

Ideas for Building and Cultivating the Most Effective Marriage and Relationship Education Instructors

Tera R. Hurt, Ph.D., University of Georgia

Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D., University of Denver
and the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program

Steven R. H. Beach, Ph.D., University of Georgia

If you're involved in initiating marital enhancement programs or large marital enhancement research projects—particularly if you are directing the project and responsible for getting things off the ground—chances are, you've asked yourself these questions:

- ✓ My program or research study can be unpredictable at times. How can I develop a supportive staff that will stay with me through the twists and turns?
- ✓ How can I ensure that I hire the right person for the job?
- ✓ How can I get my staff to tell me what they really think or make an investment in the work?

✓ I see that my staff is tired. What are some things I can do to jump-start them again?

ProSAAM Offers Ideas

ProSAAM stands for "Program for Strong African American Marriages." It is funded by the John Templeton Foundation and is also partially supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The study is designed to develop a culturally sensitive version of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). At the University of Georgia's Institute for Behavioral Research, we are testing this program in a sample of 500 married African American couples. We are also combining ProSAAM with direct parenting instruction in our Program for Strong African American Fathers (ProSAAF), a project that is funded entirely by ACF. That project will require that we recruit 460 African American couples with children.

The ideas presented here are just that—ideas. We're not comfortable calling them "guidelines," because we recognize that "one size doesn't fit all." With such a wide variety of groups currently implement-

ing marriage and relationship education demonstration projects, we realize that some of these ideas may not work in other settings. Nevertheless, there are many aspects of our work, and lessons we have learned, that can easily be applied across the board. And it's our pleasure to share these with you in hopes that our ideas can help you strengthen *your* program.

These ideas were developed within the context of a project where numerous part time staff were hired to conduct the marriage education services. Programs that are more dependent on volunteers may find some of these ideas less useful, because organizing the work of volunteers may differ in fundamental ways. However, any viable program will likely need some core "paid" staff, and the ideas presented here are particularly pertinent for hiring decisions—regardless of the number of staff required.

Praise for ProSAAM



The ProSAAM group in Georgia often refers to its team as the "Georgia miracle." The "miracle" refers to the future promise of the program, but it might just as well refer to the team they have assembled. I have had the good fortune and pleasure to interact with this team on a number of occasions, and I am amazed. As I have told many government and private sector officials, evaluators, and program managers, 'Study what these project managers did to recruit and develop this team in Georgia, because they did it right.'

In fact, I have been so impressed with what the Georgia team has accomplished, that I encouraged them to share the secrets of their success with a wider audience. That's what this paper is about. Granted, some of the ideas presented here may not be ideal for your program in terms of setting; others may not work as well due to various constraints or cultural/regional factors. Nevertheless, I believe that ProSAAM's ideas will benefit any agency, program, or team attempting to do similar work. And I sincerely hope that you will be able to recreate the wonderful sense of teamwork and camaraderie that the Georgia team enjoys.

—Scott M. Stanley



Does personnel selection really matter?

Absolutely! We believe that the instructors in a program setting that implement marriage and relationship education training are critical to its success. For this reason, we recommend:

- **Creating a team that has the basic attributes to do this work in the best possible way.** This may sound like a no-brainer, but some people will believe in, engage in, and conduct this sort of work much more enthusiastically and effectively than others will. Belief in the importance of your program's mission will sustain instructors through the inevitable strains associated with this type of work. And leaders with a high energy level will be better able to balance competing demands. Moreover, a high level of interpersonal effectiveness will make the experience more rewarding.

- **Identifying and recruiting people who see their involvement in your program as consistent with their own long-term goals**

and their own identity. Turnover can be deadly, not to mention costly, to your program aims—and this is true whether you're working with people you hire or with volunteers. For starters, there is the obvious, upfront cost of the training. More importantly, however, there are administrative and management costs associated with turnover that may not be immediately appreciated. It takes time to find new instructors. There also can be significant lost opportunities as a direct result of a sudden reduction in the availability of high quality instructors. For example, community enthusiasm can easily wane as you attempt to recover from turnover.

■ **Hiring people who will find the work rewarding.** This kind of work is not easy for many reasons, but it can be immensely rewarding. The sense of doing fulfilling, important work is contagious and will help inspire others on your staff. Part of the reward of working on marriage enrichment comes from having a harmonious and effective team that is reaching into the community to serve others.

Who am I looking for?

There is a great deal of diversity among the types of people that can provide marital enrichment services in an effective manner. In other words, you're not looking for one specific type. Indeed, your team will be far stronger with a range of talents and styles. Still, there are some characteristics we've noticed that the very best instructors in marriage and relationship education appear to share:

■ **Good presentation skills.** Not all key team members have to be gifted motivational speakers, but they should all be genuine, warm, and able to faithfully convey the core content that your program is delivering.

■ **An ability to connect with couples and make them feel welcome.** The best instructors will be able to convey that they like couples and enjoy working with couples.

■ **A sense of passion for this work.** It may be a job, but for the best instructors, it's not "just a job." While we think it's important to pay people well, the best people for the job are those who would be tempted to do the work without any pay at all. Along with passion comes enthusiasm. Various studies suggest that one of the key ingredients of successful service provision is that clients be able to perceive that the providers believe in what they're doing. So, in addition to building a cohesive team, by hiring those with a passion for the work, you will also be creating an effective team.

■ **A strong belief in marriage.** If your services are essentially marriage education, but your instructors don't necessarily value marriage, they may succeed in providing the mechanics of relationship education. But they'll likely do so without conveying the attitudes that will support the *implementation* of those skills. Teaching, or modeling, attitudes may be even more powerful than teaching skills, and at a minimum, it may enhance the effect of skills training. Teaching attitudes is best accomplished by somebody who shares the goal of your clients to develop and sustain happy and healthy marriages. To this end, it can be extremely valuable to listen for whether or not the people you are interviewing

for your team have had particular experiences in their family or personal backgrounds that leads them to have passion for this work.

■ **Involvement in strong marriages themselves.** The Georgia team has been very effective in hiring married couples who want to work together in providing these services. Because we have been so successful in hiring married individuals with strong commitments to their own marriages, we feel the couples themselves symbolize the very real possibility of successful marriages.

How can I tell if someone will be a good "teacher?"

Teaching is integral to being a good instructor. Some people excel at teaching, others not so much. How to tell the difference? One strategy that has worked particularly well in the hiring process in Georgia involves showing prospective candidates a video featuring some of the core content in the curriculum, then asking them to role-play walking a couple (role played by the interviewers) through the concepts and an exercise that was just explained on the video. Granted, this approach is a bit unusual for a job interview, and it might be somewhat stressful for some candidates. However, we have found that sampling skills that are directly related to the most essential ones needed for the job is an extremely wise hiring strategy. Candidates who sparkle tend to sparkle right away.

How do I attract—and keep—a strong team of instructors?

As noted above, we realize that not every program hires instructors. However, there are many advantages to hiring at least a core team of instructors, whether full-time or part-time. Having a core team (as opposed to working exclusively with volunteers) gives you the ability to have a standing capacity of services. It also assures you the highest level of control—as in quality control—over the anchors of your educational program.

To attract the best instructors, here's what we consider most important:

■ **Paying people well.** This doesn't necessarily mean paying them a lot, but it does mean paying them at a level that meets their needs and makes it likely that they will want to continue working long-term with your program. Your program literally lives and dies with the quality of the people leading it, and when you have high quality people, you'll want to hang on to them. In some agency settings, you may need to consider creating a new position description for these roles so that you can pay them at a different level than other agency staff commensurate with the high priority of getting and keeping the right people for the job.

■ **Paying people fairly.** In many programs, group leaders are paid hourly. In others, they may be paid by completion of services offered. This latter situation can have negative effects on staff morale. We also believe that it is important to make sure that people are paid even when services are not provided through no

fault of their own. For example, suppose a workshop is scheduled and several couples sign up to attend, but for some reason, no one shows up. We think you should still pay your instructors. After all, it's not their fault that the couples were no-shows, and your instructors still have bills to pay. More importantly, even when they *are* paid, a no-show scenario can, by itself, be a bit demoralizing to your team—and not paying your instructors could reduce morale further.

■ **Being flexible**, particularly during times of crisis or when your instructors are experiencing financial strain. Look for ways to create special allowances for their needs in ways that build loyalty and allow you to hang on to your staff. When key employees need some time off to deal with personal matters, for instance, assure them that they will still have a job when they return. When possible, consider even going so far as to help them deal with special financial crises, or other circumstances, and they're likely to reward you with loyalty.

■ **Thinking "outside the box."** If you are creating a program within the context of an established government agency, don't make the mistake of moving existing employees into these educational roles simply because you already have them hired. For a new program of this sort, it is essential that employees have the characteristics that will make them effective. Otherwise, apparent cost-savings could quickly become a net cost.

How do I keep my team strong?

Once you have recruited an effective team, here are a few ideas that have worked extremely well for us at building a maintaining a sense of group cohesion:

■ **Stay close to your instructors.** Take time to discover who they are, what they're interested in, and what their goals are in life. If you're privy to their personal or couple goals, you stand a much better chance of becoming aware—and taking advantage of—opportunities that arise within your efforts to allow them to reach these goals.

■ **Set aside time in team meetings for team building.** Doing this is a great way to practice what you

preach, given that most effective marriage education curricula include such activities as part of many sessions. Team building activities also increase energy and cohesion within the group. We believe that the best team building activities meet certain criteria: they have a point, they are fun, and they open the door to a more effective meeting or training experience.

One example the Georgia team uses and that may transfer well to other groups entails having team members pretend that they're in Washington, D.C. and need to lobby for more funding for the ProSAAM effort. An activity like this has team members doing something fun that also has direct relevance to the ongoing need of your team members to explain things enthusiastically to the clients and/or community leaders.

■ **Consider having your team attend other trainings as a team.** For example, we have had our entire team attend other workshops given within the University of Georgia on such subjects as customer service. We have found that these activities build cohesion in novel ways, even as they foster ongoing growth in skills among team members.

■ **Establish clear leaders.** Teams are most effective—and tend to excel at collaborating—when they have clear leadership. Of course, different people can take the lead in different ways, at different times, and for different tasks. But your team will be more cohesive—and ultimately more productive—when there are one or two clearly identified leaders to whom everyone else is accountable.

We hope that these ideas will encourage and excite you to search for ways to build and cultivate a stronger team to meet *your* program aims. We believe that it is very important for you to be clear on what your program needs before beginning the selection process. Once your workers are hired, we hope that you see the value in providing them with a fair wage and being supportive of them in times of personal and professional crises. Finally, in order to sustain enthusiasm among your program workers, it is important to take time to build in activities that allow your team to grow together—as individuals *and* as professionals.

About the Authors

Dr. Tera R. Hurt is the Program Coordinator for ProSAAM and ProSAAF. She leads a team of instructors, assessment specialists, and community outreach consultants who are implementing ProSAAM (and soon ProSAAF) in northeast and central Georgia. Her leadership style is reflected in the current document. Dr. Hurt is grateful for the support that Perdeta Bush and LaTrena Stokes have provided her with, in her efforts to develop innovative team-building activities.

The program content was developed by a team of investigators and consultants including Dr. Steven Beach, Dr. Frank Fincham, Dr. Lily McNair, Dr. Velma McBride Murry, Rev. Dr. Kenneth Board, Rev. Dr. Jerry Alexander, Elder Terris Thomas, and Dr. Scott Stanley as well as a growing network of individuals who are contributing new ideas in a variety of ways.

Dr. Scott Stanley is Co-Director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies and a research professor of psychology at the University of Denver, and an important source of ongoing encouragement for ProSAAM and ProSAAF.

Dr. Steven Beach is the Director of the Institute for Behavioral Research and Professor of Psychology at the University of Georgia. He is marital researcher.