

Will vs Skill Matrix

A Leadership Assessment Tool for Developing Your Team

The Will vs Skill Matrix is a powerful framework for understanding where your team members are in their development journey and how to lead them effectively. This tool helps you diagnose performance challenges and tailor your leadership approach to each individual's unique needs.

Understanding the Matrix

SKILL refers to a person's ability, competence, knowledge, and experience to perform a specific task or role. This is what they *can* do.

WILL refers to a person's motivation, attitude, confidence, and commitment to perform a specific task or role. This is what they *want* to do.

The Four Quadrants

Quadrant	Will Level	Skill Level	Description
High Will / Low Skill	High	Low	Enthusiastic Beginner
High Will / High Skill	High	High	Peak Performer
Low Will / Low Skill	Low	Low	Struggling Employee
Low Will / High Skill	Low	High	Disengaged Expert

Quadrant 1: High Will / Low Skill (Enthusiastic Beginner)

Profile: This person is eager, motivated, and excited to learn but lacks the experience, knowledge, or technical ability to perform at a high level yet. They have the right attitude but need development.

Example: Sarah just joined your team as a junior project coordinator. She's enthusiastic about every assignment, asks great questions, and stays late to learn new systems. However, she makes frequent mistakes in project documentation and doesn't yet understand the nuances of stakeholder management.

Leadership Approach - DIRECT & TEACH:

- Provide clear, specific instructions and expectations
- Offer structured training and hands-on coaching
- Give frequent feedback and encouragement
- Break down complex tasks into manageable steps
- Celebrate small wins to maintain motivation
- Be patient—skill development takes time
- Assign a mentor or buddy for day-to-day guidance

Your Goal: Build their competence while protecting their enthusiasm. Invest heavily in their development because their motivation makes them coachable and likely to succeed.

Quadrant 2: High Will / High Skill (Peak Performer)

Profile: This is your star player—highly capable and highly motivated. They have both the ability and the drive to excel. They're self-directed, reliable, and often exceed expectations.

Example: Marcus is your senior analyst who consistently delivers exceptional work. He volunteers for challenging projects, mentors junior team members, and proactively identifies process improvements. He's both competent and committed.

Leadership Approach - DELEGATE & EMPOWER:

- Give them autonomy and trust their judgment
- Delegate important, challenging assignments
- Provide resources and remove obstacles
- Offer opportunities for growth and advancement
- Recognize and reward their contributions publicly

- Involve them in strategic decisions
- Challenge them with stretch assignments
- Ask for their input on team improvements

Your Goal: Keep them engaged and growing. Don't micromanage—they'll resent it. Instead, focus on retention by providing meaningful work, recognition, and career development opportunities.

Quadrant 3: Low Will / Low Skill (Struggling Employee)

Profile: This person lacks both the ability and the motivation to perform well. They may be overwhelmed, burned out, misplaced in the wrong role, or simply not a good fit for the organization.

Example: Jennifer has been in her customer service role for six months but still struggles with basic protocols. She frequently calls in sick, shows little interest in improvement, and her performance metrics are consistently below standard. She seems disengaged during training sessions.

Leadership Approach - DIAGNOSE & DECIDE:

- Have an honest, direct conversation to understand root causes
- Determine if this is a temporary situation or a fundamental mismatch
- Explore whether personal issues are affecting performance
- Assess if they're in the wrong role (might thrive elsewhere)
- Set clear performance expectations with specific timelines
- Provide support and resources for a defined improvement period
- Document performance issues and improvement plans
- Be prepared to make tough decisions if improvement doesn't occur

Your Goal: Determine quickly whether this person can be developed or needs to transition out. Investing heavily here often yields poor returns. Sometimes the most compassionate decision is helping someone find a better-fit opportunity elsewhere.

Quadrant 4: Low Will / High Skill (Disengaged Expert)

Profile: This person has the ability to perform at a high level but lacks motivation, engagement, or commitment. They're often experienced employees who have become complacent, frustrated, or burned out.

Example: David is a veteran software developer with ten years of experience. He's technically brilliant but does only the minimum required. He's cynical in meetings, resistant to new initiatives, and his negative attitude is affecting team morale. He used to be a top performer.

Leadership Approach - RECONNECT & INSPIRE:

- Have a one-on-one conversation to understand what changed
- Listen for underlying issues: burnout, feeling undervalued, personal problems, lack of growth
- Reconnect them to purpose and impact of their work
- Explore what would re-engage them (new challenges, different responsibilities, recognition)
- Address any legitimate concerns about workload, resources, or support
- Set clear expectations about attitude and engagement
- Provide new opportunities that leverage their expertise
- If motivation doesn't improve, have direct accountability conversations

Your Goal: Diagnose why they're disengaged and address it. These employees have valuable skills and experience—if you can reignite their motivation, they can quickly return to peak performance. However, don't let negativity poison your team culture.

Using This Assessment with Your Team for 1:1 Meetings

Step 1: Self-Assessment

Ask team members to plot themselves on the matrix for their current role or specific responsibilities. This creates self-awareness and opens dialogue.

Step 2: Leader Assessment

Independently assess where you see each team member. Differences between self-assessment and your assessment reveal important perception gaps.

Step 3: Conversation for 1:1 Meeting

Discuss the assessments together. Ask questions like:

- "Where do you see yourself on this matrix right now?"
- "What would help you move toward high will/high skill?"
- "What obstacles are preventing you from performing at your best?"
- "What support do you need from me?"

Step 4: Action Plan

Based on the quadrant, create a tailored development plan with specific actions, timelines, and success measures.

Key Leadership Insights

- 1. Will is more important than skill.** You can teach skill, but motivation comes from within. Hire for will, train for skill.
- 2. People move between quadrants.** This isn't permanent. Life circumstances, organizational changes, and leadership quality all affect where someone lands.
- 3. Your leadership approach must match the quadrant.** The biggest mistake leaders make is using the same approach for everyone. A peak performer needs delegation; an enthusiastic beginner needs direction.
- 4. Low will is often a symptom, not the disease.** Before labeling someone as unmotivated, investigate. Poor leadership, unclear expectations, lack of resources, or personal challenges often masquerade as low will.
- 5. Not everyone can or should be saved.** Some people are in the wrong role or organization. Prolonging the inevitable helps no one.

Reflection Questions for Leaders

- Where does each of my team members fall on this matrix right now?
- Am I using the right leadership approach for each quadrant?
- Who has moved quadrants recently, and why?
- Am I spending too much time on low will/low skill employees at the expense of my peak performers?
- What can I do to move more people toward high will/high skill?
- Am I creating conditions that foster will (purpose, recognition, growth, autonomy)?

"Leadership is not about treating everyone the same. It's about understanding what each person needs to reach their potential and having the courage to lead them accordingly."

Remember: Great leaders diagnose before they prescribe. Use this matrix as a diagnostic tool to understand your team members deeply, then tailor your leadership to help each person grow.

Ready to Accelerate Your Management Growth?

These assessment results show where you need to flex on your management approach with your team. But knowing the different management styles and having the readiness to apply these are two different things.

If you're ready to build unshakeable management confidence and see real results in your team's performance, let's talk about how personalized coaching can accelerate your growth.

Book a free 15-minute Discovery Call to discuss these results and how you can create a personalized action plan.

Leading with purpose,
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