

The Mentoring Relationship: Content and Process

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Psychologists who achieve similar levels of academic success in graduate school vary in the success that they achieve on the job. Cognitive psychologists contend that the differences in job success and satisfaction are only partially explained by ability and motivation (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). The remaining variability may be attributed to individual differences in tacit knowledge. New professionals who display practical intelligence about managing their careers and dealing with coworkers fare much better at stabilizing in a position. Knowing the employer's or colleagues' social expectations for psychologists on the job and preferred methods for meeting these expectations allows new professionals to succeed. Studies have identified the tacit knowledge and practical intelligence of individuals who have mastered the vocational development tasks involved in stabilizing in a new job. Programmatic research on the developmental tasks and coping responses involved in stabilizing has produced helpful information about the formal requirements of adapting to a new job. This information has been converted into advice that mentors can use in guiding new professionals in adjusting to work and developing their careers.

There appear to be at least six developmental tasks faced by psychologists entering new positions. The first task is called *organizational fusion*. Fusion means that the new professional must successfully adapt to the organizational culture established by the employer. Many psychologists encounter "culture shock," or what organizational psychologists call "surprises" (Louis, 1980). Inability to fit into the new culture can lead professionals to quickly leave or be asked to leave their position (Wanous,

1977). When new professionals find their way to fit into the new culture, then they must attend to *position performance*. The employee must meet the normative standards for production that have been established for workers in that position. Failure to do so can result in termination.

After an initial period of proving that they can participate in the culture and do the job, new professional must concentrate on two demands of everyday worklife. Ordinarily, the new professional must display the ability to form good *relationships with coworkers* and exhibit effective *work habits and attitudes*. During this period, failure to get along with colleagues is the most frequent reason that psychologists lose their jobs. The second reason is being an inconsistent producer. Being late, leaving early, not showing up, taking too much time off, not concentrate on tasks, and doing poor quality work can lead to termination.

New professionals who show that they have a good work ethic and that they can "get along," should in due course turn their attention to "getting ahead." This requires attention to *advancement* opportunities within their current organization and charting an organizational path for themselves. In addition to "looking ahead" in their current organization, it is wise to "look around" for advancement opportunities in similar organizations that may offer better *career paths*.

The coping behaviors outlined in the Appendix make an excellent agenda for developing a career in graduate school and in a professional position as a psychologist.

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APPENDIX  
Vocational Coping Behaviors for Work Adjustment and Career Development

A. Organizational Fusion

1. establish oneself as a team player
2. acquire job knowledge and expertise
3. make quality contact with people
  4. learn from the experts
  5. focus on the big picture
6. change oneself to fit into the organization
  7. do any task to get the job done
  8. establish credibility others

B. Position Performance

1. establish high internal standards
  2. set measurable goals
3. seek multiple levels of feedback

C. Work Habits and Attitudes

1. be well organized
  2. motivated to work hard
  3. be early
  4. promote open communications
5. get the job done immediately
6. experience pleasure from work
7. strive to perfect skills

D. Coworker Relations

1. take time to listen
  2. respect coworkers as persons
  3. Sensitivity to the needs of others
  4. ability to get along with others
5. acknowledge the strengths and efforts of others

E. Advancement

1. keep current in your field
  2. involvement with other professionals
  3. seek new challenges on the job

F. Career Path

1. set specific goal for advancement
  2. challenged in current field
  3. less crystallized career plans
4. strategize to achieve long-term organizational goals
  5. change career path