

Role of the Agent in Leader Training

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Our knowledge of working with and through volunteer leaders is not complete. There are many areas of concern in which we must operate by intuition and judgment. However, enough is known of some aspects of working with leaders to make a professional approach more than mere guess. We know something of what leaders do; we know they need; we know from observation and study that leaders are often recruited but not trained; and we have some clues as to who might best choose those to serve as leaders. Indeed a great deal more is known about capitalizing on interests, of understanding and utilizing individual circumstances, and of the professional's appropriate relationship to the volunteer than is included in the method of operation for many of us.

An Extension worker can do professional work without ever having a local leader in his county. But the need for local leaders has generally been recognized. This is a discussion of how the agent performs, professionally, with and through local leaders.

The fact that the agent trains local leaders instead of doing direct teaching of 4-H Club members, or other lay people, places him at a higher level of professional work—he is teaching the trainer or training the teacher—however he wants to look at it. As a person rises in professional ability in educational work, he moves from teaching somebody directly to teaching the person who teaches directly.

Let's keep in mind that he teaches or trains someone who teaches or trains someone else. If the agent does *not* teach or train the leader, but lets the leader do as he pleases with whatever experience

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and ability he had when he was recruited or selected, the agent is not doing *any* professional educational work.

Leaders Recruited But Not Trained

This is one of the enigmas of Extension work. We still find local leaders recruited but not trained in states where local leaders have carried the major, if not the total, responsibility of teaching local people for the past two or three decades. We do not know the answer to this problem yet. We did find out in the Western Region study¹ that one out of every 12 Extension workers thought that many local 4-H leaders do not need to attend leader-training meetings. (It seems that more than one out of 12 act this way.) This accounts for some of it, but not all by any means.

One of the reasons we do not know more than this is because we have not attempted to study the problem deeply enough. Another reason is that it is difficult to get true answers from people who have been told so often they should train leaders. They hesitate to answer truthfully when asked why they don't. This idea is illustrated in a book about advertising.² In the 1930's an interviewer was expected to find out almost anything from a respondent simply by asking him a straight question. It was some time before analysts realized they were being misled. For example, when asked about preference for a strong or mild mouthwash, a lady admitting a preference for a strong mouthwash should also be admitting to an utter stranger that she suffered from (what the world had been taught to call) halitosis. Extension workers find it difficult to admit that they do not know how to train local leaders—or to admit that they do not like to work with adults, and so forth.

Recruiting leaders is an almost unknown field of information. It probably would be possible, through depth interviewing and case studies, to find out how people became local leaders. However, the casual questioning usually used in studies does not produce the truth, or enough truth. Research has revealed some facts about what kind of people should be local leaders:³ They should be slightly above the group with which they will work as to income, success, education, and social level; they need to be social and community minded; they need to *feel* they have the time, although they may be the busiest persons in the community. This is about all we know.

¹ Federal Extension Service, unpublished data (will be published in 1963).

² Martin Mayer, *Madison Avenue, U.S.A.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 217.

³ R. C. Clark and W. E. Skelton, *The 4-H Club Leader*, Cornell 4-H Club Bulletin 94 (Ithaca, New York: State College of Agriculture, December, 1950).

We used to think that a parent of a 4-H Club member was a better leader than a non-parent and that a former 4-H Club member was better than a never-member. Recent research⁴ is producing slight inklings that this may not be true—just enough of a shadow of a doubt to suggest that this area needs more study. For instance, these are types of tendencies that are not proved and need further study: Parents of 4-H Club members remain as leaders for a shorter period than non-parents; parents give more time and attention to their own children than to the other members; former 4-H Club members tend to put more stress on events and competition than on education.

Who Chooses Leaders

At one time it was assumed generally that leaders chosen by the club members were the best leaders. Recent studies⁵ point out that perhaps this is not true. Indications are that perhaps those chosen by Extension agents make the best leaders. Again, what we don't know about this is much greater than what we do know. Undoubtedly there is a combination that would work best—perhaps bringing community leaders and 4-H Club members together to make decisions concerning the choice of a leader. I would be willing to maintain that those good leaders whom the agent chose were often chosen after he had discussed the problem with the community, or after he himself was well acquainted with the people in the community.

Perhaps all we really know about selection of leaders, beyond their status in the community, is that they are patient people, like to teach, or can show someone else how, enjoy children and can stand being with them for periods at a time, and are willing to give some time to being trained themselves.

In some places where leader-training programs exist, leaders are not being given opportunity to lead their clubs after being trained. This is such a violation of all rules of respect for human dignity that it is difficult to understand. It practically says that the leader finished the course; otherwise, why does the agent run right out to the club meeting and do what the leader was supposedly trained to do himself? To me, recruitment of a leader should include keeping him for a year or so. Therefore, recruitment includes not only

⁴Eleanor G. Inman, "A Review of Literature on the Selection and Training of Local 4-H Leaders" (unpublished Master's seminar paper, University of Maryland, 1962).

⁵1962.

selecting him, asking him to serve, training him, but also giving him a chance to function.

We know of two reasons why Extension agents do not give leaders a chance to function: (1) Some agents do not believe that any leader is good enough to teach; (2) some agents like so much to be with young people that they cannot resist working directly with them. No doubt there are other reasons.

Extension Agent As Supervisor

A county Extension worker should consider himself a supervisor—a supervisor of local leaders.⁶ Supervision here means the acts of training, helping, planning, encouraging, recognizing, shifting responsibilities, evaluating, providing materials and ideas. These acts are facets of high-level professional activity.

When a community is accustomed to an agent holding meetings and working directly with 4-H members, it is an especially high-level challenge for him to show them the contribution of both leader and agent.

An educator—a person who is really interested in what happens to the individuals he is trying to help—reaches his peak of accomplishment when he and the others with whom he works can say “we” and “us,” not just “I” and “me.” I can’t imagine any greater professional satisfaction than to work with local leaders with a specific objective in mind for the boys and girls, and later find that they have learned what the agent had in mind earlier. To reach this stage takes even more patience than I mentioned the local leaders should have. Moreover, the supervisors of the agents need just as much patience.

I want to stress, when discussing the use of local leaders and giving them responsibilities that are worthy of their abilities, that just having local leaders and giving them responsibilities is not enough. They must be given help, and the agent must give professional leadership.

DEVELOPING A TRAINING PROGRAM

In Extension I think we have gone overboard on the idea of grassroots philosophy, the people’s program, the “democratic” procedure, and so forth. This crops up in rationalizing our own actions when we don’t know how to do something ourselves. Certainly this has

⁶ See “An Evaluation of Supervision of Volunteer Leaders in Tennessee 4-H Club Work” by George S. Foster (unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1962).

not been the only reason. We have believed in involving the people.

This points the way toward developing a leader-training program for local leaders. Who plans the program? There obviously is disagreement concerning this point. In the Western Region study (unpublished data), 37 per cent of the Extension workers say that the Extension workers should have the major say on what should be included in leader-training meetings; 54 per cent of Extension workers say that the local leaders themselves should have the major say on what should be included. Of the State 4-H staff people in the study, 86 per cent thought that local leaders should have the major say on what should be included. Of course, they could be right.

However, let's look at the three major sources of information for planning any educational program: (1) The needs as displayed by a study of the situation; (2) the interests of the individuals being trained (sometimes called their recognized needs as well as interests); and (3) the knowledge of the professional person as to what the person or persons need in light of the situation.

Our studies⁷ have shown that about one-half of our local leaders are first-year leaders. This means that Extension workers, supposedly trained for their jobs and many with years of experience, usually think that local leaders, first-year ones who have never worked with 4-H before, know better than they what should be in the training program. Admittedly, the groups that make the suggestions are usually longer-tenure leaders. But many of them have had experience only in their own local communities. (I can't help wondering if one of the many reasons why local leaders don't attend leader-training meetings is because the program they plan does not meet their needs once they are on the job.) Here is what first-year and longer-tenure leaders tend most to ask for in leader training.⁸

First-year leaders:

- How to involve all members actively in club meetings and activities.
- How to give responsibilities to boys and girls.
- How to recognize individual achievement regardless of requirements.
- How to help members feel a part of the group.
- Help with recreation.
- How to organize and supervise clubs.
- Information about helps available for doing the job.

⁷Garrel K. Sabrosky and Fern S. Kelley, *Let's Strengthen our Local 4-H Leader Training*, Federal Extension Service, PA 394 (Washington, D.C., 1959).

⁸Garrel K. Sabrosky, *Help 4-H Local Leaders Do a Better Job: Studies Point the Way*, Federal Extension Service, PA 359 (Washington, D.C., 1958), see refer-

How to inform and work with people in the community.

Help with demonstrations.

Help with records.

Longer-tenure leaders:

How to inform and work with parents of members.

How to help members with project work.

Help with recreation.

How to inform and work with people in community.

Help with demonstrations.

Help with records.

Now, I'd like to mention just two items which neither group named: (1) "How to teach," and (2) "How to plan and organize local 4-H Club activities."

Would we want a training program for local leaders that did not include these two items? There are many more items they did not name. All this can be more serious when we consider that the relatively small amount of information and training that can be given in training meetings (or in training materials) is selected often by the leaders themselves.

Rather than either agents or leaders having the major say in what to include in leader training, perhaps it should be planned jointly. As second choice, perhaps Extension workers should have major say. Major say does not necessarily mean they have the total say. Giving leaders the major say might be a poor third choice.

Meeting Needs

Finally, it is appropriate to discuss reconciling the training program needs recognized by Extension agents with the training or other needs recognized by the volunteer leaders. Extension is responsible for the program carried out in the communities. Tax money pays the Extension workers' salaries and expenses. These agents are responsible to the taxpayer to see that a program in line with federal, state, and often county laws is carried out. Therefore, the Extension worker has the responsibility to think through what he must do—then, how to do it.

Sometimes leaders can be trained only if they are first given what they ask for. In other words, their interests are met first, and then other important needs must be met, whether or not the leaders recognize them. I stress the word important—important to the program

is what I mean. A study of volunteers in another agency⁹ revealed that belonging to an association of volunteers was very important to the professional staff, but of very low importance to the volunteer leaders. Is this association membership really important to the 4-H Club program? This study also revealed that the volunteers did not value attendance at training meetings was nearly as important as to the professional workers.

Is attendance at training meetings by local leaders important to the 4-H Club program? Research in education, social science, and human development has shown, in general, that certain learning experiences can be set up only in a group situation. Other things can be learned through written materials. I do not mention the home or personal visit as a training method, even though Extension workers use it high, because no Extension agent has the time to go around and adequately train every local leader individually. (I consider it a valuable supplementary method when necessary, and when particularly needed with certain individuals.)

SUMMARY

Since we know that all people are not organization-minded nor even meeting-minded, we must recognize that some people who agree to be local leaders do things they dislike. It is only sensible to remove the disliked parts of their job. Attending meetings may be or will be one of these disliked jobs for many leaders. We need to ask: Which is most important—the association of local leaders or the training meetings? For what, when, and for whom?

Find out what local leaders like to do and what they will do. Find out what they want to learn and what they will go out of their way to learn. (Their absence from meetings will be a way of telling you some of this.) Then start with leaders where they are—not where you are. But don't stop there! Carry them along to where you are—not just a few of them, but all of them.

And now comes another challenge to professional workers. You cannot stop your own professional improvement as you move the leaders along with you. As professional leaders you need to stay ahead of them. Good local leaders will find their work satisfying only when their professional leader, the Extension worker, continues to help them with bigger and more difficult problems.

⁹David Thursz, *Volunteer Group Advisors in a National Social Group Work Agency* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960).