

Administrative Climate

**Climate in an organization is not fixed—
it can be created and altered by those
with leadership responsibility**

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ACCUMULATING evidence supports the idea that an organization serves as more than a means through which resources (such as personnel, finances, materials) are assembled and managed. Evidence suggests that the manner in which resources are assembled and the way in which they are managed can have an important bearing on the total and sustained productivity of an organization. This appears especially to be the case in organizations whose output depends largely on the contribution of individual members of its staff—and even more so in organizations whose purposes and products are intangible (for example, in the Extension Service).

The manner in which organizational resources are assembled and managed depends upon the performance of those with administrative responsibilities. In an organization such as Extension, administrative tasks are performed by all professional personnel who have assignments that require planning for and with, supervising, and appraising the efforts of others—either other professionals, lay leaders, or clientele. Personnel with these responsibilities have the opportunity to influence the milieu (environment, setting) in which others are to function and, presumably, to be productive contributors in helping achieve the organization's objectives. Levinson¹ refers to the relationship between man and organization as a "process of reciprocation." He maintains that this concept explains the meaning of the organization to the man and vice versa and provides

¹ Harry Levinson, "Reciprocation: The Relationship between Man and Organization," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, IX (March, 1965), 370-90.

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the basis for better understanding morale and motivation, leadership and training problems, job evaluation and personnel selection, and role performance.

We are not talking about the physical structure of an organization (its organizational chart, who reports to whom, how many levels of supervision there are in the organization); we're talking about the atmosphere that exists (that is created) and within which a staff functions. For the purposes of this paper and this issue of the *Journal*, we're calling this atmosphere the "administrative climate."² We're not talking about a climate that would merely insure that all organizational participants be happy and content. We're talking about an organization functioning at the peak of its productive potential in which also employees find satisfaction, reward, and challenge in their efforts, and make their optimum contribution.

Justification for devoting an issue of the *Journal* to such a "theme" is predicated on the proposition that "administrative climate" is not a given—not a predetermined, unchangeable condition set by the structure, source of financing, and the like. It is proposed that the climate in an organization is not fixed—that those with administrative (supervisory) responsibilities not only create but can alter such climate. They create climate through such means as the way they perform their responsibilities, by the manner in which they relate to others in the organization (above, below and on a level with them in the organizational structure), by the expertise they bring to their job, by the way they view their responsibilities to others and the organization. Rensis Likert³ describes effective supervision as an "adaptive and relative process" wherein ". . . a leader, to be effective, must always adapt his behavior to fit expectations, values, and interpersonal skills of those with whom he is interacting."

This issue of the *Journal* is designed to bring some of the emerging notions and research evidence to the attention of those who desire to see the Extension Service continue to be dynamic, forceful, and increasingly productive and effective.

This article is intended to "set the stage" for other papers in the issue (each of which can stand on its own as an important contribution to our possible understanding of how an organization can be

² An "innovative atmosphere," as characterized by Thompson, illustrates part of this idea. He contrasts the outcomes of an innovative atmosphere to that of control-centered management. See Victor A. Thompson, "Administrative Objectives for Development Administration," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, IX (June, 1964), 91-108.

³ Rensis Likert, "Effective Supervision: An Adaptive and Relative Process," *Personnel Psychology*, XI (Autumn, 1958), 317-28.

made to function more productively and effectively). Ideas not covered in the major papers in this issue will be introduced here and dealt with only briefly. As with this paper, the entire issue is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the theme—rather as a way of introducing worthwhile ideas related to it.

ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE

As a background for contemplating the “administrative climate” of an Extension organization, it may be useful to consider some of the features which contribute to its somewhat unique character:

1. Cooperative Extension generally operates on the assumption that programs will be unique, adapted to local needs and conditions. That assumption is manifested in the involvement of clientele in program planning, and in the requirement of separate plans of work from counties and states.

2. The great bulk of Extension personnel is concentrated at the local level and activities at the state and federal levels are generally, if not exclusively, regarded as supportive. Compared to other bureaucratic organizations, Cooperative Extension is “flat” in structure with broad spans of control.

3. While Extension personnel are probably as subject as members of other organizations to the attractions of personal and organizational advancement, the stated values of the organization focus on benefits the programs bring to its clientele. Activities and programs are justified on this basis, difficult as measurement in these terms may be. This pragmatic orientation pervades Cooperative Extension. This type of organization has been characterized as a “service organization.” The client group (the part of the public in direct contact with the organization) is the prime beneficiary.⁴ With major emphasis on getting the job done, and rather less on method, Extension uses informal and unstructured techniques of education.

4. Perhaps the outstanding characteristic of Extension’s organizational landscape is that its activities and personnel are scattered. Even where comparatively large staffs exist, activities tend to be individual. In the county, even the closest senior/assistant agent relationship does not permit the close and frequent observation which characterizes supervision elsewhere. The individual worker operates, for the most part, in the absence of fellow professionals. State-level supervision of county workers is even more sketchy. Administration and supervision of specialists is still less complete. Despite

⁴See Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, *Formal Organizations: A Comparative Approach* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 51-54.

the fact that most specialists are based close at hand, many of their activities are conducted in the field. In any case, supervision seldom includes observation of teaching activities and is often limited by considerations of professional expertise or academic freedom.

5. Extension's professional staff is composed of college graduates, often with advanced degrees. Whether or not they hold faculty appointments, they operate in the same general tradition as the academic staff. They expect to, and are expected to, exercise professional judgment in their work. As professionals, they expect, and are generally accorded, the freedom to go with that responsibility.

DEMANDS ON PERSONNEL

In order for an organization to function there are certain demands made of its personnel:

1. If administration is truly adaptive by nature, there can be no specific rules which will work well in all situations. However, it is characteristic of organizations that they do have generalized rules that are applied to almost all situations, even though the rules may not fit. To be effective, functioning in the absence of close supervision, the individual must understand the organization for which he works. He must be aware of the resources it places at his disposal and the limits it imposes upon him. He must know it well enough to predict the actions of other members and to understand what is expected of him. At a minimum, he must know where to get help.
2. If the employee is to perform intelligently and independently—and the circumstances described above demand that he do so—he must know and accept the goals of the organization. These provide the criteria by which he evaluates his own projected actions. Only with close and coercive supervision, if then, can an employee be expected to work toward ends which he does not accept. One function of administration in Cooperative Extension must be to communicate and gain acceptance for its basic objectives.
3. An atmosphere of expectation demands initiative and creativity on the part of the employee. He must be prepared to respond with initiative and creativity if an atmosphere exists which will permit and encourage such response. The climate in most organizations is not characterized by such an atmosphere. But it should be.

ASPECTS OF CLIMATE

The decision to devote an issue to this theme was triggered by a comment on personnel plateauing, referred to by Morrill and Mor-

will in their article.⁵ The significant question is: Why do personnel reach a plateau in their productivity? We know it exists (it can be observed happening). We don't know the specifics of why. We do know from observation that it can be overcome, but often drastic measures are necessary.

Do conditions exist in Extension that are conducive to personnel plateauing? Evidence from a study conducted with Minnesota county agricultural agents is worth contemplating.⁶ When Swanson asked agents what they would like to be doing five years hence, 45 per cent (as a first choice) reported wanting to be in some position other than the one they then occupied. The concern is not that a big portion of the personnel aspired to other positions (presumably with increased responsibilities and opportunities for contributing to the organization's purposes). The concern is this: If these are personnel the organization wishes to retain, what can be done to assure their continued productivity? Obviously there are not enough positions existing at the area, district, and/or state levels to accommodate 45 per cent of the organization's personnel within the next five years. (Titles could be changed to make it appear that assignments had changed, but that's not likely to be the solution in the long run.) Can anything be done? Evidence presented in other papers in this issue suggests a resounding "Yes."

Expectations

An interesting notion not dealt with specifically by other papers in the issue is that of "expectations." What impact do the expectations of the organization (co-workers, supervisors, those supervised) have upon personnel? In a study of careers of managers in large industrial organizations, Berlew and Hall⁷ found that something happens during the first year of employment which has a strong impact on a trainee's career. They found that company expectations in the first year were more strongly related to later success than was performance in that year—yet both expectations and first year performance were related to later success. As a result of their findings the researchers speculate that meeting high expectations in the critical first year leads to internalizing positive job attitudes and

⁵ See J. Glenn Morrill and Olive L. Morrill, "Personnel Plateauing and Motivation," this issue.

⁶ Harold B. Swanson, "Factors Associated with Motivation toward Professional Development of County Agricultural Extension Agents in Minnesota" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1965).

⁷ David E. Berlew and Douglas T. Hall, "The Socialization of Managers: Effects of Expectations on Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, XI (September, 1966), 207-23.

high standards. Such attitudes and standards would lead to high performance and success in later years.

Sanction System

Another phenomenon worth noting is the sanction system of the organization. Are rewards (salary increases, promotions, recognitions) visibly, obviously, and directly related to the espoused objectives—or are they tied more visibly and obviously to peripheral criteria? Warner and Havens⁸ say that “what is sanctioned tends to be what can be evaluated, and what can be evaluated tends to be what is visible, tangible, traditional, measurable.” They suggest that the sanction system provides a better basis for predicting the action of the organization or its personnel than do organizational objectives—if goals and sanctions do not coincide.

There is evidence that “management gets what it inspects”—the supervised takes his cue from his supervisors (not from what the supervisor says, but what he does). What the supervised observes his supervisor doing—what the supervisor spends time doing, how he approaches problems, what commands his attention—is what is important. If the supervisor devotes his time to matters not concerned with the central purposes of the organization, then these must be the important matters. Consequently, the supervisor is emulated by those he supervises. Laitin⁹ says that whatever receives management’s attention and time is exactly what subordinates give back. Whatever is assigned, checked upon, looked into, rewarded and punished, is what the staff will do. Management reaps what it sows!

It is not enough to expect achievement; it must be rewarded when it is in line with organizational goals. The knowledge that good performance will be recognized is an essential part of a healthy administrative climate. The process is complicated, however. The nature of the reward or penalty is important. It is common to think of money or position in this connection. But these are not the only things of value. In fact, they may be relatively unimportant in comparison to recognition. (A quick and “completely unscientific” survey of one group of Extension workers revealed that being called to the state office on a genuine consultation regarding program is the ultimate accolade.) In every organization

⁸ W. Keith Warner and A. Eugene Havens, “Goal Displacement and the Intangibility of Organizational Goals,” paper presented at a meeting of the American Sociological Association, Miami Beach, Florida, August 29-September 1, 1966, pp. 16-18 (mimeographed).

⁹ Yale J. Laitin, “Human Relations Research—A Key to Productivity,” *Management of Personnel Quarterly*, III (Spring, 1964), 8-14.

there are specific conventions that carry connotations of reward or penalty far beyond their objective properties. The important thing is that it is the receiver who determines the value of rewards.

The nature of achievement is also perceptual to some degree. Everyone evaluates his own work and regards some of it as better or more important than others. Problems are created if performance that the worker sees as good goes unnoticed or if indifferent work is rewarded. Consistency in giving and withholding rewards is vital.

Security

Security seems to be fostered by a sense that the supervisor can give help or has access to help. This demands that the supervisor be seen as upward influential—with power to intercede with the “boss.” It also demands that he know enough about the job to offer help or at least to find help when problems arise. Security is closely associated with an atmosphere of expectation.

The employee must see himself as having the freedom to fail in a good try for an important end. Taking initiative means taking a chance, and people don't take chances if the costs of failure are too high! This freedom can't be extended indefinitely, of course, but it must be present in some degree if initiative is desired.

Finally, security depends on predictability. The expectations toward the employee must be consistent with each other and the ways in which they are expressed must also be consistent. Administration demands communication and communication demands behavior which can be interpreted accurately.

Rules and Surveillance

While it has been pointed out that direct observation (surveillance) is difficult to manage in Extension (and it is costly), rules may not be as difficult to achieve. The necessity for imposing either may result from the failure of personnel to produce or perform as expected. This is particularly true where rules and surveillance are directly concerned with the level of participant performance. According to Rushing¹⁰ formal rules and surveillance will be greater when personnel fail to attain minimum performance levels. However, rules and surveillance do not always achieve the desired results. Stringent controls of behavior may result in reduced motivation and productivity—the condition they were created to correct.

¹⁰ See William A. Rushing, “Organizational Rules and Surveillance: Propositions in Comparative Organization Analysis,” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, X (March, 1966), 423-43.

This is not to say that there should not be guides as to performance standards or records of performance. Statistical records of performance (results achieved) may provide the employee a basis for appraising his own productivity (increase his direction and hence his job satisfaction) and serve as a means for effective supervisor/subordinate relationships.¹¹

The dispersed organization of Cooperative Extension may lead to a greater need for rules than if it were small and compact. (A study of the Forestry Service reveals that performance in keeping with organizational objectives can be achieved in a widely dispersed staff.)¹² A good climate demands, however, that rules be kept to an absolute minimum and that, rather than limiting initiative, they aid in understanding the organization. Violation of this precept may not only lower productivity, but may result in the loss of creative staff members—as well as creating the need for even more rules.

CONCLUSION

With the attention presently being given to organization (and reorganization) in Extension, careful, considered thought and discussion of the ideas treated in this issue of the *Journal* seem warranted. Organizational and administrative changes that are occurring can appropriately be described as drastic and potentially far reaching (e.g., naming of one person with administrative responsibilities for county staffs, area specialization and staffing, mergings). Increased productivity and efficiency do not result automatically from alterations in an organization. It may be possible to achieve momentary vigor as a result of the activity necessary to achieve a reorganization, but unless regenerative powers are built into the new organization and its procedures, the final outcome may be less than anticipated. The desired administrative climate appears to be one that (1) assures maximum productivity toward achieving the organization's objectives and (2) is, at the same time, most rewarding and satisfying to those participating.

Perhaps ideas introduced in this issue can be elaborated later in more detail—many of them deserve to be. And there are other ideas related to the topic of "administrative climate" which we hope to treat in subsequent issues of the *Journal*.

¹¹ See Blau and Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-80.

¹² See Herbert Kaufman, *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), pp. 197-200.