

Executive Skills for Goal Achievement

A Coaching Workbook for Human Service Practitioners and Program Leaders



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Welcome!

We love Executive Skills, and we are excited to share our enthusiasm for Coaching informed by Executive Skills with you. No matter your title, role, or responsibilities at work and beyond, Executive Skills are the skills *all of us have* that help us set, progress toward, and achieve our goals.

This workbook is a compilation of five foundational strategies that will help you learn what Executive Skills are and how to leverage Executive Skills strengths and mitigate struggles that get in the way of progress toward goals. It is grounded in the following **core values**:

- **Participant expertise:** Participants are experts in their own lives, strengths, and goals.
- **Strengths-Based:** People experiencing scarcity have the strengths, skills, and potential to achieve their goals.
- **Normalize:** Our Executive Skills and resulting behaviors are normal for our life experiences, resources, and current context.
- **Reduce environmental barriers:** Deficit-based mindsets contribute to systems and environments that create conditions of poverty. Shift the mindset and systems may follow.
- **Celebrate success:** Goal progression is goal achievement; acknowledge and celebrate effort along the way.

In this Coaching workbook you will:

- Learn about Executive Skills: the brain-based skills we all have
- Outline powerful coaching questions informed by Executive Skills
- Practice leveraging Executive Skills to set and progress toward good-fit goals
- Explore environmental modifications that reduce obstacles to goals
- Design a few new ways to incorporate Executive Skills Coaching strategies into your teamwork or leadership – no matter your role, title, or organization

How to use this workbook:

Think about this workbook as a recipe, where each strategy is an ingredient that you can become familiar with over time. Each strategy includes self-reflection, key concepts, and an applied learning section for you to design and test out your new Executive Skills knowledge through practice. Like many good recipes, there is a lot of room for you to improvise and contextualize with that which already exists in your program or organization. And while each strategy has standalone value and benefit, like an excellent recipe, the combination is greater than its parts. Let's get cooking!

Strategy 1: Executive Skills Knowledge



Grounding: What comes to mind when you hear the term “Executive Skills?” Jot a few words or phrases below:

Connect with Content: Executive Skills Overview

- Executive Skills are the twelve brain-based skills that help us organize, react, and get things done. Everyone has all twelve Executive Skills. They can help or hinder our progression to our goals.

HOW WE ORGANIZE

- Organization
- Time Management
- Planning/Prioritization

HOW WE REACT

- Emotional Control
- Flexibility
- Response Inhibition
- Stress Tolerance
- Metacognition

HOW WE GET THINGS DONE

- Task Initiation
- Sustained Attention
- Goal-Directed Persistence
- Working Memory

- Everyone has different Executive Skills **strengths** – the skills that we naturally like to use or draw energy from using – and Executive Skills **struggles**, the skills that drain us or are harder for us to use when we are tired, hungry, stressed, etc. Our strengths and struggles show up as behaviors:
 - *Example:* I am strong at time management [Executive Skill], so I am good at estimating how long it will take to write an email [related behavior].
- This mix of Executive Skills Strengths and Struggles is called our **Executive Skills Profile**. There are no Executive Skills that are better or worse than any others; everyone’s Executive Skills are normal for their life experiences and current resources.



Executive Skills develop most rapidly in early childhood, adolescence, and when someone becomes a new parent or caregiver.

- Identifying our own Executive Skills profile will help us set realistic goals, identify strategies to mitigate obstacles, and create environments that support success.
- It is a common misconception that Executive Skills are only for people with the title of “Executive” at work. Everyone has Executive Skills, regardless of your work status or sector, education, or title.
- We always learn about our own Executive Skills before we talk to someone else about theirs. And, we do not try to change anyone’s Executive Skills – including our own! We learn to leverage our Executive Skills strengths and mitigate the behaviors that result from our struggles when they get in our way.

Reflect: How does your understanding of Executive Skills now differ or reinforce the ideas you wrote in the first reflection?

Activity: Learn Your Executive Skills Profile

1. Take ~10 minutes to complete [the Executive Skills Questionnaire](#) by Dr. Peg Dawson and Dr. Richard Guare from the perspective of how you engage at work. This self-assessment is confidential, and your results are shared only with you.

2. After completing the ESQ, identify the 3 Executive Skills that have the highest numbers – these are your strengths, and the 3 Executive Skills with the lowest numbers – these are your struggles. A tie between some skills is common.

My Executive Skills strengths:

Reflect:

How do your strengths show up as behaviors at work?

When and in what environment do they show up most?

My Executive Skills struggles:

Reflect:

How do your struggles show up as behaviors at work?

When and in what environment do they show up most?

3. Everything above is normal: Executive Skills knowledge illuminates our strengths and normalizes our struggles.

How might learning about your Executive Skills profile reduce self-judgement or negative self-talk?

Apply Your Learning: Discuss Executive Skills with a peer

Now that you know your own Executive Skills profile, it can deepen your learning to discuss Executive Skills with a peer.

Suggested next steps: Schedule a 15-minute conversation with a colleague about Executive Skills. Invite them to read this Strategy (Executive Skills Knowledge) and follow the steps in advance of your conversation. Then, prepare for the conversation: nonjudgmentally and openly share both of your individual Executive Skills Profile, how your Executive Skills Show up as behaviors at work, and how that impacts your progress toward work and/or life goals.

PLAN YOUR NEXT STEPS:

1. Who will you invite to discuss Executive Skills with you?
2. By when will you schedule the conversation?
By when will you meet?
3. Why is this step important to you?

Strategy 2: Executive Skills Mindset in Practice



Grounding: Circle 3 key words that reflect core values or practices you uphold at work.

Equity Kindness Reliability Love Hope Courage

Open-Mindedness Gratitude Connection Focus Productivity.

Humor Honesty Accountability Justice Resilient

Write in:

How have your unique life experiences help shape these core values for you?

Connect with Content: Putting an Executive Skills Mindset into Practice

- An Executive Skills mindset is centered on what we know about Executive Skills and these shared core values: Participant expertise, Strengths-Based, Normalize, Reduce environmental barriers, Celebrate success.
- We can put what we know about what Executive Skills are, how they develop, and how they can help or hinder goal progression into practice through these choices and actions:
 - Be aware of **unconscious bias** and stereotypes we may bring into our work and commit to staying curious and nonjudgmental.
 - Show up to conversations with colleagues and participants **prepared** with Executive Skills knowledge and open-ended questions.
 - **Reduce distractions** by silencing technology and arranging space for confidentiality, trust, and safety (headphones on virtual call / doors or windows in person).
 - Establish a moment of **high-quality connection** to spark a feeling of vitality, mutuality, and demonstrate positive regard from the start.

- Demonstrate **active listening** for participant's vision, values, and purpose as expressed through both words and body language.
- **Ask open-ended, powerful questions** to help the participant discover new possibilities and insights to shape their next steps.
- **Clearing and bottom-lining:** Articulate a time-bound period for the participant to vent or clear a situation or feeling, without engaging in long, descriptive stories. Bottom-lining involves summarizing the core issue or goal to move forward.
 - *Example:* Coach: "We have five minutes to start with whatever is on your mind...[five minutes pass]...What I hear you say is [one sentence reflection]. Does that sound accurate to you? If so, what is one step you'd like to take to address it today?"
- Identify and vocalize the **Executive Skills strengths** you see the participant displaying or describing, and **celebrate progress** toward goals, no matter how small.

Reflect: Which of the coaching actions above do you already use regularly in your work? Which 1-2 coaching actions could you focus on using more consistently

Activity: Crafting Powerful Questions

Leveraging an Executive Skills mindset at work does not require subject matter expertise. It means you remain curious and ask good questions: open-ended, nonjudgmental, “powerful questions” that elicit the responder’s reflection, exploration, and expansion of their experiences and goals. These types of questions shift power in conversations, create space for autonomy and agency in setting goals, and demonstrate trust.

Review this short list of **Executive Skills-informed Powerful Questions** and choose one to reflect on below.

- What Executive Skills strength of yours did you rely on this week? How did it show up in your work as a behavior or action, or strategy?
- What Executive Skills challenge of yours was extra hard for you this week? How did that manifest in your work as a behavior or action?
- What win at work did you have in the past week/month? How did you leverage your Executive Skills to contribute to that win?
- “Strengths Spot” – Identify a couple of successes you noticed and call attention to that using the SEA model: Spot the Executive Skills strength – Explain what you noticed about the situation – Affirm why that’s valuable to the work.

Apply Your Learning: Ask a Powerful Question

Now you are prepared to put your Executive Skills mindset into practice.

Suggested next steps: Schedule a follow-up 15-minute conversation with a peer who already knows their Executive Skills profile (see Strategy 1: Executive Skills Knowledge). Nonjudgmentally and openly share both of your individual Executive Skills Profiles, how your Executive Skills Show up as behaviors at work, and how that impacts your progress toward work and/or life goals using an open-ended powerful question.

PLAN YOUR NEXT STEPS:

1. Refresh your memory: What are your 3 Executive Skills strengths & 3 Executive Skills struggles?

2. Who will you invite to discuss Executive Skills with you?

3. Refresh your memory: What did they identify and disclose to you as their 3 Executive Skills strengths and 3 Executive Skills struggles?

4. By when will you schedule the conversation?

By when will you meet?

5. Which Executive Skills-informed powerful question from the list above (or of your own) will you discuss?

Strategy 3: Leveraging Executive Skills for Goals

Grounding: Identify a big, complex, effortful goal that you have accomplished. Which Executive Skills strengths did you leverage to help you achieve this goal? Which Executive Skills struggles created obstacles during the process?

Connect with Content: Leveraging an Executive Skills mindset to accelerate goal achievement.

- Executive Skills are the twelve brain-based skills that help us organize, react, and get things done. Everyone has all twelve Executive Skills. They can help or hinder our progression to our goals.

FACT

When we experience **scarcity** our brain focuses on alleviating that need, and it becomes harder to craft and sustain progress toward longer-term, complex, effortful goals. Alleviating the basic need scarcity (like sleep, hunger, or safety) helps create more cognitive bandwidth for longer-term goal setting.

- We can intentionally refine our goals so that they are a “good-fit” with our Executive Skills. Good fit goals are:
 - SMART: Specific (clear and focused), Measurable (you know the marker of achievement), Achievable (can be completed given the participant’s resources and environment), Realistic (within reach and relevant to the participant’s motivation and priorities), and Time-bound (date and time deadline).
 - Set by the person who will be taking action to achieve the goal.
 - Aligned with the importance of the goal: Why does this specific goal matter to the person setting the goal?

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 - Set by the person who will be taking action to achieve the goal.
 - Aligned with the importance of the goal: Why does this specific goal matter to the person setting the goal?
 - Leverages the individual’s Executive Skills strengths from the start, and does not require their Executive Skills struggles *upfront*.
 - Example: Common goal = Get healthier.
 - Reframed good-fit goal: I want to make an appointment with a new doctor, so I can have an annual checkup and make sure I’m healthy to care for my kids as they grow. Using my strong *task initiation and stress tolerance skills* I will research three doctors who accept my insurance by Monday at 5pm, and I will set up an appointment with the first one who is available.
- To help sustain momentum and accountability, **check in regularly** on goal progression, goal plans or revisions, and celebrate every step taken along the way.
- Identify how to **celebrate** when the goal is achieved, and follow through on the celebration!

Reflect: When have you experienced scarcity, and how did that impact your focus on long term goals?

Activity: Set a Good-Fit Goal

1. Set a Goal: Think about a goal you would like to accomplish within the next 30 days. Write or draw your goal here.

Center on purpose: Why is this goal important to you?

2. Reframe your goal as a good-fit goal, ensuring it is SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound:

Consider Executive Skills: How does your Good-Fit Goal leverage your Executive Skills strengths to get started or sustain your momentum? Will it require your Executive Skills struggles to get started or call on when you lose momentum?

3. Start Small: What is the first step you will need to take to achieve your goal? By when?

4. What will I do to celebrate when I complete the first step toward my goal?

Apply Your Learning: Share Your Goal

Now that you have set a goal, one evidence-based method to increase your likelihood of achieving the goal is to create your own accountability by telling someone about it.

Suggested next steps: Email or text a peer or friend about your goal and ask them to be your “accountability buddy” to help you stay focused on the goal, and to share when you experience a setback. Tell them what your goal is, why it matters, and when you hope to achieve it. You can ask them to check in with you on your goal midway through your plan. Let them know when you achieve your goal!

PLAN YOUR NEXT STEPS:

1. Who will be my accountability buddy?

2. Take 5 minutes now to email or text them about your goal.

3. I will check in with my accountability buddy on my goal progression by [date] and [time]

Feel free to add a reminder to your calendar!

Strategy 4: Executive Skills and Environmental Modifications



Grounding: Think about a routine you have in your daily life (i.e., brushing teeth, drinking coffee, checking the mail). What makes the routine so easy that you do it without much effort?

Connect with Content: Decreasing obstacles with Environmental Modifications

- Environmental Modifications are the ways that we can adapt the environment within our control *to decrease barriers to goal achievement*.
- By adapting what we can within our physical or virtual spaces, technology, processes and policies, written materials, or the tasks themselves, we can make it easier to leverage our Executive Skills for goal achievements.
 - First, identify Executive Skills struggle and how/when it may arise. Then, identify a modification to put into place in advance or in the moment when the struggle arises.
 - Examples:
 - Physical space to support *sustained attention*: Hang a large clock on the wall so you can always see the time without getting distracted by a screen.
 - Technology to support *task initiation*: Set automatic notifications to remind you of the time to begin a chore.
 - Process to support *organization*: Use a bowl by the door to put your keys in each time you enter the home.
- At the **individual** level, we can craft Environmental Modifications that can help mitigate obstacles that results from our individual Executive Skills struggles.
- At the **group or organizational** level, Environmental Modifications can be applied to decrease unintentional barriers to goal achievement program design, policies, or written materials, for example:
 - Program Design: start time is after the local daycare opens
start at 9:15 instead of 9:00.
 - Written materials: Handbook is long and wordy
Use concise language and imagery that explains a policy clearly without jargon, with the key action item or takeaway at the top.

- We can lessen the impact of obstacles that arise by using Gabriele Oettingen’s “implementation intention” method to anticipate and plan for likely obstacles, **using an if, then plan**.
 - Example: *If I think I could be late for the appointment* [Executive Skills struggle or another specific obstacle] arises, then I will *set my alarm to leave 5 minutes earlier than usual* [environmental modification to plan in advance].”

Reflect: How does the concept of Environmental Modifications contribute to more equitable programs or environments for people experiencing scarcity?

Activity: Craft your Environmental Modification

1. What is a goal you are working toward this week? (or refer to the goal you set in Strategy 3: Goals).

2. What are the Executive Skills that will be required to start the next step toward the goal?

Executive Skill: Resulting behavior:

Executive Skill: Resulting behavior:

Executive Skill: Resulting behavior:

3. If one of these Executive Skills is a struggle of yours, or you know a struggle will show up later in your process, design an Environmental Modification to try to avoid the obstacle altogether or to mitigate it in the moment as an *if/then plan*:

To prevent / If [Executive Skill struggle]
shows up as [this specific behavior]
at [a specific point in time or process],
then I will [Environmental Modification].

Apply Your Learning: Apply Environmental Modifications to Processes

Now that you understand the positive impact of Environmental Modifications on individual goal setting, you can take it to the next level and apply this learning to a program.

- 1.** Describe or document the first five steps in a process that customers/participants/families experience in order to first access your programming.



- 2.** Which of the steps you outlined above work smoothly? Highlight them with a star.

- 3.** Which parts of the process above seem to take longer than expected, are outdated or overly complicated, or require excessive paperwork or duplicative conversations? Highlight them with a circle. These are your opportunities for Environmental Modifications.

- 4.** Choose one of the circled steps and identify which Executive Skills are required from the customer/participant/family to succeed in the step.



- 5.** Pick one of those Executive Skills and imagine it is a struggle for an individual. Craft an Environmental Modification to alleviate some of the stress in that process.



Strategy 5: A Parallel Process of Executive Skills in Leadership



Grounding: Identify a strong leader you have worked for or with. What behaviors or actions do you admire in that leader?

Connect with Content: Using Executive Skills Throughout an Organization

- Embedding Executive Skills mindsets, language, and good-fit goals into a full team or program requires leadership buy-in, modeling, and practice.
- “The Parallel Process” refers to the **exact same process** that those with leadership roles in the workplace pursue to understand their own Executive Skills profile, how it shows up in their leadership, and how they can leverage their teams’ Executive Skills, too.
 - Understanding their Executive Skills profile
 - Centering on their good-fit goals – and why those goals matter to them
 - Supporting their goal planning and progression by asking Powerful Questions and other coaching actions
 - Modifying the environment to reduce barriers to goal achievement
 - Celebrating goal progression and goal achievement.
- The Parallel Process reduces some power differential across hierarchical structures, by sharing a common language about Executive Skills strengths and struggles, and how they show up as behaviors at work. This can improve psychological safety in dyadic and team working relationships.

Reflect: How do you think your own learning and use of Executive Skills strategies would change if your direct leader modeled Executive Skills mindset and practice?

Apply Your Learning: Invite a leader within your program or organization into a conversation about Executive Skills.

Suggested next steps: Schedule a 15-minute conversation with a leader at your organization to share what you have learned about Executive Skills. Invite them to read the introduction of the workbook and then share your learning about your own Executive Skills and how they help you achieve your workplace goals. Discuss what you enjoyed learning about Executive Skills mindset and practices, and what questions you continue to have.

PLAN YOUR NEXT STEPS:

1. Who will you invite to discuss this workbook with you?

2. By when will you schedule the conversation?

By when will you meet?

3. What are the key takeaways you would like to share with this leader about your learning about Executive Skills mindset and practices?

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About NEW MOMS

New Moms is the parent organization of Bright Path. Since 2016, New Moms has leveraged the knowledge and practice of Executive Skills Coaching within our programs to support, encourage, and celebrate the strengths and goals of the 400+ young families who engage annually in our housing, family support, and workforce development programs in Chicago – as well as those of our staff, Board of Directors, Associate Board, and anyone else who walks through our doors.

We believe so strongly in the strengths-based, positive impact of Executive Skills Coaching for our entire organization that we train other organizations on it, too. This workbook is a compilation of the foundational strategies we have learned from years of embedding Executive Skills Coaching at New Moms' 2Gen programming and in our work to support other organizations' successful use of Executive Skills Coaching with their teams and programs.

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