

Stages of Farrier Development by Esco Buff, PhD

In spite of farriery being an age-old and attractive profession, relatively little attention has been devoted to the professional development of farriers. Planning for professional growth is an important part of our personal and professional responsibility. Effective planning involves looking beyond the present moment and taking a long-term, holistic look at our careers. In order to succeed, we need to select those opportunities that are most effective in helping us reach those goals.

Movement from stage to stage is the essence of professional development. We move to a new stage by meeting developmental needs characteristic of the current stage we are in. Associated with each stage are identifiable characteristics and needs.

Stage 1 – The Entry Farrier Stage

This stage corresponds to a time in one's career where the individual first enters the farrier profession. During the first years as a new farrier, you are typically highly energetic and motivated to put into practice all the applied learning acquired through farrier school or apprenticeship.

Not surprisingly, entry stage farriers encounter a number of issues, both professional and personal. Some professional issues that they struggle with include 1) competence, 2) certification and credentialing, 3) ethical and legal concerns, and 4) heavy reliance on external expertise for advice. Personal concerns include 1) need for recognition, 2) balancing work and personal life, 3) financial strain, and 4) possible race/ethnic/gender issues.

Often, there is a period of tremendous transition for entry stage farriers because they are moving from a graduate student role to one of a peer or colleague.

Stage 2 – The Crossroads Farrier Stage

As one enters this stage, there is an initial questioning of whether to remain in the farrier profession. It's during this time that farriers are faced with a decision...do they opt to become a lifelong farrier or do they pursue another career?

Farriers at this stage engage in a fair amount of reflection of what has transpired over their early years as a farrier. Questions they begin to ask themselves are: is this the right life-long career for me, am I getting my needs met through this kind of work, and is there anything better out there?

The choice that lies before a farrier in this stage is whether the benefits of working in the farrier profession outweigh the disadvantages of remaining in the field. As they engage in this personal reflection, their professional identity can become better defined.

Another feature of this stage is the ever-present stress that has accumulated from over commitment to customers which can interfere with personal life. If the crossroad farrier does not find ways to manage this stress, they will likely begin to experience burnout. Further, the conflict between their work and personal life will become more pronounced. It is essential that all professionals move out of this stage to attain personal and professional satisfaction.

Stage 3 - The General Farrier Practitioner Stage

This stage can be a satisfactory level for many professionals for a number of years, as long as growth in expertise or responsibility continues. Some farriers never move beyond this level. Farriers in this stage have been accepted as members of the professional community and independently contribute their expertise.

This stage is characterized by a rapid growth in professional knowledge, independence, and autonomy. The general practitioner stage farrier seeks to build at least one area of expertise for which they are noted for. Some farriers in this stage seek additional training through occasional clinics and conventions.

Stage 4 - The Seasoned or Professional Farrier Stage

Farriers in this stage typically have made the decision to continue their work as a professional farrier. There is a reexamination and reevaluation about the potential for change during the upcoming years. This realization generally leads to a revision of their farrier dream.

Farriers who have reached this stage are ready to take on responsibility for developing or mentoring others in the farrier profession and often seek to develop additional areas of expertise beyond which they currently possess. Such efforts result in a broad-based expertise that can be extremely rewarding.

A move to this stage does not necessarily imply a change in what we do as farriers, rather a change in mind set. Over time, experiences and accumulated wisdom replace prescribed way of doing things. In this sense, the professional farrier has their own body of knowledge that they rely on much more heavily in their work.

During this period, there is intense personal and professional reflection, consciously giving time and energy to processing, alone and with others, significant professional experiences.

Another observation from this period is that as time goes on, professional farriers may experience increasing professional isolation. Professional elders may gradually disappear through retirement or death. Those that remain behind often experience a sense of loss of their professional peers. Similarly, there may be feelings of isolation or inability to significantly contribute to the field in a substantial way.

It is very important for professional farriers to find ways to challenge themselves. If this does not happen, there is a high risk of becoming stagnant and stale.

Stage 4 – The Advisor or Leadership Farrier Stage

Few farriers reach this stage and those farriers who enter into this stage have displayed high commitment to the farrier industry. However, there may be some pull to explore other options such as becoming an equine clinic or university farrier, farrier school instructor, professional consultant, author, etc.

Farriers in this stage play a key role in shaping the future of the farrier industry. They have developed a distinct competence in several areas of expertise and often have a regional or national reputation. They are sought out by other farriers for their mentoring and advisory skills.

Conclusion

Most farriers will have little trouble identifying their current stage. Others will have considerable difficulty because they see themselves being in different stages. This is perfectly natural, especially when there are changes taking place in the nature of our jobs. To maximize the benefits of stages, it is important to try to select the one stage that best describes where you feel you currently are in your professional growth.

Another important point is that while progression from one stage to another should be a common goal of most professionals, some are satisfied to remain in a particular farrier stage. Satisfaction in most of the stages can be maintained as long as growth in expertise continues. A move to an advisor or leadership farrier stage is not necessarily appropriate or desired by all.

Now that we have seen the typical stages farriers may go through, we will discuss ways to promote and enhance professional development in another Hoofcare Bottom Line article.