Find your growth opportunities

BY JENNIFER ABRAMS

Five key facets can help us become more socially aware, psychologically mature, and cognitively capable.

While the concept of being a professional prominently features in teaching standards worldwide, as a profession we don't devote much time to the study of what it takes to be one. In schools, the idea of defining, and then supporting, the emotional and psychological development required to be a professional remains on the periphery — it's an expectation without support.

While research finds collective efficacy is essential for the collaborative work we do (Donohoo, 2017; Hattie, n.d.), we rarely have the opportunity to learn the hows of being a professional: how to be an effective team member and how to be a supportive colleague.

Schools must get better at supporting all adults in terms of their personal development —at supporting faculty and staff to grow (up) at work. As Felipe Fernández-Armesto said in *So You Think You're Human? A Brief History of Humankind,* "If we want to go on believing we are human and justify the special status we accord ourselves — if, indeed, we want to stay human through the changes we face — we had better not discard the myth but start trying to live up to it" (Fernández-Armesto, 2005).

REFERENCES

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EDGES

This tool asks us to consider our development as a professional. What are the skills, dispositions, and mindsets we need to develop to become professionals and do the important collective work we do in schools?

A group's growth and a school's effectiveness rely on individuals within the group stretching at their edges to become more socially aware, psychologically mature, and cognitively capable. In this way, our personal efficacy can contribute to developing that psychologically safe environment we know is important in our work in schools.

Continually stretching at our learning edges will allow us to work more productively, more purposefully, and in healthier ways for everyone.

While not an exhaustive list of capacities, abilities, and skills, the following five key facets encompass a great deal of what an educator, in every role, could work on in terms of personal and professional development. These facets are further described and explained in *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work* (Abrams, 2021).

1. Know your identity.	2. Suspend certainty.	3. Take responsibility.	4. Engage in reciprocity.	5. Build resiliency.
What should we know about ourselves to work more effectively and humanely with others? How can we learn about our history, upbringing, strengths, biases, limitations, motivations, and values so we become better and more aware colleagues and teammates?	How do we stretch beyond ourselves and build our intellectual humility and perspective taking? How do we suspend our certainty that we are "right" and reflect on and critique our own decisions and value systems?	How can we take responsibility for our own work product, language, actions, and development? How can we face challenges directly and humanely with an intent to work out solutions?	What skills do we need to live with a sense of equality and mutual respect in our team and supervisory relationships? What do we need to do to show our belief in the worth and dignity of those with whom we work and the communities we serve?	What emotional and psychological hygiene must we practice to be healthy for ourselves and for others? How do we sustain commitment, energy, and health for ourselves and our work? How do we build the bandwidth to feel more comfortable with life's ambiguities and disappointments?

SELF-REFLECTION

Review the five facets above and complete the self-assessment on pp. 76-77. Once you have done so, use them as part of self-reflection after meetings or part of professional growth plans. For example, at the end of every meeting, each team member can take a minute of quiet time to reflect on how he or she demonstrated the mindsets, capacities, and skills of the five facets.

- Did I see how knowing myself (or not) impacted my work with my colleagues in helpful or unhelpful ways?

- Did I suspend my certainty and not just advocate but also inquire?

- Did I take responsibility for my language choices? If so, how?

- Did I demonstrate mutual respect for all? If so, how?

- Did I manage myself so I could be supportive within the group? If so, how?

- How did keeping these five facets in mind support my learning and the learning of my teammates?

LEARNING EDGES SELF-ASSESSMENT

DIRECTIONS

Look at this set of questions that provide "learning edges" — areas you can stretch yourself to grow as a professional. Write your responses on a separate sheet of paper or electronic device. If you are unable to answer the question fully and feel comfortable doing so, ask a colleague what he or she thinks might be an appropriate response. If you don't have an answer, make note of that fact. It's OK to have a stretch edge.
    When you have completed the self-assessment, review your notes and ask yourself:
  • What do I see in terms of how I do or don't demonstrate these five facets of being a professional?
  • If I'm having trouble answering a question, do I notice what is getting in the way of doing so?
  • How might I address the challenges I face within each facet?
  • What can I do to help me progress, stretch, and grow (up) in my personal development so I can support my teams and my school?

1. Know your identity

- How do I articulate my connection to various parts of my identity (gender, race, ethnicity, faith, etc.), and do I see how these parts of myself impact my choices and actions on teams and in the classroom?

- What are my values, work styles, and preferences? How do they affect my work and leadership?

- Where are my blind spots in terms of how I see the world? What don't I notice?

- Which parts of my identity have the strongest effect on how I see myself in my personal life and in my professional life?

- What do I know about how I see the world differently than others? How do I work effectively with those differences?

2. Suspend certainty.

- In what ways do I demonstrate keeping an open mind and listening without defensiveness to another point of view?

- In what situations should I be asking, "What am I missing?" or "Where could I be wrong?"

- In what situations do I admit mistakes easily and apologize if defensiveness gets the better of me? In what situations should I be doing more of this?

- What surprises me most when others have a different perspective? What is my response (internally and externally), and how might I respond even more effectively?

- How do I seek others' input so I have a fuller picture of any given situation?

- In which situations have I realized I didn't have the whole picture, which resulted in less than optimal outcomes? What can I do to improve my ability to see the whole picture?

3. Take responsibility.

- Do I share requests, decisions, concerns, disappointments, and grievances in productive ways? In which situations? In which situations is this a challenge for me?

- Do I speak with care and candor to those below, equivalent to, and above on the organizational chart and using solution-oriented mindsets and language? In which situations do I find this a challenge, and how can I improve?

- Do I acknowledge others who make a positive difference in my work? Where might I do so more consistently?

- Have I crafted a professional development map for myself based on my needs in the workplace and hopes for my career?

- What is something I need to take more responsibility for in my work? How might I do so?

4. Engage in reciprocity.

- In what ways do I demonstrate a belief in the worth and dignity of all individuals with whom I work? Do I model supportive and productive team behaviors: active listening, questioning, offering suggestions, and verbal and nonverbal behaviors that exhibit respect, and show personal regard? If so, how?

- Can I share examples of my language choices that demonstrate a belief in each group member and his or her contributions?

- Do I consistently support others and their development as group members and if so, how?

5. Build resiliency.

- Do I provide myself time, space, ability, and opportunity to acknowledge difficulties, loss, and disappointment, and do I do so in a healthy way?

- Do I recognize that self-care is inextricably related to team care and provide myself time for self-care? How so?

- Do I cope as well as I can with unexpected chaos and high-anxiety situations? If not, how am I learning to do so more effectively?

- Can I soothe myself when I am dismissed, diminished, challenged, or ignored? What are my strategies for doing so?

- In moments of discomfort, how do I continue to let in information so I make informed, nonreactive choices and keep myself centered?

- Do I have strategies that help me remain centered in my life and at work? What are those strategies?