

putting it all together

Gene Turner

Professional improvement is largely a matter of putting it all together. All of us have opportunities to improve ourselves. Some of these are directly related to our profession; *others are a part of our off-the-job life.* Taking advantage of both of these is necessary if we're to continue professional growth.

On-the-Job Opportunities

We're fortunate in Tennessee to have an administration that provides liberal opportunities for on-the-job professional improvement. A prime example is the five-week winter session at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville that is available each year for county Extension professionals. An agent can earn nine hours graduate credit during this period. With proper approval, any agent can attend this session and continue to draw complete salary. In addition, the Tennessee Farm Bureau provides a \$100 scholarship to agents attending this session.

I went to one of these sessions after working about four years. The value of the educational information gained and the association with fellow Extension learners and faculty provided the motivation to request and receive a year's study leave to work toward and obtain a master's degree, and later an Ed.D.

Graduate Study

These two periods of leave to earn degrees constitute major portions of my professional improvement package. The knowledge and technical information gained were valuable; of equal importance was the association with fellow students and faculty members. Likely the greatest value gained was the opportunity to work on thesis and dissertation problems. There were times, I'll admit, when I wouldn't have made such a statement.

My thesis problem was concerned with selecting the most profitable enterprise mix with given farm resources for a selected area in Tennessee. The planning techniques learned and studying the results of alternative solutions have been

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useful in farm management, program planning, and other aspects of my work.

My dissertation problem was a study of the role of the county Extension leader, particularly, as to how his performance rating correlated with how well his staff perceived he was fulfilling his role. I gained insights into staff relationships. Particularly important was the finding that performance rating of the county Extension leader was positively correlated with the way the leader's staff perceived him to be performing his role. The higher rated leaders were perceived by this staff to be performing at a greater level than those receiving lower ratings. Probably the greatest value of a thesis or dissertation is the discipline of following a scientific problem definition and answer technique to completion.

Off-the-Job Opportunities

Off-the-job improvement opportunities constitute an important part of professional improvement. Participation in a civic club is a valuable aid. Early in my career, I became an active member of the Lions Club. In recent years, I've been active in Kiwanis. Participation in both cases has been rewarding. A civic club allows learning by doing, association with a cross section of the community, and an opportunity to be of service to the total community.

I've found membership in organizations designed to do specific improvement valuable. My participation in the Toastmasters Club and YMCA Management Club has meant a great deal to me. Rather than a lifetime membership, most Extension people would probably benefit most by being involved for a few years in such an organization. Membership should help accomplish a specific improvement goal.

Reading is a must if you're to maintain a superior level of professional improvement. The *Journal of Extension* is a must. Many issues will have only one article or idea of real interest, but it's definitely worth the subscription rate. I've also subscribed to the *Harvard Business Review* for 10 years and find many articles of value. In addition, I often browse through bookstores. The business and education sections have books of particular value to Extension people. The University Bookstore has proven to be the most profitable source.

Professional Improvement Plan

Perhaps a professional improvement plan can best be described as one that develops the total person, including not only mental, but physical and spiritual, development. Professional improvement shouldn't be an end in itself, but rather a means for self-development. Perhaps a quote from

Robert Lynd, which appeared in the *Journal of Extension*, has merit: "Knowledge is power only if a man knows what facts not to bother about." Likewise, the many opportunities for professional improvement are important if we know the ones not to bother about.