

paraprofessionals: critical job requirements

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During an evaluation of the Kentucky Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), the *critical incident technique* was used to measure successful and unsuccessful events encountered by the paraprofessional EFNEP aides to: (1) identify on-the-job behaviors and attitudes of EFNEP aides to determine critical job requirements and (2) draw implications for training.

The aides identified *continuous personal contact with clients* and having an *enthusiastic attitude tempered with positiveness and persuasiveness* as crucial to success. The aides also *placed a higher value on social competency than on technical competency* when working with low-income clients.

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Paraprofessional Dilemma

Although Extension recognizes the significance and value of linking the paraprofessional with previously unreachable clients, it's faced with the problem of determining exactly what tasks the nondegreed person can, does, or should assume. The dilemma isn't surprising because the term "paraprofessional" or "nonprofessional" itself is ambiguous. As Riessman says: "Nonprofessional describes what he is not but does not clearly indicate what he is."¹

In our study, there was consensus of what the EFNEP aide was not, but very little agreement of what she was to be.

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This lack of consensus negatively affected the development of relevant and effective training programs.

Reason for Using Technique

In an effort to identify the job requirements of the EFNEP aide, we used the critical incident technique. And, later we'll share with you our ideas on how this relates to the design of training programs for EFNEP aides.

The critical incident approach was selected because it

. . . obtains a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations. . . . A list of critical behaviors provides a sound basis for making inferences as to requirements in terms of aptitudes, training and other characteristics.²

The critical incidents were collected to determine what the EFNEP paraprofessional actually is by listening to what she says she does in performing the tasks assigned.

How Study Was Done

The critical incidents were obtained during comprehensive survey-type interviews with 40 female EFNEP aides who had been working on the job longer than 3 months. Actually, 75% of the aides had been employed in EFNEP for over 2 years. The majority of aides (85%) were married. Only 12.5% were without dependents and only 5% had completed less than 9 grades of school. Twenty-five percent of the aides were black.

These interviews took place either in the aide's home or in a private room provided by the local county Extension office—whichever place the aide chose. In meetings and through letters, the aides were assured that the evaluation study was essentially a general program assessment, not an investigation of individual performance. The anonymity and confidentiality of their responses were respected.

After the more structured interview had been done, the critical incidents were obtained by asking the aide to recall "a time when she felt exceptionally good or exceptionally bad about her work as an Extension aide and tell what happened."

According to Flanagan:

. . . To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects.³

In our preliminary trials, we found that the terms "exceptionally good" or "exceptionally bad" generally triggered the recall of incidents that met Flanagan's definition. Since the critical incident technique just generates data related to behavior in a specified situation, we found our opening question effective.

All we wanted were simple judgments from the aides about these critical events in their EFNEP experiences. In the recall of these events, we expected the aide to: (1) describe the situation, (2) describe the actions and reactions of the client and the aide herself, and (3) share her post-event reflections about knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to her role or training for that role.

By summarizing the observations of even this small number of independent observers concerning similar "good" and/or "bad" experiences, we expected to arrive at some objective conclusions that could help in the design of more effective training programs.

Each incident was taped, with the aide's permission, as the incident was being recalled. In addition, the interviewer took notes and intervened only when necessary to keep the aide talking about her experience. After the aide's initial and general comments, the interviewer asked several questions designed to elicit comparable data (who, what, when, why, etc.) if the recall of the critical incident didn't include these items. We didn't limit the respondents in terms of how long ago their incidents happened, whether they described the effective before the ineffective incidents or vice versa, or whether their incidents were actually "effective" or "ineffective" as perceived by the interviewer.

Before analysis, each incident was transcribed, reviewed, and then edited to guarantee anonymity and assure readability.

Since we didn't screen incidents during the interviews, not all of the episodes described were usable after they were transcribed. Of the 80 incidents recorded, 66 were acceptable—36 were classified as effective incidents and 30 ineffective. Incidents were considered effective if the aide felt the client was making obvious progress, the client maintained a continued interest in the program, and/or the client was actively participating in the program. Ineffective incidents were those in which the aide felt there was no improvement evident, the client was disinterested, or the client lacked commitment to the program.

Findings and Conclusions

On-the-Job Behaviors

The aides stated in 64 of the 66 usable critical incidents recorded that making individual personal contact with the client as contrasted to group contact was critical to the effectiveness of the EFNEP delivery service. Almost the same number (60 out of 66) indicated that follow-ups were necessary to bring about the needed changes.

Using materials directed to the needs of the specific audiences was cited by the aides in 39 of the 66 incidents as being significant to effective change.

Almost 44% of the aides reported that taking the initiative or decided action to nonfood incidents or situations was

necessary for successful client relations. Effective action by the aide to meet the real or imagined client problem of the moment “spoke louder than words.”

According to some of these same aides, gaining the client’s confidence and establishing credibility is equally as important as thorough field preparation.

More than 80% of the aides were aware of the attitudinal or psychological factors affecting their impact with a prospective client—83.3% identified enthusiasm, 80.6% identified a positive attitude in general, and 80.6% identified persuasiveness as being vital to their success with clients.

On the other hand, ineffective incidents were associated with lack of understanding and/or knowledge of specific client types and, consequently, the inability to relate or work effectively with them.

Ineffective incidents were also associated with the aide expressing a negative or discouraged attitude, a lack of self-control, or focusing on preconceptions about the client or client environmental conditions.

In the majority of the ineffective incidents, the aides said that the result was negative because the client didn’t seem interested in improving her situation despite the aide’s repeated efforts.

Critical Job Requirements

On the basis of these specific findings and the general context of the incidents, we consider the following major critical job requirements for an EFNEP aide:

- Working closely and continually with clients on an individual basis.
- Using materials that are relevant and understandable to the specific needs of a given client.
- Exhibiting initiative and being able to take appropriate action needed to help client.
- Being positive, enthusiastic, persuasive, self-confident, committed, and concerned.⁴
- Gaining client’s confidence and establish credibility.
- Demonstrating technical knowledge in area of food and nutrition by being able to plan an activity that transmits nutritional information to clients.
- Determining a client’s degree of interest in program objectives at the end of the initial contact.

Implications for Training

Meaningful training for paraprofessionals must be related to the experiences and challenges they perceive operating in their work environment. This is why the critical incident technique is a valuable tool for identifying relevant training needs. By determining and tabulating the behaviors and attitudes expressed in the effective and ineffective

incidents, it becomes obvious which ones are critical and associated with successful actions and which ones are most likely to engender failure. Thus, the critical incidents offer to training personnel a realistic base on which to develop and direct training curriculum.

The following examples emphasize some specific Extension paraprofessional training needs.

Because a number of aides admitted to negative attitudes when confronted with particularly unsuitable client conditions, a need exists for aides to acquire a sensitivity towards the client independent of the overt physical conditions of the client or the client environment.

Because the recorded ineffective incidents pointed out that aides lacked an understanding or knowledge of their *specific clients*, there's a need to instruct aides in techniques for approaching a client that will be meaningful, nonthreatening, and comfortable to the client. They also need training in understanding what may motivate different people.

In addition, not only is EFNEP a people-oriented program where social skills are important, but it's also a program that requires the transmittal of nutritional knowledge to the client through the aides. Although this critical incident study didn't generally reveal that the aides felt teaching skills were important, we conclude that to obtain the program goals and to minimize on-the-job frustrations for the aides, their social skill training must be augmented with at least minimal technical training. This is one place where the aide may have to put more weight on professional judgment than on the expressed need of the client.

We believe the findings from this critical incident study not only shed light on the day-to-day work behaviors and attitudes of an EFNEP aide, but also provide insight into what this paraprofessional is in the work context. Also, the findings suggest how organizational personnel can support the aide for her enhancement and growth as well as for the enhancement and growth of the community and Extension.

Footnotes

1. Frank Riessman, "Strategies and Suggestions for Training Nonprofessionals," *Community Mental Health Journal*, III (Summer, 1967), 104.
2. John C. Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique," *Psychological Bulletin*, LI (1954), 355.
3. Flanagan, *ibid.*, p. 327.
4. It's recognized that anyone who works with people in an interviewing, teaching, or similar capacity should possess these characteristics. However, the fact that the Extension aides, through this study, also identified these characteristics as being important to their success with clients not only reinforces an already established fact, but, also points up the aides' overall perception of their EFNEP role requirement.