My name is Jason de Koff, and I am an associate professor at Tennessee State University. I engage in teaching, research, and extension (i.e., a three-way split appointment). I earned my Ph.D. in agronomy from Purdue University in 2008. As ASA’s 2015 Early Career Professional Award recipient, I have been asked to provide tips for success based on my experiences in academia. Below are reflections on my early career, which serve as my top points of advice for new faculty members.

1. Adapt or Perish

I think the old mantra “publish or perish” still holds true to a certain degree in academia because promotion-and-tenure guidelines require publications; however, I think Darwin’s idea of “adapt or perish” holds greater value. What I mean by this is that as an early career professional, you are in uncharted territory, and new stimuli are affecting you on a regular basis for the first year or two. There may be an assortment of potential issues that can and do occur such as a last-minute, unexpected meeting announced by the department chair or a new request for proposals with a 30-day submission window; an equipment failure in the lab or field; a much-needed, but delayed, shipment of important chemicals; a month-long drought after planting or a week of rain on the week you were planning to plant; sick students; or mislabeled samples. These are stimuli that we were relatively shielded from as graduate students but are now in charge of managing as professionals. Those that can adapt well and quickly will be more likely to survive and be deemed the “fittest” by their department.

If you know you aren’t as nimble as others in this arena, this is where a mentor can really help you out. They can help you avoid many of these pitfalls since they have the experience related to your discipline and your institution. Multiple mentors are a great idea because one person is not going to have all of the experiences or advice to help you avoid all issues that you might encounter. If you are a pessimist, try to cultivate more optimism, and if you are an optimist, cultivate some pessimism. A healthy dose of both can help you to plan for potential problems and manage these problems well when they arise.

2. Lead with Your Strengths

It can be a daunting task to build a program or multiple programs from scratch as an early career professional. Focus first on your strengths, which also are usually the things you enjoy doing most (if your strength is Pokémon Go, this might not be the profession for you). This will allow you time to get acclimated to your new responsibilities while still moving things forward. Once you’ve gained some confidence in the process, you can start moving into areas that are more difficult and take the time to develop these weaknesses into strengths or at least moderate successes. For example, if teaching is your jam, develop or redevelop your courses using whatever hybridizing, active learning, pedagogical strengths that are in your wheelhouse. Then start focusing on your research program. You don’t want to put it off too long, but you do want to focus on one thing at a time (multi-tasking doesn’t work).

3. Beware of Time Sucks

Time sucks are those events or individuals that take time away from completing daily objectives. These can include meetings. An effective meeting is one that is well structured with clear objectives and is led by an organized leader. It is important to identify those meetings that will be most effective and of greatest priority and learn to say “no” to meetings that are not. It is also important to keep the service part of your responsibilities in check and proportional to your other responsibilities. It really is OK to say no to a meeting or an additional service request, even one by a department chair, as long as you have previously gained some confidence in the process, you can start moving into areas that are more difficult and take the time to develop these weaknesses into strengths or at least moderate successes. For example, if teaching is your jam, develop or redevelop your courses using whatever hybridizing, active learning, pedagogical strengths that are in your wheelhouse. Then start focusing on your research program. You don’t want to put it off too long, but you do want to focus on one thing at a time (multi-tasking doesn’t work).