

Perspectives on Agent Roles

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The Extension agent works in a social system that has two parts: a knowledge center and a client group. The agent functions in this work environment to link the resources of the knowledge center to the needs of the client system. In so doing, he is expected to play, either singly or in combination, the roles of analyst, advisor, advocator, and/or innovator. The authors define and discuss these four roles, in the attempt to help the Extension worker to better understand his work environment as he performs as a change agent.

THE Extension agent's work environment is a social system in which the parts exist in an orderly arrangement and according to some scheme or plan. A basic thesis of this paper is that the agent functions to link the parts together, and that his roles are to be understood with this function in mind. By "role" we mean the behavior that is expected of a person when he is involved in a given situation as an Extension agent.

From the agent's vantage point, the system in which he works has two parts: a *knowledge center*, which he contacts mainly through the Cooperative Extension Service; and a *client group*, which he contacts individually or through a sponsoring lay board, such as an Extension Council, 4-H Council, or special interest group. From the knowledge center, he derives role identity, i.e., as an employee of Cooperative Extension. From the client group, he derives primary role commitments, i.e., definition of his responsibilities to the local population. These responsibilities may in fact be discharged in relationships involving person-to-person contact, or agent contact with special interest groups.

In this paper we hope to provide the Extension worker with an

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analytical model that will enable him to better understand the work environment as he performs as a change agent. We believe this understanding will come more easily if the focus is primarily on agent roles, rather than on specific task or job definitions. This, in turn, should lead to more specific definition of the agent's responsibilities in any given situation. This specificity should better enable him to set the priority of professional action necessary to meet the responsibilities to both client and knowledge center.

The outstanding characteristic of the Extension agent's work environment is that it brings into focus a concern for guiding change through a planned educational process. In gross terms, an agent functions in this process to link the resources of the knowledge center to the needs of the client system. Because of the nature of the agent's activity, it is accurate to think of him as a professional *change agent*.¹ By "change agent" we mean an individual who plays purposive roles designed to influence the process of change in a specific situation.

In Cooperative Extension work, the change agent's relation to a client is conditioned by the pervasive philosophy that (1) an agent's responsibility, broadly defined, is to help people help themselves, and (2) that the client should be involved in programs which have him as the ultimate target. People more readily accept innovations that they understand and perceive as relevant, and that they have had a hand in planning.²

THE ROLES OF A CHANGE AGENT

An Extension agent may play roles which do not bear directly on the client system and which do not involve inducing change in the client. These "maintenance roles" grow out of office supervision, clerical responsibilities, and other duties which fall under the general notion of "operations." These roles are not the concern of this paper. We are more concerned with those roles which link the Extension agent to a concern for change in the client system, that is, those roles that make of him a change agent and an important functionary in an educational process.

¹For a discussion of the concept of change agent, see especially Ronald Lippitt et al., *The Dynamics of Planned Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1958).

²See Auren Uris, *The Management Makers* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962), pp. 91-164; Kurt Lewin, "Group Decision and Social Change," in T. Newcomb and E. Hartley (eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949), pp. 330-44; and Art Gallaher, Jr., "The Role of the Advocate and Director of Change," in Wesley C. Meierhenry (ed.), *Media and Educational Innovation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 23-50.

The conception of roles presented here emphasizes the behavior expected from an agent in a specific situation, regardless of subject-matter content involved.³ Viewed in this way, the change agent is expected to play, either singly or in combination, the following roles:

1. *Analyst*—the change agent's main commitment is to interpret a situation for the client.
2. *Advisor*—the agent's main commitment is to present to the client alternatives applicable to a given situation.
3. *Advocator*—the change agent's main commitment is to recommend to the client one from among a number of alternatives.
4. *Innovator*—the agent's main commitment is to create an innovation to satisfy a special need of the client. (We do not restrict the concept "innovator" to the social relationship between an initial and later adopter, both members of the client group. Rather, our focus is on the relationship between a professional change agent and a client.)

We should stress that an agent's success in each role derives particularly from his technical knowledge and background experience in subject-matter areas. Equally important are his knowledge and experience in program planning and evaluation processes.

Analyst

A client frequently feels the need to understand a particular problem area. He is not concerned with obtaining advice nor, at the moment, even solutions. In such cases it is not uncommon for him to request that an agent analyze a given situation. For instance, a farmer who thinks he has done everything he was supposed to do may ask the agent simply, "Why did I lose money *this* year?" He expects to be told why, and this requires in-depth analysis of the total operation. This means carefully examining all available data and assisting the farmer to appreciate the need for objective analysis of his operation. If such data are incomplete, the agent then has a lever to sensitize the farmer to the need to be fully informed and to the value of maintaining records to achieve that end. This may mean the difference between success and failure in farming.

It is important for the agent to know when only analysis is expected. Otherwise, he can damage the agent-client relationship by

³A. T. Mosher, *Varieties of Extension Education and Community Development*, Comparative Extension Publication No. 2 (Ithaca: New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University, December, 1958), p. 64f, supports the view of process over content in the role of an Extension worker.

giving advice, advocating an alternative, or attempting an innovation, all of which involve decisions that the client desires for himself or would like to postpone. The client merely seeks analysis of a specific situation—and requests the agent's expertise to provide it—so as to have a sound basis on which to make decisions. We can say, then, that an agent who interprets a situation for a client is functioning in the role of analyst in the agent-client relationship.

We suggest that this role, more than any other, is basic to the success of a change agent. Its importance is not simply that a client demands analysis of a problem area. Rather, it stems as much or more from the fact that *only* by analysis does the agent truly comprehend specific needs of the client, or can he identify possible alternatives applicable to a given situation. In the words of Lloyd H. Davis, "A first requirement for conducting educational programs concerned with helping people recognize and solve their problems is for the Extension worker himself to identify and understand their problems."⁴

Without analysis, an agent may try to help a client without first knowing the client's definition of the problem. For example, a farmer who feels he needs more income from a Grade-C dairy operation asks an agent for analysis of the problem. If the agent does not analyze the situation carefully, he could recommend a change in enterprise, say to Grade-A production, that is completely beyond the economic and managerial capabilities of the client or, for that matter, his occupational expectations.

In addition, only by analysis can an agent comprehend the total work environment as a system. Thus, it is essential that a new agent analyze his work environment carefully and give particular attention to how his predecessor-agent performed. Furthermore, analysis should be a *continuing process* so that, once involved, an agent can keep his work environment current. Population mobility, political changes, and a host of other variables work constantly to cause clients to redefine their expectations of an agent, Cooperative Extension, and even of themselves. Only by analysis can the agent know this is happening and compensate for it in role behavior.⁵

Advisor

When the agent's main commitment to a client is to provide alternatives applicable to a given situation, the agent is performing as

⁴Lloyd H. Davis, "On Being Professional," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Winter, 1963), 197.

⁵See Art Gallaher, Jr., "The Agent as an Analyst," this issue.

the role of advisor. It should be stressed, however, that success in this role is tied closely to the agent's ability to analyze. To advise a client successfully regarding alternatives is to be aware of the parameters of the problem, and these are determined only through analysis. In the case of the dairy farmer, the agent, after thorough analysis of the situation, may conclude that one of the alternatives is to get out of the dairy business. Here, the alternatives range from a negative "get out of dairy farming" to a positive "upgrade."

The line between advising and advocating is often very fine. This does not, nevertheless, mean it is not real. To advise is to *present alternatives* to the client but to leave the decision-making process mainly to him; to advocate is to *recommend one* from among a number of alternatives, to tell a client what should be done and, thereby, become more intimately involved in formulating decisions for him. The client provides the cue as to whether advice or advocacy is expected.

From the vantage point of the total work environment, the agent should know to whom he is giving advice. This can be difficult where mass media and blanket-mailings are employed. For example, one county agent was criticized for the publicity about a special meeting on poultry.⁶ In addition to announcements in the county newspaper, notices were mailed to 800 farmers in a client group of about 1000. Most of the farmers had no commercial interest in poultry. This, combined with the then drastic slump in the egg market, and the knowledge that only ten farm families came to the meeting, caused the farmers to criticize the agent as being out of touch with the needs of the economy and as not knowing his clients.

Advice intended for a specific segment of the client system, unless so specified, can be interpreted by the rest of the system as irrelevant, a waste of time, and misuse of the agent's energy. At the same time, when an agent advises the total client system, he should keep this group in mind. In short, different styles are required to communicate with individuals, groups, and audiences.

Advocator

When the agent's main commitment to a client is to recommend a specific alternative, the agent is performing in the role of advocator. As in the advisor's role, success in this role relates directly to the analysis that precedes advocacy. An agent must understand the range of alternatives possible in a given situation. He is then in a

⁶ Art Gallaher, Jr., *Plainville Fifteen Years Later* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 75.

better position to advocate and support the alternative which he believes best suited to the client's problem.

As a matter of strategy, the agent should, whenever possible, guide a client through the analytical process by which he comes to understand the range of alternatives possible.⁷ This enables the client to share in the decision-making process and will, perhaps, minimize his coming to think that decisions are being taken away from him. Again, since advocacy involves telling a client what should be done, as opposed to advising him on alternatives, the agent should know when this is the client's expectation.

Innovator

When the agent's main commitment to a client is to create an innovation to satisfy a specific need, the agent is performing the role of innovator. Most technical alternatives introduced into the client system, however, are created by agencies that are part of the knowledge center, or they come from other public or private agencies charged with the responsibility for effecting change in given subject-matter areas. Thus, though the agent works with many technical innovations, he does so mainly as an advisor or advocator to the client system.

There is, however, one area of innovative activity commonly engaged in by the change agent. This is the role he performs in linking knowledge systems to the client's needs.⁸ The agent plays this role, for example, when he functions as an "information provider," or otherwise facilitates the dissemination of technical data. On the other hand, the agent may call in a specialist from the knowledge center, either to *advise*, *advocate*, or *innovate* solutions for a particular problem. In addition, he may link federal or state agencies to local groups in ways not heretofore considered by either the agencies or community leaders. This kind of role again points up the need for continuing analysis of the total work environment by the agent. It also requires the Extension organization to assume major responsibility for making its field staff aware of added possibilities for linking systems. With continued proliferation of federal, state, and local programs, it is important to keep agents informed of current developments and of ways to relate these to the needs of the client group.

⁷ See Lloyd Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-98.

⁸ For a more complete discussion of the concept "systemic linkage," see Charles P. Loomis, "Tentative Types of Directed Social Change Involving Systemic Linkage," *Rural Sociology*, XXIV (December, 1959), 383-90.

INTERPRETATION

To view the Extension agents' work environment through the kinds of roles suggested here is to cast emphasis on the *process* rather than on the *results* of working with the client system. Our focus is on the behavior of an agent as he relates to the client, and we have conceptualized this behavior in ways that do not depend on the subject-matter content that forms the basis for the relationship. We have, therefore, stressed the need for a change agent to *analyze* his work environment. Only through the understanding thereby obtained can he successfully play the roles of *advisor*, *advocator*, and/or *innovator*. We have implied that it is logical, as shown in Figure 1, to approach a problem through the sequence of roles outlined. In short, the enactment of these roles mirrors the program-planning process used by effective Extension personnel. Following this procedure and maintaining sensitivity to the commitment inherent in each of the roles, an agent can better relate to a client, and in ways that provide the latter with a relevant educational experience.

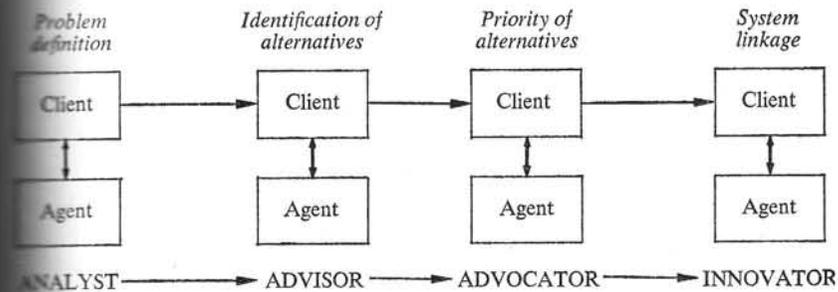


Figure 1. Client-agent role relations.

If the agent relates to a client in the ways suggested, that in itself should constitute a significant and unique learning experience for the client. Further, if the agent is sensitive to this fact, he can exploit it to both his own and the client's advantage. Thus, as he engages in analysis, he can (where relevant) involve the client in such ways that he comes to appreciate the process necessary to define problems, derive alternatives, and make decisions about solutions to problems. In this way, the agent transfers role patterns to the client, who in turn becomes more analytical and can function as an advisor and advocator, perhaps even an innovator, as he relates to others in the client group.

A focus on roles should provide more relevant criteria for measuring agent success. Within this frame of reference, "success" is the

ability to establish, maintain, and utilize the human relationships necessary to achieve relevant learning experiences in the client. Involving people in an educational experience is a complex process that demands knowledge of social organization, social action, and motivation to a degree rarely attained by the average Extension worker. However, unless his performance is judged against this background of expectations, an agent can hardly be expected to narrow the gap between "what is" and "what should be" in his role as a change agent. The view presented here contrasts with the commonly held notion that criteria such as number of meetings held, telephone calls made and received, newspaper articles written, or pamphlets distributed, are adequate measures for performance rating. We suggest further that an agent who is sensitive to roles, hence to behavior as opposed to subject matter, can better evaluate his own skills in a given situation, and, thereby, make more accurate judgments of the need for other kinds of support from the knowledge center.

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