The Non-Formal Manager in Extension

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Abstract

Extension agents and other professionals often say they are so busy doing their jobs there is no time left to be the professionals they trained to be. If asked what they do all day, they will probably respond that they do what they need to do to keep things going. They will offer a long list of activities that clearly are part of a manager’s work but never mention the word “manager”. Newer employees often are frustrated by the incongruence between the emphasis of their job interview, their job description, and the work they actually do.

This paper examines program agents and other professionals who work as non-formal managers -- program professionals who may or may not be responsible for the work of paid assistants and volunteers and who are not officially designated as managers of their working unit or within their organization. They are expected to be prepared even though their job descriptions and job interviews barely refer to management skills.

Several common scenarios that can lead to these types of incongruent work situations are presented, along with a brief overview of management levels and functions, and a brief review of how managers tend to acquire their skills and knowledge. The impact on productivity and job satisfaction for the professional and the organization when management responsibilities are unclear, poorly defined or unspoken, and several strategies are offered to support professionals who struggle as unprepared non-formal managers, with suggestions on how to minimize and/or eliminate these frustrating situations.
“I am so busy doing other things; I barely have time to do what I thought my job was.” Teachers, ministers, doctors, architects, engineers, and other professionals often remark with some frustration that they are so busy conducting their businesses that there is no time left to be the professional they trained to be. If asked what they do all day long, they are likely to respond that they do what needs to be done to keep things running. If asked to be more specific, they usually offer a long list of activities and tasks that are part of a manager’s work. Wolford’s study (1999) of the assimilation of new employees into Ohio State University Extension included an open-ended “other comments” question about their job. Among the hundreds of statements were frequent comments, like the ones above, that expressed frustration and confusion about the incongruence between the emphasis of their job interview, their job description, and the work they were actually doing. Extension agents engage in managerial activities, yet feel unprepared for these responsibilities. They reported that:

- They thought they would be teaching but instead are expected to spend their time coordinating the work of others;
- There is too much to do and no one to help them set priorities;
- Everything is important, but there are not enough resources to get everything done; and
- New and experienced Extension agents resist the organization’s encouragement to secure soft funding because they view additional program personnel as complications that take time and make their work more difficult.

It is important to note that not all employees welcome the opportunity for more responsibility or a wider span of control in their work (Chonko, 1982). Individuals who have been successful problem solvers in their technical work may not be prepared to solve problems associated with people (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 1980). Predictably, managers are more effective and satisfied with their jobs when they have a desire to manage (Koontz, O’Donnell, & Wehrich, 1988).

Non-Formal Managers

Wolford’s (1999) study focused on new employees, but the job frustrations expressed by the participants frequently have been found among well seasoned Extension agents (Chambers, 1992; Patterson, 1997; Smith, 1980; Wolford, 1999) and other kinds of professionals. Studies have been found about librarians (Person, 1980), nurses and head nurses (Boeglin, 1996; Crossley, 1993; Fleming, 1991; Pilon, 1988), park rangers (Gitelson, 1980), pharmacists (Curtiss, 1977), physicians (Sherman, 1995), professors (Solomon, 1987), sales representatives (Comer, 1985; Falvey, 1994), the clergy (Hambrick, 1992; Krasinski, 1989; Sundberg, 1991; Walters, 1996), and non-profit agency directors (Kennedy, 1991) that share, in varying degrees, similar inconsistencies between the work people in these professions trained to do in college, what they thought their jobs were going to be (Downs, 1995, Norton, 1997), and what they really do now that they are immersed in their chosen professions. Instead of doing what they trained to do as individuals or as members of teams, they find themselves doing whatever they need to do to get their jobs done. They may be responsible for managing their personal work schedules, coordinating the schedules and work of others who report to them, evaluating the work of others, and sometimes managing the operations of a facility.
In today’s work environment, people must deal with complex issues that necessitate a wider range of responsibilities and more self-management (Burr, 2001). A new kind of work has emerged where jobs are broader, are less rigid, and have less well-defined boundaries (Motowidlo & Schmitt, 1999). Such jobs no longer define specific task requirements, but more broadly require employees to exercise more decision making and to apply an increased range of knowledge and skill as they perform their duties (Wall & Jackson, 1995). For this study, professionals who routinely perform management duties and tasks, but have no formal management designation by their employers will be called non-formal managers.

Most people, regardless of their official designation as workers or managers, engage to some extent in both labor and management, sometimes at the same time (Grant, 1984; Grint, 1995; Stewart, 1997; Watson, 1994). Management identifies work that needs to be done, determines what tasks are involved, and then decides how the work will be done. Managers work with and through others to accomplish organizational goals (Drucker, 1954; Watson, 1994). Labor produces the desired products or results according to the predetermined plan (Mintzberg, 1979). Most non-managers need some level of managerial competencies in order to complete their work because managerial activities such as planning, organizing, and setting priorities are inherent in all jobs (Alcorn, 1992: Grant, 1984). Similarly, most managers engage in non-managerial activities such as direct selling, sharpening pencils, filling in for absent workers, screening phone calls, and bookkeeping (Carroll & Gillen, 1967; Higgins, 1994; Watson, 1994). Even though non-managers and managers routinely perform the same duties and tasks, there are differences between the two, including the amount of time spent on specific tasks, and the extent of closeness to outside organizations, co-workers, and network size (Carroll & Teo, 1996).

The need for professionals to have strong management skills is often unexpected and unrecognized by an organization. There are five common ways people may find themselves needing management skills they did not know they would need previously. These occurrences that can happen at any point in their careers can throw employees into managerial situations without regard about whether they possess the competencies they need to be successful.

The five ways are:

1. Employees who have been competent problem solvers in technical areas are promoted to managerial positions. They learn that as managers they are not prepared to solve problems associated with people and need a completely different set of skills and knowledge (Hunsaker & Alessandra, 1980; Rashid & Dar, 1994).

2. Sales associates, who have been working directly with customers in sales or services, become managers. They discover they must shift their perspectives from working alone for self and the personal rewards of sales commissions and personal compliments, to working with others, seeing those who work for them as their new customers, and enabling others to succeed (Lorge, 1999).

3. Management vacuums may develop as an organization grows unless employees are willing and able to change along with the organization (Drucker, 1974; Higgins,
An organization may lose its competitive advantage if managers fail to recognize the need or are unwilling to change their duties and tasks to accommodate their evolving jobs (Bonvillian, 1997; Moravec, 1994).

4. Organizations do not recognize the extent to which strong management competencies have become critical for effectiveness. Unaware of the need for management competencies as a job qualification, they often completely omit them from the position description, and rarely identify the development of management competencies as a critical topic of employee training (Norton, 1997).

5. Organizations embrace Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) to increase efficiency and hone a competitive edge. This trend among organizations, which started in the 1980s, has resulted in more participatory leadership among the employees, and has blurred the distinction between management and labor even more. Employees are empowered to take more responsibility for managing their work, development, and careers (Drucker, 1999; Durity, 1991; Tornow & London, 1998). CQI and participatory leadership have become standard practice for organizations that do not want fall behind in today’s market (Seitzinger & Boyle, 1991).

Extension Agents are Non-Formal Managers

Extension agents are typical non-formal managers – they spend much of their time as performing the duties and tasks of managers. They are responsible for program planning, development, leadership, and implementation of their own program at the local level. They typically manage themselves as well as other paid assistants and volunteers (Conners, 1995; Kiesow, 1973; Long, 1980; Ritsos, 1984) which extends the Extension agents’ programming efforts and produces value-added goods and services (Colvard, 1994; Kerr, Hill & Broedling, 1986).

Extension agents are managers regardless of their official designation. They perform functions that are widely accepted by those who study and teach management as well as those who are trained managers as management functions (Colvard, 1994; Fayol, 1949; Gulick & Urwick, 1937; McDermott, 1995; Stewart, 1987; Van Fleet, 1991; 1992). They manage operations, finances, marketing, human resources, and administration of individual programs such as camps, workshops, tours, and educational competitive events.

Not hired as managers however, most Extension agents may not have very much formal or informal management training. If asked how Extension agents perceive themselves – as teachers, as managers, or as some combination of both – they will probably first say they are teachers. This is consistent with the historical view of Extension agents as teachers and community facilitators (Ludwig, 1999a; Simons; 1962 Wilson, 1976). In spite of the real work agents do, their position descriptions and job announcements generally do not describe daily duties and responsibilities in managerial terms, do not mention demonstrated management experience as a desirable qualification, nor do are the positions identified as managerial (“Careers,” 2000; Patterson, 1997). The preferred professional qualifications for the Extension agent has historically been vocational agriculture education or vocational home
economics educations. And while they are teachers, not acknowledging the managerial aspects of their work feeds the tendency to ignore the need to improve their managerial skills.

Perception is Everything

Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory states that human behavior is influenced by the individual's beliefs regarding outcome and efficacy expectations. Self-efficacy develops as a result of one or more types of experiences: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, persuasion, and physiological variables (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is an individual’s personal assessment of his or her capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to perform at a certain level. Self-efficacy is concerned with perceptions and judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses rather than with the skills one has (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Such perceptions of one’s skills are important because when employees believe they possess the specific skills and knowledge needed to complete their work, they tend to think more positively about themselves (Kornhauser, 1965) and their jobs (Brophy, 1959, Rowe, 1996; Terrian, 1990). When people successfully perform tasks that they believe require abilities that they value and believe they possess, success fits with their self-concepts and is accompanied by satisfaction (Kaufmann, 1962; Vroom, 1962). Productivity has been linked to the levels of value placed on ability and motivation, (Gagne & Fleishman, 1959; Mace, 1935; Viteles, 1953; Vroom, 1962) and to previous relevant formal training and advancement potential (Barling & Beattie, 1983). If employees believe their work does not require any abilities that they value and believe themselves to possess, their performance levels will be unrelated to their concepts of self, and their productivity will be lower than when abilities and motivation have high values (Kaufmann, 1962; Vroom, 1962).

Individuals’ levels of self-efficacy and their levels of performance are related. How individuals meet the demands of specific situations is related to their perceived self-efficacy or personal beliefs in their capabilities to perform the tasks (Wood & Bandura, 1989). The literature suggests that non-formal managers who do not perceive themselves to be managers will have managerial self-efficacy levels that are lower than their teacher self-efficacy levels. That is, they are less willing to seek managerial training and less likely to persist in difficult managerial situations (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1997; Barling & Beattie, 1983; Blair & Price, 1998; Ford & Noe, 1987; Gist, 1985, 1987; Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Maurer & Palmer, 1999; Maurer & Tarulli, 1996; Noe & Wilk, 1993). Since the selection process for most non-formal manager jobs is not concerned with the managerial aspects of those positions, the individuals who are hired will not be likely to have much formal managerial training and this will affect their managerial self-efficacy levels (Maurer, 2001; Orpen, 1999). Non-formal managers who are unprepared to perform as managers may experience job ambiguity and role conflict as they struggle to do their work. This can affect their job satisfaction levels (Bedeian & Armenakis, 1981; Champion, 1993). The Jobs Attitudes Model suggests that self-efficacy, along with other beliefs, may influence the attitude of job satisfaction (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). If non-formal managers find there is a experience a mismatch between their skills and the work they are doing, they may be dissatisfied with their work (Beehr, Walsh, Taber, & Jeffrey, 1976; Comer, 1985; Gael, 1983;
Netermeyer, Burton, & Johnston, 1995; Norton, 1997; Odson, 1986; Organ, 1990); experience frustration and confusion, have lower levels of job satisfaction, and have lower productivity (Bandura, 1986; Carroll & Bandura, 1982). Employees who are clear about their job expectations tend to be more effective, and those with high efficacy beliefs have high productivity and job satisfaction (Bandura, 1986; Carroll & Bandura, 1982).

With adequate organizational support, training and educational programs may provide opportunities for individuals to develop the experiences that could foster feelings of self-efficacy (Igbaria & Livari, 1995; Zimbardo, 1991). Wood, Bandura, and Bailey (1990) found that high levels of reported manager self-efficacy fostered performance accomplishments. Consistently, employees with higher self-efficacy levels are higher performers, more tenacious, and more persistent (Mager, 1992) than those with lower self-efficacy ratings (Bandura & Jourden, 1991, Bandura & Wood, 1989; Wood, Bandura, & Bailey, 1990). When non-formal managers are not performing their unofficial management tasks, they perform the duties and tasks for which they were formally trained.

The domain of manager self-efficacy is not well developed; several studies were located that examined the self-efficacy levels of leaders and top level managers, but only two studies were found that were focused on front line managers (Berzok, 1997; Robertson & Sadri, 1993). Even less research has been done on non-formal managers – those individuals who do not choose careers in management, but who, nevertheless, find themselves spending much of their work time performing management duties and tasks. The extent to which non-formal managers have high self-efficacy beliefs is associated with several variables and the relationships the variables have to each other is unclear beyond these limited studies (Bandura, 1986; Carroll & Bandura, 1982). There is some evidence that non-formal managers who are required to perform managerial duties and tasks will have high self-efficacy levels for their professional work and lower efficacy levels for their managerial efficacy. Knowing self-efficacy levels could be valuable when assessing the impact of training and development activities.

It is no surprise that Extension agents do not perceive management competencies as being very important for their work or that these agents are rarely encouraged by administration to participate in management training (Cooper & Graham, 2001), when the managerial competencies of Extension agents consistently have been embedded within non-managerial competencies. Numerous studies throughout the U.S. have identified professional competencies, skills, and knowledge needed to perform various types of Extension program and administrative jobs. Studies that have examined the management training needs of Extension employees have focused on those with formal administrative assignments (Lindner, 2000; Lyles, 1990; McNutt, 1986; Palmertree, 1988; Plafcan, 1983; Smith & Clark, 1987; Whiteside & Bachtel, 1987), and Extension agents as a generic group (Little, 1981; Reynolds, 1993). Other studies have focused on specific groups such as urban Extension agents (Borden & Harris, 1998; Kalangi, 1963; Ritsos, 1985), and Extension agents who work with food and nutrition (Natino, 1983), and 4-H agents (King, 1997). Studies that have examined the training needs of Extension agents have tended to embed management duties and tasks within administrative categories or ignore management all together (Abdul-Hadi, 1963; Conners, 1995; Gonzales, 1982; Holzer, 1995; Leidheiser, 1970; McCormick, 1959; Peabody, 1968;
Price, 1960; Soobitsky, 1970). Most competency studies can be traced back to competencies identified by McCormick in 1959, so they all tend to be similar in the tasks identified and the way the tasks are grouped. These competencies continue to influence the way Extension considers the work of Extension agents and the importance that Extension agents place on managerial competencies.

Several definitions of management are commonly accepted (Higgins, 1994; Koontz, 1955; Peters & Waterman, 1982). For this paper, management is defined as a set of activities performed in order to bring about the overall steering or directing of the organization (Watson, 1984). This paper uses Higgins’ (1994) set of management functions that are: creative problem solving as a manager’s core function with planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. Managerial functions occur within the five areas of an organization which includes marketing, operations, finance, human resources, and administrative (Van Fleet, 1991).

Training

Training may be considered as the most obvious way to help Extension professionals improve their management skills once they recognize their roles as managers. And when a combination of formal and informal experiences is offered along with guided practice, employees can develop the technical, interpersonal, and conceptual skills they must have to solve problems, find opportunities, and help an organization be efficient and effective (Katz, 1974; Mintzberg, 1995). Most new managers flounder to varying degrees. Even formally educated managers will not be effective managers until they learn from their own first-hand experience (Dowell, 1999; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1995; Whitehead, 1929). When non-formal managers are not recognized as being managers at all, their chances of having access to management training are remote.

Opportunities for non-formal managers to self-select management training or to be encouraged by their employers to seek such training seem unlikely however, when several points are considered:

- Managerial training for first-line managers who are recognized by their employers as managers is often ignored although training has been shown to be a wise use of limited funds because it is cost effective to train one person who can inspire many people.
- Good people who have a good manager are more likely to stay with the organization (Lorge, 1999).
- In many organizations that believe they train their managers for their jobs, in reality the training is often limited to having someone show them around (Crockett & Elias, 1984).
- The lack of organizational encouragement to development managerial skills is further compounded when non-formal professionals do not recognize the activities they are performing as managerial and do not perceive themselves as managers.

The literature suggests several simple ways to address the incongruence that occurs when the real work of a job does not match the job description or the focus of the job interview.
1) Conduct a job review to discern what the real work is. Interview and observe others who do similar work in similar settings, conduct a DACUM. Compare the existing job description with the new one.

2) Develop appropriate questions for job interviews that seek insights about applicants' formal and non-formal management experience.

3) Recognize the differences among the different levels of managers -- not all managers develop the mission statement. Some managers are front-line and must make the mission and vision a reality.

4) Offer and encourage employee participation in basic management training. Simply learning the functions of management and how they apply to daily personal work can be useful for every employee.

5) Realize that those employees who spend time managing the work of others will have less time to conduct personal direct services. The direct services will delivered by the people who are managed. Performance expectations and reviews need to reflect the work accurately.

References


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Additional References available by emailing lamuth.1@osu.edu