

Specialist and Agent: Men in the Middle

Agents and Specialists have "relevant others" who hold different demands and expectations for them and apply different standards of evaluation

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THE WAY IT IS formally organized—how the organization chart looks—has implications for the way any organization works. At the same time, people within any organization (such as the various Extension Services around the country) interpret the formal organization and their place in it in different ways. Thus, anyone seeking to understand how an organization operates and why must take both the formal organization and the way its members interpret their place in that organization into account.

For example, whether Extension specialists are housed in departments or in a group of their own may result in different "effects" or different kinds of performance and orientation among those specialists. At the same time, the informal contacts and arrangements that are possible under different formal organization will probably vary. And it is very possible that under different organizational systems specialists will see different people as being important to their success in and out of the organization.

To investigate a limited number of these relationships, a state was studied where the Extension specialists are housed in and administered through departments.¹ Both specialists and agents were studied so comparisons could be made of these two positions.

¹For a more detailed report on this study see Carl J. Couch and Jack Murray, "Evaluation, Publications, and Significant Others of Michigan Extension Specialists," mimeographed manuscript (East Lansing: Institute of Extension Personnel Development, Michigan State University, June, 1963).

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Certain kinds of people are relevant to both agents and specialists—administrators, colleagues, and clients, for example. These are people who work with and evaluate specialists and agents and help decide whether they have resources to work with (or even a job!). They are called *relevant others*. At the same time, specialists and agents learn that not all of these people are equally relevant. Some specialists and agents may make decisions about what to do (how to behave) in terms of what they think the director of Extension expects or wants. Others may pay more attention to what their clients—farmers, farm families, and so on—say and want. Those people who specialists and agents say are most important to them are called *significant others*.

This study examined the “relevant others” and “significant others” of specialists and agents, and made some measure of how both groups are evaluated by each other and by administrators. In addition, attention was given to how specialists and agents identified themselves in their job (*self-identification*). This article deals with the findings of this investigation. To follow the discussion carefully, it will be necessary to keep in mind the meanings of “significant others,” “relevant others,” and “self-identification.”

Analysis was based on agricultural agents and specialists who had been in Extension at least five years. Twenty-one of 35 agricultural specialists in this category completed the questionnaire. Out of 101 agricultural agents with five or more years on the job, 68 completed the “self-identification” part of the questionnaire and 72 the “significant others” part.

SUMMARY

Briefly, those specialists who selected clients as “significant others” tended to receive high evaluation from both agents and administrators. Conversely, those who selected administrators tended not to receive high evaluation. This was true despite the relatively low correlation between the two measures of evaluation. Those agents who selected both administrators and clients as “significant others” tended to be evaluated high by administrators, whereas those who selected administrators or clients as “significant others”—and failed to select the other—tended to receive low evaluation.

Specialists who defined themselves in terms of subject matter (e.g., “I am a soils specialist”) tended to receive high evaluation. Agents who defined themselves as coordinators or organizers tended to receive high evaluation. Those agents who defined themselves generally as an expert in a certain area of knowledge did not receive any higher or lower evaluation than those who did not.

The amount of written material produced by specialists was associated with educational background but with very little else. Specifically, it was not closely, if at all, related to evaluation.

EVALUATIONS OF AGENTS AND SPECIALISTS

Both agents and specialists are usually evaluated by their administrators. A rough measure of such an evaluation was made by taking the mean salary increment for each individual for the preceding five years. Of course this is not a "pure" measure. However, as Blalock points out, salary is one of the reward and punishment controls administrators maintain.² Agents and specialists also evaluate each other. Since there was particular interest in communication behavior and performance, agents were asked to select the three specialists they thought were the most outstanding as: (1) effective teachers in a group situation; (2) effective writers of educational material; (3) effective consultants; and (4) effective sources of rich ideas.

Identical questions were asked of specialists to get their evaluation of agents. This measure also is limited; agents and specialists may not know each other well. Most agents did make selections, but not all of them made three. Many specialists made no selections, indicating they had only limited opportunity to observe agents. Also, there are more agents than specialists. So the measure of specialists' evaluation of agents has more severe shortcomings than the measure of agents' evaluation of specialists. Consequently, only limited reference will be made to specialists' evaluation.

If a specialist was frequently selected by agents as outstanding in any one of three areas—richest source of ideas, most effective consultant, or most effective with groups—he tended to be selected frequently in the other two areas.³ The fourth area—being an effective writer—was not closely correlated with the other three forms of selection.⁴

Why weren't specialists who were rated outstanding in the three communication activities ranked high in the area of writing? It may be that competencies in these four areas simply do not go together. Or it may be that this was not a very meaningful question since some agents indicated they pay little attention to the authorship of Extension material.

Since agents and administrators have different interests and

² T. C. Blalock, "Role of the Subject-Matter Specialist," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Summer, 1963), 93-100.

³ Correlations ran from a low of .72 to a high of .80.

⁴ Correlations ranged from .29 to .51.

standards, and since they observe specialists in different activities, we expected that they would evaluate specialists differently. To check, salary increments were examined—the indicator of the administrator's evaluation—in relation to agents' evaluations. There were relatively low associations between the two. Salary increments and frequency of selection as the richest source of ideas had the highest correlation ($r = .36$). The lowest was between salary increment and frequency of nomination as an effective consultant ($r = .03$). In short, all were relatively low. These low associations between salary increments and frequency of being selected as outstanding by agents suggests that agents use different standards in evaluating specialists than do administrators.

Because the number of selections of outstanding agents by specialists was quite low, no comparable analysis could be made for the association between specialists' and administrators' evaluation of agents. The data did suggest that agents who were selected frequently as outstanding in one area also tended to be selected in others. There also was a positive association between being selected frequently by specialists and high salary increments.

Specialists and Significant Others

The "significant others" of specialists and agents were obtained by asking them to "indicate whose evaluation is of greatest concern to you." This was an open-ended item; answers were placed in nine categories: family, co-workers (other specialists or other agents), subject-matter peers (fellow department members), friends, clients, university administrators (department head and dean), Extension administrators, agents for specialists or specialists for agents, and others.

It was expected that those specialists who selected agents as significant others would tend to be highly evaluated by agents and those who selected department heads would tend to be highly evaluated by administrators. These expectations were not supported by the data. Instead, those who selected department heads as "significant others" tended to receive low evaluation from department heads (as measured by salary increments) and also tended not to be selected as outstanding by agents. Both of these tendencies were quite pronounced. Those who mentioned agents as "significant others" were not selected by agents as outstanding any more frequently than were those who failed to mention agents as "significant others."

What category of specialists, then, was selected by both department heads and agents as being outstanding? It turns out to be those

specialists who mentioned clients of Extension—farmers, agri-businessmen, and so on—as their “significant others.” These specialists tended to receive higher-than-average salary increments and to be selected frequently by agents as outstanding. These associations also were quite pronounced.

Another finding that has certain implications for specialists was that those specialists who mentioned *Extension* administrators as “significant others” tended to receive low evaluation from both agents and department heads. This association was not so pronounced as the other two, but quite definite. These associations between evaluation and “significant others” were present despite the fact there was relatively little correlation in the ratings specialists received from agents and administrators.

Agents and Significant Others

In light of the results for the specialists, it might be expected that those agents who listed clients as “significant others” would tend to obtain the highest evaluation. This was not the case. There was no direct associations between mentioning or non-mentioning of specific “relevant others” as “significant others.” But when those agents who listed both administrators and clients were compared with those who listed either clients or administrators, but not both, a definite pattern emerged. (None of the agents failed to mention either one or the other.) Those who listed both received higher salary increments than those who listed only one; the difference was quite marked.

The data were also examined for associations between listing clients and/or administrators and frequency of agents being selected as outstanding by specialists. There was a slight tendency for those agents who listed clients saliently (as their first or second choice) and those who did not list administrators saliently (as first or second) to be selected more frequently as outstanding by the specialists. Due to the relatively few selections made by agents, this observation is of limited consequence.

Specialists' Self-Identification

“Self-identification” was operationalized as agent and specialist responses to: “Describe yourself by completing the following statement ten times. I am. . . .” There was a tendency for those who made “I am” statements in terms of subject matter to receive high evaluation. That is, those who responded by making a statement like “I am a soil scientist,” or “I am a specialist in dairy,” tended to receive higher-than-average salary increments. They also tended to

be selected most frequently by agents as being outstanding specialists.

Agents' Self-Identification

For agents there was no association between "self-identification" as a source of information—making such statements as "I am a source of agricultural information" or "I am well trained in agriculture"—and evaluation received. There was a very definite association between identification of self as a coordinator or organizer (e.g., "I am a coordinator," "I am a coordinator of agricultural programs," or "I am an organizer") and evaluation received. Agents who made one or more such statements definitely tended to receive salary increments greater than those who did not. There was also a tendency for those who defined themselves by making the statement "I am an educator" or "I am a teacher" to receive higher-than-average salary increments, but the tendency was not very pronounced.

Written Material

One dimension of the role of specialists is to produce bulletins and other written material. Therefore we gave attention to associations among: (1) amount of material published through Extension channels, (2) the evaluation received, (3) the "significant others" of specialists, and (4) the education background of the specialists. A publication index of the amount published by each specialist was computed for the preceding five years. Productivity scores ranged from a high of over 100 pages to a low of zero.

There was little or no association between the amount of material written by a specialist and how he was evaluated by agents and administrators.⁵ It would appear that either (1) the most effective writers are not doing the most writing or (2) agents and administrators give little attention to the amount of written material produced in evaluating specialists.

Data were also examined to determine if there was any association between "relevant others" selected as "significant others" and amount published.⁶ There was none. In contrast, there was a high

⁵ $r = .29$ between amount produced and being selected as an outstanding writer by agents; $r = -.15$ between publication index and selection as "richest source of ideas"; $r = .06$ between publication index and mean salary increment.

⁶ The publication productivity index was based on the formal Extension material published during the five years before October, 1962. The index was computed as follows: 1 point for each page of a first printing of a bulletin; $\frac{1}{2}$ point for each page of a revised printing of a bulletin; $\frac{1}{2}$ point for each page of a first printing of a folder; $\frac{1}{4}$ point for each page of a revised printing of a folder; and 1 point for each page of *Agricultural Handbook* material. Where more than one author was listed equal credit was given to each.

degree of association between educational background and the amount of written material produced. Those with a Ph.D. had a mean productivity score of 38.8 compared with 15.2 for non-Ph.D.'s. At the same time, there was no association between type of degree held and "significant others" selected.

IMPLICATIONS

What follows is highly speculative and is offered in the spirit of attempting to raise what is considered some significant issues—just as answers or solutions to any problem. In a very real sense, both agents and specialists are men in the middle. Both have sets of "relevant others" who place different demands and expectations upon them and apply different standards of evaluation. Any member of an organization with more than one set of "relevant others" is in a similar position.

It is significant that specialists who select clients as "significant others" and fail to mention administrators tend to be evaluated highly, whereas agents who do the same are not. A possible explanation is that this results from differences in the roles of specialists and agents. The specialist is assigned the task of being a resource person. To a certain extent his availability to others as a resource person is determined by who is significant to him. If clients are significant to him, he makes himself available to them either directly or indirectly.

The agent is also assigned the role of being a resource person, but in a somewhat different fashion. Administrators don't expect him to be the source of all information. (He may be viewed in this manner by local clients!) But administrators do expect him to be the means for contact between sources and users of knowledge. If he is too oriented toward the client group, he may be viewed as not maintaining the desirable amount of contact with the university—specifically, Extension administrators. If he is primarily oriented to administration, he may not be making the expected contacts with the client group, again leading to low evaluation.

It is possible for specialists, also, to adopt an orientation toward either the internal system (the university) or the client groups. When the specialist adopts an orientation primarily to the university, he is not placing himself in a likely position to satisfactorily fulfill the resource person role. Since he is housed within a department on campus, he can maintain the desired amount of contact with the department without selecting this set of "relevant others" as "significant others." This may explain why specialists can select clients and not administrators and still be evaluated highly. For example,

it may be that, within Services not having specialists housed within departments, the specialists who would receive the highest evaluation might be those who select both members of their departments and clients as "significant others."

The social situation in which agents operate is somewhat different. He is regularly in contact with both local clients and other members of the Extension Service. His role, too, is flexible enough to allow him to emphasize either one or the other set of "relevant others." But, since he is expected by administrators to maintain contacts with both and to bring about contacts between the two, if he selects "significant others" from both sets of "relevant others" he tends to receive the highest evaluation.

Associations observed between forms of self-identification and evaluation are highly compatible with this interpretation. Those specialists who define themselves as subject-matter people are indicating that they are sources of knowledge—resource people. This is compatible with the general expectations held toward specialists by other members of the Service. Similarly, those agents who define themselves as coordinators or organizers are indicating they have accepted the role of bringing together different groups and categories of people. They are thereby more likely to perform their role in a fashion that would be highly regarded by administrators. Conversely, those agents who define themselves as sources of knowledge or experts in a given field are not highly evaluated since they are not expected to assume this type of primary responsibility.

Failure to observe any definite associations between the amount of written material produced and evaluation received or the selection of "significant others" poses some interesting questions. The amount of energy devoted to this type of effort is primarily one of personal interest and training and not a function of the person's "significant others" or of the evaluation received. This suggests that, if more or a different type of written material is desired, the reward system as it relates to writing must be examined.

It is apparent that this study does not supply answers to all organizational questions. It does suggest that a meaningful way of looking at Extension organization is in terms of the kind of organization and training and personnel selection procedures that provide the self-identification and orientation necessary for effective performance. The data clearly suggest that the same type of orientation and self-identification is not desired in all Extension people.