

hiring paraprofessionals: a problem or a challenge?

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One week you're an Extension agent, planning and implementing your own programs. The next week you may be an Extension professional with 10 or more neighborhood workers to train and supervise. These neighborhood workers, or paraprofessionals, will teach your programs to clientele you haven't been able to reach. This change in an Extension agent's responsibilities can create problems, resulting in frustration and anxiety.

On the other hand, being a professional, supervising a team of paraprofessionals can present new challenges, accomplishments, greater satisfaction, and an opportunity to reach new audiences.

Administrative Responsibilities

Most Extension agents have had courses on how to teach; however, few have had courses in administration. A supervisor of a team of workers should know the basic principles of personnel supervision. It may be necessary to enroll in an administration course. If this isn't possible, there are many good books on educational administration that can help clarify your role as a supervisor.

Administrative functions include many of the same functions agents already perform—planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, reporting, budgeting, expanding communication, evaluating, public relations, and decision making.

Problems and Challenges

This article doesn't elaborate on the functions of an administrator, but rather looks at some of the problems a professional educator encounters when paraprofessionals are hired. Paraprofessionals teaming with professionals is a relatively new concept. The idea of indigenous paraprofessionals

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working in neighborhoods dates back to the Hull House workers in Chicago, and the Works Progress Administration program in the early 1930s. The growth in numbers of workers can be attributed to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Assigning paraprofessionals to teach informally in their own neighborhood has rapidly become a new educational method of reaching the disadvantaged.

What are some of the problems or challenges facing an Extension agent who acquires a team of paraprofessionals?

Threat to Professional

Some professionals look on the paraprofessionals' accomplishments as a threat to their professionalism. This is unfortunate because both the professional and the paraprofessional have unique and separate roles. Although these roles may become blurred at times, one shouldn't become alarmed, for it may be a sign of progress.

Generally, it's the professional's job to continually provide in-service training and make sure all subject matter taught is research based and accurate. It's the paraprofessional's job to translate educational jargon to the language of the people.

Indigenous neighborhood workers may be very knowledgeable in "street ways" and it's important to recognize and capitalize on the contribution they can make. Knowing each other's roles and building on each other's contributions, strengthens, not weakens, the effectiveness of each worker. Professional possessiveness of subject matter or jealousy should not be part of a team's efforts.

Over-Qualified Personnel

When the job market is tight, there may be a tendency to hire over-qualified people who are willing to take a paraprofessional job as a stepping stone to a better one. This is a common mistake in hiring paraprofessionals and should be avoided. These aides may not represent the clientele the institution wishes to teach.

It's easy to hire someone with college training in nutrition to become a nutrition education aide. But, experience has shown that over-qualified workers soon become dissatisfied with the job and the pay when it becomes apparent there'll be no opportunity to move into a professional position.

Attitude and Background

The professional's attitude and middle-class background may be a barrier to developing a team spirit with the paraprofessionals. Being on time, being prepared, being neat, or even being appropriately dressed may be foreign to the newly hired paraprofessional. A carefully worked out job description,

clearly defining the job expectations, should help to eliminate misunderstandings and job dissatisfaction.

Professionals and paraprofessionals who have developed good relationships respect each other's customs, values, and contributions to the program. They can learn from each other.

*Loss of
Indigenous
Character*

Paraprofessionals may lose their indigenous character without moving from their neighborhoods. This could result in an alienation of the very people they were hired to teach. Low-income individuals, motivated to become paraprofessionals, usually have a strong desire for status. With the continued training Extension paraprofessionals receive and the informal association with Extension agents and specialists, paraprofessionals may find themselves no longer a part of their own community.

Returning to their community as a university employee may produce intensive personal strain. This could result in paraprofessionals outgrowing their old neighborhoods. They may, then, no longer be able to serve as the bridge between the academic institution and their community. Paraprofessionals should be encouraged to continue to be involved in their communities and continue to have friends in their own neighborhoods.

If you're called on to become a supervisor of paraprofessionals, accept the challenge and look on their successful programs as an extension of your *best efforts!*

There's danger in over-socializing between the professionals and paraprofessionals, especially if the paraprofessionals limit their social contacts to their new university friends. Paraprofessionals are more valuable if they continue their interest in their neighborhoods, using new knowledge to benefit their people.

*Fear of
Delegation*

Supervisors not experienced in supervision often are concerned they won't be able to keep aides busy. This is a real concern. Keeping 10 people productively busy isn't easy. The professional needs to be able to delegate responsibility and develop work schedules. Unfortunately, some professionals are so used to doing the job alone, they may feel some tasks won't be done properly unless they do them themselves. It's a good administrator who recognizes and uses the workers' talents. Professionals should learn to view a paraprofessional's takeover of some responsibility not as a threat to the professional's job, but, rather, as an opportunity to gain time to do creative thinking.

Dead-End Job *The paraprofessional's job is often a dead-end one. Unfortunately, in most institutions, including Extension, the career ladder isn't clearly defined. The tendency, then, is to keep the paraprofessional at an entry level position, simply because there's no other job available. While it's difficult for an administrator to encourage paraprofessionals to seek new, challenging jobs elsewhere, it's necessary for the individual growth of the paraprofessional.*

Summary As you can see, there are unique problems in teaming professional educators with indigenous paraprofessionals. But, these problems aren't insurmountable. Some rather powerful evidence shows these Extension teams have made great strides in teaching nutrition and gardening to adults and youths. If you're called on to become a supervisor of paraprofessionals, accept the challenge and look on their successful programs as an extension of your *best* efforts!