

21 LIFE HACKS for a Competitive Advantage



**BUILD THE SKILLS TO CREATE
THE LIFE YOU WANT.**



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SKILL TREE™

The World has Changed.

*To get ahead today, you need a strong
personal competitive advantage.*

What's a competitive advantage?

competitive advantage (noun)

1. Something that places a company or a person above the competition.

Your competitive advantage comes from the skills, attitude, and drive that make you stand out. It's unique and personal to you—and it's something you can start building for yourself right now. Maybe you already are!

The 21 life/professional skills in this document are life hacks that can help you create that competitive advantage for every area of life: personal, professional, and beyond. No matter how grand, modest, or laid-back you view your life and experiences, you'll need a personal competitive advantage to achieve what you want.

Building your competitive advantage now means that you'll be ready to make the most of any opportunity that comes your way—big or small, easy or hard. Starting today, you can put yourself in the best position to pursue whatever you want and adapt accordingly.

At the back of this PDF is a poster that shows all 21 skills that make up your personal competitive advantage. Feel free to print it and display it where you'll see it every day, as a reminder of what you're working toward.

Your personal competitive advantage will help you become the best version of yourself in every area of your life.

Here's to you!

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- Generational expert with 25+ years of insight and impact
- 80+ dynamic, inspiring, and actionable keynotes annually across North America
- 8 awards for Mark's national bestseller *Answering Why*
- 250+ radio, television, and podcast interviews on generational and workforce development issues
- 300+ articles and 5 million readers at Forbes.com, where Mark has contributed weekly since 2019
- Works on building his own personal competitive advantage every day



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Find out more about Mark and his mission at markcperna.com

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21 Skills for a Personal Competitive Advantage

21



1. Consistency:

Building Momentum, Growing Every Day, and Owning Your Future

Small steps might seem like they don't really matter, but they're actually vital to long-term success. Compound progress—the minor but consistent actions you take every day to get just a little better at something—adds up fast. It doesn't have to be a big or hard habit to make, just something that moves you in the right direction. Everyday effort is your shortcut to success.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Think of one small, positive action you can start taking to get better at something. Even if it's just five minutes a day, it matters. Do it consistently for 30 days.*



2. Human Connection:

Building Relationships, Creating Trust, and Growing Through Others

Human connection simply means building authentic relationships with people who inspire, challenge, and support us. Everyone you meet is silently asking three questions in their head: Do you see me? Do you hear me? And do I actually matter? When they feel the answer to each of those questions is yes, you've forged a human connection with them. As smart machines become more common in everyday life, the people who can build strong interpersonal connections will be ahead of the game.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Practice being present, staying engaged, and smiling more when you talk to family, friends, and even casual acquaintances.*



3. Self-Management:

Taking Ownership, Building Focus, and Following Through

When you can manage yourself, you can control your actions, thoughts, and emotions to stay focused on what matters most. People who self-manage pay attention to their own emotions as well as those of others. When something feels off or they experience a strong or even overpowering feeling, they can name what is happening and adjust their response accordingly. Self-managers set boundaries for their behavior and regulate their own responses.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Identify a situation where you may frequently struggle with strong feelings and make a plan to respond in a positive way. Pay attention to how you feel, adjust your response, and try again.*



4. Emotional Intelligence:

Understanding Emotions, Navigating Relationships, and Leading with Insight

Your emotional intelligence (EQ) is your ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, both your own and those of others. This powerful life and leadership skill can help you navigate relationships and build trust. When you are emotionally intelligent, other people feel safe with you. It doesn't mean you're perfect, but you pay attention to how everyone is feeling (including yourself) and show care for others.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Start paying extra attention to other people's expression, tone of voice, and body language for clues about how they're really feeling. Do the same for yourself.*



5. Coping:

Managing Stress, Building Inner Strength, and Responding with Resilience

If you can respond to challenges, emotions, and stress in healthy, productive ways, you can cope. Life is full of pressures, making your ability to cope with these pressures a big part of your long-term success. Coping can look different from person to person, but it's important that your coping strategies add to your overall well-being, not take away from it.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Practice calm breathing, in through the nose and out through the mouth, for one or two minutes every day. When you find yourself in a stressful moment, use your calm breathing technique to stay centered.



6. Communication:

Expressing Ideas, Listening Well, and Building Mutual Understanding

Communication is one of the most sought-after skills in the real world. It's simply the ability to clearly express your thoughts, listen actively, and collaborate with others. Be present. Good communication builds connection, grows trust, and solves problems before they get bigger. To thrive in social, academic, and work environments, you need to speak, write, and listen well. No one can read your mind—it's up to you to clearly share what you're thinking and hear other people's thoughts respectfully.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** When you're talking to someone, ask yourself if they can fully understand what you're saying or if different words would help with clarity. Make sure you treat communication as a two-way street so the other person's voice can also be heard.



7. Active Listening:

Paying Attention, Building Trust, and Strengthening Understanding

Active listening might be an underrated skill, but it's truly powerful in everyday interactions. Active listening means being fully present and focused when someone else is speaking. In a fast-paced world full of distractions, learning to "listen on purpose" is a big piece of your competitive advantage. People who listen with their whole selves to others can build trust, empathy, and stronger relationships.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Think how you feel when you can tell someone is really listening to what you're saying. Copy what they do to make the next person who talks to you feel the same way.



8. Empathy:

Understanding Others, Building Compassion, and Growing Connection

Having empathy means you can understand and even share the feelings of others. Instead of thinking only of yourself, you care about what others are experiencing and you want to help. It's like a superpower to strengthen relationships, reduce drama and conflict, and make you a person others trust. Being empathetic doesn't mean you try to solve other people's problems, but you're there for them and they know it.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Think about someone you know who might be going through a tough time. Let them know you're there for them and be ready to listen without having to fix their problem. Your presence will be a gift.



9. Leadership:

Inspiring Others, Owning Responsibility, and Making a Positive Impact

Whether you see yourself as a leader or not, you have the power to influence other people and be a positive force in their lives. True leadership isn't having a title or winning a popularity contest, but using your influence to make things better for everyone. It's a mindset of responsibility, service, and vision. Great leaders approach life with ideas and plans, but they always make space for other people's voices to be heard.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Think about a great leader you admire and why they're so good at leading. Identify one way they make people feel safe/inspired and start practicing that habit yourself.



10. Teamwork:

Collaborating Effectively, Sharing Responsibility, and Growing Together

Teamwork is simply working well with others toward a shared goal. Great teams know how to listen, compromise, support each other, and solve problems together. Doesn't that sound like a team you'd like to be part of? In life, collaboration is part of almost everything. Being a great teammate isn't always easy but when we keep the goal in mind, care about the people we are working with, and stay focused on solutions, we can help our team achieve amazing things. Collective success depends on how we show up for one another.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Think about any group you're part of and assess what kind of teammate you are. Commit to being a person others can trust.*



11. Adaptability:

Embracing Change, Staying Flexible, and Thriving Through Uncertainty

Life throws curveballs all the time. Schedules shift, expectations change, and we have to keep functioning even if our routine is changed. This is what adaptable people do best. They can adjust their thoughts, actions, and mindset when things don't go as planned. Adaptability gives you the tools to stay calm, resourceful, and confident in unfamiliar or changing situations. It's not just "going with the flow," but rather making the best of every circumstance that comes your way.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Reflect on the emotions you often feel when something changes (fear, excitement, uncertainty, or something else). Make a plan to manage your feelings the next time something changes so you can keep moving forward.*



12. Problem-Solving:

Thinking Critically, Taking Initiative, and Creating Real-World Solutions

Problem-solving is a powerful skill that helps you meet challenges with logic, creativity, and a willingness to take action. In life, problem-solvers are the people that others rely on to move things forward. They stay calm under pressure, identify what's really going on, brainstorm options, and choose a thoughtful response. Great problem-solvers are also great teammates because they listen, adapt, and help others succeed.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Think about a situation or problem that feels overwhelming or complicated. Try looking at it a different way and find one small action you can take to make it better.*



13. Critical Thinking:

Analyzing Information, Making Better Decisions, and Thinking for Yourself

Opinions, noise, fake news, and fast-moving information: you deal with it every day. Your job is to make sense of it by applying 3 tools: evidence, logic, and reflection. Critical thinking means asking good questions and checking your assumptions. Your ability to think critically about large and small issues allows you to evaluate information and make thoughtful decisions.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Think about something you have always assumed to be true and ask yourself what evidence and logical basis supports that belief. If you don't know, find out.*



14. Time Management:

Planning Ahead, Prioritizing What Matters, and Owning Your Schedule

Everyone has the same amount of time in a day, but how you use it is up to you. Time management is the superpower that helps you plan, organize, and use time wisely to reach whatever goal you're aiming for. It allows you to focus, prioritize, and follow through, even when distractions show up. Because they will! Managing your time effectively gives you more control over your stress and your future.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *For one week, keep a log of how you're using your time each day. Then assess it and ask yourself if your choices are moving you closer to or further from the kind of life you want to live.*



15. Work-Life Balance:

Managing Responsibilities, Protecting Wellbeing, and Living with Intention

Everyone has to balance the things they have to do with the things they want to do. This is called work-life balance and when you have it, you can manage your responsibilities and personal goals without sacrificing health, joy, or connection. If you've ever felt burned out or exhausted with all the things you have to accomplish, work-life balance can help you protect your time, energy, and mental health. You can build routines now that leave space for both progress and rest.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Take an inventory of what gives you energy—and what drains it. Use these insights to plan a more balanced week with built-in time for responsibilities as well as relaxation.



16. Networking:

Building Relationships, Creating Opportunities, and Growing Together

Networking may sound like a business buzzword, but it's actually something everyone should do. It simply means building authentic relationships that lead to growth, opportunities, and collaboration. You already have a network of family, friends, instructors, supervisors, and mentors, just to name a few. Networking is the proactive mindset that you can help them and they can help you.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Create a personal network map of people you already know and how each has contributed positively to your life. Think of ways you may be able to help them in return.



17. Creativity:

Thinking Differently, Expressing Yourself, and Solving Problems with Imagination

Being creative isn't limited to artistic pursuits. It's the ability to think in original ways, explore new ideas, and express yourself with confidence. Creativity empowers you to be a flexible thinker and problem-solver. It's like a muscle; the more you use it, the stronger you get at trying different perspectives and being open to new possibilities. Creative people are curious and courageous.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Pick a boring part of your day and think of three ways you could redesign it to be more fun and/or efficient.



18. Punctuality:

Being Reliable, Building Trust, and Owning Your Time

Punctuality is the habit of being on time, prepared, and respectful of others' time. Learning to manage arrival times, deadlines, and daily routines is an underrated but powerful skill you will use your entire life. If you want to build a reputation for reliability, your ability to show up ready will be invaluable because it shows you as a responsible, disciplined, and trustworthy person. It can also help reduce stress.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Write down how long you think it takes to complete a task (such as getting ready in the morning). Then, time how long it actually takes and compare actual versus expected time.



19. Negotiation:

Speaking Up, Finding Solutions, and Creating Win-Win Outcomes

Negotiation isn't just a business tactic; it's something you're probably already doing every day. Negotiation is your ability to communicate needs, solve disagreements, and find fair outcomes that benefit everyone involved. People who negotiate well are always looking for "win-win" situations where everyone is happy with the result. To negotiate, you have to understand what the other person wants, what you want, and how to make those wants work together.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** Reflect on a past disagreement and write down: 1) what you wanted, 2) what the other person wanted, and 3) a possible solution. Use these insights next time you have a conflict with someone.



20. Conflict Resolution:

Managing Disagreements, Repairing Relationships, and Building Peace Through Communication

Everyone deals with arguments and conflict; it's just part of the human experience. When you address disagreements with calm and clarity, they can often be resolved quickly and strengthen the relationship rather than damage it. Conflict resolution is the skill that helps you pause, listen, speak your truth, and work toward shared understanding, even when it's uncomfortable. Being able to approach conflict without fear or aggression will help you respond instead of react.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Think about what makes an apology meaningful. Practice writing or saying an apology where you own your fault and express empathy for the person you may have hurt.*



21. Bully-Proof:

Standing Strong, Staying Safe, and Supporting Others With Courage

You don't have to be hard or aggressive to become bully-proof. Instead, you can learn to protect your mindset, speak up, set boundaries, and build a strong inner foundation of self-worth. Being bully-proof means you understand your value, stay connected to supportive people, and speak up—for both yourself and others—when something isn't right. Unkindness, exclusion, or cruelty doesn't define who you are.

► **MAKE YOUR MOVE:** *Practice assertive (not aggressive) responses to common bullying scenarios using a calm tone, clear words, and confident body language.*



A Final Note

These 21 skills are for everyone—and no one has mastered them all perfectly.

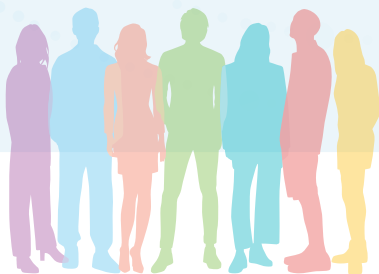
Decades into my career, I'm still working on mine. It might seem like a lot of work, so I encourage you to focus on one skill at a time. Every small step that you take counts.

The exciting thing is that you don't have to wait to lay the foundation for your personal competitive advantage. Use these skills as hacks to start creating the life you want. Whatever you want to accomplish, you can get there quicker with the skills you build now!

These 21 skills are part of the Skill Tree, used in educational organizations at all levels across North America. To find out more about the Skill Tree, visit TFSresults.com/skilltree.

Thanks for taking this journey toward the best version of yourself. You are amazing!

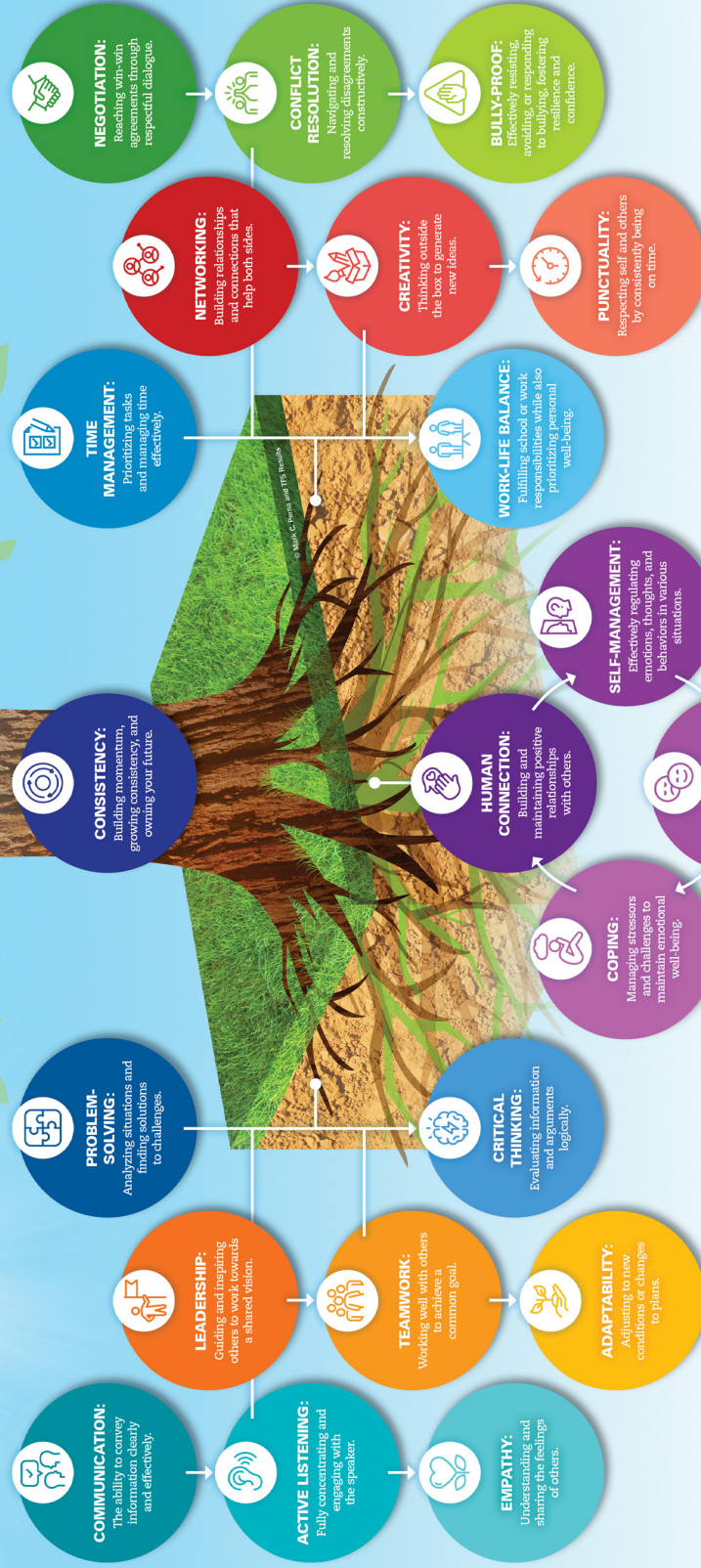
Warmest Regards, Mark



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