

4-1-2002

A Systems Approach: Maximizing Individual Career Potential and Organizational Success

Linda M. Kutilek

Ohio State University Extension, kutilek.1@osu.edu

Gail J. Gunderson

Ohio State University Extension, gunderson.1@osu.edu

Nikki L. Conklin

Ohio State University Extension, conklin.1@osu.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Kutilek, L. M., Gunderson, G. J., & Conklin, N. L. (2002). A Systems Approach: Maximizing Individual Career Potential and Organizational Success. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(2), Article 3.

<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss2/3>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



April 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 2 // Feature Articles // 2FEA1



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

A Systems Approach: Maximizing Individual Career Potential and Organizational Success

Abstract

Continuing professional development for employees is critical to meet the demands and expectations of the evolving workplace. In the search for career fulfillment, individuals may no longer plan to spend their entire work lives in one organization. Maximizing an individual's career potential to enhance the success of the organization calls for a systems approach in career development. Systems approaches are implemented in a manner that enables the individual to enter and exit the model at the most appropriate point. This article provides an overview of the professional development model in a systems context used by Ohio State University Extension and its application in changing organizations.

Linda M. Kutilek

Associate Professor and Leader, New Personnel Development
Ohio State University Extension
Columbus, Ohio
Internet Address: kutilek.1@osu.edu

Gail J. Gunderson

Leader, Organization Development
Ohio State University Extension
Columbus, Ohio
Internet Address: gunderson.1@osu.edu

Nikki L. Conklin

Associate Professor and Leader, Training & Development Team
Ohio State University Extension
Columbus, Ohio
Internet Address: conklin.1@osu.edu

In today's world of work, organizational restructuring and technological changes are the norm. Career paths have shifted from climbing the corporate ladder to traversing the corporate landscape in search of job enrichment and satisfaction. In the search for career fulfillment, individuals may no longer plan to spend their entire work lives in one organization. Maximizing an individual's career potential to enhance the success of the organization calls for a systems approach in career development.

Systems approaches are characterized by an inter-relationship among parts, all of which are working together toward a defined goal. The parts of the system depend on each other for input and output, and the entire system uses feedback to determine if desired goal(s) have been reached (Kowalski, 1988). Systems approaches are implemented in a manner that enables the individual to enter and exit the model at the point most appropriate to the situation. As we examine and foster career growth and development, the model is responsive to the needs of the individuals throughout their tenure with an organization, not just in the early years of their career.

Ohio State University (OSU) Extension uses professional development strategies to support personnel based upon a four-part model (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1997; Rennekamp, 1988). The components include the:

1. Entry stage,
2. Colleague stage,

3. Counselor stage, and

4. Advisor stage.

The model was adapted for use by the authors (Table 1). Though some individuals may benefit from following the model in a stepwise fashion, others may move among the stages differently, depending upon prior career experience and the career track in the organization. For example, an individual may be at the advisor stage in one job role and then shift to the entry stage when their job role changes.

Table 1.

Systems Approach: Professional Development Model: Ohio State University Extension

Career Stage	Motivators	Organizational Strategies
Entry Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~Understanding the organization, structure, culture ~Obtaining essential skills to perform job ~Establishing linkages with internal partners ~Exercising creativity and initiative ~Moving from dependence to independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~Peer mentoring program ~Professional support teams ~Leadership coaching ~Orientation/job training
Colleague Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~Developing area of expertise ~Professional development funding ~Becoming an independent contributor in problem resolution ~Gaining membership and identity in professional community ~Expanding creativity and innovation ~Moving from independence to interdependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~In-service education Specialization funds Professional association involvement ~Formal educational training ~Service on committees or special assignments
Counselor and Advisor Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~Acquiring a broad-based expertise ~Attaining leadership positions ~Engaging in organizational problem solving ~Counseling/coaching other professionals ~Facilitating self renewal ~Achieving a position of influence and stimulating thought in others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~Life and career renewal retreats ~Mentoring and trainer agent roles ~Assessment center for leadership ~Organizational sounding boards

Adapted from Rennekamp, R., and Nall, M. (1993). *Professional growth: A guide for professional development*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Publication IP-34.

Continuing professional development for employees is critical to meet the demands and expectations of the evolving workplace. This article provides an overview of the professional development model used by Ohio State University Extension in a systems context and its application in changing organizations. The model is applicable in examining the professional development provided by an organization for all personnel, while the types of development may vary based upon job roles.

The Entry Stage

The entry stage can be characterized as the initial phase of employment, when the essential motivators for development include understanding the organization, the organizational structure and culture, and skills essential to perform the job. Organizations are frustrated by the seemingly inordinate amount of time required to supervise newcomers (Beeler, 1994). New employees may feel overwhelmed with all the information regarding the organization, their job duties, and the operational policies and procedures. Focus should be placed on developing easy-to-use tools for managers and new employees to help them do their jobs. Extension wants new employees to develop skills quickly to a level at which they can perform their work efficiently and effectively.

Ohio State University Extension has developed a multi-layered structure to address initial

professional development needs. This program structure includes a peer mentoring program, identification of professional support teams, leadership coaching, and orientation/job training programs.

Peer Mentoring Program

The peer mentoring program has been designed by Extension employees for their co-workers. A mentor is defined as a trusted adviser, friend, and teacher, and should be a peer who is a non-evaluator. All potential mentors are required to participate in a training session prior to being selected. Critical to the mentor/protégé relationship is an early start after hiring, having similar jobs, and developing familiarity with each other, agreed-upon goals, mutual trust, and confidentiality.

To help in creating mentoring pairs, each potential mentor/protégé is asked to complete a bio-sketch form that includes information about background, experience, work-related interests, non-work interests, specializations, hobbies, family, etc. An evaluation is conducted at 3- and 12-month intervals to assess satisfaction with the pairing and the process.

One of the biggest struggles for county mentoring participants has been the distance between mentor and protégé. Others mention difficulty with the time commitment, although the majority of pairs indicate they meet six or more times during the year.

Within the last 4 years, more than one hundred mentor/protégé partnerships have been created. Although the mentoring pair is established for the first year of an employee's career, many of the relationships have continued beyond that point. New staff members indicate that the experience provides temporary support until they are able to become more familiar with other co-workers and find links to personally chosen mentors within the organization.

Professional Support Teams

OSU Extension has a formal structure of support for each county Extension agent. This support team consists of:

- A District Director,
- One or more District Specialists, and
- The County Chair. The county chair has fiscal, administrative, personnel supervision, and overall educational program responsibilities for the county's Extension educational program.

The county agent's support team has responsibilities to:

- Provide an environment for motivation,
- Provide recognition of successes,
- Identify areas for change or improvement,
- Set goals for future performance,
- Identify training and professional development needs, and
- Collaborate to evaluate performance.

District support teams have additional roles related to the Extension mentoring program, including the selection and training of the initial mentor pool and the pairing of a mentor with a protégé.

Leadership Coaching

County Extension agents have the opportunity to participate in an Action Leadership Retreat, which is a 2-day program designed for individuals with 1 to 3 years of experience. This assessment workshop is a developmental experience for these employees focused on 12 behavioral anchors. The behavioral anchors include:

- Organizational skills,
- Interpersonal skills,
- Sensitivity,
- Communication skills,
- Change-management skills,
- Diplomacy,
- Decision-making skills,
- Conflict-management skills,
- Collaborativeness,
- Self directedness,
- Visionary skills, and
- Assertiveness.

Peer coaches have been assigned to individuals who have participated in the Action Leadership Retreat. The coaches assist in keeping employees focused on the professional development plans made during the retreat, serve as a sounding board, and provide the employees with a set time to focus on each of the behavioral anchors and themselves as professionals. The coaches work with the staff member for a 14-month year period. Performance is assessed with a 360-degree feedback process at the beginning and end of that time to identify areas of growth.

Orientation/Job Training

The current methods of orientation include presentations of information about the organization and employee roles through written materials, statewide orientation sessions, and on-going core training workshops. Training programs are also offered in core job skill areas of:

- Effective teaching,
- Program development and evaluation,
- Team building,
- Individual development, and
- Volunteer program management.

Training sessions are provided for professional staff during the first 2 years on the job to assist them in developing these core competencies. In addition, all staff are provided with training in their subject-matter area and in computer technology.

Another on-the-job training program, Learning the Ropes, has been developed for the first 2 weeks of an agent's job. The training topics were identified through surveying new and experienced agents. During this training program, new professionals meet with support team members to:

- Clarify expectations and goals of performance,
- Shadow experienced trainer-agents for insight into role performance, and
- Learn from co-workers the short- and long-term needs of their community.

Ohio State University Extension will continue to support new employees through this multi-layered structure. Initial experiences with these processes have demonstrated that this support helps to meet the employees' need to be successful--and to be recognized for that success.

The Colleague Stage

The second component of the model is the colleague stage. During this stage, the individual grows in professional knowledge, independence, and autonomy in carrying out the job role. Individuals seek to build at least one area of expertise for which he or she is recognized by colleagues and shares through service on committees or by assuming special assignments or tasks. The individual may seek further development in this stage through formal educational training, such as enrollment in a 2-year degree program, undergraduate program, or graduate school (Rennekamp & Nall, 1993).

Personnel may remain in this developmental stage for many years, particularly if their job role remains consistent. Some additional motivators for these individuals include:

- Independent contribution to problem resolutions,
- Gaining membership and identity in a professional community,
- Increasing efficiency and effectiveness in performing job functions, and
- Expanding creativity and innovation (Rennekamp & Nall, 1993).

Knowle's concept of andragogy assumes that adults desire self direction and tend to be self directed as they mature (Knowles, 1980). Tough and other adult educators have identified that many adults pursue self-directed learning projects throughout their lives related to both job roles and personal interests. Some research also indicates that though adults may practice self direction in some aspects of their lives, they may not always carry it over to learning (Kerka, 1994). Thus, as professional development is designed within an organization, planners cannot rely simply on self-directed learning to achieve individual development or organizational effectiveness.

In-Service Education

OSU Extension has expanded in-service training substantially in the last 10 years to respond to the rapidly changing needs of employees for specialized development. In order to effectively meet the needs of the public, the individual professional must have a higher level of technical expertise now than was needed previously. In the early 1980's, 25 in-service programs were provided annually by the organization, generally ranging from 1 to 3 days in length.

In 1998, OSU Extension offered over 75 highly specialized in-service programs. Each in-service was coordinated by an individual or team of professionals from within the organization. Coordinators are encouraged to use a sounding board or committee of individuals who are potential participants to insure relevance of the program. Though content experts from OSU or other universities often present in-service programs, many of the programs include sessions based upon peer sharing or peer teaching. Sometimes this is accomplished by providing unstructured time for networking, dialogue, and problem solving among participants.

New delivery approaches include:

- Internet training with on-line chat rooms,
- Telephone conference groups supported with reading materials and Internet dialogue,
- Study tours, and
- Interactive satellite television.

Examples of training conducted in 1998 include:

- Design for Learning, a 10-week program on designing effective adult learning programs;
- A Work/Life study tour for professionals who conduct programming on healthy work/life balance for individuals and businesses;
- Environmental and Natural Resource Economics, an Internet-based course offered for academic credit to enhance technical expertise of individuals working in Agriculture and Natural Resources; and
- Spanish Skill Building and Hispanic Cultural Awareness workshops for individuals with significant Hispanic populations within the communities in which they work.

Professional Development Funding

Several types of funding support have been provided to enable self-directed learners to identify developmental needs and to obtain resources to participate in external development programs. Some examples include:

Specialization Funds

\$65,000 is available annually to support individualized professional development plans focused on enhancement of specialized areas. Responsibilities include the development of educational programs, materials, and reciprocal teaching among peers within a close geographical area. To receive funding, individuals must submit plans that are reviewed by an administrative team.

Support for Professional Association Involvement

Under this plan, individual unit administrators are encouraged to allocate a minimum of \$500-700 per individual annually to attend a national/international professional association meeting. If the faculty/staff member is presenting a workshop, an additional \$300 is available once a year to support participation. Individuals may use work time to participate in professional association annual meetings. State associations provide \$2000 annually on a competitive basis for individually proposed professional development.

The concept of providing professional association support has also been extended to office support personnel. They have developed their own professional association, Chi Epsilon Sigma, and through fund raising, have established professional development scholarships. Extension Administration provides \$7500 in competitive funds annually to fund individual or team proposals outlining plans for professional development. A committee of support staff with the assistance of staff development professionals review the proposals and award the funds.

Formal Education

As employees of the university, all personnel are eligible to enroll in undergraduate or graduate education with a fee waiver. OSU Extension implements policies providing flextime and flexible scheduling as well as short term sabbaticals to enable employees to take advantage of this benefit.

The Counselor and Advisor Stages

Professionals who reach the counselor and advisor stages are often ready to assume additional responsibility for others in the organization. To accommodate these developmental needs, individuals often seek to develop areas of expertise beyond those they currently possess. Characteristics of these stages include movement from independent contribution to a focus on interdependence and the ability to work through others.

Other outcomes include greater responsibility in decision making and problem solving and the ability to represent the organization both internally and externally. They often seek self renewal and enhanced training, opportunity to serve in formal training roles, job enrichment, career counseling, and temporary assignment to special projects. They may also chair committees or assume other leadership roles in order to use their expertise and influence.

In order to tap individuals' expertise and desire to contribute to the organization, OSU Extension has developed several opportunities for professionals in these career stages. To address the development needs within these stages, career development retreats, an assessment center for leadership, mentoring and trainer roles, and organizational sounding boards have been used.

Life and Career Renewal Retreats

It is common for individuals to experience "peaks and valleys" throughout their careers. Hagberg (1982) describes this journey using a Job Lives Model. This model demonstrates the experiences and choices individuals face through skill building, career change, job change, self renewal, treading water, and inner kill. Organizations that recognize the need to maintain a healthy workforce often provide opportunities for employees to reflect and dialogue about their career progress and satisfaction.

A 2-day life and career renewal retreat was developed for self-exploration, discovery, and personal reflection on work/life issues. The goals of this program are to:

- Provide a framework and strategies to assist people in examining their specific career/life issues;
- Provide a relaxed environment conducive to exploration and reflection;
- Communicate the shared responsibility for career development within the organization, and
- Provide tools for employees to develop action plans for both personal and professional renewal.

The retreat includes:

- Presentations,
- Group discussions,
- Individual thinking,
- Reflecting, and
- Planning and dialoguing with the facilitators and group participants.

During the last 5 years, approximately 150 program and support professionals have chosen to participate. Some participants leave with a confirmation that things are good as they are, while others begin to take steps to enhance or alter their career direction and satisfaction.

Mentoring and Trainer Agent Roles

A unique feature of the formal mentoring program is the District Mentoring Contact. The District Contact helps to facilitate and monitor the progress of each mentor/protégé pair in his or her 16-19 Extension units. Contacts are responsible for:

- Maintaining regular communication with the pairs,
- Providing follow-up with protégés 2 weeks and 3 months after pairing, and
- Serving on the state mentoring developmental committee.

Mentoring Contacts work to assist mentors with information about upcoming events and programs to share with their protégés and to become aware of problem situations as they arise.

The protégé/mentor can inform the District Contact if the process isn't working, and a new mentor will be assigned. When a new mentor has been selected, the District Contact is informed of the new pairing. The process of initial contact and periodic monitoring will begin again with the new pair.

Many individuals in the counselor and advisor stages voluntarily serve as trainer agents in on-the-job training and internship programs. They use their experiences and effectiveness as partners with human resources and administration to guide and direct new employees.

Assessment Center for Leadership

An assessment center is a comprehensive, standardized procedure in which situational exercises and job simulations are used to evaluate individual employees for various job roles (Thornton, 1992). Individuals are evaluated on their performance on the exercise by a team of trained assessors.

In 1985, OSU Extension developed an assessment center to assist in the analysis of current managerial abilities and future training needs of Extension county chairs. The assessment center incorporates seven exercises that enable participants to demonstrate skills on the fifteen job-related dimensions of:

1. Oral communication,
2. Written communication,
3. Leadership,
4. Initiative,
5. Planning/organizing,
6. Decision making/judgment,
7. Development of coworkers,
8. Behavioral flexibility,
9. Organizational sensitivity,
10. Assertiveness,
11. Objectivity,
12. Perception,

13. Sensitivity,
14. Management control, and
15. Collaborativeness.

Assessor selection and training is an essential part of the assessment center process. Experienced professionals who have reached the counselor and advisor stages often have the knowledge and are very capable and willing to serve as assessors. The assessor not only observes and evaluates participants, but assists the participants in integrating the results into their daily work environment and in developing a professional development plan based upon the behavioral dimensions and potential learning opportunities.

The emphasis of this assessment center has been developmental. Individuals participate in this process within the first 6 months of their appointment to the county chair role. The center has gained national recognition, with more than 400 individuals participating from 25 different states.

Organizational Sounding Boards

It is often difficult to gain employee input in large, complex organizations. OSU Extension has chosen to develop sounding boards. The sounding boards provide an opportunity for employees, in the counselor and advisor stages to:

- Make suggestions,
- Provide feedback and
- Communicate regarding decisions and organizational direction.

A county chair sounding board is comprised of five county administrative leaders who are in the later stages of their career. They meet via teleconference several times annually with a state human resource leader to discuss processes and procedures that affect employees and to determine effective marketing and communication strategies.

Conclusion

The synergy of this model as implemented by OSU Extension is evident in the manner in which peer teaching, mentoring, dialogue, sharing, and coaching contribute to the growth of others while at the same time encouraging personal growth. Though traditionally the organization has dedicated proportionately more resources to the Colleague stage, priority attention is being placed upon the entry stage, counselor, and advisor stages to aid in assimilation and retention of personnel. As new employees are hired with prior career experience, emphasis needs to be given to support systems and processes for identification of professional development needs and subsequent guidance to appropriate developmental opportunities.

References

- Beeler, C. (1994). Roll out the welcome wagon: Structuring new employee orientations. *Public Management*. August, pp. 13-17.
- Dalton, G., Thompson, P., & Price (1977). The four stages of professional careers: a new look at performance by professionals. *Organizational Dynamics*, 6 (1):23.
- Grimm, J. (1996). Orientation: The first important thing you do. *The American editor*. April-May, pp.12-14.
- Hagberg, J. & Leider, R. (1982). *The inventurers: excursions in life and career renewal*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA.
- Kerka, S. (1994). Self directed learning. *Myths and realities series*. Columbus, OH: ERIC clearinghouse on adult, career and vocational education.
- Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. (2nd edition). New York: Cambridge Books.
- Kowalski, T. (1988). *The organization and planning of adult education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rennekamp, R. (1988). A career development model for 4-H professionals. *A final report of the 4-H professional research and knowledge base projects*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, p.24-54.
- Rennekamp, R. & Nall, M. (1993). *Professional growth: A guide for professional development*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Publication IP-34.
- Thornton, G. C. III (1992). *Assessment centers in human resource management*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA.

Copyright © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)