

The Agent as an Analyst

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As a change agent, the Extension worker plays many roles. It has been suggested that the role of analyst is the one role critical to the success of such a change agent. Using case histories of four agents who worked successively in one position, the author shows how—and why—two agents were successful and two were not. He emphasizes that an agent must continually analyze the work environment so as to make relevant definitions of problems and keep informed of the most appropriate role strategies for relating to the client.

EXTENSION AGENTS are often called "change agents." And the work environment in which the Extension agent relates to the client group focuses mainly in a concern for change. In this environment, the Extension worker is expected to play a number of roles, either singly or in combination. Some of these roles involve maintenance of the work environment, whereas others involve more the way an agent relates to the work environment and especially to the client aspect of it. The latter roles can all be subsumed under the rubric of change agent. By "change agent," I mean an individual who plays purposive roles designed to influence the process of change in a specific situation.¹ The roles, defined with the client as referent, are:

1. *Analyst*—the agent's main commitment is to interpret a situation for a client.
2. *Advisor*—the main commitment is to advise a client regarding alternatives applicable to a given situation.
3. *Advocator*—the main commitment is to recommend to a client one from among a number of alternatives.
4. *Innovator*—the main commitment to the client is to create an innovation to satisfy a specific client need.

¹For a more complete discussion of the change-agent roles which follow, see Art Gallaher, Jr., and Frank Santopolo, "Perspectives on Agent Roles," this issue.

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It has been suggested that of these roles, analyst is the one that is critical to the success of a change agent.²

The definition of "analyst" given above is one based on relationship to the client, and it is obvious that this aspect accounts mainly for the critical significance of the role. It is, after all, only through analysis that an agent can comprehend the client's definition of a problem and assist him in its solution. At the same time, there are other aspects of the work environment which are equally critical for an agent's success and which depend upon his analytical skills. Let us explore the latter point further and look especially at (1) how analysis bears on the success of an agent new to a situation, and (2) how it bears on his success in making a realistic definition of his work environment. In either case, we are interested in how analysis enables the agent to adjust to a work environment so as to insure his greater acceptance by the clients.

The problem area that we will investigate is the strategy an agent uses to initiate contact and to establish a working relationship with members of a client group—how he analyzes and responds to his work environment. The client group in this case consists mainly of farmers in a rural county that we shall call Woodland,³ in the northern foothills of the Ozark Mountains, in Missouri. Data cover 15 years of full-time Extension work in the county. The base-line data were recorded 1939-40.⁴ I studied the same area in 1954-55, and interviewed many of the principals who bear on the case.⁵ Of the four agents involved, two were available for interviews, one was out of the country, and one was deceased. Even though the data are not recently collected, and specifics of roles may have changed, this analysis is pertinent to current situations. It focuses on the manner of analysis and response rather than the specifics of the role, as will become more evident later in this article, under the heading "interaction."

AGENT ADJUSTMENT TO ENVIRONMENT

The first full-time Extension agent, Roy Perkins, came to Woodland County in 1938. He found mostly small, family-type, low-income farm units, operating mainly at a subsistence level effort. Relatively isolated from outside contact, the county had a reputation as being backward and resistant to change. However, isolation was

²Gallaher and Santopolo, *op. cit.*

³All names of places and persons have been altered.

⁴James West, *Plainville, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945).

⁵Art Gallaher, Jr., *Plainville Fifteen Years Later* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

crumbling and the people were being pressed to change their traditional way of life. The main points of pressure, all resisted in varying degrees, were New Deal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), Works Projects Administration (WPA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), and Social Security (administering direct relief).

Perkins was aware of two potential sources of trouble: (1) the people were not receptive to modern farm practices and he would therefore need to sell his programs; and (2) the county was a traditional Republican stronghold, and to gain personal acceptance he should therefore be discreet about his own Democratic party affiliation. These two problems merged in the client system so that they complicated his relating to members of the client group.

The formal resistance to scientific agriculture was made known early—the County Court would not appropriate funds or help Perkins secure office space. The rationale for the refusal was that funds were short, but interviews in 1954 reveal that the decision was based on the sentiment that Extension simply was not needed.

The only alternative was to put Extension in the same office with AAA. This was unfortunate because, of all the New Deal programs, AAA conflicted most with the traditional ideals of the client group. With both organizations in the same office, the client group assumed a formal link between them. This confusion multiplied when Perkins had to spend some of his time propagandizing for the AAA. To most people, then, Extension represented “another unwanted program of the Democrats.”

Perkins set out to sell specific programs by working through leaders who, once sold, could function as legitimizers for others in the client system. However, as Perkins related it:

Unfortunately, our early leaders were political leaders, and Democrats on top of that. We spent an awful lot of time overcoming resistance to the organization . . . not so much to what we were trying to sell, although there was some of that, too, but to the Extension setup itself.

Thus, the agent was confronted by clients who were mainly Republican and who, for the most part, rejected Extension as a New Deal reform program of the Democrats. Furthermore, the agent's strategy for contacting and maintaining relationships with these clients could not succeed because only the minority Democrats would cooperate. He was very sensitive to his own role strain⁹ at the

⁹ Goode defines “role strain” as “the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations.” See William J. Goode, “A Theory of Role Strain,” *American Sociological Review*, XXV (August, 1960), 483-96.

point, and, analyzing the situation, realized that to follow his original course would only increase tensions. So he changed his tactics. He spent less time trying to work through groups and their leaders, and instead shifted to an education campaign based on personal contacts designed to "sell the individual man." He seized on every opportunity to meet farmers individually and to interpret Extension and economic needs to them. In his contacts, he stressed (1) the need to consider change; (2) the fact that Extension, represented by him, was *the* organization to provide the change needed; and (3) that the place to start was on local herd development.

Perkins was eventually highly successful. He gained the acceptance of Extension and of himself as a representative of the organization, and by his efforts left a seemingly indelible imprint on the *personal contact character of the role of change agent*. In the minds of many, agent and agency merged into one.

Largely through personal contacts, in which he interpreted individual situations and "did a lot of selling," Perkins guided the interest of the client group toward herd improvement. This was reflected in the large number who sought vaccination for their animals, the purchase of 75 purebred bulls, and new attention to feeding practices. In addition, largely through personal contacts, Perkins established a firm image of Extension as an innovative agency, and, with its focus on herd improvement, one that firmly understood the client group's needs. He left an image of the agent as one who is informed, who is motivated and competent to do *analysis* both at the individual and group levels, and who, as a consequence of analysis, accepts major responsibility as an *advocator*.

Perkins' Replacement

Perkins was succeeded in Woodland County by Al Morgan. Morgan felt strongly that an agent should work through groups rather than through personal contacts. Extensive interviews with individual clients and examination of records show no indication that Morgan attempted to analyze his work environment, nor that he paid any particular attention to the successful strategy of his predecessor-agent. There is ample evidence, too, that he was not successful, and that he felt role strain.

As time went on, however, he adapted to the situation by curtailing his role relationships so as to focus on programs where he could manage with some success, even though within a limited segment of the client group. He concentrated on poultry, and since women managed such matters, this meant that most of his cooperators were

females. This earned him the scorn of most men, who still joke that he was "the best women's agent we ever had," and who still deride certain of his mannerisms as attempts to be attractive to the women. Even the women who worked with Morgan had little respect for him, and made jokes about "our home agent" and the fact that he was so attentive to their problems.

Morgan did establish one neighborhood group which he hoped would combine social and farm-education functions. Social affairs of the group were well attended, but the men who came rejected extending educational functions beyond homemaking and poultry. The net effect was to further consolidate in the minds of the clients an image of Morgan as a "woman's agent."

In contrast to Perkins, then, Morgan never successfully established viable linkages with the client system, nor did he stress the need for change. Rather, he insisted that professional contact with the client group be through its leaders. Because he did not establish links with individual members, he was called "lazy." And because he did not follow through with a strong push for herd improvement, there was the more damaging criticism that his competence terminated with poultry. Even the most elementary analysis of the work environment would have shown that Woodland had never been a strong poultry county, and that poultry management was not a highly valued specialty. Morgan's decision to stress poultry was, therefore, particularly damaging to his image. The client interest in herd improvement and specialization continued during Morgan's tenure, but largely because of the momentum already started by Perkins and because of good market conditions during World War II.

Client dissatisfaction with Morgan was high. Shortly before his departure, some persons agitated quietly for his removal. He left little impression that he was interested in analysis, by understanding either his work environment or the needs of particular clients; and, except for poultry, he was not an active advocate. His main emphasis seems to have been as advisor—not advice based on analysis, but rather that which grew out of his own interests and security.

A Third Agent

After four years, Morgan was succeeded by Joe Matthews. Matthews moved from another county where he was serving under Roy Perkins as an assistant agent. It is clear that Matthews understood the situation he inherited, and he set about restoring confidence in Extension and the role of the agent. He patterned his methods after

Perkins', and, if anything, gave even greater emphasis to individual and personal contacts in the client group.

Matthews was a man who really got out and moved around. . . . You could ask him a question in town and he'd be right out on yore place by the time you got home . . . never had to ask him to come out neither. . . . Every place you stopped they'd know Matthews.

In addition, Matthews continued Perkins' stress on the need for change. However, he placed local changes within the broader framework of region, state, and nation, and constantly played up innovations and their advocacy by Extension. Perkins had also done this, but the climate for alternatives was much improved by the time Matthews came to the county.

Matthews got more things done, and advanced more ideas than anyone else we have had. . . . He had ideas for the county that went beyond agriculture . . . he always thought in terms of general improvement, not just agricultural improvement. . . . He was a good stock man, and continually emphasized quality animals and production.

Matthews, then, followed closely the role set by Perkins: personal contact as a main tactic, and stress on the need for change and the function of Extension to provide it. He restored confidence in the agent's analytical role as a way of making change rational; the clients felt he knew what he was talking about, and trusted him to interpret and assist with the solution to individual problems. They felt he worked hard to understand the needs of the county, and they trusted his ability to advise on alternatives and, most importantly, to reduce alternatives to logical choices. In line with this, Matthews aggressively pushed the role of advocate. He insisted, for example, that the client group should feel that the agent *is* responsible for bringing innovations to their attention. With the groundwork laid by Perkins, diminishing isolation of the county, better prices, and a client group now responsive to technological change, Matthews far exceeded the pioneer efforts of his mentor.

The Fourth Agent

After six years, Matthews resigned and was succeeded by Mack Davis. At the time of my research, Davis had been on the job four years, and though Extension was well accepted and he was liked personally by many people, the client group did not consider him a successful agent.

Interviews with Davis revealed that his conception of the agent's role was mainly that of advisor. To him, an agent is a technical spe-

cialist to whom people come for advice; and to make his advice available, an agent should cultivate group leaders.

Davis felt that personal contact demeaned the professional status of the agent by putting him in the service of the client! He resented, for example, a farmer saying he sometimes "used" an Extension agent. Davis, therefore, minimized personal visits as a contact mechanism; he tried to enlist cooperation by impersonal means—news releases, letters, and circulars—and through existing groups. He sought to redefine his role to that of a technical specialist available for consultation on farm problems. Consistent with his stress on the advisor role, Davis was enthusiastic about his newspaper column. However, since in the column he did not distinguish the segment of the client group he was addressing, he was often criticized for being irrelevant. In fact, a frequent criticism was that Davis was not close enough to the situation, i.e., *he was not analytical*, that he was apt to stress the wrong things at the wrong time! He was criticized for interpreting local needs by what he had learned "as a student" rather than from an understanding of the local situation.

Furthermore, Davis was not as aggressive about the potential for change that inhered in Extension as Perkins and Matthews had been. This was unfortunate, since by now the client group had come to value innovation, especially in agricultural technology, and Extension's advocacy function in innovation. Davis seemed oblivious to the success of two of his predecessors, or the reasons for it.

Davis did not succeed in defining his role mainly as an advisor. He, too, felt role strain. For example, he cast blame for his failures upon the client group: "If it rains soup, some people will turn their bowls upside-down." He also erected barriers by going outside the county to attend church, trade, and do much of his social visiting. Within the county, he worked mainly with a small group of cooperators, many of whom, unfortunately for his image, were relative newcomers to the area. He was most successful in 4-H Club work, and was pegged as a "kid's agent."

Davis was criticized by some as unfriendly, aloof, and incapable of interacting. When he did occasionally visit with a client, he did not always have something in particular to talk about. Since he was not an aggressive advocate, his actions were interpreted as not knowing his job. This was a particularly damaging criticism, since the client group expected him to have a strong commitment to the role. Some who supported Extension as an organization, accommodated to Davis' definition of his role and sought to contact him at his office. However, he was not always in, and this led to further criticism. There was even quiet agitation for his removal.

INTERPRETATION

We have looked at the personal adjustment styles of four incumbents in a particular position. In all four cases, as agents new in the work environment, they felt role strain. The two agents judged successful by the client group analyzed their work environment carefully and each did it early in his tenure. Out of this understanding, they related to the client system mainly through personal rather than group contacts. (There is no intent to imply that this method is equally applicable to all cases; only that in this situation, analysis showed that it was needed.) In the relationship thus established, these two agents projected role images of themselves as being competent and willing to analyze and thereby understand the needs of the client group. It is clear that they saw the definition of problems as part of their role. Working from this frame of reference, they stressed the agent's responsibilities to advocate.

The two men who were judged unsuccessful did not properly analyze their work environment. Rather, they saw themselves as agricultural specialists who were there to advise farmers on problems which the farmers should define. Thus, their job was to react to problems rather than to define or discover them or to assist a client in interpreting his needs. Neither agent established relationships with the client group of the kind that his two more successful counterparts had. Nor did he do the kind of analysis necessary to understand the strategy of relating to the client. The two agents *assumed* that the strategy of contact had to be in a group situation. Furthermore, they saw their role as advisor; they stressed neither analysis nor advocacy roles. In each case, the clients took this to mean that the agents did not know their business; one became known as a "woman's agent," the other a "kid's agent." Many people liked the unsuccessful agents personally, but the evaluations of them as agents rested more on what the clients perceived the agents' roles to be.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest a view of the agent's work environment which should predispose him to greater sensitivity to the analyst role. He should, for example, see his work environment as containing (1) a knowledge center, where the service organization—Cooperative Extension—is located, and (2) a client group, which is the main beneficiary of that service. From this vantage point, the business of Extension is problems, i.e., the *identification* of and subsequent *solution* to needs in the client system. Tensions, in the sense that there is a constant environmental challenge to the client, combined with an adjustment by the client that never

achieves perfection, are intrinsic to the work environment. Thus, it is *normal* and also *normative* for Extension to be engaged in the problems of the client. The absence of problems is an *abnormal* situation, and either denies the need for Extension to exist or means that the job of analysis is not well done. In other words, an agent can never assume an ideal model of his work environment, nor can he assume the client's ability to render an accurate interpretation of a problem and of the agent's role in coping with problems. He must continually analyze the work environment so as to make relevant definitions of problems and keep informed of the most appropriate role strategies for relating to the client.

This total system—which includes both Extension and the client—is best viewed as a *tension management system*.⁷ And since the Extension agent has main responsibility to link the client to the knowledge center, we can view his position, regardless of the change-agent role played at a given moment, as a *manager of tension*. Thus, to confront problems is to him the normal order of business; to understand problems is to be *analytical* and, hopefully, the normative *modus operandi*.

If he succeeds as a change agent, he reduces the strain in a given problem area, and is thereby able to manage tensions that inhere in the felt need of a client. However, if he is not successful, especially as an analyst, he is apt to increase tension in the client system by either giving the wrong answers to the right questions, or, worse still, giving answers to questions yet to be asked! This presentation is intended to bring such a problem into clearer focus.

⁷ For a more detailed explanation of the tension-management view of systems, see Wilbert E. Moore and Arnold S. Feldman, "Society as a Tension Management System," in George Baker and Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr. (eds.), *Behavioral Science and Civil Defense Disaster Research Group*, Study No. 16 (Washington: National Academy of Science, National Research Council, 1962), pp. 93-105; and Wilbert E. Moore, *Social Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), especially chs. 1 and 4.

WE LIVE IN AN AGE of rapid social change and unprecedented increase of new knowledge and scientific invention. In such an age we must do all in our power to strengthen our great system of formal education. But we must not stop there. We must also recognize that a free society today demands that we keep on learning or face the threat of national deterioration. —JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY