

## *Staff Competence*

**Promotion to a supervisory or administrative role is no guarantee  
of adequate preparation or effective performance**

**GEORGE HYATT, JR.**

TO BE effective, an organization must staff with the kinds of competence necessary to achieve its program objectives. Consequently, a clear set of objectives is a prerequisite to intelligent identification of areas of needed staff proficiency. An analysis of objectives for identifying areas of staff competence must be accompanied by an examination of positions at the several levels of the organization. If one assumes that the same skills are necessary for the specialist, the county agent in agriculture, 4-H, or home economics, the administrator, and the supervisor, he is grossly in error. It is essential to analyze the nature of the tasks performed in these positions at the several levels of the organization.

The county Extension agent is often faced with the problem of providing leadership in developing a total educational program at the county level. In this capacity, he must be capable of analyzing and identifying the relevant social and economic needs of the people within his county and also of determining how all the available resources might be brought to bear most effectively on existing problems. On the other hand, he is confronted with the problem of working individually and in groups with highly specialized farmers who may well have investments of more than a quarter of a million dollars in their farm enterprises. In brief, he is generally expected to function as an administrator, programmer, and technical specialist.

At times this situation creates a conflict in the agent's mind as to whether or not he should specialize in a specific area of technical agricultural subject matter or, rather, be broadly trained in adult education. This is no theoretical problem, but one that agents face in real-life situations. Other agents are faced with similar problems. Emphasis is being given to work with the disadvantaged element of

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society. This emphasis, as well as the movement to work with urban-based 4-H Club members and urban homemakers, presents new and unique challenges to those agents who have primary responsibility for these program areas.

Another dimension which must be considered relates to staffing. There is a trend toward larger county staffs. At the same time county Extension administrators are being designated. This opens another area of competence necessary for the person fulfilling an administrative role. The fact that a person is highly competent in a specific program area or in a particular area of subject matter does not necessarily guarantee that he will be a highly skilled administrator.

The area agent or area specialist's position is a relatively new one in Extension. This person generally works in four to six counties and has a two-dimensional function, as I see it. First of all, he provides close-up support for county Extension agents in terms of specialized help in a particular subject-matter area. In addition, he performs on a broader geographic base, much like a typical county agent, by developing programs that seek to solve problems that are area-wide in nature. If he is to provide specialized assistance to Extension agents, he obviously needs to be trained to a relatively high degree in a specific subject-matter field.

The specialist role is perhaps one of the most challenging in the Extension Service and is difficult to fulfill adequately. The subject-matter specialist must not only know his field, be able to understand and do research, but he must also be able to interpret research in a language that lay people as well as Extension agents can understand. It is difficult for me to perceive of county agents moving directly into a specialist role without some additional advanced formal training in the area of the specialty. Neither do I see a highly trained individual with little concept of adult education working with maximum effectiveness as an Extension specialist.

The lack of a clear concept of the function of adult education in Extension education and the need and desirability of performing his role can not only render an Extension specialist ineffective but it can also jeopardize the total Extension program. We might well look into the experiences in other fields of adult education where it has been demonstrated that the competent researcher or classroom teacher is not necessarily an effective adult educator.

Supervisors and administrators require competences that are quite different from those required of the Extension agent, the area specialist, or the state specialist. The mere promotion of a person to a supervisory or administrative role is no guarantee that he will

perform effectively or that he is adequately prepared for that role. Findings of several recent studies point out that the training of personnel is woefully lacking as employees move from specialist or agent roles into supervisory or administrative roles. Merely assigning to a supervisory position does not provide the competences needed to effectively perform in such a role. Graduate programs at the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, as well as at Cornell, Harvard, and the University of Chicago, have had a tremendous impact upon the effectiveness of our supervisory staff throughout the Extension Services.

The point has been stressed that different competences are needed for different positions, and different competences are necessary for different program areas. Eleven generalized areas of competence relevant to the Extension worker's job have been identified. However, it should be kept in mind that the level of competence in each area might be different for people occupying different positions.

1. *Extension workers need to understand the Cooperative Extension Service, its objectives, organization, and relationship to the Land-Grant institution.*

Findings of studies in education, psychology, sociology, and public administration support the proposition that the objectives and relationships within an organization must be defined and understood by those who are responsible for implementing its objectives. Adequate competence in this area is paramount for the effectiveness and success of the Extension worker. Without such knowledge, we cannot thoroughly understand our jobs, intelligently defend our profession, or suggest action to improve it.

2. *Extension workers need to know and understand technical subject matter appropriate to their needs and the needs of people with whom they work.*

Technology or technical subject matter is the core of Extension program content. All successful Extension educational efforts require significant technical subject matter or content appropriate to the problem. In order to effectively perform our role as educators, we must have adequate knowledge of subject matter related to our jobs and an understanding of its relationship to the problems of people. In this capacity, we must be proficient in analyzing and interpreting research data directly related to the subject-matter fields under study.

Our basic legislation states specifically that Extension's job is to

"aid in diffusing. . ." We must know what is to be diffused. If we are to maintain our position as educational leaders in this period of rapid change, we must have at our disposal the latest technical information on all problems of concern to the people with whom we work.

3. *Extension workers need to know and understand the principles and processes of programming and to have a high degree of proficiency in applying these concepts.*

The difficult task is seeking out pertinent facts, situations, and trends and synthesizing them into an educational program designed to meet the changing, complex needs of our clientele—a program that makes a maximum contribution to society. This problem is made difficult by the many changes which are occurring at phenomenal rates. There emerges from these changes one of the most crucial problems facing Extension today. What are the most effective and efficient means of: (1) determining the needs of the people served, and (2) working with them to plan and carry out an educational program to meet those needs?

Fortunately, there is evolving a body of theory concerning programming. Principles of effective planning and assumptions on which these theories are being developed are evolving out of: (1) research findings in the behavioral sciences, (2) controlled experiments in program development in Extension, and (3) critical study and analysis of experiences of Extension personnel. We are challenged to maintain a thorough understanding of the principles and processes of programming and to continue to strengthen our skills in applying these to actual situations.

4. *Extension workers need to know and understand the principles of learning and teaching and to have a high degree of proficiency in applying these principles.*

In order to teach, we need to understand the basic fundamentals of teaching and learning. Knowledge alone is not enough to stimulate desired action. Getting people to understand, accept and apply knowledge is a difficult task. A basic understanding of the teaching-learning process can greatly facilitate and enhance our efforts in planning for and effecting change among people.

5. *Extension workers need to understand and to have a high degree of proficiency in the communication process.*

Our effectiveness in influencing people is dependent upon: (1) our ability to select significant subject matter in line with the inter-

ests and needs of people; and (2) our ability to communicate it to them effectively. The importance of our knowing how to communicate, as Extension workers, is highlighted by the fact that our success as change agents is dependent upon how well we can get people to understand and act upon our recommendations.

6. *Extension workers need knowledge about and understanding of the structure and dynamics of human society.*

The neighborhood, community, county, state, and general society in which we live are constantly undergoing social change. The question is not whether there will be change. The questions are: In what direction will change take place? How rapidly will it take place? How can it be directed for the greatest individual and societal rewards with the least financial and social costs?

In planning, initiating, and effecting change among people, the Extension worker carries a heavy responsibility. Whenever he seeks to alter people's way of life, he is dealing with the well-being and happiness of generations. If his skill is poor and his judgment bad, he can destroy cooperative human relations and create feelings of animosity that will affect uncountable numbers of individuals. If, on the other hand, his skill is equal to the task, the possibility is open for creating cooperation where it did not exist and for bettering the lives of generations of people. The responsibility need not overawe, but it must impress each Extension worker with the necessity for the most careful training in understanding the structure and dynamics of human society as a basis for understanding and directing the change process.

7. *Extension workers need to understand human development processes and to maintain a high degree of skill in human relations.*

In order to achieve maximum success in changing people's behavior, the Extension worker needs to understand people, their behavior patterns, and the factors affecting these behavioral patterns. The lack of such an understanding can cause Extension workers to pursue courses of action in sharp conflict with people's beliefs and values. Extension workers and the other adult educators today face a major challenge to provide the kind of educational leadership that will fuse and blend the desires of the people with the objectives sought by the organization. We must fully understand our clientele and why they behave in a certain manner before we can plan and provide effective learning situations.

8. *Extension workers need to understand the principles of manage-*

*ment and to attain a high degree of proficiency in applying these principles.*

Perhaps the most significant shift in emphasis in Extension education in recent years has been toward management training. This shift has come about as a result of a recognition of the need for more effective and efficient utilization of human and physical resources on the farm, in the home, and in the community. These are times marked by rapidly changing technology, greater capitalization of business, more goods and services available, a high degree of specialization, and greater interdependence of production, marketing, and consumption. In such a situation, skill in management has a far-reaching influence on the welfare of the individual as well as on the society in which he lives.

Managerial skill has been defined as "the ability to make decisions that achieve goals in the most efficient manner." The skill of making decisions wisely can be learned. It can be applied by the individual, the family, the group, and the firm. It can help assure better individual incomes, higher levels of living, and a generally higher level of ability to make decisions; it also gives confidence to carry them out.

*9. Extension workers need to be informed about current issues and problems confronting the people and proficient in discussing them in an objective and informative manner with groups.*

People have always had to deal with controversial public problems. In recent years the scope and nature of such public problems have increased. These issues often transcend community, county, area, and state boundaries. The people are turning to us for help in acquiring facts concerning issues and for methods of analyzing and appraising such facts.

We have an important obligation to help rural and urban people understand public policy issues. With the complex interdependence of agriculture and other segments of the economy, no public policy can narrow its sights to a single economic or occupational group. Laws affecting agriculture may actually reflect the views of urban legislators to a greater extent than they do the views of rural legislators. Men and women in every segment of the economy realize that every public policy affects their welfare and influences the way they must manage their resources.

*10. Extension workers need to know and understand the principles of administration and supervision.*

As the Extension program has grown in scope and complexity, so

has the organization. In the past two decades, the number of Extension workers at state and county levels has almost doubled. In addition, new positions have been created at state and county levels. These developments have been welcomed by the professional staff and lay leaders; however, these gains have also created problems. In many instances, these changes have made coordination more difficult and have nurtured compartmentalization of programs.

In order to provide the type of leadership and support that is needed to develop and execute a successful program, Extension workers serving in leadership positions at the state and county levels need a comprehensive understanding of administration and supervision. The mission entrusted to Extension is too important to be left in the hands of persons who are not competent administrators.

*11. Extension workers need to know, understand, and be proficient in applying the principles and techniques of evaluation.*

In order to determine their effectiveness as educators, Extension workers must continually evaluate the Extension educational process and results obtained. Objective evidence is needed as a basis for initiating and continuing program activities. Continued and improved achievement in programs will depend to a large extent on how well we, as Extension workers, define and continue to improve the specifications for our many educational activities.

#### CONCLUSION

Perhaps one of the most significant trends that has taken place in recent years has been the increased amount of formal training beyond the baccalaureate degree for Extension workers at all levels. This has been motivated in part by the increasing level of education of our clientele and by the commitment of Extension workers to upgrading the level of the Extension profession.

I can identify several major points as salient considerations to be faced and problems to be solved if we are to maintain the kind of competence needed to continue an effective Cooperative Extension program:

1. The program objectives of the Cooperative Extension Service of each state must be clearly set forth and understood by members of the staff. Supervisors and administrators who have a responsibility for selecting staff members need to keep these objectives in mind as they search for personnel.
2. Adequate job descriptions are essential in selecting and training for the kind of competence necessary to meet the objectives.
3. There exists a recognized degree of competence general to all

Cooperative Extension employees. These competences may be needed in greater depth by some staff members than by others, but they provide a framework around which we can organize our personnel selection, our in-service training, and our graduate education for all Extension personnel.

4. Non-specialized agents can best serve if they are prepared in such areas as principles of management or family life education and adult education.
5. Area and state Extension specialists need to concentrate their training and be highly competent in their technical subject-matter areas. They need to be specialists in fact as well as in name. In addition, some understanding of the educational processes and programming is imperative if they are to be effective in their role. Expertness in technical subject matter should be a condition of employment.
6. State Extension organizations need to identify the supervisory and administrative personnel to be needed in the next four or five years and provide opportunity for these candidates to receive training in supervision and administration prior to assuming new roles in the organization.
7. Extension personnel at all levels need to be more knowledgeable about research in the field of adult education.
8. County Extension agents need to increase their formal academic training to the Master's level if they are to be effective members of the Cooperative Extension Service team. The nature of this graduate training will depend upon the direction they intend to move within the organization. For effectiveness at the county level, attention needs to be given to education, psychology, and sociology as well as to further training in the technical subject-matter fields.
9. State subject-matter specialists need to hold the doctorate in their area of specialization when they join a staff, or to acquire this formal training within a short period afterward. Additional training in education and the behavioral sciences is highly desirable.
10. As the Cooperative Extension Service assumes roles that are broader in nature, traditional agriculture and home economics competences available within the college of agriculture and home economics will need to be supplemented from other segments of the university, either through cooperative arrangements with other facets of the Land-Grant institution or by hiring people with these competences.