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AUTHOR Aanstad, Judy; Borders, Dianne
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ABSTRACT

This presentation describes a course, "Lifework Planning," designed to help women evaluate their current job status and plan career changes commensurate with long-range life goals. The framework for the program is self-directed learning, through which women develop coping strategies for change. Participants and leaders make mutual decisions regarding course content, and participants map out individual goals. The presentation lists several characteristics of life-planning programs: (1) they are developmental, helping women to accept changes in life plans as natural outcomes of developing needs and values; (2) they promote self-confidence; (3) they are supportive, involving friends and family and the program group itself in providing feedback and encouragement; (4) they emphasize taking responsibility for one's own life; (5) they offer strategies and means for gathering information about career options and about one's own interests, abilities, and values; (6) they show participants how to use all available resources for career development; and (7) they teach such career-related skills as assertive communication, stress and time management, and goal-setting. The presentation gives examples of these program traits as they have been realized in Lifework Planning groups. The appendix provides a course outline. (Author/CS)

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A Life Planning Program for the Working Woman

Judy Aanstad, Ph.D.
DiAnne Borders, M.A.Ed.

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A Life Planning Program for the Working Woman

Women are going to work in unprecedented numbers in this country. They usually find themselves, however, in lower paying jobs. The course The Working Woman: Lifework Planning was designed to help women evaluate their current job status and design a plan of action for career change commensurate with long-range life goals.

A self-directed learning model was chosen as the program framework. This approach focused on developing coping strategies for change and encouraging a confident, active approach to life and career plans. The course itself was designed as an experience in self-directed learning, including participants/leaders' mutual decisions of course content and individual goals for course outcomes.

The desired products - increasing self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-responsibility - were obvious in the initiative assumed by participants, the content of class discussions, a supportive atmosphere, and the life and/or career decisions made.

The report includes a copy of the program outline.

A Life Planning Program for the Working Woman

Women and the Work Force

Women are going to work in unprecedented numbers in this country. By the end of 1979 forty-four million women, or over 51% of all those over sixteen years of age, were in the labor force (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1980). The increase in working women is even greater than that predicted by the Labor Department five years ago. Some of the increase is due to changing family units - many women are now the head of a household through divorce or death and need the money. Some of the increase is due to inflation and hard economic conditions - more families need two pay checks to make ends meet today. And some are women who can afford not to work, but want the satisfaction and challenge of paid employment. Nearly two-thirds of women in 1978, however, worked to meet an economic need - they were single, widowed, divorced, separated or had husbands earning less than \$10,000 (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1979).

So what happens to these women in the labor force? According to the March 1978 Current Population Survey, women's earnings averaged \$8,570 and men's earnings averaged \$14,850. With comparable education levels women earn only three-fifths of what men earn. Only one in ten female workers earned as much as the average male worker in 1977. The average male with no more than a high school education earns \$3,400 to \$5,400 more than the average female college graduate in white collar occupations (Young, 1980). These statistics are not changing. In 1980 women were still earning about \$6 for every \$10 earned by men (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1980).

Why does this salary discrimination exist? There are a variety of reasons, most related to societal norms for men and women, which are difficult to change. One reason is that there is a larger proportion of relatively less experienced, younger workers among women than men. Only time can change this. A second reason is women tend to concentrate in lower paying, traditionally female jobs (which is probably why they are lower paying) such as teaching, social work, secretarial work, and nursing. Most electricians are still men and most stenographers are still women. In 1976 electricians averaged \$10.33 per hour and highly skilled experienced stenographers averaged \$4.92 per hour (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1978). A third reason for salary discrimination is that women lack some of the planning and career goal-setting skills men often have or develop early. The average homemaker who decides to return to work does so at age 35 and then stays in the job market for an average of twenty-five years (Sheehy, 1974). Often, it seems, a woman returning to the work force will take the first job she finds and then stay with it even though it may offer poor compensation and little room for professional development.

Need for Life Planning Course

The course The Working Woman: Lifework Planning was developed to meet some of the special needs of working women. Although only time and broad efforts on the part of many people will change societal norms which help create job discrimination for women, individual women can right now develop skills and attitudes which will increase their effectiveness in the work environment. The three main purposes of the course are 1) to give women an opportunity to do systematic career planning, 2) to teach some skills which will be useful to them as they begin to act on their career plans, and 3) to encourage a confident and active approach to lifework planning.

The Working Woman: Lifework Planning Course has been offered for four years at the Lifespan Center, once each fall and each spring. The response has generally been excellent, with twelve to sixteen people filling a class each session. The class has been promoted through a widely distributed brochure; talks in the community, information sent to some of the larger local businesses, newspaper articles, and recommendations by pleased participants. Positive response to the Working Woman course seems to be part of a developing recognition nationwide that the growing number of working women need special support, information, and help to succeed. Both new magazines like Savvy and Enterprising Woman and the recent proliferation of "New Girl" networks underscore this fact.

Characteristics of Life Planning Programs for Women

A variety of career planning programs for women are described in the literature (Goodman, Walworth, & Waters, 1976; Manis & Mochizuki, 1972; Rice & Goering, 1977; Setne, 1977). Many of these focus on the needs of women returning to the job market rather than those of women already working. Within the career counseling field only within the last twenty-five years have researchers considered career planning theories for women. Even now there is no complete or very useful theory about the career patterns and choices of women. Zytowski (1969), Ginzberg (1971), and Super (1957) have briefly considered the career development of women, but most of their research focuses on male career patterns.

Some of the important characteristics of lifework planning programs for women include:

1) Developmental approach. This means active acknowledgement that women may make many developmental changes over a lifetime. What is a primary focus during certain years may not be as important later. Both Harmon (1970) and Wolfson (1976) have found that career patterns of women cannot be predicted from information known about them as college freshmen. It is important, then, to help working women understand it is natural to make changes in life plans to fit developmental needs or values. Shifting Gears presents a helpful rationale and model for changing while Gail Sheehy's Passages seems to be the Bible of developmental changes for women. Actually Ann Morrow Lindbergh's book Gift From the Sea is also a lovely view of different stages in a woman's life, although it speaks more to the homemaker than career woman.

2) A second important characteristic of a lifework planning program is that it promotes self-confidence in the participants. Most women have learned to put others first and to be humble for so long that they lack confidence in themselves. This may especially be true in a work environment. One exercise we have found helpful is to ask each woman to introduce herself in the most positive way possible; citing accomplishments and positive personality traits. While doing this one woman described herself as assistant to the president in a multimillion dollar company and went on to outline several accomplishments. After she finished she said she had never before introduced herself as other than a secretary although she had, indeed, been promoted and was handling major responsibilities. We need to learn to acknowledge who we are, what we can do, and to feel good about it. Fortunately a lot of this happens during the group process in a career planning class. Women begin to encourage each other and point out accomplishments and skills to each other.

3) A third characteristic of an effective lifework planning program is that the women involve their families and friends in their planning. We all need support and encouragement and working women especially need this. If family doesn't give it, supportive friends may supply the needed umph. The class itself provides this support during the eight weeks of meetings. Some friendships formed in class continue afterwards, and the participants are encouraged to develop a support system if it is lacking currently in their lives.

4) A fourth characteristic is that of an emphasis on taking responsibility for self. Often women tend to react rather than act. Many women have had parents and then a husband to give them direction, so this class emphasizes by its' nature that no one can choose a career direction for you but yourself. Only you can ask for that promotion. By the very nature of the class the participants learned even the outcome of the class was up to them, not someone else. One interesting exercise which illustrates this point is called the "Chairman of the Board." This exercise asks the participants to list the individuals who comprise the executive board managing their lives. The participant is then asked to name the chairman of the board. Too often homemakers will recognize that their husband is really the chairman of their board rather than themselves. They have relied on another person to direct their lives.

5) A fifth characteristic of an effective lifework planning program is that the women are offered a strategy and means of gathering information both about themselves - their interests, values, abilities, personality style, background experiences, situational factors - and also about the world of work and possible career options.

Once the women realize that most people have little knowledge that about career possibilities (that they are not unusual), and that there are strategies for learning about options, the women can begin this exploration process. Vocational testing is generally valued by women, especially at first, as they look for outside validation of who they are.

6) A sixth characteristic of an effective lifework planning program is that it allows and encourages the participants to utilize all available resources. We are too often afraid to ask for what we want. Our first line of resources is right there in the class - the other participants. Often within a moderate size group individuals may have information or contacts that can be of use to others. The second line of resources is composed of family and friends; the final line of resources is made up of those professionals the participants seek out as they gather information about career options. One woman in our class was unemployed, having quit an unsatisfying job. During the course she defined what she wanted to do and went to see a friend of hers who was also the president of a large company. When she told him what she wanted to do and asked for a job, he hired her. Another woman in the class heard about a job she thought would be ideal for a classmate. She told Jane about the job. Jane inquired about the job, liked what she found out, applied for it, and now is happy and tired mastering new job challenges.

7) A seventh characteristic of an effective lifework planning course for working women is that it teaches a variety of skills that many women might be lacking. These skills potentially include:

- decision-making
- goal-setting
- assertive communication
- job hunting skills

risk-taking

stress management

time management

Individuals in the class will vary in their level of competency in these areas. All of these skills are helpful and those most needed may be included in the class. These skills can be used both in other settings for other purposes and also in later years as the necessity to re-evaluate a career direction arises.

Program Framework: Self-Directed Learning Model

We chose a self-directed learning model for the Working Woman class. This learning model is based on the theories of humanistic educators (Carl Rogers and A. W. Combs, for example) and Malcolm Knowles' work with adult learners. Knowles' "andragogical" learning utilizes planning by both students and teacher; activities such as inquiry projects, independent study, and experiential techniques; and evaluation by mutual assessment of the agreed-to contract (Knowles, 1970 & 1975). The "teacher" functions primarily as a resource and as a facilitator.

Self-directed learning thus focuses on developing coping strategies for change. "Learning" is viewed as a skill: students begin to identify sources and methods for gathering needed information, a process they can transfer to other academic areas and to life decisions. Proponents of self-directed learning believe the result is more effective learning because the emphases on self-responsibility and one's own initiative promote self-confidence in new learning tasks. Self-directed learning is also compatible with adult developmental stages, providing a needed skill for coping with the inevitable periodic changes in career, family, and personal life.

For these reasons we found self-directed learning to be the most appropriate model for Working Woman. It provided the necessary base for a comprehensive life-planning program, rather than just a career plan. It tied together the important characteristics of lifework programs for women previously described. It taught skills especially needed by women, who are generally less skilled in self-direction, self-responsibility, and the decision-making process. And it was an appropriate base for the purposes of the course - especially teaching some skills which would be useful as participants began to act on their career plans, and encouraging a confident, active approach to life and career plans.

The Working Woman participants were struggling with (and sometimes against) change - dissatisfaction with job, the pressures of economics, upheaval in family structure (children leaving home, divorce, etc.) and unknowns about self. Each situation was different. The self-directed learning model was appropriate because of the ease of adaptation to individual circumstances and decisions.

The participants' motivations for coming were personal ones. The expectations they presented were to increase understanding of self and the world of work. They asked for career and personality tests, values clarification, job-search skills, career outlook information, and lists of options they could consider. The self-directed learning model was an obvious base for the needed work gathering information about self and the world of work, creating options and seeing the pros and cons of each, making a decision, and moving forward. Beyond this immediate process, however, was the acquisition of a strategy for dealing with the inevitable decisions to come, as each woman continued to develop and/or change as her circumstances changed.

Program Outline

The Working Woman course outline was dictated by the individual needs and expectations of the participants (see appendix). The tests we administered (Self-Directed Search, Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory, and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), the topics covered in class, the exercises, activities, and homework we included, the women invited to the panel, were all chosen in conjunction with the women in the class. The course outline was not too different from what we expected. The important difference was the open atmosphere created by mutual (participants/counselors) decisions, and the modeling and experiencing from the start through the self-directed approach. For example, in the process of listing their needs and expectations during the first class, the women were encouraged to become aware of their priorities, the decisions they faced, and to take some responsibility for beginning to act upon them.

Some women made additional individual plans, such as learning to write a resumé and completing this project with a counselor. All were encouraged to work on their particular needs between classes.

An important part of each class was time for processing. The women discussed the information they had gathered, the insights they had about themselves, and the feelings of both fear and confidence about their new learnings and possible applications to their decisions.

Program Outcomes

Evidence of the use of the self-directed learning model surfaced often. Participants' comments reflected a recognition of the continuing process of self and career development. They began to assume more of the direction of

the class, beginning a discussion without prompting, or asking for a change in the course outline to accommodate new concerns. Several spoke of the value of having learned "what I must do," where to go, and how to get needed information. Others mentioned the importance of examining the positive and negative aspects of personal responsibilities. Many reported seeking feedback from supervisors, co-workers, friends, and husbands. The women were intense and serious, often continuing discussions during the breaks or after class, and frequently asking a counselor for individual help.

The supportive atmosphere was particularly valuable. The women were relieved to find "others have similar problems," and glad for the opportunity to learn from each other. Increasingly they offered both options and support to members who seemed stuck, often more by themselves than by circumstances.

There were unexpected outcomes, of course. One woman came for the first half of the sessions; then returned to the last class to tell us, "All I needed was some reassurance of my skills to get my confidence back. I got that the first few nights. I came by tonight to tell you I've applied to the Culinary Institute."

Some decided to remain with a job for a while because it best fit present family circumstances. Some were still interviewing or negotiating with supervisors. Others were in the midst of major changes in career fields. And one was unable to face the risks of change in her situation.

Increasing self-awareness and self-confidence were perhaps most evident in the discussion following the panel: "We could make the same kind of speech about our own lives and decisions if we just realized it."

Conclusion

The Working Woman: Lifework Planning was designed both to teach coping skills and to use these skills in the learning process. The self-directed learning model encouraged self-confidence and self-responsibility as adjuncts to content learning. Thus content and process were equally important.

Appendix

The Working Woman: Lifework Planning

- I. Introduction to Working Woman
Get acquainted exercise - Introduce self and one thing you like about current job
Introduction to self-directed learning
Small group - list of what you want/need to learn and do
Large group - put lists together
TEST: Self-Directed Search
- II. Plan for course
Group plan - from large list, grouped into categories, choose those to cover in class together
Individual plan - other topics to research, goals for self (write resumé, interview, etc.)
Resources - written materials, people, organizations, each other
TEST: Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory
HOMEWORK: Complete handouts for assessing skills and achievements
- III. Job trends, generating job options and job contracts (lecture)
TEST: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
HOMEWORK: Read "Getting a Job"
Complete "Adjective Checklist" - self, family member or friend, co-worker or supervisor
- IV. Test interpretation
Discussion of exercises completed for homework
CLASS AND HOMEWORK: "Activities to Help You Utilize Your Test Results"
Examples: Checklist of interest, personality characteristics, and values to assess current job and options being considered
List of descriptive strength statements from adjective checklists and MBTI
- V. Stress management
Lecture covering sources of stress, techniques of stress management, and a demonstration of one relaxation technique
"Work Hour" for analyzing test results individually, in small groups, with a counselor
HOMEWORK: Read "Stress - And How To Live With It".

VI. Assertiveness (role play and discussion)
Exercise - "Assertive Situations on the Job"
HOMEWORK: Read "The New Assertive Woman" and complete exercise at end

VII. Panel
Women in areas of interest to participants discuss personal career paths and opportunities in areas represented
HOMEWORK: Complete questions for presentation next week (options, strengths, roadblocks, steps of a plan of action)

VIII. Summaries
Individual presentation
Sharing contacts and support

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