



Maintaining Professional Momentum In Your Teaching

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Dimensions of Professionals Who Maintain Momentum

What are the dimensions of individuals who maintain professional momentum in their teaching? The thesis of this paper is that such professionals are up to date with the science they profess. Not only do these professionals generate new knowledge, but they also use the new knowledge generated by others. They maintain authority in their role. When they speak, advise, instruct, and report, people listen because something worth listening to is being said. Individuals who maintain momentum in their teaching have great credibility. They also maintain a high level of energy and commitment.

Another vital sign of professors who maintain their momentum is that they care for their role, whether it be research, teaching, or extension. Likewise they continue to care for their clients and gain much from the helping relationship that they have with their clients.

These professionals are not in a "rut" in any of their endeavors. They maintain a fresh perspective and a continuing commitment. They are not satisfied to go about their professional life as they always have and merely maintain the status quo. They reach outward and onward.

This energy and activity is not reserved just for clients and specific job assignments, but also gladly encompasses contributions of service to the university and the profession in general.

In summary, such professors are capable of delivering, and they do deliver. They do not become stagnant and give out.

The Current Environment

"Professional stagnation among American faculty is in danger of replacing faculty mobility" (*Change Magazine*, p. 217). John S. Roll (1980), President of the University of Maryland, says, "Most educational leaders agree that during the 1980's there will be fiscal austerity, emphasis on cost effectiveness, and attempts at higher productivity in academe. If American economic growth slows, high quality, labor-intensive organizations whose product is excellence - from great restaurants and symphony orchestras to research laboratories and universities - are expected to be among the hardest hit . . . moreover, with enrollments in higher education entering a period of stabilization and possible decline, the opportunities for new appointments and promotions will be limited." He then asks, ". . . how do colleges and universities continue to increase their quality and productivity

in a decade of increasing fiscal constraints when overall enrollments are no longer increasing?" (p. 4)

A rapidly occurring phenomenon in such an environment is the tendency of faculty to experience "burnout." This condition is receiving increasing attention in the literature. Burnout has been variously defined as "complete exhaustion" (Henrickson, 1979, p. 37), "a response to circuit overload; it is the result of unchecked stress caused by the institution's impersonal and unyielding demands and by the immediate environment in which . . . (professing) is done." (Henrickson, 1979, p. 37). It is, "The feeling of being locked into a job routine." (Reed, 1979, p. 67).

Kahn (1978) suggests that one of our biggest problems is overload. He says we do not object to what we are asked to do — we feel the requests are very appropriate —, but we feel we cannot meet all the current demands. Kahn feels there are two dimensions to overload. There is qualitative overload, when we feel the request is too difficult; and quantitative overload, when too much is asked.

When examining faculty morale at The University of Texas in Arlington, Hunter et al. (1980) found that faculty felt they were overworked, and faced ambiguous roles and evaluative criteria. They also considered their job stability and mobility uncertain and felt there was a low level of collegiality.

To the extent that professionals face an environment with any of the above components they will probably find it difficult to maintain their professional momentum and will need to work seriously at self renewal.

Symptoms of a Need for Self Renewal

It is impossible to provide a complete list of symptoms of a need for self renewal. However, the presence of any of the following conditions could indicate the need for an individual seriously to pursue self renewing strategies.

For some individuals the need for renewal begins with a general feeling of uneasiness. As Hendrickson (1979) points out, "the joy of . . . (professing) begins to slip away." (p. 37). She also indicates that self concept drops and one begins to question the meaning of that which he does.

Another indication of problems, especially in the case of burnout, is "a gradual loss of caring about people they work with" (Maslach, 1978, p. 56). When professors begin to resent being bothered by their students, advisees, or other clients, they are headed for real trouble. Professors cannot allow themselves to write off the very people they are trained to serve.

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In other instances the people who are affected feel overworked. They sometimes feel that they are not able to complete any of the responsibilities as well as they feel they can. There is a loss of zest. People often begin to dread going to the office. Others find themselves counting the days until Friday or the end of the term, and still others begin to realize that they are anxiously awaiting retirement.

Still others become so repetitive in their work that they become bored with much of what they do. Whatever the symptoms, when they are present they indicate the need for self renewal.

The Nature of Self Renewal

Perhaps no one has addressed the issue of stagnation and the need for renewal better than John Gardner (Gardner, 1964). Gardner reminds people that in order for there to be renewal there must often be growth and decay as well. He says, "in the ever-renewing society that matures is a system or framework within which continuous innovation, renewal and rebirth can occur" (Gardner, 1964, p. 5 and 6). Furthermore, "renewal is not just innovation and change. It is also the process of bringing results of change into line with our purposes" (Gardner, 1964, p. 7). Nevertheless, "as we mature we progressively narrow the scope and variety of our lives . . . We become caught in a web of fixed relationships. We develop set ways of doing things" (Gardner, 1964, p. 10). Obviously this leads to "doing it the way we always have" even when those ways are no longer defensible.

Gardner (1964) points out that no one is sure why some people are more capable of self-renewal than others, but he does suggest some characteristics of people who are capable of self renewal. Such people continue to develop their potential and to discover themselves, have a dialogue between themselves and their environment, and systematically explore the full range of their potentialities.

However, while all of this admonition to be a self-renewing person is fine and good, we must also remember that "it is not only the most difficult thing to know oneself, but also the most inconvenient one, too" (Gardner, 1964, p. 15).

Change and self renewal are in fact very difficult. John Gardner contends that most of the obstacles to self renewal are in the mind of the person rather than in the environment. Most people, professors included, tend to have many self-defense mechanisms built up, and they use these defenses almost without thought. The very nature of being defensive is quite an obstacle to change and renewal.

Another big obstacle to change and renewal is vested interest. People like to protect what they have created; who they are; where they are. This kind of mind set is natural and good in many cases; however, it also gets in the way of considering innovation or even the possibility of the need for change.

Based on what is known about the way people learn, it can be concluded that change generally does not occur unless the person who "needs to change" has a personal felt need to change. Until individuals personally feel uncomfortable with their current state of affairs there is likely to be no real effort to change, thus to renew themselves. Therefore, either the individual or those around the individual need to create a situation wherein the individual becomes uncomfortable with what is (when appropriate) and begins to seek new ways of functioning. How can such conditions be created?

Consider using some of the following techniques which can help faculty members realistically assess where they are and have the feedback necessary to decide whether or not they are in need of change or renewal.

1. **Video-taping your performance.** The most potent activity or technique to foster a felt need is to have your class(es) video-tape recorded. The hardware is readily available at almost every institution of higher education. Once your class is video-taped, arrange for a private viewing. When a faculty member sits for an hour and watches his/her own teaching performance, he/she cannot help but make important self-discoveries. As the faculty members view their teaching they need to assume the posture of a student in the class and have the following question foremost in mind, "How would I like to be in this class and how well would I be able to learn in such a situation?" You can "tell a professor" they have problems, but until the faculty member decides for himself/herself that there are problems, then little can be accomplished. Through this process of self-examination the impetus for self-renewal and change can be realized.

2. **Audio-taping your performance.** If one cannot have his/her teaching performance video-taped, then at least have the class audio-taped. This can be done very discreetly. Reviewing one's performance need not consume precious time in that you can listen to your class presentation as you drive home from work. Here again, if you diagnose "things" with which you are not pleased, the first step toward renewal has taken place. You have a frame of reference against which to focus your attention and a "new goal" toward which to strive.

3. **Reviewing student notebooks.** Another activity which can promote self renewal in teaching is to occasionally collect a random sample of students' notes from a class. Professors are amazed at how the students have things confused. However, once you reflect on the class sessions in question you will probably discover the source of the problem. Once again, this is a point from which to depart.

Once a professor has a personal felt need to change, to seek renewal, then he/she is ready to try strategies designed to promote renewal.

Alternative Strategies for Maintaining Professional Momentum

Clearly strategies for self renewal must include self-help, peer support at the work place, and enrichment of

one's personal life. The idea of renewal has to involve the total person and cannot be confined to a narrow concept of professional improvement. Consider the following strategies for renewal.

1. Try Something New and Daring. The literature from education, higher education, social work, nursing, personnel, and psychology all agree that an overall strategy has to be to try to stop doing "it" the same way. One writer (Reed, 1979) suggests that the mind, like automobile tires, needs to be rotated.

Whatever your major responsibility, if you seek renewal, then experiment. Develop new research interests and methodology, new curriculum and teaching approaches, and new contacts.

2. Create a Support System at Work. Kahn (1978) feels professionals need social support on the job. He says he "mean(s) the expression of positive affect - liking, respecting, admiration. (He) would also include expression of affirmation, letting our colleagues and those we supervise know that we recognize and appreciate the strenuous situations with which they are working." (p. 63). We in the agricultural sciences must renew our pride in collegiality and close knit professional support of one another.

3. Hold Retreats with Colleagues. Get away from the university in an atmosphere conducive to reflecting, examining, and sharing. Recreate together; dream together; and share the responsibility of being a loving critic. Give one another ideas and assistance as well. Suggest new ideas and follow through with personal assistance.

4. Return to Industry. A stint in the industry we serve is a good change of pace. It reacquaints use with reality and offers fresh perspectives while at the same time reaffirming existing accuracies.

5. Analyze the Mix of What Makes Up Your Job. When you have completed your analysis, work with those to whom you report to alter that mix. For example, move to a new instructional level. If you are primarily conducting research, build in a good proportion of resident instruction for a term or change roles with an extension specialist. Others may want to add more advising or research or service. The idea is to try a new focus for a while. It revives, and that is essential to all professionals.

6. Work for Greater Movement Among and Between Colleges. Faculty mobility is fast becoming a thing of the past. Many faculty used to move to another university to keep themselves stimulated. With this option fading, Toll (1980) feels it will be necessary for universities to work seriously at providing the flexibility to allow exchanges of scholars. We may need to exchange positions for a term with people in other colleges in our university or with faculty from community and technical colleges. The insights gained and new ideas shared can be extremely helpful to all cooperating units.

7. Research Your Teaching. According to Mathis (1980), attempts to study and improve college teaching

seem to be viewed as involving great risks for those who are the objects. All academic disciplines cloak themselves in their own mysteries about the manner in which they are best taught. To examine these mysteries and make them public is to expose the act of teaching to scrutiny which strips away myths and identifies illusions. (p. 17) Most professors, after a while, feel rather definite about their approaches to teaching. Such tentative hypotheses need to be empirically verified. The very quest for truth should renew.

8. Decompress Between Work and Home. While it is easy enough to say one should not take work home, learning to practice it requires a sustained effort. It needs to become a learned habit. Maslach (1978) reports that "burnout rates soar when separation between work life and home life falls apart." (p. 56).

9. Use Mental Health Days. For most conservative agriculture professors, suggesting using sick leave to recharge or renew sounds unthinkable. However, it makes little sense to wait until one is hospitalized for exhaustion or has become ineffective as a professor to decide to take sick leave.

10. Exercise, Relax, and Pursue New Avocations. At first blush you'll probably think you don't have time for any of this. That is a sure sign you need it. The time it takes for moderate exercise, a short but well planned rest, or to study an avocation, returns attractive dividends in the form of renewed productivity.

Summary

The ball on the issue of self renewal is always in the reader's court. No one can do it for you. You have to feel the need to do it yourself and then invest the time, energy, and risk needed to make it happen. There is always an alternative. You can "die on the vine" before you are ripe.

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