

The Progressive Line in Freemasonry: Its Benefits and its Burdens

**Daniel D. Hrinko, W.M.
Arts & Sciences Lodge No. 792
Grand Lodge of Ohio**

One of the founding principles of Arts & Sciences Lodge was that all of the many aspects of Freemasonry should be investigated and discussed as a means of gaining further light about their importance and the lessons they contain. This should be done in a thoughtful and conscientious manner as each topic deserves. Through our experiences in other lodges, our members have had extensive experience in the officer progression process typical in our lodges, a model generally referred to as the “progressive line.” We felt that discussing the benefits and burdens of this model was an important step in our development as a lodge.

What follows is a summary of the salient points which our discussion revealed and is, accordingly, the product of many brilliant minds; not of any single one. Your writer’s role was merely to compile this summary.

As one might expect, our discussion immediately revealed that the purpose of the progressive line model was to provide a system for training men to become proficient at the tasks associated with various positions within the lodge. It is to assist them in learning the ritual, familiarize them with their administrative and leadership duties, and prepare them to undertake their responsibilities in a manner in which they can take pride.

Specifically, the progressive line model is intended to set a path or standard of expectations which encourages the member to invest the time needed to learn what he must learn in order to be successful. It provides a sense of continuity in that one knows what is expected of him, now and in the future. It provides a means of avoiding stagnation whereby certain positions may be filled by the same person for years on end, to the detriment of the lodge. It creates a structured opportunity for new members to assume responsibilities. Lastly, it sets the stage for nine or ten members to be active in nearly every meeting.

But we quickly identified several problems, or at least perceived problems, associated with this model. The progressive line model forces qualified brethren to move out of a position and, eventually, out of the officer line, denying the lodge the direct benefit of their expertise and talent. It creates a rigid system whereby people are prevented from moving into or out of officer positions. It sets the expectation that once you enter “the line,” you are expected to fulfill all duties of all offices for the next seven years whether you are willing or not. Each officer is expected to move up and out, and in lockstep.

It also creates the expectation that a brother must be an officer to be involved in the lodge’s activities, and if not, then he is to be sidelined as such. Just as it creates the assurance that nine or ten members will be active in nearly every meeting, it likewise creates the limitation that only nine or ten members will be active in any particular meeting.

There are times when this model breaks down, such as when a brother is forced, by job or other commitments, to drop out, creating a hole in which either a past master or an unprepared brother

must then be placed. It sets the stage for viewing one who is forced to leave as letting the lodge down at best, or at worst as being disloyal. Finally, it creates a situation where one who lacks a commitment to excellence will do only the minimum necessary to progress, and everyone around him must then compensate for his shortcomings.

In our discussions of the options available to us, we began with the rules of the Grand Lodge of Ohio applicable to officer qualifications. They were straightforward and clear. The *Code for the Government of Lodges* states that to be installed as Master of a lodge, a brother must have first served as a Warden, and received the Degree of Past Master either in a Convocation of Past Masters or a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. In the ancient charges, as published in the Constitution and Bylaws of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, we learn that “the most expert of the Fellowcraft shall be chosen or appointed the Master or overseer of the Lord’s work; who is to be called Master by those that work under him.” Beyond the progression from Warden to Master, the concept of a progressive line is nowhere to be found.

Since there is no requirement of a progressive line, we then discussed alternative concepts, methods or ways of preparing and selecting officers. Having “a free for all” election for every position would make it difficult if not impossible for the lodge to have stability, predictability, or address the need for preparation. We noted that truly open elections create opportunities for qualified brethren to take on responsibilities as their interests and talents allow rather than being forced into a set system. Those who have the talent and ability to move into positions of authority quickly while serving with a high degree of proficiency can do so. Those who possess other talents or have no interest in the senior level of leadership are free to apply their energies in ways useful to the lodge but more fulfilling to them.

Clearly it is important to the welfare of any lodge that all our brethren have opportunities to learn, master, and demonstrate their proficiency at whatever position may interest them. By providing such open opportunities through open elections, we set the stage for growth within our lodge. But each opportunity we create brings on a new challenge: How do we identify those willing and competent to serve in office?

Our discussions lead Arts & Sciences Lodge deciding to pursue a blended system. We concluded that the Junior Warden, Senior Warden, and Master would be considered the “progressive line.” This would bring the benefits of continuity and stability to the Lodge’s senior leadership. We created a mentorship system to provide training opportunities for interested members to serve the Lodge as officers, and as a means for demonstrating proficiency. To further improve stability, a consensus of our members favored having the Master and Wardens in their stations for two years.

This mentorship system expects a brother interested in a position to show initiative by approaching the mason serving in a particular office and, expressing a desire to learn that particular position, spend time with that officer learning the ritual and the responsibilities of the office. When he is ready, he will volunteer to pro tem that position over the course of several meetings to demonstrate his proficiency. Should he be interested, motivated, and talented, any brother may have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate his proficiency at several positions during a particular year.

This mentorship model allows as many as are interested to be actively involved in nearly every position in the lodge without formally accepting the responsibilities of being an officer. The model allows the brethren to be involved and contribute to the life of the lodge in a way which allows flexibility and is limited only by their individual motivation and talents.

The mentorship model also expects the officers to encourage members to study with them and become proficient at those positions, eventually stepping aside to allow their students to demonstrate their proficiency. This includes learning lectures, charges, as well as other parts of the ritual. It also includes coaching candidates and other responsibilities essential to the operation of the lodge. This process is critical to the success of the model which will create a pool of brethren who are excited about their participation, talented in their ability to contribute, and capable of assuming positions of responsibility and authority within the lodge.

A traditional progressive line begins with an appointed position, making selection of the appointee a critical decision held by one member: the Master. Although Masters generally do consult with the lodge leadership – generally past masters – it ultimately falls to the Master to make a decision which will have a lasting effect, for good or ill, on the health and well-being of the lodge for the next several years. Our mentorship model begins the progressive line with the election of the Junior Warden and, we think, addresses this problem by placing this critical decision in the hands of the brothers of the lodge.

Creating a pool of talented and interested brethren who have taken the time and effort to learn various positions and demonstrate their proficiencies through their work in lodge creates another challenge. When it's time for elections, how do the members know which of these “workers in the quarries” are interested and willing to serve in what positions?

Our answer was for each prospective officer to express his interest to the lodge by listing the offices for which he feels he is proficient and is willing to serve presenting that list to the lodge Secretary. This would be done at the September meeting.

The secretary would then report at the October meeting identifying each position and all members who had declared themselves as being proficient and willing to serve in those positions. The members would receive this report at the October meeting and, over the next month, have time to consider their own thoughts and opinions regarding who is best qualified to serve in each position and then vote accordingly at the annual meeting to follow. Through their votes, the members would also express their opinions regarding the appointed positions, providing direction to the new Master as to how the members would like him to fill these offices.

Our collective opinion was that our blended system would meet the demands of training and identifying qualified men to be officers and leaders of our lodge, while providing more freedom and flexibility to the lodge and its officers. Our model provides an opportunity for anyone to become involved at whatever level he feels comfortable and capable. It also provides a remedy for some of the difficulties commonly associated with a progressive line which can interfere with the lodge's health and development.

We at Arts & Sciences began using this system beginning in the fall of 2011 and thereafter unless the members decide to follow a different system based on their experiences with this model, and after further discussion. This gives the members the opportunity each Masonic year to pursue their interests, learn new positions, and demonstrate their proficiencies. We believe that our experiment will contribute to a richer and more energetic environment for all of our brothers to become involved in the activities of Arts & Sciences Lodge.