Whenever I think of my professional development experience, this is the image that comes to mind- a bunch of mismatched socks.

Each one might look good in its own right, but it's not necessarily connected to any other one. They're all just sort of thrown together.

That's how it has felt for me.

When I used to work for organizations, I would get emails somewhat frequently that would say hey there's this training on Wednesday if you're interested or here's a training you have to go to or I'm sending you to this conference or whatever form the professional development took.

But I never got much context on the front end and I never got much follow-up on the back end. Each one, even if they were wonderful and some of them were though all of them certainly weren't. They just kind of existed on their own.

As a result, they didn't really have the impact they should have or could have.

I want to save you and your staff from this fate and to ask you and encourage you to think about how you can provide professional development with a purpose.

Some important questions for you to ask as you set out on that journey is what do your staff want?

And what do your staff need?

Ideally, these are one and the same but in many instances they are going to be different.

How do you balance when there is a disconnect between what your staff want and what your staff need?

How can you provide what they want even if you think it's not a pressing need and how do you encourage them to make the most out of what they need, even if it's not really what they want?

Another important question to ask is how do you know if it's working?

And what does working mean?

For example, if you send your team to the same national conference every single year which requires time and travel and frankly money. What is the purpose in doing so?

Is it simply to provide them an opportunity to travel and get out of the office?

Are you wanting them to connect with other professionals in the field?

Are you hoping that they bring back lots of good ideas for your programs?

There are lots of reasons to pursue different professional development opportunities, so be conscious and intentional about what those reasons are.

How can you assess if they achieved the end you hoped they would achieve so when the next year rolls around or the next staff rolls around that you know, whether or not this is a worthwhile opportunity?

How are you remaining open to some professional development opportunities that you haven't tried yet and how do you become aware of things that you're not yet aware of?

We tend to in this field and in lots of fields, really relegate professional development to workshops and conferences, these one off opportunities. Somebody external comes in or you go somewhere external for a topic that you should ostensibly be taking back to your work.

But just giving someone information isn't enough to help them process it and really make it a part of how they operate going forward.

First you need to provide the information whether that's a workshop or conference or lots of other ways, which we'll talk about in a minute. It doesn't end there. After you provide that information pretty quickly you need to make sure there is an opportunity to practice it.

Our memories are not very good or very long, so if we don't put into practice what we're learning we lose it pretty quickly.

How can you then as a follow-up put that information into practice and then provide staff an opportunity to process it through some self-reflection and also through coaching and feedback.

Then you deepen the learning with more information and the cycle continues.

There is value in variety. If you work for an organization, like I did where all the professional development was mandatory for all staff all the time, there is limited value to that. .

Instead, there is a lot of value in making some trainings mandatory and some optional- and look I just defaulted to trainings too! Professional development does not equal trainings, right?- opportunities where some can be mandatory, some can be optional, some are open to everybody, some are open to people that it pertains to or that are interested in it, some you are providing- you're giving the funding, you're giving the information, you're letting people know how to sign up- and in other cases you're opening the door for staff to come to you with opportunities they're interested in for you to approve.

There's a recommendation from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy that frontline staff should get about 20 hours of professional development per year and upper level management should get about 50. Again, this is an about, so it doesn't need to be exact but these are some parameters that you can work around.

There are so many options. We start with our conferences and trainings, because they are familiar and accessible, but then there are so many other ways to grow as a professional.

Think of the ways you grow in your personal life too.

If you want to learn a language or a new recipe or how to find a cheap flight to Brazil, you might jump online and look at videos, or you might talk to other people, or join groups, or use any number of the many ways we have at our disposal to learn and get information.

This holds true for professional growth, too.

How are you being open to professional growth opportunities for yourself and your team that are outside of traditional conferences and trainings?

I'm going to provide with this lesson a list of some links where you can explore.

These are by no means comprehensive. There are so many options out there. There are all these other areas that we often neglect, things that qualify as soft skills like communication, relationship building, leadership skills, emotional intelligence, learning languages, cultural competence, professionalism- which is a loaded one- career development, community understanding, advocacy, organizational skills, technical skills and on and on and on.

How are you providing robust opportunities for your staff to grow?

And for your leaders, leadership skills are great, but they should also have the opportunity to grow in lots of other areas too

Think about how you can come up with a plan.

In the resources, you will find a template you can use to get started.

Do you have the authority and the capacity to give your staff some agency over a professional development budget?

How can you start to share the responsibility of professional growth and development with your team rather than being in charge and dictating all of it?

So something for you to think about is, how can you strengthen the professional development opportunities available for your team?