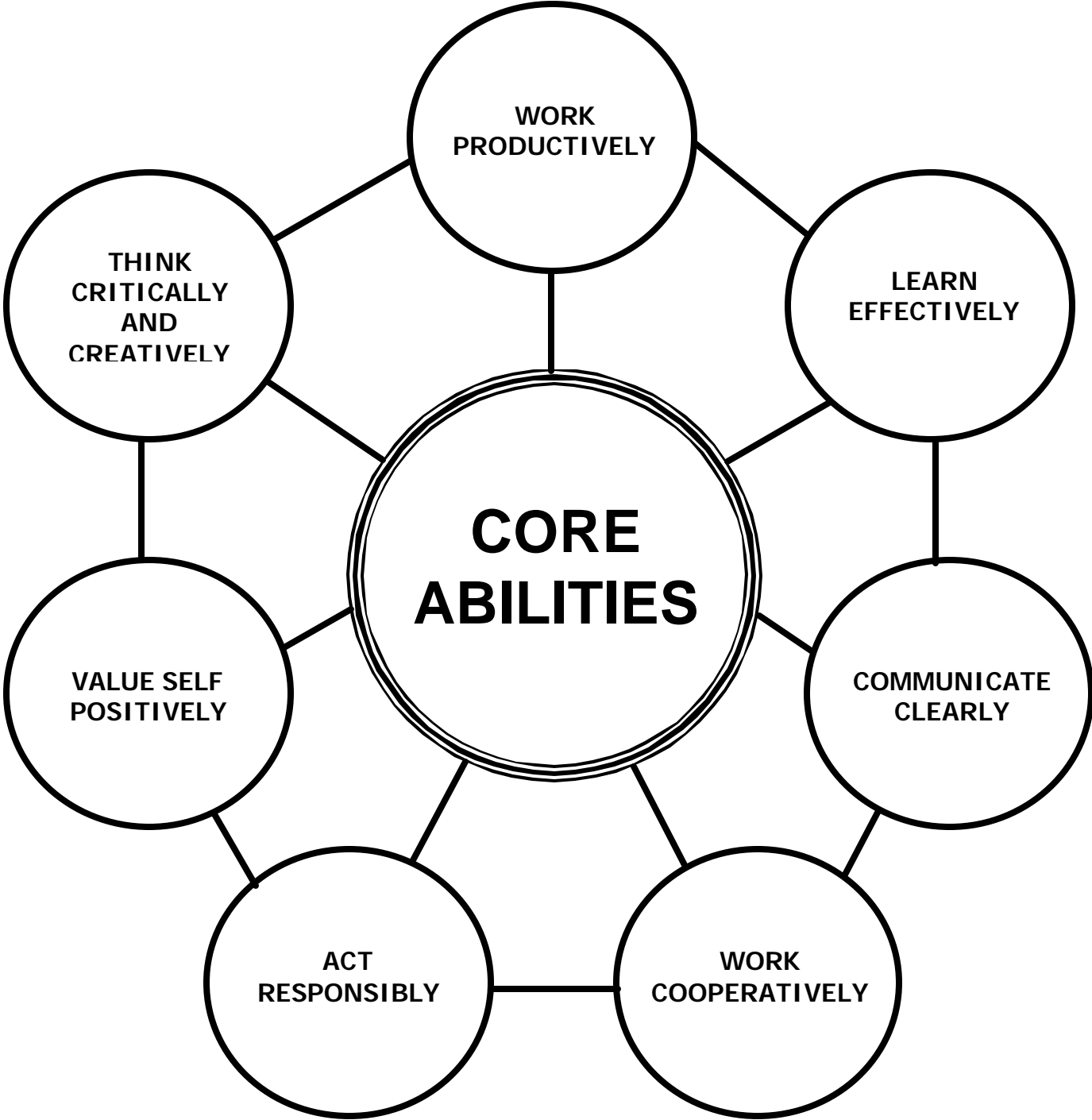


# CORE ABILITIES



## BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE PROJECT

During the 1988-1989 school year, Moraine Park staff participated in Building Communities Study Groups, which explored the findings of the AACJC Commission on the Future of Community Colleges. The primary recommendation from the Curriculum Study Group was that “Core Abilities be integrated into all program courses.”

The Study Group defined **Core Abilities** as “**transferable skills essential to an individual’s success regardless of occupation or community setting. These skills:**

- **complement specific occupational skills;**
- **broaden one’s ability to function outside a given occupation;**
- **connect occupational, personal, and community roles and perspectives.”**

The core ability concept is not a new one. “Essential skills” or “core competencies” have been established by educational institutions such as Alverno College in Milwaukee and Seminole College in Florida. Studies done by the U.S. Departments of Labor, Education, and Commerce have resulted in identification of essential elements in “building a quality workforce.” Professional organizations such as the Association for Supervision and Training Development have identified “workplace basics.” Wisconsin, Michigan, and Colorado have conducted employability skills surveys and made recommendations for education for employment.

With an abundance of available research, the Building Communities Study Group could have recommended that Moraine Park adopt one of the core ability profiles already in existence. However, the Committee members believed that the core abilities should reflect Moraine Park’s needs and beliefs about essential, transferable skills. Therefore, the Core Ability Project was initiated.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The goal of this project was to identify core abilities. However, the process used to accomplish this task was an important facet of the plan. Moraine Park's staff, advisory committee members, and students were the primary sources of information for identifying Moraine Park's Core Abilities.

These steps were taken:

1. To obtain an initial list of essential skills and attitudes necessary for occupational success regardless of occupation:
  - a. An Essential Skills Survey was taken of advisory committee members at the Advisory Committee Appreciation Dinner. Seventy-five surveys were completed.
  - b. Interviews and discussions were held with Moraine Park staff. Several sessions were offered at each campus, over a six-week period, in order to encourage staff contributions. Ideas were contributed by 138 management, instructional, and support staff.
  - c. An Essential Skills Survey was administered to students in supervisory/management courses. Thirty-nine students were polled.
2. To prioritize and identify dominant themes from the suggested list of skills and attitudes:
  - a. Group sessions utilizing a technique called "Beyond Brainstorming" were held: three at the Fond du Lac Campus, one each at Beaver Dam and West Bend, and one involving students in the evening Critical and Creative Thinking class. These sessions involved 115 people. (See Appendix "A" for a description of the "Beyond Brainstorming" technique.)
  - b. A final ad hoc committee was gathered to compile, organize, and further refine the dominant themes and list of essential skills. This committee consisted of essential skills. This committee consisted of Judy Neill, Dave Weber, Joe Pease, Pat Olson, and Ann Mielke. Each division of instruction was represented in this committee.
3. To name Moraine Park's Core Abilities:
  - a. Secondary resources which listed ideas around the core ability concept were analyzed to determine similarities and differences.

- b. Dominant themes identified as a result of the final ad hoc committee were examined for similarities and compared to the secondary source lists.
- c. The core abilities were named using the following guidelines:
  - (1) Each core ability is written using language that is as free of educational jargon as possible.
  - (2) Each ability encompasses a broad objective which could be met in a variety of ways across the curriculum.
  - (3) The combination of abilities reflects the concept of core skills necessary for work and life success.
  - (4) Each core ability represents a separate theme. However, the core abilities do not exist in isolation. Each ability supports others. Together, they represent an integrated whole.

(See Appendix "B" for a complete description of the Core Ability Project Plan.)

## DISCUSSION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE CORE ABILITIES

We believe that the following reflects a composite list of Core Abilities:

**TO WORK PRODUCTIVELY**  
**TO LEARN EFFECTIVELY**  
**TO COMMUNICATE CLEARLY**  
**TO WORK COOPERATIVELY**  
**TO ACT RESPONSIBLY**  
**TO VALUE SELF POSITIVELY**  
**TO THINK CRITICALLY AND CREATIVELY**

The following discussion of the Core Abilities includes a definition and partial listing of skills and attitudes inherent in each Core Ability. Written and defined as is, these Core Abilities serve as global objectives. However, further organization and refinement of the skills and attitudes will be necessary before they can be successfully implemented in the classroom and across the curriculum.

**To “work productively” means that an individual possesses and applies effective work habits and attitudes within an organizational setting.**

From the point of view of employers, a negative attitude and poor work habits are considered the greatest deterrents to getting and keeping a job. Even if an individual possesses necessary technical skills and the credentials to verify completion of a course of study, his or her work habits and attitudes will determine occupational success.

“The quality of our work is determined by our own actions, not someone else’s. It comes through pride in what we are doing. Excellence is achieved only when we strive to attain it ourselves.” (Hallet, 13)

Some of the skills and attitudes associated with “working productively” are:

- managing time and workload
- following safety procedures
- recognizing and applying quality standards in production
- demonstrating dependability, accuracy, initiative
- understanding how businesses operate
- handling responsibility

- carrying out instructions and job requirements
- being committed and dedicated to doing a job well
- understanding the values and norms of the work culture
- determining personal effectiveness within the organization

**“To “learn effectively” means that an individual possesses necessary basic skills in reading, writing, and computing; applies skills in acquiring information; and uses learning tools and strategies.**

“Today’s workplace demands not only a good command of the three ‘Rs,’ but more. Employers want a new kind of worker with a broad set of workplace skills—or at least a strong foundation of basics that will facilitate learning on the job.” (Carnevale, 10)

Deficiencies in basic literacy skills of reading, writing, and computing create barriers for the unemployed person who seeks satisfactory employment, for the employee who desires advancement, and for the employer who strives for improved productivity.

Knowing how to learn is the key that opens the door to future success. The employee who knows how to learn can adapt to technological changes, acquire new skills quickly, and absorb, process, and apply information as needed.

Some of the skills and attitudes incorporated in “learning effectively” are:

- taking responsibility for own learning
- listening carefully
- following instructions
- using tools for learning such as the calculator, computer, books, manuals, and community resources
- using productive study skills
- organizing information
- applying appropriate reading strategies to suit the purpose for reading
- asking questions
- accessing information from books, libraries, and other resources
- recognizing the need for lifelong learning

**To “communicate clearly” means that an individual is able to apply appropriate writing, speaking, and listening skills in order to precisely convey information, ideas, and opinions.**

“Success on the job is linked to good communication skills . . . . Only job knowledge ranks above communication skills as a factor for workplace success.” (Carnevale, 11)

Effective communication skills is extremely important in getting and keeping customers. It is at the heart of maintaining successful working relationships with coworkers and managers. The capacity to think clearly, work with others, and be productive is tied to one’s ability to communicate.

Some of the skills and attitudes essential to the ability to “communicate clearly” are:

- applying the English language correctly (spelling, grammar, structure)
- writing and speaking so others can understand
- asking questions
- knowing how to give instructions
- expressing empathy
- checking for accuracy
- writing legibly
- applying effective listening
- using acceptable language
- providing necessary detail
- describing problems accurately
- understanding the impact of nonverbal communication

**To “work cooperatively” means that an individual is capable of working with others to complete tasks, solve problems, resolve conflicts, provide information, and offer support.**

“In the past two decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the use of teams in the workplace. The team approach has been linked conclusively to higher productivity and product quality, as well as to increased quality of work life. Change strategies are usually dependant upon the ability of employees to pull together and refocus on the new common goal.” (Carnevale, 14)

First, an employee needs to get along with individuals outside of, yet vital to, his or her workplace. These include customers, suppliers, and clients. Second, emphasis on the ability to work with others within the organization will increase as knowledge workers, those with specialized job knowledge, are asked to help solve problems, make decisions, and implement ideas. As companies decentralize, in an effort to remain competitive, employees will become more responsible for constructively participating in group efforts. (Drucker, 18; Carnevale, 4)

Some of the skills and attitudes of “working cooperatively” are:

- understanding and empathizing with others
- appreciating the diversity of values and cultural differences among people
- planning and working together in meetings
- applying conflict management skills
- giving and accepting constructive criticism
- being tolerant of individual differences
- accepting advice
- applying group problem-solving strategies
- establishing productive working relationships with coworkers, clients, customers, and supervisors
- resolving conflict objectively
- demonstrating respect for others through word and action
- providing and receiving feedback

**To “act responsibly” means that an individual recognizes an obligation to self and others for his or here decisions and actions.**

“Character building must be an important component of American public education . . . . Influential messages about behavior [are] sent by families and society . . . . The only opportunity we have as a society [beyond the family] to instill positive values and attitudes is through public education . . . . Students must be held accountable for their work and for its integrity.” (Butler, 67)

An individual is responsible for adapting to changes in the workplace and in the world beyond the employment setting. This can be accomplished by taking charge of one’s career development, recognizing the need for lifelong learning, setting and working towards goals, and realizing one’s aspirations and values.

Managing self, being accountable for activities, and applying the ethical and quality standards of one’s occupation are important employee responsibilities. Integrity, civility, and humaneness are essential to working and living responsibly.

Some of the skills and attitudes of “acting responsibly” are:

- taking responsibility for own learning
- working to resolve conflicts at work, in the home, and in the community
- applying ethical work values such as keeping confidentiality, putting in a full day’s work, and following safety standards
- acknowledging a responsibility to a global environment

- applying principles of effective citizenship
- understanding his or her role as a consumer and citizen in a democracy
- searching for truth, fairness, and meaning in work and life
- assessing personal values and using them to guide actions and decisions

**To “value self positively” means that an individual applies the principles of physical and psychological wellness to his or her life.**

“. . . the single most important thing in life is ‘self-image.’ If you don’t have a good self-image, you’re not going to be successful at anything you do.”  
(Dezell, 9)

An employee who possesses a good self-image takes pride in his or her work. A positive self-image has a significant impact on one’s ability to learn effectively, to think clearly, to work productively, and to act responsibly.

Some of the skills and attitudes of “valuing self positively” include:

- applying stress management skills
- understanding and applying knowledge of nutrition, exercise, and hygiene for physical well-being
- taking responsibility for self and personal behavior
- recognizing the importance of a sense of humor to personal wellness
- possessing self-understanding of personal interests, attitudes, and values
- understanding and applying self-maintenance skills as related to drugs, alcohol, and sexual responsibility
- balancing family, work, and personal needs
- applying money management skills to personal finances
- understanding personal goals and values as they relate to the work environment

**To “think critically and creatively” means that an individual applies the principles and strategies of purposeful, active, organized thinking.**

The American society is in the midst of a significant change in how organizations are structured. “Direction and discipline will come from within, not above . . . .”  
(Drucker, 18) Decentralization will be a key factor in improving productivity and providing businesses and industries with a competitive edge. (Carnevale) Employees at all levels will be asked to contribute ideas, help solve problems, and make decisions.

“Responsibility for making good decisions and accomplishing tasks will devolve increasingly upon workers, not a select group of managers.”  
(Drucker, 19)

Some of the skills and attitudes of “critical and creative thinking” include:

- applying problem-solving steps
- setting goals and working to attain them
- comprehending, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information, ideas, and problems
- understanding and recognizing other points of view
- making decisions based on careful analysis
- demonstrating open-mindedness
- persevering through difficult and complex problems
- recognizing the difference between facts and opinions
- thinking about why and how he/she thinks as he/she does
- applying logical reasoning in solving problems or dealing with information

## CONCLUSION

In “Why Johnny Can’t Get a Job,” Owen Butler, Chairman of Procter and Gamble, states that “schools transmit important messages about what is and is not acceptable behavior through an ‘invisible curriculum.’” He contends that “. . . schools must return to practices that promote good work habits and develop such positive traits as responsibility, self-discipline, and self-reliance. Lack of these traits is the primary reason many . . . people are unemployable.” (Butler, 67)

The core abilities are dominant themes in the “invisible curriculum.” By identifying them and designing a framework for instruction across the curriculum, we can communicate to students what is acceptable and necessary for successful employment and satisfying careers. An individual’s success, productivity, and effectiveness in work, school, family, social, political, economic, and community roles are determined by the successful integration of these abilities.

Individual instructors may already teach these abilities in their classrooms. However, by implementing core ability instruction, and by holding students responsible for their application and transfer from one area to another, this institution will have a far greater impact on the ability of Moraine Park’s graduates to be successful in the workforce.