

# Formation Path in the Workplace: How Does It Work?

This Traditional Process Focuses on Personal and Spiritual Growth



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The interest in formation programs continues to grow. Officials of Catholic institutions seek to have their leaders “formed” in addition to being educated. But what does “being formed” mean? How do you know if you are on a formation path? What are the underlying assumptions of those who are invited into a formation program?

The purpose of this article is to clarify the nature of formation, to identify a common assumption about entering into a formation program, and to lay out the elements of a formation path. Having a clear understanding helps identify if a formation program and process is on track.

## ASSUMPTION REGARDING FORMATION

Individuals are unsure about the meaning of formation. They find it challenging to define or explain it.

I’ve tested this assumption in introductory meetings with executive teams. I asked, “What is formation?” I’ve experienced the awkward searching silence; the “I-know-I-should-know-that” look. I’ve observed the struggle to try to respond to the question. After a short experience of awkwardness and minimal responses, I ask, “How many have this nagging suspicion that formation means that someone will be trying to make me into somebody that I am not nor want to be? Will I be forced to do something that I don’t want to do?” The hands go up and the heads nod in agreement on these questions. An unspoken assumption is that formation as being about force — making someone comply. This highlights the cautiousness and hesitancy to embrace formation because of the uncertainty about what formation is.

Formation is not another name for an educational program, though education is a component of formation. It is not, per se, a development program in which the goal is new perfor-

mance skills, though formation will impact performance. Formation is defined as “an act of giving form or shape to something or of taking form.” Formation, then, is the act of self-shaping, of self-growing to become the people we are meant to be.

Formation of a human being does not happen alone; it is not an act of “rugged individualism.” Formation occurs within the context of a group or a community. Human beings are formed in their interactions with one another. It is these human interactions that are formational and have the potential to be transformational.

When leaders comprehend that formation is about flourishing rather than forcing, a collective sigh of relief fills the room. Mild resistance and polite suspicion diminishes and openness and curiosity begin to appear. It is as if an unspeakable, deep desire has been addressed, and “permission” has been given to acknowledge that desire and to seek the source of that desire.

## WHAT IS FORMATION PATH?

As individuals are unfamiliar with the definition of formation, they are also unfamiliar with the path of formation. All the major religions identify the general movement of a formation process. In fact, formation is a traditional process to engage in for personal and spiritual growth. The process is ancient. In the Christian tradition, the formation path was named as the processes of: purgative, illuminative and unitive. The dynamics and movement of the path remains consistent across major religious traditions. What is new is introducing it into the workplace.

Leaders are more familiar with a career path and the world of business. This is the world of competition and critical thinking, analysis and action. The culture of the workplace as well as human tendency can reward those who know how to compete and win; those who know how to think and act; and those who know how to get things done. These are in and of themselves useful skills and abilities. They are reinforced in the

workplace and can become the primary lens through which the world is viewed.

When being introduced to the concept of formation in the business culture, it is quite natural for people to assume that good business practices and analytical thinking will translate into good formational practices. This is not the case. A different type of thinking is required for one to be on a formation path. While the words may be familiar, a formation path often invites one to unexplored territory. It is more like entering a foreign country and trying to communicate without knowing the language.

Most of us are familiar with the idea and language of a career path. Understanding the nature and direction of a career path helps put the nature and direction of formation path in context. A career path and a formation path are complementary. They point one in two different directions. They can enhance one another and yet they exist in different realms. These two realms require two different sets of skills.

Unfortunately, if the context and process of formation is not clearly identified, then formation can become translated into the language of work. Formation can become another word that is used but the behavior is basic task accomplishment and achievement. The language of formation can become a veneer that thinly disguises the more familiar behavior of “task completion.” Initially, some may view formation as another task to be checked off as “completed” or better yet “exceeded expectations.” Others may view formation as something foreign to the world of work, and treated as irrelevant.

The following five categories allow us to highlight the key differences between a career path

and a formation path:

- theme
- purpose
- direction
- signs of progress
- minimization or avoidance

These five categories will be briefly contrasted and compared for the purpose of clarifying the nature and direction of each path.

### CAREER PATH

**Theme:** The easiest way to think of one’s career path is to think in terms of a resume. I would suggest that the universal theme of a resume is: *I came. I saw. I conquered.* I came into this situation. I saw this problem. I created these results. And I did this process in every work situation I was in. I’m *a doer, a problem solver and an achiever.*

**Purpose:** The purpose of my resume is to demonstrate that I am *different from everyone else.* I am the unique problem solver this company needs. All the abilities that created those achievements in the past can benefit this organization if I am hired.

**Direction:** I want to show that my path is an *upward and exclusive one.* I’ve taken on more responsibility. I’ve accomplished things where others failed. I’m moving upward toward a very elite and exclusive group of individuals. I’m on my way to the top. I am ready for the next step. I am one of the *elite.*

**Signs of Progress:** The signs are *usually external* — increase in salary; additional responsibilities or new job title. Earned awards such as “top salesperson” or “employee of the year” are also marks of progress.

**Minimization or Avoidance:** I want to skip or minimize

### Orienting: Career Path and Formation Path

	Career	Formation
<b>Theme</b>	I came, I saw, I conquered	I was called/sent, I heard, and I entered in
<b>Purpose</b>	Unique: Different from others; Value in doing	Created and interdependent; Value in being
<b>Direction</b>	Upward and exclusive	Inward, downward, inclusive
<b>Marked by</b>	Externals; measurable rewards	Internals — depth and wisdom; meaning and giving
<b>Skip Over/Minimize</b>	Failure; setback or anything ordinary	Nothing; all belongs



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*any failure or setback.* One is coached to spin weaknesses and problems into strengths or potential strengths. I want to demonstrate that I have no weakness that can't be turned into strengths.

### FORMATION PATH

**Theme:** The theme of a formation path begins by recognizing that you *were called* into being and *sent* here for a particular purpose. You recognize that you are a created being. As such you *enter into others' worlds* and lives. You don't conquer them; you join with them on their journey. You don't presume that you are the center or the answer. You see yourself as having gifts or abilities that you offer to others for their good. You make others the focus of your attention and try to enter into their world.

**Purpose:** The purpose is to realize one is *created and interdependent*. Since you were created you realize that you *participate* in existence and life. You realize that your life is interdependent with all beings because God made all beings. A person on a formation path sees the *value in being* and lives out of the fragile compassion that is often expressed as, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

**Direction:** The direction of a formation path is an *inward, deeper and inclusive* movement. It is a path marked by learning how to look within oneself, let go and surrender. A formation path is paradoxical because the more you enter into your unique center, the more you experience connection with others and so become more inclusive and connected. You see where everyone and everything belongs.

**Signs of Progress:** The progress of a formation path is marked by *internal depth* and the *ability to find meaning and connections*. One values meaningful living. *Simplicity, wisdom and generosity* are signs you are making progress on this journey.

**Minimization or Avoidance:** On a formation path you *avoid nothing*. *Everything belongs* — from happiness, gratitude and success to pain, embarrassment and suffering. You are not afraid of "looking bad." Perceptions, assumptions, resentment, anger, etc., become great teachers whom you don't have to explain away or ignore. Eventually, you are no longer afraid of them but come to

embrace them because of what they teach you. On a formation path you learn both to embrace and let go of success and failure.

A career path needs a formation path and vice versa. They balance and complete one another. To focus exclusively in the world of career can create disenchanting achievers; individuals who have gained as much as they can of the world but who run the risk of losing their souls in the process. On the other hand, focusing exclusively on their internal world can create narrow minded, narcissistic and overly sensitive individuals who are fearful of making a contribution toward the common good.

These complementary paths complete the individual who consciously engages them. Engaging on a formation path requires a certain amount of discipline and attentiveness because it is hard to silence the influence of the "career path" mentality. This mentality ignores limits and boundaries. This is as true for those in vowed religious life as it is for those new to formation. We have all known individuals who have made religious life a career path rather than a formation path.

An individual on a formation path seeks to see the world from a different set of eyes with a wider, more encompassing vision — a different mind set that is more reflective or contemplative. A formation path adds the elements of reflection to analysis; seeks asking the right questions as much as finding the right answers; and values being quiet and still as much as being pro-active. On a formation path, one becomes more conscious of the inherent tension between a career path and a formation path and one becomes more willing to hold these two tensions together.

Introducing a formation path at work may be awkward. The culture of work conditions us to the language and behavior of the career path. The work environment automatically sets the context for how one is to think, speak and behave. In adding and inviting individuals to a formation path, we are slowly trying to change the culture by adding formation to career. When we do this in a conscious way, we are creating a context for the full-flourishing of the individual because we are adding the quest for meaning to the quest for market share. ■

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