What Is the Forester’s Role?


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“If the professional forester has lost influence in the resources management decision-making process the fault does not lie with his inability to carry out the technical requirements of his job.” wrote Professors I.I. Holland and R.I. Beazley in their article published in the autumn 1971 issue of the Journal. “Instead, it can be argued that he has failed in his ability to fulfill a role.” A role is defined by the authors as “an expected pattern of behavior associated with a particular position.” When the article was written, foresters were already “being required to make technical resource use decisions within a complex matrix of economics, politics, and administrative dictates and still be sensitive to the aspirations, needs, capacities, mistakes, and inconsistencies of an increasingly environment-conscious and demanding public.” Holland and Beazley anticipated that the practice of forestry would require increasing numbers of professionals suited to the complex role of resource managers and administrators. They wondered if the profession would be “well supplied with foresters adequately equipped to play these roles” and whether it was “attracting and educating enough young people who can eventually play them better.” To both questions, their answer appeared to be “No.”

They observed that “young people with latent managerial sales or administrative ability have not been attracted to forestry in very large numbers” and, as evidence, provided the personality profile test results for forestry students at the University of Illinois–Urbana and Southern Illinois University–Carbondale. Their students exhibited a number of personality characteristics that have served the profession well including intelligence, creativity, independent decisionmaking and autonomous action, teamwork, and esprit de corps; however, the Illinois students did not exhibit an interest in the more abstract and complex administrative roles. Holland and Beazley remarked, “It is little wonder that other more vocal, aggressive, outgoing, and articulate people in other professions and walks of life are taking on the role of resources use decisionmaking, once an important function of technically trained foresters.”

Furthermore, Holland and Beazley pointed out that much of the forestry curriculum dealt with the technical aspects of forestry based on job descriptions that lacked information about personality requirements or expected behaviors. “At least at the lower levels, job descriptions stress the technical requirements of the job” while an individual’s success “depends on several factors, including the requirements of the position, the behavior expected by others, how the individual thinks he should behave in the job, and the individual’s actual behavior. The actual role is related to personality and motivations.” They maintained that the successful bonding of employer needs with student aptitudes would require “Much more careful screening of students, expert counseling and guidance, and well advertised descriptions of role as well as job requirements by both public and private employers of professional foresters . . . Until realistic role descriptions supplement job descriptions there is little chance that more of the right kinds of people will be attracted into professional forestry or that educators will be able to modify curricula to improve the education of professional foresters.”

Although based on a limited sample, Holland and Beazley considered their “results and implications” generally applicable to forestry and forestry schools. Ultimately, the job market would determine the mix of abilities required of forestry school graduates, but they called on employers to be more active in determining the technical and nontechnical job qualifications needed if an applicant “is ever to play a larger role within the organization,” and in articulating them to forestry schools and young people interested in a career in forestry. “A clear distinction must be made between jobs which can be adequately filled by technically oriented foresters and those which require a ‘socioeconomic’ orientation.”

Thirty-five years later, employers continue to be an essential contributor to the continuous self-assessment and improvement of SAF-accredited forestry programs. However, it is not surprising that feedback is not uniform among employment sectors. The differences continue to revolve around the role that a particular employer expects a forester to fulfill and the innate abilities of the individual. As Holland and Beazley indicated, a mix of foresters is required to meet the varied demands of the profession. Employers must continue to carefully screen applicants while the schools must determine how to best meet the demand.

Nevertheless, the leaders of many great organizations are not necessarily the people one may have predicted. Becoming a leader is a life-long process of growth and development. Clearly, the role of SAF is to support both employers and educators by continuing to provide inspiration, opportunities and training for our developing leaders, especially our young leaders, and by encouraging diversity of thought, intellectual inquiry, and dialogue.

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