



Fitness Careers

Where Do I Go From Here?

by Jennifer L. Bacon, M.S.

As many people in service industries do, fitness professionals often tumble headfirst into the fitness industry excited to make a difference in the lives of those around them. Whether you were a new college graduate or following your passion with a second career, you may not have had a 10-year career plan in place when you took the plunge into the fitness profession. Once you've been in a career path for a few years, you may choose to dive deeper to become an expert in your current role, seek an opportunity to advance to a higher role, or perhaps try something entirely new. Even after this decision has been made, the path may not be clear how to actually do what you want to do next. Let's take a closer look at your options and what it takes to get there.

YOU FOCUS ON BECOMING AN EXPERT IN YOUR CURRENT ROLE

If your passion lies in the act of hands-on frontline working with people day in and day out, then direct your attention inward. Hone in on what you truly are passionate about and become a specialist — become the best at what you do. Fitness pros who do this are amazing in their specialty areas and are really what drives our industry forward. You are the experts on the front lines who are trying different ways of working with people to create behavior change, seeking ways to make exercise more effective and more enticing. You are the master instructors, inventors of products, and expert trainers whose trial and error experimentation will move us all forward. Lionel, one of the best trainers I've had the pleasure to work with, did just this. He focused on corrective exercise and learned so much that his expertise and confidence soared, and with it, so did his clients. They achieved incredible results, and he is challenging the norm continually by pushing the boundaries and experimenting with new techniques.

YOU WANT TO ADVANCE

When talking to fitness professionals about career growth, one thing that always comes up is how challenging it is to progress from one level to the next or to have a clearly laid out career path. Many fitness companies are on the small side, so there may not be succession planning or professional development



programs in place. Even large fitness and wellness organizations sometimes struggle with grooming their talent in a meaningful way. This may put you in a situation where your next step is clear as mud, and it is up to you to set your own goals and tackle preparing for what is next. Here are some things to ponder that just may help you forge your way onward and upward.

1 - Figure out what you are good at and do more of it.

What do you really love about your job? Is it the people, mentoring or coaching, analyzing data, working with budgets and goals, or selling services to help others? What types of positions can you seek that will allow you to do more of what you love? What may prove to be even more helpful is thinking about what you don't enjoy. Accomplished personal trainers can feel the pull to become fitness managers, but if the thought of overseeing others brings on an involuntary eye roll, then management is not for you. Make sure you are not climbing the ladder simply because it's there.

2 - Find someone who will be honest about your development needs.

Early in my career, I received a performance review from a manager that I really respected in which she gave me the highest marks available in every category. I felt honored that she thought I was doing a good job, but clearly, there were areas I

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needed to work on and could have benefited from constructive feedback and direction. If you are not getting honest constructive feedback from your manager, ask for it or seek it out from a mentor you respect and trust. You cannot grow if you don't know how to direct your efforts.

It's OK to have weaknesses, and we are all working on something. What's most important about weaknesses is that you develop the self-awareness to know your limits. Become familiar with the line between what you are prepared to handle and what is just beyond your experience and skills. You need to make the call to refer things that arise to someone else more experienced when the situation exceeds your current abilities. Understanding your own limitations and how to mitigate them is far more valuable to your company than having you feign strength in every area and then fail because you never asked for help.

3 - Create a need by providing value.

A former colleague, Shawn, a regional manager, was interested in moving into a different role, but there was no scripted next step for him. He offered to work on fitness center start-up projects and volunteered to select and order the fitness equipment. Soon he was working with software to layout facilities and recommend finishes and really developed his skills to a high level. As the company grew, they recognized the need to have someone who could be responsible for designing new locations and interfacing with clients while overseeing the start-up process. Because Shawn had developed expertise in this area (even though it was not a requirement for his existing role), he was the first person the company thought of for the position. He created a need by demonstrating his value. How could you start to spread your wings and gain new skills that could later be recognized as a need? What can you contribute that can add value to your company while still in your current role?

4 - Interact with your leadership team.

If you are interested in advancement, become familiar with the leadership team. Take advantage of opportunities to get to know them better so they in turn can get to know you. Make an effort to spend time with leaders who work at or visit your site (regional managers, HR directors, general managers, etc.) and engage them in meaningful discussions. At a minimum, be there even if you are not scheduled to work and introduce yourself. If company leaders share news or announcements on conference calls or in emails, listen and pose thoughtful questions in response. Just asking a well thought out question can catapult your value in the leadership team's eyes. Have you ever asked a senior leader in your company to spend 20 minutes with you sharing how they got to where they are in their career? Most people enjoy sharing their journey and not only would you gain valuable information, the leader inevitably would learn more about you and what you want to do with your career. When that next

advancement opportunity arises, you will be front of mind because your name and potential are recognized and known.

5 - Raise your hand and say yes.

Have you ever been in a meeting when the facilitator asked for a volunteer to take on a task and everyone suddenly received an important message on his or her phone? Break the silence and volunteer! Be the go-to person, be the one who can be counted on, and be the one who always delivers. You will be growing your own personal brand and creating a strong reputation. By raising your hand and saying yes today, you will have more support when you apply for a promotion tomorrow.

6 - Prepare before meetings.

This one seems so incredibly simple that it's totally amazing how many people don't do this. When I had my first real job, I got an opportunity to be on a company-wide committee that was developing an enterprise-wide program. I joined the committee after it had already been underway, and I was really nervous to attend my first meeting. It was a big deal to me at that time. To calm my nerves, I sat down for 15 minutes the day before the meeting and wrote out my thoughts and suggestions for how to develop the program. When it made sense to do so in the meeting, I started to share what I had come up with; remember, I spent 15 minutes preparing. My contribution impressed the committee so much that, by the next day, word had trickled back to the general manager at my site and he heaped on the praise for what I had contributed. There was nothing that I shared that was groundbreaking, it was simple stuff. The fact that I had put my thoughts together before the meeting was the key to blowing their socks off. From this point forward, I always came prepared to meetings, and I continue to this day to be amazed at how beneficial this has been for my career.

7 - Lean toward your next step by challenging yourself where you are.

With a little effort, it's amazing how extra experience gained today will help you to be prepared for your next role. If you are thinking about the next step up in your career, check out the "Skills Needed in This Role" section of the Table. If you are in one of these roles and want to get to the next step, review the tips in the Table for "How to Progress to the Next Level."

YOU WANT SOMETHING ENTIRELY NEW AND DIFFERENT

You may decide that the fitness profession is not the ultimate destination for your career. If you've made the choice mentally to leave but have not yet taken the leap, don't underestimate the wisdom and knowledge that you can pull from your fitness experience to take to other industries. Can you manage projects or people, learn sales techniques or develop your business writing

TABLE :

Your Current Role	Skills Needed in This Role	How to Progress to the Next Level
Department Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet goals set for the department • Oversee day-to-day staff • Address member concerns • Adhere to a budget • Deliver frontline services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate leadership among the department manager group • Express interest in what other departments are doing • Contribute fresh ideas • Support management initiatives
Small Site Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist with goal setting • Manage professional development of specialists • Solve personnel issues • Anticipate member concerns • Manage resources to get the most from the budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the levers that are pulled to achieve desired outcomes with staff and programs • Learn about the operations of other locations • Gain more experience in sales and finance management
Large Site Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set goals and measure outcomes • Manage department managers • Balance resources to achieve multiple objectives across departments • Guiding others versus doing it yourself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get involved in a company-wide initiative or rollout • Assist with a start-up • Mentor a small-site manager • Package and share your successes for company-wide deployment
Regional Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translation and dissemination of company goals to each site • Remote team management skills • Ability to standardize and scale program operations • Achieve goals by supporting others who directly impact the results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get active in the industry; join a board or write a column • Be a thought leader in your company and create a strategic vision for growth and improvement

skills, practice public speaking, or gain an understanding about the finances behind running a business? All of these skills and more can be learned in fitness careers and transferred into other areas. It's important to stay engaged and give it your all because coworkers and members you currently are working with may very well be who recommend you for a position in a new industry. I know many people whose really strong performance and commitment to their role in fitness led them to successful careers in other lines of business. The reputation and relationships you build in fitness can serve you well in many other industries. No matter where you are going, your fitness roots can help you get there.

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Jennifer L. Bacon, M.S., *has 18 years of experience in the health and fitness industry in the commercial, corporate, and community settings. Her education includes a B.S. in Natural Science and Mathematics from Muhlenberg College and an M.S. in Applied Anatomy and Physiology from Boston University. Jen has had the benefit of experiencing the industry from several vantage points as a trainer, program manager, general manager, human resources director, and in several corporate leadership roles. Her areas of focus include project management and team engagement. She currently is leading the fitness line of service for Premise Health as the Director of Fitness.*