

Six Competencies Young Professionals Need to Be Successful

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The first leap into the real world can be a doozy. While taking that leap is incredibly exciting, it also carries hints of anxiety, risk and, at times, nausea. This leap pulls you from the structured, comfortable and familiar environment of the academic realm, and moves you directly into “the unknown.” The good news is that you are not the first person to take this leap. Whether you just graduated, preparing to graduate or transitioning to a new position, there are six competencies that will prepare you to succeed in new environments.

For the past 24 years, Agriculture Future of America has prepared young professional to be successful and impactful leaders for the agriculture and food industry. An integral part of this process is AFA’s focus on developing students in six core competency areas: relationship development, systems thinking, collaboration, cultural EQ, interpersonal IQ and career management. Here are a few insights and tips on how you can learn, embrace and grow in these six competency areas to become a successful professional and leader.



Relationship Development | *Building and fostering healthy relationships.*

Relationship development is a lot of work. It takes consistency, commitment and time to build relationships with others. Making new friends is awesome. Maintaining those friendships to build trust and open communication will make time spent in the workplace fulfilling and enjoyable. Some key aspects of successful relationship development include listening first, being inclusive and respectful to all, contributing ideas and embracing the ideas of others, seeking consensus in group environments and cultivating positive responses to difficult conversations.

Getting started: use active listening daily. When you are having a conversation with someone, particularly a difficult one, listen closely and pause before responding. Before you add your own thoughts to the conversation, see if you can paraphrase what they were saying to clarify that you understood what they meant, not just what you heard.



Systems Thinking | *The ability to innovatively influence systems through critical thinking and problem solving.*

Human nature makes us a little selfish. We think about how our decisions will affect us, but we should also think through the affect we have on others. Systems thinking challenges the idea of linear, top-down influence and focuses on our ability to create significant positive change no matter what position we hold within an organization and/or industry.

To do this, always take time to do proper research on the patterns, processes and complexities you are a part of. Don’t be afraid to disrupt those, but be sure to do so for the right reason. Take in different viewpoints, clearly communicate your intentions for change and collaborate with the people in your circle who can help make the change better. The key to systems thinking is to avoid the selfish tendencies that come easily and focus on being intentional in the way your role in the system can be a positive force.

Getting started: identify the systems you are a part of. Friend groups, school, clubs, networks, etc. are all different systems. Once you have these identified, start looking at how you influence the people and processes of that system. Doing so will provide a better look at the scope of your impact.



Collaboration | *The ability to work effectively with others toward a common goal.*

Collaboration is no new concept, however collaborating at a time when you have no clue how you will be interacting with your team can be challenging at best. Flexibility and a solution-oriented attitude are a must when working towards a common goal within a fluid environment. Additionally, you need to be able to read the dynamics of your team throughout the collaborative process. Are they resisting certain communication styles? Are they bought into the goal you are trying to achieve? How do they react to change? If you are proactively identifying the dynamics of your team, you will be in an ideal position to flex to the team’s needs and collaborate effectively.

Getting started: create a habit of clearly organizing your communication. This should include an introduction of the topic, content body, transitions and a conclusion. This may sound elementary, but by establishing clarity with others from the beginning, you will set the stage for clear communication throughout the collaboration process.



Cultural EQ | *The capacity to perform across diverse environments with an inclusive bias.*

It is vital to embrace those who are different from ourselves. No matter a person’s background, race, gender, sexual orientation, interests, major, political position, authority, etc., we must be able to engage with others with an inclusive bias.

The term “bias” can feel negative at times, but it is simply a favor or leaning towards a certain thing. If you have a bias towards inclusivity, you will exhibit behaviors that cultivate inclusion and involvement of every perspective. Cultural EQ in the workplace includes working constructively with diverse individuals and groups, incorporating alternative viewpoints, being curious, regularly assessing personal biases, and being innovative in the ideas you bring to the table.

Getting started: listen to differing insights, opinions and ideas. You are doing yourself a disservice if you only listen to those who have the same ideologies as you. By listening to those who think differently, you get a better sense of the whole picture which will enhance your efforts in creating inclusive environments.



Interpersonal IQ | *The ability to relate with sensitivity and influence with a built-in bias toward leading & learning.*

Pursuing professional development can often feel like we are constantly focusing on how we are being perceived by others. Be it interview tactics or collaboration; we can start to obsess over how we are being interpreted from the outside. Interpersonal IQ asks us to shift our thinking and spend time on our internal self.

A career in agriculture and food will inherently require you to learn new things, take on new challenges and lead whenever necessary. What interpersonal IQ does is prepare us to positively react to change on a personal level. Embracing a bias towards learning and leading will set you up for success. From using feedback as a learning tool (not taking it as a personal jab), to accurately assessing the motivational drivers of yourself and others, to prioritizing your mental health, growing your Interpersonal IQ will provide momentum in both your career and personal life.

Getting started: pay attention to your triggers. Think through how you react to people, environments and challenges. When you get angry or frustrated, what is it about the situation that caused it? What about positive reactions? Find patterns in your triggers to help prepare for future negative reactions that can ultimately hinder your self-confidence and/or the ability for others to have confidence in you.



Career Management | *Using exploration, feedback and reflection to manage you and your teams.*

It seems like agriculture and food offers new opportunities around every corner. While exciting, this can also bring about a lot of difficult decisions. How do you know if a position is right? What if the organization doesn't align with your values? Will a career move after one year keep you on track for your short-term and long-term goals? So many things will be running through your head, so it is helpful to have the skills and resources to work through those questions.

The career management competency narrows in on the proactive behaviors of identifying goals based on personal values, prioritizing and committing to strong cultures and values, developing routines that promote productive work, and being able to identify and apply personal strengths for greater fulfillment in your day-to-day.

Getting started: make goal writing a routine. Regardless of format, write down the things you want to achieve in six months, one year, five years, etc. This will exercise your ability to clearly communicate what is important to you and provide pointed direction when making difficult decisions.

AFA's six core competencies can provide the needed guidance for you to take ownership of your success. While proficiency in the competencies won't happen overnight, through consistent practice and reflection, you will be on the path to achieving your personal and professional goals.

Finally, please remember career success looks different for everyone. It is unique to you and can only be defined by you. Nonetheless, there is an industry-wide need for dynamic, innovative and passionate problem solvers. By investing in yourself with tools such as these six competencies, you will find that even in the most challenging of times you will find success and bring others along with you.

If you would like to experience these competencies in more depth, head to agfuture.org to learn more about the opportunities offered by AFA.



About the Author

As the program manager in design and execution, Emily works to plan and coordinate AFA's competency focused programs and events.

Before joining AFA in 2019, Emily enjoyed her roles as learner, teaching assistant, student recruiter, and dedicated fan of the Mizzou Tigers. Emily earned her Bachelor's in agricultural education and leadership and her Master's in agricultural leadership, communication and education, both from the University of Missouri. She is also an AFA alum, having completed three tracks at the annual AFA Leaders Conference as an undergraduate.

Emily grew up on her family's century farm in Bowling Green, Missouri, sparking her passion for agriculture, and a lifelong love of homegrown sweet corn.



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