

• DEVELOPMENT & ONE-TO-ONES • GUIDE

Using a skills matrix for *development plans*

A skills matrix is usually sold as a team tool, but it is just as powerful one person at a time. Read a single row and you have the honest, evidence-based start of a development conversation: here is where you are, here is where the role needs you, and here is the plan to close the gap. This is how to turn the matrix into better one-to-ones and development plans people actually own.



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Reading time 12 min · **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework · **Updated** May 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

To use a skills matrix for development, read one person's row as the basis of their plan: compare their current level on each skill against the level the role requires, agree one or two skills to focus on, and set a concrete action, a course, shadowing, coaching, a stretch task, with a target level and a date. Revisit it at each one-to-one and re-score as they progress. In short: **the matrix turns a vague "how's it going?" into a clear current-to-target plan the person can own and you can track.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **One row is one development plan.** A person's row, current levels against required, is the honest starting point for their growth.
- **Focus on one or two skills.** A plan that targets everything achieves nothing; pick the gaps that matter most to the role and the person.
- **Current to target, with an action.** Each goal is a move from a current level to a target, with a specific action and a date.
- **It makes one-to-ones concrete.** The matrix replaces a vague catch-up with a shared, evidence-based conversation about real capability.
- **Progress becomes visible.** Re-scoring over time shows growth, which motivates people and proves the development worked.

— START HERE

One row is a *development plan waiting to happen*

Most guides treat a skills matrix as a team-level instrument, coverage, gaps, risk. But turn it ninety degrees and read a single row, and you have something just as valuable: the honest, evidence-based foundation of one person's development plan. The same data that shows team resilience shows individual growth, if you read it the right way.

The row tells the person's story

A person's row on the matrix is a portrait of their capability: where they are strong, where they are developing, and, read against the required levels, where they fall short of what the role needs. That comparison, **current level versus required level**, is the raw material of a development plan. It replaces the vague sense that someone "could be better at X" with a specific, agreed picture: at Level 2 on data analysis where the role needs Level 3, and the plan writes itself from there.

It makes one-to-ones concrete

One-to-ones often drift, a catch-up on workload, a quick "all good?", and rarely touch development in any structured way. The matrix fixes that by giving the conversation a **shared, factual anchor**. Instead of a manager's impressions, both people look at the same row, agree where the gaps are, and talk about how to close them. It turns development from an awkward

annual ritual into a running, evidence-based conversation that fits naturally into a regular one-to-one.

Growth you can see and own

Because the matrix is scored, development against it is **visible and measurable**. A person can see exactly which level they are aiming for and watch their rating rise as they get there, which is far more motivating than a goal expressed as "get better at presenting". Research consistently links clear development paths to engagement and retention; people stay where they can see themselves growing. The matrix makes that path concrete, and crucially, it lets the person **own it** rather than have it done to them.

— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Vague development goals *go nowhere*

Development conversations fail for a simple reason: the goals are too vague to act on or track. "Improve your leadership" is not a plan. A skills matrix forces the specificity that turns good intentions into real, visible progress, and people notice the difference.

8%

GARTNER, 2024

of organisations have reliable workforce skills data, so most development plans rest on impression, not evidence.

2x

WORKHUMAN, 2025

more likely employees are to stay when an organisation invests visibly in their development.

39%

WEF, 2025

of workers' core skills are expected to change by 2030, so everyone needs a live, evolving development plan.

The cost of vague development is quiet but real: time spent on training that targets the wrong things, people who plateau because no one mapped their next step, and good staff who leave because they could not see a future. A skills matrix addresses all three by making development **specific, evidenced and visible**. It points training where the gap actually is, gives each person a clear next level to aim for, and shows progress as it happens. Done well, it changes the felt experience of work: people see that their growth is mapped, supported and noticed, which is exactly what keeps them.

Four ways the matrix powers development

Used for development, a skills matrix does four things a normal review cannot. Each turns the same scored data into a better conversation and a clearer plan.

ENABLES 01

Honest starting point

The row gives an agreed, evidence-based picture of where someone is, so the plan starts from reality rather than from a manager's impression or a person's hopes.

ENABLES 02

Clear targets

The required level for each skill is a concrete goal to aim at, so "get better" becomes "reach Level 3 on data analysis", something you can plan for and measure.

ENABLES 03

Focused action

Seeing the gaps lets you pick the one or two that matter most and attach a specific action to each, rather than scattering effort across everything at once.

ENABLES 04

Visible progress

Re-scoring at later one-to-ones shows the level rising, which proves the development worked, motivates the person, and informs the next plan.

Together these turn the matrix into an engine for growth, not just a record of it. The honest starting point and clear targets frame the conversation; the focused actions make it achievable; and the visible progress closes the loop and starts the next one. Notice that none of this requires a separate development system, it is the **same matrix you already use for the team**, simply read one row at a time and pointed forward instead of just measuring the present.

The 0 to 5 capability framework

A development plan needs levels that describe what "better" actually looks like. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith, gives each level a clear meaning, so a target is a described destination, not a vague aspiration, and the step from one level to the next is obvious.

0

No skill required or desired EXCLUDED

The skill is not needed for this role within the next year. Useful in planning: it keeps development focused on the skills the role actually needs, rather than chasing every gap.

1

In training / Trainee WEIGHTING 25%

Expected to be proficient within a year. Has completed up to 75% of training and does not yet fully understand the quality requirements. A natural first development target for a new skill.

2

Developing capabilities WEIGHTING 50%

Has completed more than 75% of training. Can probably perform the task alone, but consistent quality is not yet evidenced, so complex output still needs checking. A common "from" level in a plan.

3

Capable WEIGHTING 75% · USUAL TARGET

Has completed 100% of training and shown consistent quality and productivity. Works unsupervised. The most common development target, the point at which someone genuinely counts on a skill.

4

Subject Matter Expert / Trainer WEIGHTING 100%

Prolonged experience; works autonomously and can train others. A stretch target for someone already capable, and the path toward mentoring and leadership.

5

Strategic ownership / Leadership WEIGHTING 100%

Can define and develop new processes and skill requirements, show cross-function expertise, and demonstrate leadership. The destination for those on a path toward strategic or leadership roles.

The gap is the plan

Reading a development plan from the framework is simple: the distance between a person's **current level** and the **required (or aspired) level** on a skill is the gap, and closing it by one level is a clear, achievable goal.

Because each level is defined, both of you know exactly what reaching the next one means in practice. The weightings, Level 1 = 25%, 2 = 50%, 3 = 75%, 4 and 5 = 100%, also let you watch the person's overall capability percentage rise as the plan delivers.

A worked example. One skill, turned into a development goal:

```
Data analysis current 2 (developing) → required 3
(capable, unsupervised)
gap = one level → action: analytics course + a real
reporting task to own
target Level 3 by next quarter – specific, supported, and
measurable.
```

— SEE IT FOR ONE PERSON

An individual *development plan*

Here is one person's row turned into a development plan. Each bar shows their current level; the dashed marker shows the target the role needs, or that they are aiming for. Where the bar falls short of the marker is the gap, and each focus skill carries a specific action and a date. This is the matrix read forward, for one person.

Aisha's *development plan*

CUSTOMER TEAM · THIS QUARTER



■ current level | target level Levels shown on the 0 to 5 scale (each step = 20%).

2

focus skills this quarter (data analysis, coaching), each with an action and a date

Illustrative plan on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. The plan targets two gaps now and parks a third, rather than chasing everything at once.

HOW THIS PLAN WAS BUILT

- **Start from the row.** Aisha is at or above target on complaint handling and CRM, so those are maintained, not developed. The plan only spends effort where there is a real gap to close.
- **Pick one or two focus skills.** Data analysis and coaching are each a level below target and matter most to her role now, so they become this quarter's focus, with everything else held steady.
- **Attach a real action to each.** A course plus a report to own for data analysis; mentoring a new starter for coaching. Concrete actions with dates, not "improve", are what actually move a level.
- **Park the rest, deliberately.** Compliance is a bigger gap but not this quarter's priority, so it is consciously deferred. A focused plan that closes two gaps beats a scattered one that closes none.

Five steps to a development plan from the matrix

Turning a row into a plan takes about ten minutes in a one-to-one. These five steps keep it focused, collaborative and owned by the person, which is what makes it stick.

1 **Look at the row together**

Open the person's row and the required levels side by side. Let them see their own scores; this is a shared conversation, not a verdict delivered to them. Seeing the honest picture together sets the right tone and surfaces any disagreement about a rating before it becomes a problem.

2 **Agree the gaps that matter**

Compare current to required, and talk about which gaps matter most, to the role now, and to where the person wants to go. Factor in their aspirations, not just the role's needs; a plan that serves both is the one they will commit to. Agree, do not assign.

3 **Pick one or two to focus on**

Resist the urge to tackle everything. Choose one or two skills to develop this cycle, the ones with the most impact and momentum, and consciously park the rest. A focused plan that closes two gaps beats an ambitious one that closes none.

4 **Set a concrete action and target**

For each focus skill, agree a specific action, a course, shadowing, coaching, a stretch task, a target level, and a date. "Reach Level 3 on data analysis by next quarter via a course and a report to own" is a plan; "get better at data" is not. Specificity is everything.

5

Review and re-score next time

Revisit the plan at the next one-to-one: how is the action going, and has the level moved? Re-score when the skill has genuinely grown, celebrate the visible progress, and set the next focus. This turns development into a running loop rather than a once-a-year form.

— AVOID THESE

Six mistakes in development planning

MISTAKE 01

Vague goals

"Improve leadership" cannot be planned or tracked. Express every goal as a move from a current level to a defined target.

MISTAKE 02

Targeting everything

A plan that tackles every gap achieves none. Pick one or two focus skills and park the rest deliberately.

MISTAKE 03

No concrete action

A target with no action is a wish. Attach a specific course, task or coaching, and a date, to each goal.

MISTAKE 04

Ignoring aspirations

A plan built only on the role's needs misses the person's. Factor in where they want to go, or they will not own it.

MISTAKE 05

Delivering, not agreeing

A plan handed down is rarely followed. Build it together from the shared row so the person owns it.

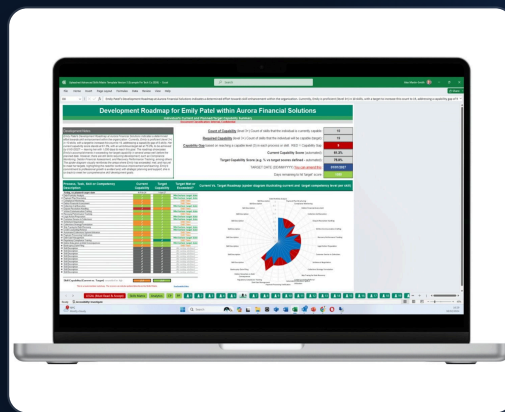
MISTAKE 06

Never revisiting

A plan set once and forgotten stalls. Review and re-score at each one-to-one so progress stays visible.

The method is free. A ready-made matrix just makes each person's plan *fall out of the data*.

Everything here works in a blank spreadsheet, and that is a fine place to start. A purpose-built template just makes the development view effortless: with current levels and required levels already in place, each person's gaps are visible the moment you open their row, capability rises as you re-score, and one-to-ones become a quick, concrete conversation about the next level rather than a vague catch-up.



The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix turns each person's row into a development roadmap, current levels against targets, so one-to-ones start from evidence and progress is visible, all on the same 0 to 5 framework used throughout this guide.

TRY IT FREE

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The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. See one person's gaps at a glance.

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— COMMON QUESTIONS

Quick *answers*

Q How do I use a skills matrix for development plans?

Read one person's row against the required levels to see their gaps, agree one or two skills to focus on, and set a concrete action, a course, shadowing, coaching or a stretch task, with a target level and a date. Revisit it at each one-to-one and re-score as the person progresses.

Q How does it improve one-to-ones?

It gives the conversation a shared, evidence-based anchor. Instead of a vague catch-up, both of you look at the same row, agree where the gaps are, and discuss how to close them. That makes development a concrete, regular part of the one-to-one rather than an awkward annual ritual.

Q How many skills should a development plan target?

One or two at a time. A plan that tries to improve everything spreads effort too thin to move any level. Pick the gaps that matter most to the role and the person right now, attach a real action to each, and consciously park the rest for a later cycle.

Q What makes a good development goal?

Specificity. A good goal names the skill, the current level, the target level, the action that will close the gap, and a date, for example "reach Level 3 on data analysis by next quarter via a course and a report to own". Vague goals like "get better at data" cannot be planned or tracked.

Q How do I track development progress?

Re-score the skill when it has genuinely grown, usually at a later one-to-one, and the rising level shows the progress. Because the matrix is scored, growth is visible and measurable, which both proves the development worked and motivates the person to keep going.

Q Should development plans follow the role or the person?

Both. The role's required levels show what the person needs for their current job; their aspirations show where they want to go next. The best plans serve both, closing the gaps the role needs while building toward the person's goals, which is what makes them genuinely own it.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith".

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— SOURCES

Gartner. (2024). *Talent management research: Workforce skills data*. Gartner.

Martin-Smith, A. J. (n.d.). *The 0 to 5 capability framework*. Upleashed Limited.
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World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025*. World Economic Forum.

Grow them, *one row at a time.*

You now have the development method. The quickest way to start is to pick one person before your next one-to-one, read their row against the required levels, and agree one focus skill with a real action and a date. A plan built from the matrix is one they can see, own and actually achieve.

[Try the free 5x5 builder →](#)

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