

THE CONSERVATOR AS COLLECTION MANAGER: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROFESSION

We have been asked to comment today on the trend in conservation for the most experienced conservators to become increasingly involved in collection management functions while spending proportionately less and less time treating individual objects. I have been a victim of this myself, and for some time I have been interested in the significance and ramifications of this trend. Recently I have been particularly curious as to how we compare with other professions in this regard, that is, whether this trend towards greater administrative responsibilities has parallels in other technically-oriented professions. I decided to look for literature that might have focused on how professionals in related fields, such as engineers or scientists, cope with similar shifts in responsibilities. With surprisingly little effort on my part, I came across a new book entitled Novations: Strategies for Career Management¹, which is based on a study the authors began as professors of the Harvard Business School, investigating for more than twenty years the careers of professionals in organizations. They studied the careers of scientists, engineers, professors and others who had spent years learning a profession and then tried to use that professional training in a complex organization--which no one in the training period had prepared them to understand.

This book presents a model for career development which is summarized in the handout you have received. I believe that an appreciation for this model and the analysis it represents will throw light on the dynamics of role changes for the conservator. Two ideas are central to understanding the model: career stages and novations. The authors found that professionals' careers do not proceed in straight lines, but actually develop in distinct stages: the apprentice, the colleague, the mentor and the director stages. Those who successfully move from one stage to the next pass through a novation--a re-negotiation of obligations and expectations with those around them that is founded on achieving competence at each stage.

In the preface to this book an engineer summarized the four stages in the following terms. In stage one, he says, the inexperienced professional has a set of "tools" or techniques in their repertoire and, whether they realize it or not, they look for problems where they can apply those tools. In stage two, professionals begin to be genuinely helpful when they start to listen to the client and focus on the solution to the client's problem, using whatever tools are needed. In stage three, professionals become even more helpful when they learn to help clients explore whether or not they are working on the right problem. And in stage four, the most effective professionals are those who are broad enough in their thinking to question whether or not the right system is being addressed. Is the problem actually a technical one, or is it really an organizational or political one?

There is a wealth of information contained in this book and it could easily become a primer for managing one's own career and for helping to guide the careers of one's associates. I would like to underscore what the authors consider the central theme of the book: the need to manage one's own career by understanding how careers unfold, and how they differ from the expectations one has as one enters a profession. I would also like to caution against equating the word organization with institution. There are many organizational contexts for conservators, whether you work in a museum, library, regional center, or private practice. One can even define the organization as the whole group of professional conservators, and observe the different career stages played out in that context.

A cursory glance at the model reveals how relevant is the discussion of the changing role of the conservator, particularly focussing on Stages III and IV. The kinds of activities we are talking about when we say collection management, activities such as planning long-term preservation strategies, coordinating multiple functions with preservation parameters, educating others and articulating preservation concerns, allocating resources, and supervising or directing preservation teams, correspond to functions in the third and fourth stages of the career model, the mentor and sponsor stages.

Collection management functions for conservators usually come about because the broadest preservation issues need to be addressed, and the conservator, as the preservation specialist, is turned to for these functions. More often than not, the issues are policy issues which require planning and coordinating with a complex amalgam of systems. Information is usually the vital commodity of exchange, and the critical boundaries and interfaces are overseen by individuals fulfilling Stage IV functions: that is, providing direction, representing the information to outside publics, and making key decisions or exercising power. I would like to emphasize the fact that you don't have to have the title of manager or director to be fulfilling this role, nor do you need to be working within an institution. The question remains, is this the best use of conservators' time and talents.

It is easy to see that one of the rewards of taking on these functions is exercising power and influence. True, the demand is there to address these broad issues, and for some types of collections, these are critical issues--for example, setting up a preservation environment. But we might ask ourselves if information is really our vital commodity of exchange.

The trend in libraries to create positions of preservation librarians or administrators ideally can address the need for attacking some of these system-wide problems without totally co-opting the time of the conservator. On the other hand the conservator may feel impelled to be involved at this level of policy development because of the far reaching implications of these decisions. As technical specialists, in a field largely determined by technical parameters, we are loathe to completely relinquish control to administrators and precipitate a Morton-Thioko/NASA sc nario where decisions are made independently of the technical facts, with potentially disastrous results.

On the other hand, a successful collegial relationship between a preservation administrator and a conservator can be very successful at accomplishing system-wide goals without the complete loss of conservators at the bench.

I think most conservators at the third and fourth stages of the model find themselves trying to maintain one foot in each camp--remaining involved in the technical work while supervising others, exercising power, and acting as conservation spokespersons. According to this study, there is an inherent dilemma in maintaining strong technical roots and also exercising management functions for most professionals. Those people who successfully keep one foot in each camp do so with considerable effort, and they must learn to accept and cope with conflicts. However, a significant finding of this study with a strong bearing on this dilemma for conservation is the identification of another kind of professional who is an exception to this general pattern. This is an individual who is definitely performing stage four functions--that is bringing a considerable amount of influence to bear on the organization, but not as a traditional manager. Instead they are persons who are valued as idea innovators, persons whose power comes from the depth of their knowledge and insights, from their ability to penetrate a problem to its core, and find solutions that cut through the anomalies. They are usually found in fields where a premium is placed on new research and original contribution. I would suggest that there are many analogies between these high-tech fields where ideas and knowledge are highly valued and the world of conservators who make their most significant contributions by solving technical conservation problems. I believe the conservator addresses a critical and nontransferable need by working with the materials themselves.

In answer to the above question, is information our vital commodity of exchange, I do not believe it is. I find in my own work, that all the communication and coordination with others, all the high-level interfacing and interaction, can never make up for the lack of tangible production in the care and treatment of objects. Thus the demand for broad-based systems does not replace the demand for conserving individual objects. And conservation practice requires a concentrated effort free from the kinds of interruptions that many management positions take for granted. This is not to say that information exchange is not important, just that it may not be the highest priority for conservators, and may be effectively handled by others.

I would like to conclude by pointing out some of the interesting implications of the career model for conservators. One is the importance of not missing or prematurely abbreviating stages. The apprenticeship stage is not the same as the formal training period, nor even necessarily the period of internships. Apprentice means being a working professional with the reciprocal obligations a job implies. The demands of the job help to establish the discipline which is achieved through carrying out routine work with attention to detail. Competence is achieved through the development of accuracy, initiative, discipline and breadth of perspective.

The transition from apprentice to independent contributor or colleague is not a sudden change, it is an outgrowth of gradually developing more competence and assuming more responsibility. This

is a general principle for all the career transitions: you learn a lot of what you need to know for the next stage by performing well in the stage you're in. Conservators at Stage II work with relative independence, manage their own time, develop specializations, and master a methodology--a process for developing a set of skills that can be applied to many different problems. With this comes credibility as a colleague and a reputation for competent work. This is the drive gear for most conservators, they learn to lose themselves in their work--from which they receive great satisfaction.

The third stage is characterized by both greater depth and breadth of technical experience, and a fundamental shift in focus to being concerned with the growth and development of others.

Emphasis on directing a team becomes very important, and this positively effects both the quality and quantity of the work accomplished. I believe it is this triad relationship of apprentice/colleague/mentor that builds an infrastructure which will assure quality treatments. As for the mentor, remaining involved and up-to-date in the technical work is enhanced by developing mentor relationships with younger, recently trained professionals.

For conservators, the fourth stage may be the most problematic, for it is not clear if this stage necessarily involves leaving the bench altogether. However, I will offer the hypothesis that many of the activities identified with this stage can be fulfilled without necessarily becoming just a manager. One alternative is to widen the area of collective responsibility for preservation issues. And on a more practical level, one needs to create a good system for delegating administrative details to others whose primary function is to offer this kind of support.

My final point returns to the words of the engineer: in Stage IV, the most effective professional questions whether or not the right system is being addressed. In the field of conservation, the fundamental issues remain the technical and practical problems of material preservation. Solutions to these problems are the principal agenda of practising conservators working at the bench, from which the broad-based systems may be derived. The influence and direction provided by such idea innovators does not necessarily result from executive decisions or management strategies. It derives from the force, intellectual clarity, the disciplined and informed originality, and above all, the utility of their ideas. At this level, I think we can identify members of our profession whose organizational context is the whole field, and whose ideas, technical breakthroughs, discoveries, and new constructs have clearly helped to shape the future of our profession.

REFERENCE

1. Dalton, Gene W. and Paul H. Thompson. Novation: Strategies for Career Management. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Comany, 1986.

From a talk given by Robert J. Espinosa, Book Conservator at Brigham Young University, Conservation Lab 6339 HBLL, Provo, Utah 84602, at the AIC Annual Meeting, BPG Luncheon, 1986.

FOUR CAREER STAGES

<p style="text-align: center;">STAGE I</p> <p style="text-align: center;">APPRENTICE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Helping - Learning - Following directions - Working on part of a larger project - Expected to willingly accept supervision - Does most of the detailed work 	<p style="text-align: center;">STAGE II</p> <p style="text-align: center;">INDEPENDENT SPECIALIST</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Goes into depth in one problem or technical area - Assigned to own project or clients - Relies less on supervisor for answers and more on self and peers - Develops credibility and a reputation 	<p style="text-align: center;">STAGE III</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MENTOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Still involved in own technical work - Greater breadth of technical skills and application of skills - Involved in developing people as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Mentor (b) Supervisor - Deals with the outside to benefit others in the group 	<p style="text-align: center;">STAGE IV</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SPONSOR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides direction for organization - Sponsors key people - Represents the organization to the outside publics - Exercises power for the benefit of the organization
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BARRIERS TO MOVEMENT BETWEEN STAGES

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Individual Barriers in Stage I</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indecision about career - Finding right job - Finding mentor - Settling in 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Individual Barriers to Stage II</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of technical competence - Lack of confidence - Lack of initiative - Lack of focus 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Individual Barriers to Stage III</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Narrow focus on technical work - Won't assume responsibility for others - Lack of interpersonal skills - Won't let go of details 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Individual Barriers to Stage IV</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unable to provide proper direction - Doesn't sponsor best people - Lack of contacts - Unwilling or unable to use power
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From the book *Innovations: Strategies for Career Management*, Gene Dalton and Paul Thompson, Scott, Foresman and Company, December 1985

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