

## Notes from Research Support Faculty Forum – Where is My Career Path? (2/20/2008)

### **Background**

About 25 Research Support Faculty from the College of Forestry met to discuss professional development opportunities, job expectations, and the process for annual performance reviews. FRAs, Senior FRAs, RAs, and Professional Faculty from Forest Science, Forest Resources, and Wood Science were represented at the meeting. Additional input was received by e-mail and personal interviews. This document summarizes responses and suggestions made by participants to several questions posed by the RSF Committee.

### **Professional Development and Mentoring**

*Professional development* can be defined as formal and informal maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skills, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional duties throughout working life. Such activities may include skill-based training, personal growth, continuing education, as well as peer collaboration, work groups, mentoring and coaching.

*Mentoring* is a confidential, supportive and non-directive dialogue for discussing work-related goals and challenges. A mentor is a person experienced in your field of interest who can guide you toward your career goals and to becoming a competent professional able to contribute to your research team, the organization, your profession and the larger community.

There appeared to be a wide range of experiences among the RSF in terms of professional development. Most seemed to have positive experiences but others did not. Several barriers to taking advantage of professional development opportunities were identified. Simply knowing about available opportunities was identified as a main impediment to professional development. Another impediment was a view that RSF on grants are hired to do specific jobs that do not include other activities such as professional development. It was recognized that both the employee and their supervisor have responsibilities in facilitating professional development, but it is not clear what those responsibilities are.

*What are keys to facilitating professional development?*

- Learning about available opportunities
  - o What responsibilities do supervisors have for providing an employee the time and funds to pursue professional development opportunities?
  - o How often should professional development be pursued (e.g., once a year, every other year)?
  - o What responsibilities do supervisors have for encouraging professional development opportunities?
  - o What responsibilities do employees have for identifying and requesting participation in professional development opportunities?
  - o What types of opportunities can we (as individuals) bring forward to our supervisors?

- Is formal mentoring considered a professional development opportunity?
- How can the RSF community better identify professional development opportunities and notify others about them?
- Being aware of promotional tracks within each rank
  - A flowchart could help new employees see and think about longer term goals and what's needed to reach them.
  - Is there flexibility in the requirement for years of service in being promoted to Senior FRA? (e.g., why do people with extensive experience and/or PhD's have to work as an FRA for 4 years before being promoted?)
- Open communication between supervisors and employees is essential, and an acknowledgment by supervisors that RSF have career goals.

*How do all of us -- RSF, supervisors and others in the department -- ensure that professional development is taking place for our employees?*

- How do we initiate conversations with our supervisors around professional development? For some RSF, this is a difficult topic to broach with their supervisor.
- How does professional development become part of the departmental culture? (Example: at Colorado State, research budgets are crafted so that each employee is allowed a stipend of \$2,500 annually to pursue appropriate professional development activities.)

### **Job Expectations and Yearly Work Plans**

Some RSF expressed uncertainty about what their supervisors' short- and long-term expectations are for their position. Several suggestions were made on how to improve communication and articulate expectations.

*What needs to happen to make certain that employees and their supervisors are on the same page regarding job expectations, work plans, professional development plans, rewards, as well as consequences of not meeting work objectives?*

- Formal work objectives need to be stated and agreed upon at the beginning of each work year. When other projects or work-related time constraints arise, supervisors need to be sensitive to how those projects affect yearly work plans, and employees need to assert the possible consequences.
- Is the annual performance review (by definition, a look back) the most appropriate time to also look forward and address the year ahead and longer term career goals, or should this discussion take place in a separate meeting?
- Weekly or monthly check-in meetings and status reports could be scheduled to address concerns and provide more immediate feedback.
- Informal meetings and discussions add value to employee-supervisor communication.

*What are the policies related to pay raises for RSF?*

There was a good bit of uncertainty among the RSF present about when and how pay raises could be granted. Some had even been told that pay raises on soft money were not possible. Better clarification is needed on when raises are appropriate (e.g., significant changes in position duties and responsibilities, merit raises, cost of living increases) and how the % increases are determined.

*What are some barriers to successful communication between employees and supervisors?*

- Supervisor does not understand technical aspect of employee's work (conversely, employee does not succeed at explaining these aspects).
- Professorial faculty members serve as supervisors but often are not formally trained as supervisors. OSU Human Resources offers training for supervisors and managers for Professional Faculty (see Core Curriculum for Managers and Supervisors at <http://oregonstate.edu/admin/hr/training/core.html>). Can OSU develop similar workshops on supervisor training geared toward Professorial Faculty? Can Professorial Faculty be required to take such training?

*What is the expectation around university service for soft money employees?*

- We need clarity on this because there's a perception of a catch-22: that is, service is encouraged but not "paid for" by granting/funding agencies – where do the University, College, and Department stand on this?

*What roles do dual supervisors have and how can these roles be clarified?*

Several Forest Science RSF have both a federal supervisor and an OSU supervisor. In many cases, the federal supervisor oversees the day to day activities of the RSF but the OSU supervisor is required to conduct the employee's annual review. For several of these employees it is not clear as to the exact role each supervisor has in the annual review process or in providing professional development opportunities. These roles need to be clearly defined at the time of employment and modified as needed with agreement from all parties.

### **Annual Performance Reviews**

About half of the RSF in attendance found the annual review process to be helpful, but the others felt that it was just a formality and a "box" that needed to be checked off each year.

*What constitutes a constructive annual review?*

- Annual work assessment prepared in advance by the employee and shared in advance with the supervisor. Attachment A is a Forest Science document titled "Effective Annual Performance Appraisals." Many RSF in attendance were not aware of this document nor had they been asked to answer or discuss the questions listed on it.
- Documentation of accomplishments beyond publications (e.g., feedback from peers/clients on employee's impact and contributions; development of web sites; software development). Some RSF do not have (or do not perceive) opportunities to be co-authors on peer-reviewed publications. Other ways are needed to help document their accomplishments and contributions to their research programs. If appropriate, soliciting feedback from people we work with or our clientele could be used to document other accomplishments. This is done during the promotion process to Senior FRA but would be helpful throughout the career of support faculty.
- Candid feedback from the supervisor on employee strengths and areas for improvement (this can set the context for a discussion of professional development needs).
- No surprises: by having regular (e.g., weekly or monthly) meetings, employees and supervisors should know where each stands going into the annual review. This should not be the only time of year the employee gets feedback, be it positive or negative. The

annual review should not be adversarial in nature but has come across that way to a few of the participants.

- Professional development accomplishments and plans should be part of the review.
- Goals, expectations and benchmarks of progress: these should be discussed, agreed upon, and formalized during the review. Employees and their supervisors also need to agree on intermediate goals or benchmarks so the employee knows if they're on track throughout the year.
- Examination and revision (if appropriate) of the employee's position description: does it accurately reflect their current and planned duties and responsibilities? If those change, is a salary increase warranted?
- Employees need to be more assertive on several fronts, including requesting professional development and understanding what it takes to get a pay raise and/or be promoted.
- More awareness on the part of the supervisor of the employee's promotional track and longer term career goals will make the review process better. Again, RSF also have a responsibility in making sure these conversations happen.

*What are some obstacles to effective annual reviews?*

- Reviews could be adversarial and not conducive to talking about professional development and training goals.
- Making it a box-checking exercise or a simple formality.
- Having the employee write their own review (however, this does not preclude the employee addressing the key questions listed in Attachment A and sharing the responses with their supervisor in advance of the meeting).
- A perspective that it's just "more paperwork."

*What is the Department's expectation about what an annual review should be?*

- Can we get clarification from Tom about this?
- We need to ensure that a rigorous, consistent review process/protocol becomes the norm in the new department.

### **Take-home messages**

- Appreciation expressed for Tom Adams bringing these issues to the forefront and asking for our input.
- Employees must be self-advocates and take responsibility for their career development.
- Department should accept that professional development and service are a regular part of all employee's work lives.
- Making sure we transition the work of the RSF Committee to the new department: how do we make that happen?
- The annual review process can be effective for receiving constructive, meaningful feedback and for addressing career goals, work plans and professional development.
- The RSF Committee should have monthly, open meetings to maintain momentum with the topics discussed at the meeting.

## ATTACHMENT A

### **Effective Annual Performance Appraisals**

#### Purpose of the Performance Appraisal

1. **To Review Past Year's Performance**  
An evaluation of prior performance (usually the past year) in relation to one's position description and performance expectations and standards.
2. **To Review Position Description**  
An opportunity to review and update the position description.
3. **To Set Up Goals and Direction for Upcoming Year**  
An opportunity to discuss performance goals and outcomes over a defined period (quarterly, yearly) that are either individual and/or organizational.
4. **To Review Professional Development Planning**  
An opportunity to review the employee's training and identify continued professional development, training needs and opportunities.
5. **To Discuss Promotion Progress**  
If applicable, an opportunity to discuss where the individual is in his/her progress towards promotion.

#### Questions for Structuring a Performance Appraisal

1. What do you feel are your major accomplishments this past year?
2. Which of these accomplishments are you most proud of and why?
3. How are your contributions being recognized in professional outputs by others?
4. What training and professional development opportunities have you taken advantage of during the last year?
5. What training and professional development opportunities would you like to take advantage of this year?
6. What goals were not successfully met last year?
7. What are your goals for the coming year?
8. What services have you contributed to the Department, College or OSU?
9. What suggestions do you have for making your work life better?
10. What suggestions do you have for your position, project, the Department or College?
11. Please list the publications or presentations that you've authored (note: web pages count as "other" authored pubs).