

THE PERSONNEL WORKER WITHIN MISSIONS

Serving missions by doing personnel work well and wisely.

Laura Mae Gardner, D. Min.
Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics

ABSTRACT: Workers seldom move by choice into a personnel role. Too often it is one of those assignments that ‘we need someone to do this and you’re available; will you do it?’ so a person enters the task without knowing exactly what it entails nor how to prepare for it. There are no training tracks for mission-related personnel functions. This paper is intended to define a personnel role, identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to perform this role, and suggest a working environment designed to promote effective service of the personnel worker. Admittedly many mistakes have been committed in the performance of personnel duties; these are mentioned. There are also steps the worker himself can take to ensure effective service for the long term. The paper ends with a helpful bibliography of titles that will facilitate personal growth in both the missionary recruit and the long-term worker who is now functioning as a personnel officer.

The first thing we must do is to clarify the role of the personnel worker. As distinct from the role of leaders, personnel workers seldom engage in vision-building or trends analysis. As distinct from management and administration, personnel people seldom are responsible for production. Whereas administration and supervision has to do with people AND production, personnel focuses more on handling and caring for personnel. We recognize that this may cover many areas, and it is probably very different from one organization to another. The important factor is that because the task is so varied, a detailed job description is essential.

In this paper we will limit our thoughts to the aspect of personnel that has to do with selection, processing, assignment and home-office care of new candidates.

The issue that immediately arises is: how much authority does such a person have? Do they have the right or the mandate to accept or reject a given applicant? Do they have the power to tell someone to postpone their membership until certain criteria are met, or to plan and prepare to serve in a given specific location, task, or county?

I propose that the degree of authority varies from organization to organization. In Wycliffe Bible Translators, for instance, the selection staff only gathers information about the recruit. They present this along with their own recommendation to a committee who in turn makes the decision—acceptance, rejection, postponement, etc. I see great freedom in this—the personnel worker does not bear the weight of having to make a hard decision, should the candidate be found to be unacceptable. We recognize, of course, that the competence and influence of the personnel worker can add weight to any recommendations that he or she may make. So while it may appear that the personnel worker has little power, it may be more than we know. It should be used with caution.

The role should be further clarified—this is what is expected of a personnel worker in our organization, and good job descriptions written so the worker knows exactly what he or she is supposed to do, and can be assured of administrative support behind them.

We are focusing now on the aspect of personnel work that has to do with the selection process—gathering data on the person, sending information out to the general Christian public as well as responding to those who have expressed an interest.

What are the KSAs such a person needs? (Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes).

What are the most common mistakes such a worker might make and how to avoid them?

What kind of agency environment is most helpful to the personnel worker?

What are some life-savers for a personnel worker?

KNOWLEDGE. What is it a personnel worker must know when working with interested applicants, or new recruits?

He or she should know his own organization very well. What are its goals? What kind of person does the organization look for and need? What are the policies and procedures of the organization in order to answer questions that may be asked? He or she should be well acquainted with the developmental process, and know where a person (or a child) should be at a given life stage. He or she should be discerning to grasp basic dysfunction, and able to determine whether problematic behavior is environmentally caused, or whether the pathology lies within the person. He should know the field situation to which these new recruits will go, and how to prepare them for that environment. He should know mission trends and how the future is likely to be different from the past.

SKILLS. The personnel worker who serves as candidate officer or selection staff needs some specialized skills, such as discernment, ability to draw someone out, establish rapport quickly, create a trusting environment, and communicate respect and compassion. He needs to be able to see what is behind superficial behavior. He must be able to confront in such a way that bad news can be received.

To this are added the specialized skills of listening, understanding, summarizing, keeping records, taking notes, sorting, and remembering, caring, encouraging, giving direction.

If a person lacks the necessary knowledge or skills, but has the desire and willingness to be trained, and the eagerness to learn, he or she should be encouraged to do so. Few of us know everything we need to. Therefore, the attitude of teachability and eagerness and willingness to learn are of great importance. Those working with new members tell us that attitudes in the prospective or new member are more important than either knowledge or skills, since attitudes are foundational to learning. This is also true for the personnel worker.

ATTITUDES: The following list was developed by personnel workers from ten countries, representing field work in a number of different countries.

- Genuine care about people and a desire to help them develop personally and professionally;
- Sensitivity to both spoken and unspoken needs;
- Tact, gentleness, patience;
- Honesty and transparency;
- Confidence (but not arrogance) with a spirit of humility;

- Awareness of and ability to accept one's own weaknesses and strengths;
- Accountability;
- Trustworthiness; can be relied on to follow through on words or promises;
- Self esteem, ability to handle both constructive and unjust criticism;
- A learner (and excited about learning);
- Approachability; friendly, non-defensive;
- Sense of humor, ability to laugh at self;
- Quick to esteem and/or encourage as appropriate;
- Receptive to diverse ways of thinking;
- Willingness to listen;
- Values the sharing of information with appropriate people;
- Knows how to maintain confidentiality.

The most common mistakes a personnel worker might make (and most of us have made them all!) include the following:

When we do something right, something that has a positive outcome, something that appears to be effective, do we reflect on that, and ask, what was it that made that a beneficial interchange? What factors made it go well? Can it be reduplicated?

Similarly, when we make a mistake, or the outcome seems ineffective, or sad, do we ask ourselves, how could I have done that better? Was it something in me that made the interchange turn sour? Will there eventually be fruit from this interchange, or will it be permanently damaging to this person? Is there any way I can redeem this mistake? What must I do differently next time?

One way to know how to keep from making mistakes is to know the most frequent ones made by personnel people. I suggest these may be:

1. Assuming too much authority or predictive power. "I have authority in this situation, and know what should be done, and will tell these people what to do; I can expect to be obeyed. I speak for the whole organization." Or "I'm sure you will be accepted into membership."
2. Not knowing the organization's policies and procedures. When a person asks a question and I fumble around and don't know the answers, I'm not a very good representative of the organization, and I have failed to be maximally helpful to this person. Those policies and procedures were designed to be supportive. Knowing them should be my first assignment.
3. Failing to remain neutral in conflictual situations. The person sitting across the desk from me tells me how dreadfully he/she was treated by her Christian leader or parent, and I remember my own feelings of being unjustly treated, and sympathize and solidify this person in his self-pity. If I take sides with the person against someone else, I may be hindering his/her healing and future effective service. But I also know administrators (and parents) are not perfect and do make mistakes.
4. Not knowing the developmental issues and stages, and not being able to detect when the situation may be caused by environmental factors, and when the problem is internal to this person or this family.
5. Being overly responsible. This person is hurting, and it is up to me to fix them, to make things better, to do something to help the hurt to go away.

6. Not knowing how to be empathetic without agreement. Failing to understand that listening is one parameter and agreement is a different one. “Yes, I understand what you are saying; but no, I can’t agree that this is indeed the situation because I don’t know. I want to be as supportive to you as possible, but I can’t take sides in this matter.”
7. Building up a resentment, or an attitude of disdain toward people who get their lives in a mess, ‘when only a small amount of common sense would help them see the way forward in this dilemma’. I move easily to an attitude of superiority and judgment of others. Someone said, “There are two classes of people—the righteous and the unrighteous. The classifying is done by the righteous” (Ambrose Bierce).
8. Pessimism. This is related to #7. I expect the worst, and I hear the worst. I do not exude hope, and if I have faith that God is present in this sad situation, it isn’t obvious to the person across the desk!
9. Extending too much mercy. My deep compassion may be unhelpful to this person, who may need to realize that the mess he/she is in is of his own making, the consequences of foolishness or unwise choices. Mercy to this person may be viewed as injustice to another, or as enabling sick behavior. There’s a place for a certain level of dispassionate behavior.
10. Failure to grow. All of my judgments are based on outdated information, or old memories. Failing to maintain a cutting edge means I’m becoming stale and dull, not modeling growth and hope, vigor and freshness. I must update both my information and my feelings. People and situations change and if I want to be effective, I’ll devote time to learning and growth.

Most of us have made a number of these mistakes. I trust that we will not give up for that reason. Let us use this list---and the memory of mistakes we have made—to prompt us to take steps of improvement, take advantage of training seminars, ask for feedback on ways we have handled a situation and how we might have done that better, and keep reading. We need also to stay in touch with our culture, and be tuned in to the challenges and temptations of Christian young people who want to follow the Lord in full-time service.

I’m also concerned for the weary, exhausted personnel worker who no longer has the energy, or perhaps the vision to see how valuable his or her role is in the overall missionary effort. I’m concerned that we support these folks well, and that they know how to minister to themselves. For that reason, I mention here the aspects of the working environment that are most helpful for personnel people.

An environment most likely to promote wellness on the part of personnel workers includes:

- ◆ A supportive primary relationship – this person has either a spouse or a good friend with whom to pray, to enjoy life, and to find refreshment with.
- ◆ A confidant – someone you trust and with whom you can talk over your own fears or doubts, or inadequacies, or dreams.
- ◆ A debriefer – someone who knows how to debrief, and does so regularly. Many of the personnel situations are heart-breaking, and especially are some necessary decisions heavy ones. A personnel person badly needs someone to draw out the feelings, and provide encouragement or guidance.
- ◆ A scheduled case load – someone (a supervisor) should be monitoring the case load of any personnel worker. It is not possible to do the work well when it is too heavy or too much.

- ◆ Sources of consultancy – a consultant is a necessary resource—someone who knows personnel work, knows the situation, is experienced, and available to ask for input.
- ◆ Scheduled case conferencing with colleagues – if there is a luxury of working with more than one person in the personnel task, both need the freedom to discuss issues that arise. They can be of enormous help to each other by such case conferencing.
- ◆ Access to his/her supervisor – the supervisor must be available and approachable, with time to answer questions. He should also keep familiar with the issues that arise, so he or she can explain and, if necessary, defend the work done by the personnel worker if it is questioned.
- ◆ Sources of refreshment – time away, regular vacations, spiritual retreats, regular spiritual worship, some non-mission activities of play, worship, growth, fun.

Finally, there are a few bits of wisdom that might help the personnel worker survive, and able to continue to serve in this role for an extended period of time. I call these Life-Savers.

SOME LIFESAVERS... of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Remember that:

1. I didn't cause this problem and I can't fix it. I might be able to offer some options.
2. I don't have to get everything done in order to have a good day.
3. I can learn to be more efficient.
4. I can prioritize my tasks and be sure to get the most important ones done each day.
5. People are messy. So are sheep. Ewes and their lambs are a lot like the people I work with. This does not make them evil or resistant. A little grace and humor can help a lot.
6. I'll last longer if I keep the parts of my life separate.
7. I need my supervisor's support. In order to get and keep that support, I must keep him or her informed. It is also possible that he/she could be a good advisor on some of the troubling stuff I'm handling.
8. The better I know and accept myself (habits, needs, strengths, weaknesses), the freer I can be to serve others.
9. The Holy Spirit can minister to people in ways I never can. Prayer must be a part of my work.
10. It helps to be appreciated—by my organization, my supervisor, my colleagues and my clients. I will receive gratitude when it comes, but I will not wait for it, or work for it.

Will self-care then become our priority? I believe that if care of ourselves does become our major focus, we will miss the joy of being stretched in service to God and finding Him adequate. Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich says, "By concentrating day and night on your feelings, potentials, needs, wants, and desires and by learning to assert them more freely, you do not become a freer, more spontaneous, more creative person; you become a narrower, more self-centered, more isolated one. You do not grow, you shrink." May God help us to do the task of personnel work with all of our hearts, and with a wise mind, balancing responsibilities and energies in a way that honors Him above all else.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Guinness, Os (1993). Dining With the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity. Grand Rapids, MI. Baker Book House, Hourglass Books.

----- (1994). Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What To Do About It. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, Hourglass Books.

Guthrie, Stan (2000) Missions In the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press.

Jenkins, Philip (2002). The Next Christendom: The Coming Of Global Christianity. New York: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, Gordon (1983). Ordering Your Private World. Nashville: Oliver Nelson.

McNeal, Reggie (2003) The Present Future: Six Tough Questions For the Church. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Swenson, Richard A., M.D. (1992). Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives. Colorado Springs: NavPress.

----- (1998) The Overload Syndrome: Learning to Live Within Your Limits. Colorado Springs: NavPress.

Sweet, Leonard (2000). PostModern Pilgrims. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

In this paper we have used the masculine pronoun throughout for purposes of simplicity. However, the personnel task must not be limited to either gender. Both men and women are needed, and can be equally effective. Males may be more confrontive and appear less caring. Women may be more compassionate and may find it more difficult to be objective. Each needs the other. Each needs to guard against personal weaknesses. Each needs to know how to compensate for personality preferences.