

# PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

## A GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### INTRODUCTION

Washington State University Extension is committed to enabling all Extension educators to reach their fullest potential both as individuals and as members of the Extension system. We believe that by educators in professional growth we improve job performance as well as increase levels of personal satisfaction.

Planning for professional growth is an important part of all of our professional responsibility. Effective planning involves looking beyond the present and taking a long-term, look at our careers. During this planning process, we consider both personal and professional our goals and then select those developmental opportunities that are most effective in helping us reach those goals.

Using a career development approach in planning for professional development implies that we focus on the interaction between the individual and organization over time (Schein, 1978). This long-term perspective enables us to more efficiently and effectively utilize the time we are able to devote to professional development.

Although a long-term perspective is necessary, we must also maintain flexibility to make adjustments in our plans along the way. As Extension addresses contemporary issues affecting society, Extension educators will need to engage in lifelong learning in order to maintain professional expertise in relevant areas (Martin, 1991). Other changes such as the move to an information society, the ways we manage that information, higher education levels of clientele, and efforts to reach new Extension audiences all have implications for professional development.

Extension professionals move through a series of career stages as tenure with the organization increases. We move to a new career stage by meeting developmental needs characteristic of our current career stage. We then select developmental opportunities that best help us meet those needs. The professional development model introduced in this publication is based on a career stage model for professional growth. It utilizes a long-term perspective while being flexible enough to accommodate shorter-term changes in roles and focus. The sections which follow explain the model and provide examples of professional development opportunities appropriate for Extension professionals.

### A CAREER STAGE MODEL FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Over the years, a number of authors have attempted to describe the characteristics of professional careers. Most authors will agree that a professional (1) has an identifiable base of knowledge from which he or she practices, (2) has acquired a mastery of that knowledge through extended education, (3) has autonomy in making decisions regarding application of that knowledge, (4) displays a strong commitment to the field, and (5) has a lifelong commitment to professional development. (Kerr, Von Glinow, and Schriesheim, 1977)

In many careers, employees progress through a number of upward job changes, say, from sales associate to department manager to store manager to regional manager. However, professional careers often do not have as structured of a career path to follow. Many professionals choose to remain in a particular job for many years. It, therefore, becomes a challenge to ensure that such individuals have adequate opportunities to satisfy needs for professional growth.

Recognizing the unique characteristics of professional careers, Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977, and Dalton and Thompson, 1986) introduced a career stage model for professional growth that identifies and describes four distinct stages of professional careers. Associated with each career stage are identifiable characteristics and needs that guide thoughts, behaviors, and actions at a particular stage. These ultimately have an effect on the nature of developmental opportunities appropriate at a particular stage.

While the model suggests progression from one stage to another, it acknowledges that not all professionals will progress through all four stages over the course of their career. Although movement from stage to stage is sequential, progressing from one stage to another does not require a change of jobs.

The original model introduced by Dalton, Thompson and Price has been modified and adapted for professional Extension careers (Rennekamp, 1987). The four stages described below are Entry, Colleague, Counselor, and Advisor. For each stage, a set of motivators are listed that can drive professional development at that point in one's career. There is a distinct set of motivators for each career stage. These motivators provide both the impetus for participating in and the criteria for selecting from among various professional development opportunities. Not all of the motivators are active at any given time. Also listed are some possible professional development opportunities that may be appropriate for each career stage.

## **THE ENTRY STAGE**

The entry stage corresponds to a time in one's career where the individual first enters the profession or a new job within the profession. Learning how to follow comes before learning how to lead. That is the essence of the entry state. A person is expected to attain the foundation skills required to do the job and understand the organization's structure, function and culture and then move on to begin exercising initiative and creativity within defined areas.

Ideally a mentor is provided to help teach the approaches, the organization's workings and judgment not found in textbooks. Mentor relationships may be formal or informal in nature. The formal mentor at WSU Extension is often the first line supervisor. This may include the County or District Director. Informal mentor relationships are formed by both the entry stage employee and colleagues that may share program or geographic areas. While it is important to stay in the Entry Stage long enough to build a solid foundation, it is essential to move out of this stage to attain career satisfaction and to avoid becoming a perpetual "intern".

## **MOTIVATORS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- Understanding the organization's structure, function, and culture
- Attaining base level technical skills
- Giving relevancy to previous training
- Exercising directed creativity and initiative

- Establishing linkages with volunteers, advisory groups, and community
- Moving from dependency to independency
- Exploring personal/professional dynamics
- Expanding knowledge regarding relevant issues
- Building relationships with professional peers

#### **DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Orientation training
- "Mentor" relationship with a senior professional
- Periodic follow-up training and administrative support
- Establishment of peer relationships
- Experiences that foster trust, confidence and loyalty to Extension
- Career counseling

#### **THE COLLEAGUE STAGE**

Many individuals look forward to having their own projects or areas of responsibility. That marks the colleague stage. The colleague stage can be a satisfactory level for many professionals for a number of years, as long as growth in expertise or responsibility continues. Some people never need to move beyond this level, thriving on independent work (Simonson, 1986). Individuals in the colleague stage have been accepted as members of the professional community and independently contribute their expertise to solving problems and carrying out programs - a time of less reliance on mentors and more on team efforts and pulling their own weight.

This stage is characterized by building a solid technical foundation, rapid growth in professional knowledge, independence, and autonomy. The Colleague seeks to build at least one area of expertise for which he or she is noted and often shares that expertise on developmental committees and through other special assignments. Often, professionals in the colleague stage seek additional formal training through sabbatic leave and potentially enrollment in graduate school.

#### **MOTIVATORS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- Developing an area of expertise
- Becoming an independent contributor in problem solving
- Developing a professional identity
- Sharing knowledge and information with others
- Gaining membership in the professional community
- Increasing effectiveness and efficiency
- Expanding creativity and innovation
- Moving from independency to interdependency
- Expanding knowledge regarding relevant issues

#### **DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Opportunities for development of a specialty (graduate school, regional workshops, etc.)
- Increased involvement in committees
- Increased involvement in professional associations
- Opportunities to share information and knowledge
- Writing for newsletters, journals, and other publications

- Developing educational materials
- Career counseling

## **THE COUNSELOR STAGE**

The counselor stage is marked by an individual's decision and ability to contribute to Professionals who have reached the Counselor stage are ready to take on responsibility, either formal or informal, for developing others in the organization as a coach, mentor, team or project leader. At the same time, they must not neglect their own personal growth and development. To accommodate personal development needs counselor-level professionals often seek to develop additional areas of expertise beyond which they currently possess. Such efforts result in a broad-based expertise that can be utilized in organizational problem-solving.

Counselors often chair committees or take on leadership roles in professional associations. Rather than being independent contributors they understand the need for an interdependent role and accomplish much of their work through others. They are extensive boundary-spanners and often have extensive networks both within and outside the organization.

A move to the Counselor stage does not necessarily imply a change of jobs to a supervisory or managerial position, but those in the counselor stage must at some point be able to contribute to the growth of others in the system.

## **MOTIVATORS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- Acquiring broad-based expertise
- Attaining leadership positions in professional circles
- Engaging in organizational problem-solving
- Developing networks with other organizations
- Stimulating thought in others
- Counseling other professionals
- Developing coaching and mentoring relationships
- Initiating job enrichment and redesign
- Facilitating self-renewal and rebirth
- Expanding knowledge regarding relevant issues

## **DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Opportunity to serve as a formal or informal mentor
- Opportunities to chair committees and coordinate projects
- Opportunities for self-renewal and additional training
- Greater responsibility in decision-making and problem-solving
- Opportunities to serve in formal training roles
- Job enrichment, job redesign, varied assignments
- Career counseling
- Temporary assignments to special projects

## **THE ADVISOR STAGE**

Individuals in the Advisor stage play a key role in shaping the future of the organization through innovative ideas and original concepts, or sponsoring promising people. The advisor has often developed a distinct competence in several areas of expertise and often has a regional or national reputation

within and probably outside the organization through their achievements. Sponsors have a thorough understanding of the Extension organization and can be a catalyst for positive change. They are capable of exercising formal and informal influence in the decision-making process.

Not all professionals reach the Advisor stage. Yet, as with the Counselor stage, progression to the Advisor stage does not require a permanent or formal move to a titled position, but it does mean having some influence over the policies or procedures of the organization or over the nature of their own job.

#### **MOTIVATORS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

- Becoming involved in strategic organizational planning
- Achieving the respect of others in the organization
- Engaging in innovation and risk-taking
- Understanding complex relationships
- Achieving a position of influence
- Sponsoring individuals, programs, and people
- Increasing responsibility
- Expanding knowledge regarding relevant issues

#### **DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

- Opportunities to utilize expertise and influence
- Complex and challenging assignments
- Increased responsibility
- Involvement in strategic planning
- Opportunities to represent the organization to internal and external groups
- Obtaining resources
- Career counseling
- Retirement planning

#### **DISCUSSION**

Most professionals have little trouble identifying their career stage. Others have considerable difficulty because they see themselves being at different career stages with respect to different facets of their job. This is perfectly natural, especially when there are changes taking place in the nature of their jobs. For example, embarking on a new programming thrust or adjusting to the use of a new technology makes many of us engage in developmental activities characteristic of the entry stage. So in many respects, we are in several career stages at once. To operationalize the model, however, it is important to try to select the one career stage that best describes where you feel you currently are in your professional growth.

Another important point is that while progression from one stage to another is a common goal of most professionals, some are satisfied to remain in a particular career stage. Satisfaction in a career stage can be maintained as long as growth in expertise or responsibility continues. A move to a counselor or advisor stage is not necessarily appropriate or desired by all.

The model does imply movement, but not necessarily from one job to another, or even from stage to stage. This movement is achieved through continual professional growth. Such growth is essential to job satisfaction.

This model provides an excellent base from which professionals can begin to focus and articulate their plans for professional growth.

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