ✓ Apply this module's content by answering Behavioral Interviewing (BI) questions related to this content, and rating others' responses to BI questions as well

G. Assessing Soft Skills

This curriculum has one overarching goal: To prepare challenging job-seekers from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region with the soft skills needed to acquire and keep good jobs. To be perceived as valuable by both participants and employers, the curriculum must not only provide meaningful instruction, but must also have measurable outcomes directly related to workplace success.

A variety of assessments are included within the lessons and at the end of each module to be certain that relevant skills are acquired and applied to realistic scenarios.

1. Classroom-based assessments demonstrate that participants clearly understood what was taught, gained important work-related skills or insights, and applied these skills to specific situations relevant to their own lives. Specific outcomes measures include:

- Informal quizzes after each lesson and formal written tests after each module
- Careful records of class attendance, timeliness, and engagement in learning activities
- Instructor notes regarding appropriate workplace interpersonal behavior
- Written and oral responses to behavioral interview questions after each module
- Participant course evaluations
- Instructor observations regarding individual skill and attitude change

2. Real-world assessments measure actual employment-related outcomes. Ideally, many of the classroom outcomes should lead to specific measurable changes such as those listed in the research questions below:

- a. **INTERVIEWS/EMPLOYMENT:** Do program completers submit more job applications or attend more job interviews? Do they rate themselves as better prepared? more confident? Do job interviewers rate them as better prepared or more confident than non-completers?
- b. **EMPLOYMENT/RETENTION:** Do program completers receive more job offers? Do the jobs offer better hours, pay scale, etc.?
- c. **WORKPLACE ADJUSTMENT:** Do program completers rate themselves as having an easier time adjusting to the social environment of the workplace (fitting in with co-workers, getting along better with supervisors, understanding expectations, feeling more comfortable asking for clarification, etc)? Do their supervisors rate program completers as getting along better?
- d. **JOB SUCCESS:** Do program completers have fewer documented issues of tardiness, attendance or performance problems than non-completers? Do they reach job milestones (end of probationary period, gain benefits, job promotions, etc.) more often?
- e. **JOB RETENTION:** How long do program completers stay on the job? Do they more often leave under good circumstances?