

# Professional Growth

## A Guide for Professional Development



### Introduction

The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service is committed to enabling all professional staff members to reach their fullest potential both as individuals and as members of the Extension system. We believe that by supporting staff members in professional growth we improve job performance as well as increase levels of personal satisfaction.

Planning for professional growth is an important part 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, professional staff members 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.

We believe that 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, 1988). 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. 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 areas of expertise and becoming a member of a team. 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 sabbatical leave and 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**

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 different facets 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 can be 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.

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

## **Professional Development Opportunities**

Professional development is generally described as the combined impact of both organizational and individual efforts that help an individual grow and develop on the job. Those efforts initiated by the Extension System are referred to as staff development. Opportunities sponsored by other organizations in which participation by Extension professionals is self-initiated are referred to as professional improvement. Over the past few years, the relationships between professional improvement and staff development have become much stronger as the system focuses more on holistic professional development.

## **Staff Development**

The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service is committed to providing Extension professionals with both initial and continuing staff development opportunities that strengthen their ability to perform their jobs. Within Kentucky, orientation programs and continuing in-service education programs are coordinated by the Program and Staff Development Office. Some staff development programs originate outside of Kentucky and are conducted at either a regional or national level. Some offerings are delivered through face-to-face workshop-like sessions while others utilize distance learning methodologies such as web-based delivery systems. Here are some of the major types of staff development programs offered.

**Orientation** - Orientation programs are designed to help recently hired professional staff members acquire the base level knowledge and skills necessary to perform their jobs. Shortly after appointment to

a new position, new Extension employees receive one or more days of initial orientation. Initial orientation provides them with an overview of the Extension system and introduces them to many of the administrative procedures with which they will need to become familiar. Initial orientation is followed by several multi-day, theme-based advanced orientation sessions that deal with the core process skills for conducting effective Extension education programs. Newly hired agents also receive follow-up visits from administrators and specialists, participate in a visitation program with more senior agents, and complete a self-study program that encourages them to learn more about their county.

**In-Service Education** - Each year, county Extension agents and specialists participate in in-service education offerings designed to increase knowledge and skill levels in specific subject matter areas or issue-oriented areas of focus. Other in-service education offerings provide in-depth training in core Extension methodologies. Approximately 100 in-service education sessions are offered each year.

**Regional or National In-Service** - Throughout the year, the Cooperative Extension Services of other states offer a number of workshops and seminars of regional or national interest. Many times, these sessions are offered for graduate credit. These regional and national workshops will often be open to county Extension professionals as well.

**Distance Learning Opportunities** - A number of distance learning opportunities also provide valuable professional development experiences. The value of distance learning techniques such as web-based programs is that top quality educational programs can be accessed from almost any location across the country. Although not all web-based programs are considered in-service training, many provide useful information that can be utilized in program development and delivery.

## **Professional Improvement**

Professional Improvement includes a broad variety of learning opportunities and experiences not sponsored by Extension. They range from graduate courses and involvement in professional associations to self-directed study and study tours. While organization-sponsored staff development offerings address system-wide needs, involvement in professional improvement opportunities allow an agent to custom-tailor their professional development plans to meet individual and often unique needs.

**Graduate Courses** – All Extension Agents are required to have graduate level classes beyond their Bachelor's Degree. Many Extension professionals enroll in graduate courses that strengthen their knowledge and skills in a particular subject matter or process area. Most agents enroll in a program which eventually leads to an advanced degree. (Remember, you must be admitted to the graduate school of the institution offering the course before you will be permitted to enroll in courses.) If an advanced degree is desired, it is extremely important to be enrolled in an approved program before enrolling in graduate courses. To do so, contact your District Director and Assistant Director for your program area.

**Agent Associations** - Three professional associations are tailored specifically for the needs of County Extension Agents. The National Association of Extension Home Economists addresses the needs of agents with primary responsibilities in Family and Consumer Sciences. The National Association of Extension 4-H Agents is geared toward agents with responsibilities for 4-H Youth Development and the National Association of County Agricultural Agents addresses the needs of county agricultural agents. Each of the three agent associations conducts annual meetings that include numerous professional improvement workshops and seminars. Epsilon Sigma Phi is an Extension honorary that recognizes excellence in Extension work and offers membership invitations to Extension employees with five or more years of service.

**Other Professional Societies and Associations** - A number of other professional associations may have relevance to Extension work. The Association of Leadership Educators, The American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Phi Delta Kappa, and the Community Development Society focus on

the process skills used by Extension educators. The American Society of Agricultural Engineers, the American Dietetic Association, and the American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences are examples of professional societies that focus more on the subject matter areas of the Extension profession. Many of these associations and societies hold annual conferences and a broad variety of workshops, schools, and institutes.

**Other Workshops and Training Sessions** - The array of workshops and training opportunities relevant to Cooperative Extension professionals is virtually limitless. In addition to the educational opportunities offered by the organizations listed above, other options include community education courses, distance learning opportunities, for-profit management workshops, and teacher in-services. Watch for relevant offerings in your area.

**Journals and Periodicals** - Perhaps one of the most useful and cost effective methods of professional development is to subscribe to and read relevant professional journals and magazines. Many libraries subscribe to a broad array of journals and periodicals with relevance to Extension. The Journal of Extension is devoted to the field practitioner of Cooperative Extension education. This journal includes feature articles on successful programs and practical program evaluations. It also includes opinion articles on controversial topics, reviews of resource materials, and summaries of research. This journal can be accessed through the Program and Staff Development website under the Professional Development tab.

**Self-Directed Study** - Self-directed study can include a broad array of learning projects ranging from needs assessment and evaluation projects to field trails. It can include such things as independent reading and developing or adapting teaching materials for local use. Such opportunities are limited only by the imagination of the learner.

**Study Tours and Travel** - Many organizations, including Extension, offer both general and subject-specific study tours relevant to the practice of Extension education. Study tours provide opportunities to see processes and programs first hand. While costly, they often provide learning experiences not possible through meetings, workshops, or text.

## References

Dalton, G., Thompson, P., and Price (1977). The four stages of professional careers: a new look at performance by professionals. *Organizational Dynamics*, 6, Number 1, 23.

Dalton, G., and Thompson, P. (1986). *Novations: Strategies for Career Management*. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company.

Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (1992). *The 21st Century Professional in the Midst of Organizational Change*. Washington, DC: USDA.

Kerr, S., Von Glinow, M., and Schriesheim, J., (1977). Issues in the study of professionals in organizations: the case of scientists and engineers. *Organizational Behavior and Performance*, 18, 329-325.

Martin, D. (1991). *Professional Growth: A Personal Journey*. Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Service.

Rennekamp, R. (1988). A Career Development Model for 4-H Professionals. *Final Report of the 4-H Professional Research and Knowledge Base Projects*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 24-54.

Schein, E. (1978). *Career Dynamics: Matching Individual and Organizational Needs*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Simonsen, P. (1986). Concepts of Career Development. *Training and Development Journal*, November, 70-74.

Terry, R. and Sandholtz, IL (1999). A Non-traditional Faculty Development Program. Presentation, 29<sup>th</sup> ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference, San Juan, P.R.

## Credits:

Kentucky Staff Development Advisory Committee

Roger A. Rennekamp, chair and co-author

Martha A. Nall, co-author

Michael Rupured

Bill Crist

Martha Thompson

Cindy Crume

Greg Tompkins

Charlene Jacobs

Bill Umscheid

Logan Louderback

Bob Walls

Tina Peter

Paul Warner

Principle Authors, Roger Rennekamp and Martha A. Nall, Ed.D.

John M. Mowbray, edited 2006