

Looking at Professional Development in a Different Light



“I was becoming overwhelmed with what was expected of me,” said Carol, a clerk from a mid-sized township in northern Michigan. “Our township board was not working well together, and I felt like I was getting blamed for everything—even things that weren’t my responsibility.*

“Every month before the board meeting, I was putting in extra hours to make sure that I was doing what needed to get done. Then, when I’d get to the meeting that evening, the supervisor or another board member would inevitably throw me a curve ball, making it look like I wasn’t doing my job.

“For several months, I seriously considered resigning and letting someone else deal with the situation. But then I decided to attend a retreat exclusively for clerks, which was being offered by the Michigan Townships Association. I hadn’t attended any educational programs other than new officials training when I was first elected to the position. After all, I pretty much knew what I needed to know to do my job—or so I thought. As it turned out, the retreat was an eye-opening experience for me, something that I really needed to figure out how to address what was going on at my township. Instead of feeling helpless, I felt empowered to make a difference, and six months later, I’m pleased to say that things are turning around on my township board, thanks to the information and strategies that I learned at the retreat.”

**name has been changed to maintain anonymity*

Being a township official is not an easy job. How does an individual make the move from citizen to elected leader? Where does one learn how to effectively lead a community, carry out statutory duties and serve as a board member? What mechanisms are in place to provide ongoing awareness of, and guidance about, new laws and court cases that affect townships? Who can offer insight and solutions for problems that arise throughout the year?

Unfortunately, the frustration that Carol experienced in the previous scenario is not an anomaly. While the circumstances may be unique to her and her township, the larger picture she paints is one that is repeated time and time again. Faced with fewer resources, increasing responsibilities, challenging board dynamics and continual change, township officials need to recognize the value of life-long learning.

Professional development is the tool that enables an elected leader to successfully carry out his or her role as public servant.

LEARNING NEW TRICKS

Learning, which is the act, process or experience of gaining knowledge and/or skills, is hard work. Whether you’re six months old, six years old or 60 years old, learning requires energy to build new pathways in the brain. One of the fundamental differences between young versus adult learners is that it actually takes more energy

for adults to learn since we have to access higher brain functions to relearn and unlearn what we know in order to make new knowledge connections and arrangements.

Remember the expression, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks?” Fortunately, this isn’t the case with human beings. Research shows that the human brain actually searches for, and responds to, new information and stimuli. Without this input, the brain will *not* continue to function very effectively as we age.

So, if learning is so vital to our well-being, what holds people back?

In many instances, people aren’t willing to put forth the energy needed to change their learned ideas and beliefs. Human beings tend to be comfortable with the familiar and with what they know. Unless an individual recognizes the value that can be derived from his or her efforts, there is little likelihood that life-long learning will be a priority in that person’s life. The best outcomes result when an individual makes a commitment to acquire new skills and knowledge, realizing that there is a tangible return on their investment of time, effort and money.

A second factor affecting learning is the environment. Study after study shows that those who operate within a framework that allows for, and encourages and supports, learning are those individuals most likely to pursue professional development opportunities. Does your township see the value of investing in its elected leaders and staff? Is your township board willing to consider new information and explore other ways of doing things? If your board is entrenched in continuing the status quo, it is unlikely that any effort to improve performance—no matter how promising—will be met with resistance.

A third influencing element is access to education. Barriers include a lack of time, shortage of money, scheduling conflicts and difficulty in obtaining approval to attend. Are learning opportunities made available to those who wish to take advantage of furthering their knowledge and adding to their skills? Do quality educational programs exist that specifically address areas pertinent to your job as a township official? Has your township taken steps to ensure that you have the resources necessary to invest in professional development programs?

Some people shy away from learning for a variety of other reasons as well. Perhaps they’ve had a bad experience or fear failure. Maybe they need special accommodations to address a physical limitation or a learning disability. Some people experience anxiety or are nervous in a learning situation.

While all of these are certainly factors to consider, none is insurmountable.

Core Competencies for Elected Township Officials

To ensure that all township officials have the opportunity to learn what they need to know to carry out their statutory duties as well as understand effective township management practices, MTA has identified the following “core competencies”—the “nuts and bolts” that each of the four elected offices at the township level should know and/or be skilled in to successfully perform their duties:

Township Government Operations

- Demonstrates knowledge about township (general law or charter) government responsibilities, functions and powers
- Identifies the major functions of each branch of government—local, state and federal—along with their relationship to one another
- Understands the statutory duties of each elected and appointed township official
- Aware of the roles and responsibilities of other elected and appointed officials in the township
- Demonstrates knowledge of the various committees, boards and commissions serving the township, including their roles and responsibilities
- Understands how township policies and procedures are set
- Demonstrates knowledge of how ordinances are lawfully adopted and legally enforced

Interpersonal Skills

- Communicates effectively
- Listens attentively
- Works effectively with individuals, departments and committees to achieve desired outcomes
- Possesses knowledge of what constitutes ethical behavior
- Manages adversity and hostility effectively

Leadership Abilities

- Possesses vision, especially relative to the township’s needs or potential
- Leads effective board meetings and is knowledgeable about parliamentary procedure
- Possesses effective policymaking skills and decisionmaking skills
- Utilizes consensus-building techniques
- Possesses persuasive/influential abilities
- Motivates others to achieve desired outcomes
- Utilizes public relations skills to position the township positively

Township Issues

- Possesses knowledge about current issues affecting townships
- Aware of legal matters that could impact the township
- Understands the elements of risk management
- Aware of financial matters affecting the township, including revenue sources
- Possesses knowledge about land use
- Understands the planning and zoning process
- Possesses knowledge of township services and their policy implications

For core competencies specific to each elected township position, visit www.michigantownships.org/training.asp.

DERIVING THE BENEFITS OF EDUCATION

Despite the challenges inherent in the learning process, there are many benefits that can be derived from life-long learning. Chief among these are the ability to provide improved service to the township and to be perceived as competent by those on the board, as well as by staff, constituents and business leaders.

“You’re a public servant, and it’s your responsibility to be educated and stay updated as part of your job,” says Cindy Davis, MTA member information services specialist and former clerk of **Williamstown Township** (Ingham Co.). “The public has expectations, and you need to gain their trust and confidence.”

One of the key core competencies (*see page 17*) for *all* township officials is to possess knowledge about current issues affecting townships, including new legislation and court cases. This is an ongoing responsibility to prevent townships from being blindsided, while assisting in the board’s decision-making and strategic planning efforts.

“My goal when I started out in township government was to see what the position had in store for me. The best way to learn is by meeting with other people who are involved in the same situations and problems that I am.

“Continuing education is a priority. It allows me to relate to the public more things about the township. It’s my job to explain things to them, and to handle issues locally. There’s more to this job than sitting at a desk.”

—Doug Stiles, **Almena Township** (Van Buren Co.) supervisor

John Bauckham, MTA Legal Counsel, compares continuing education to preventive medical examination and care, as a means to avoid large recovery costs of hospitalization and physicians’ expenses later on. “Attending educational sessions to learn about township officials’ duties, authority and limitation can help avoid incurring huge legal expenses in defending improper officials’ actions in court, administrative tribunals or correcting mistakes through legal negotiations outside of court,” he explains. “Such legal expenses are unlimited and may even result in officials’ recall from office.”

Education surveys administered by the Michigan Townships Association have identified a myriad of other benefits, including the opportunity to establish relationships with other township officials and learn from them, providing a break from everyday

responsibilities to give new perspective to the job at hand, and allowing township officials the opportunity to step back and find innovative solutions to problems that might once have seemed overwhelming.

Increasingly, it is becoming more important for townships to prove their value to the state, as the recent threat of House Bill 4780 has shown. By staying abreast of ways to run local government more efficiently and finding methods of operating even more effectively, townships can continue to be the government of choice for more than half of Michigan’s population.

There are a whole host of factors that can influence an individual’s decision on whether to pursue educational opportunities. However, in the end, it simply boils down to the realization that if there is more to be gained from the experience than not, an individual will have the motivation necessary to clear any hurdles that stand in the way of learning.

AN ADULT LEARNER PRIMER

Once your township has made the decision to invest in the professional development of its elected officials and staff, it is critical to identify the elements that can lead to the most effective outcomes. The key factors are identifying the characteristics of adult learners and what types of professional development experiences are meaningful to them.

According to Dr. Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the field of adult learning, there are several elements to consider: (1) adults are self-directed and must be engaged in the learning process, including involvement in what is being covered; (2) adults need to connect the new information to life experiences and the knowledge that they’ve already assimilated; (3) adults value an educational program that is well organized with clearly defined elements; (4) adults need to explicitly see how the information and skills that they learn will be relevant and useful to them in their work; and (5) adults should be treated with respect, recognized for the experiences they bring to the classroom and encouraged to share what they know.

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