

Staffing Patterns in Extension

**Staffing methods should be reevaluated in light
of organizational structure and
decision-making behavior**

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MORE THOUGHT should be given to staffing patterns in Extension. This judgment has been reached considering present staff size, composition, and program demands. It is based, at least in part, on research evidence. The need will become increasingly acute if recommendations contained in the Joint Study Committee Report¹ are implemented—especially in light of those recommendations dealing with areas of program emphases, staff resources, differing bases for staffing (i.e., more area personnel), and adding a substantial number of personnel at a subprofessional level of competence.

The thought given to staffing patterns should deal, in large measure, with what is expected in the way of performance on the job. One way of looking at performance is in terms of the kinds of decisions the staff member is expected to produce. Concepts, helpful in thinking about kinds of decisions to be made, are available. Also, factors that appear to influence the kinds of decisions personnel make, which can be partially controlled by administrators, are identifiable.

The staffing pattern approach focuses on the relationship of positions in an organization and competencies required of each staff member. Positions are viewed as being so interdependent that

¹ *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968). See Lowell H. Watts, "Extension's Future—A National Report," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, VI (Winter, 1968), 199-206, for an outline of the major thrusts of the recommendations of this report.

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changing the expected performance of one position changes the performance and competencies required in associated positions. Organizational structure and decision-making behavior become the important factors involved in staffing decisions.

The purpose of this article is to suggest the necessity for Extension Services to concern themselves more specifically with staffing patterns. The concern is not on what titles are assigned to various positions, or where the personnel are officed, or the nature and size of territory they cover, or the degree they hold, or the discipline or area of study in which their degrees are held—as potentially important as these matters may be. The contention of this paper is that another factor is of overriding concern: What kinds of decisions are to be made. A way of classifying decisions (programmed or nonprogrammed) will be discussed. Some factors that have been observed (from research evidence) as to the kinds of decisions being made by Extension personnel (whether routine or nonroutine) will be presented. The focus of the discussion will be on how we can use organization to affect the kinds of decisions that are made.

Types of Programmed Decision Making

Types of programmed decisions can be thought of as polar positions on a continuum—from programmed to nonprogrammed.

Decisions are programmed “to the extent that they are repetitive and routine, to the extent that a definite procedure has been worked out for handling them.”² Nonprogrammed decisions on the other hand are novel, unstructured, and consequential: “There is no cut and dried method for handling the problem because it hasn’t arisen before, or because its precise nature and structure are elusive or complex, or because it is so important that it deserves a customized tailor treatment.”³ Simon explains nonprogrammed situations as “a response where the system has no specific procedures to deal with situations like the one at hand, but must fall back on whatever general capacity it has for intelligent, adaptive, problem-oriented actions.”⁴

The nonprogrammed decision end of the continuum can be illustrated by considering innovative behavior. Most activities and decisions are governed by existing “programs.” “There is a distinction between those decisions, on the one hand, that are encountered frequently and repetitively in the daily operations of an organization,

² Herbert A. Simon, *The New Science of Management Decisions* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

and those, on the other hand, that represent novel and nonrecurring problems for the organization."⁵

The decision maker searching for possible alternatives, examining alternatives and consequences, and engaging in learning activities typifies innovative or nonprogrammed decision-making behavior.⁶

Man's nature will condition the effect of his environment on his time-use and decision-making behavior. "There is a sort of 'Gresham's Law' whereby routine drives out creative thinking. Unless the executive (decision maker) conscientiously allocates time to innovation, he will find ways to fritter away his time by absorbing it in routine."⁷ When faced with highly programmed and highly nonprogrammed tasks, an individual tends to give precedence to the programmed (routine), even in the absence of strong overall time pressure.⁸ In this light the premium placed on innovative decision making is understandable. Consequently, a shield around the worker expected to make more innovative than routine decisions is logical. It screens out the forces demanding routine behavior.

Some have proposed allocation of resources to specific goals requiring innovative behavior and refusing to allow goal displacement. Setting of time priorities has also been suggested.⁹ Others propose making special provisions by creating organizational units with specific responsibilities and duties for nonprogrammed decision making. Such units in Cooperative Extension can be identified by the administrative head's title. "Special program leader" is an example. The arrangement provides protection of nonprogrammed activities from pressures of repetitive activity.¹⁰

The communications pattern influences the relative frequency with which an organization member encounters particular stimuli and the length of time required for him to notice information in the organization. Communication channels can be structured so that primarily innovative decision stimuli reach selected communication centers and relevant information from within the organization flows freely to the same centers.

What are these communications patterns in the Cooperative Extension Service? Are some decisions that are made by Extension workers more innovative than others? Do some Extension workers

⁵ Sidney Mailick and Edward Van Ness (eds.), *Concepts and Issues in Administrative Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁸ James G. March and Herbert A. Simon, *Organizations* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960), p. 185.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-86.

¹⁰ Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

make a larger percentage of innovative or nonprogrammed decisions than others?

Research in an Extension Setting

An attempt was made in a research effort to find out what things Extension personnel are doing that are distinguishably different and can be described. Two questions were raised. One, if there *are* discernible distinctions, can observations be made in an organizational setting as to whether people vary in the extent to which they make the programmed type (to be referred to also as routine) and non-programmed type (also referred to as nonroutine or exceptional) decisions. And two, is there a relationship between degree of innovative decision making and the way a worker used his time.¹¹

To make such an examination, the job performance of six Indiana county agents and nine Indiana and four Kentucky area specialists (a total of 19 Extension workers) was measured by work sampling. This provided an estimate of what they did and the percentage of time they spent doing it. Personal interviews were conducted with the 15 Indiana work-sample respondents plus six additional Indiana county agents, following the time-use study. The interviews were used to gain insight into "why" the work-sample respondents functioned as they did and to test the application of the routine/innovative decision concepts.

The interview respondents were asked to identify whether the problems coming to them through selected types of contact with clientele were more routine or exceptional. These data were compared with data indicating the percentage of time the work-sampling respondents spent using various types of clientele contacts. By putting the two sets of data together (the work-sampling data and interview data) it was thought possible to determine which type of Extension worker was making more routine and which was making more innovative-type decisions, and how much time each type worker spent making the different types of decisions. Tabulation of the respondents' rating of the contacts indicated that office calls were the largest source of routine problems. Sixteen of those interviewed rated office calls a more routine than unique source of problems. This was followed by telephone calls and letters, with eleven each. Farm and home visits were identified as the type of clientele contact with the most exceptional (calling for innovative decision

¹¹ John T. Woeste, "An Analysis of the Association of Selected Factors to Job Performance of Cooperative Extension Area Specialists" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, 1967).

making) types of problems. Fourteen of the 21 interviewed rated the problems coming to them during farm and home visits exceptional or nonprogrammed rather than routine. This was followed by meetings which were rated innovative or nonprogrammed by 10 of 21.

The statistical tests on time-use indicated area specialists, compared with county agents, were spending a significantly larger percentage of their time (from 20 to 30 per cent compared with 8 per cent) in farm and home visits (mean differences significant at the .05 level). County agents, compared to area specialists, were spending significantly more time with telephone calls (7 compared to 3 per cent) and office calls (45 compared to 27 per cent).

Based on the Extension workers' ratings on their time-use, area specialists were making more innovative decisions; county agents were handling more routine decisions. These findings were supported by area specialists' reports that the really hard, unique problems calling for innovative decisions were coming to them from county agents. Six area specialists indicated that the "hardest" or exceptional questions were those from county agents; one said they came from farm suppliers and another indicated they came to him from "farm service" personnel in the area. The larger percentage of time county agents, compared with area specialists, spent in telephone calls and office visits (which were all rated highly routine) suggested that county agents were filtering out routine problems. This conclusion is supported by the evidence that area specialists were spending a significantly larger percentage of their time (approximately three per cent compared with less than one per cent for county agents) preparing for teaching, visits, conferences, and tours. By definition, such behavior would be considered more innovative than, for example, providing answers to direct questions by telephone. Designing an agronomic project, constructing an evaluation instrument, or developing a new program proposal could be still more innovative.

When the interview respondents were asked, "Who should be answering the routine questions?" all nine area specialists were in full agreement—the county agent. The agents were, however, in less accord. Seven said the agents; three indicated that the secretary or anyone encountering the problem.

As suggested in the introductory statements, the question being raised in this paper is how organization can be used to affect the kinds of decisions being made. The research data just cited suggest that the structure of a position in the organization may influence the decision behavior of staff members. For example, some of those

serving as area specialists once were county agents. And even though such data can not be considered conclusive (we don't really know how the area specialists, who were formerly county agents, functioned as county agents except by comparison with those who are presently county agents), they are suggestive of the impact organization may have on function. Those with area specialist assignments were spending more time concerning themselves with the nonprogrammed (innovative, nonroutine) types of decisions than were those with county agent assignments.

Decision Chains

Organizational structure can be thought of as a sequence of decision centers or points. Information can flow in and out of each center, making up and defining problems and solutions which can also flow up and down what will be referred to as the decision chain.

Problems continuously confront staff members in decision centers. This may occur in the Extension office, during a meeting or workshop, or in a home. If the educator—a decision maker—does not have an appropriate solution, he either begins the necessary innovative behavior to solve the problem (if this is his responsibility) or he transfers the problem to another appropriate decision center in the chain expected to either further define or to solve the problem. He accomplishes this either through an existing programmed solution or through the development of a new program.

For example, the client may take a problem to a county Extension worker, who either answers it or passes it on to an area specialist. He either has an answer, develops one, or passes the problem to a state specialist. In other cases, the problem may be given directly to an area specialist who either provides an existing solution, develops a solution, or passes the problem to another decision center.¹²

Between any of the decision centers, an additional center with a program aide, secretary, or program assistant could be placed. Their purpose would be to intercept and handle the routine decisions.

If the programmed/nonprogrammed continuum were to be placed alongside the organization hierarchical chart, it would appear

¹² The examples should not be taken to suggest that answering questions or solving problems for clientele encompasses all of an Extension worker's behavior. Although a large percentage of time is spent in such behavior, the performance of other tasks such as planning training schools, developing long range programs, teaching classes, and guiding clientele in solution of their own problems is recognized. Although decision behavior of some type is necessary to complete any of the tasks, the examples were chosen for purposes of clarity and familiarity.

the more routine (programmed) decisions would be made at the lower echelons of the organization and the more unique (innovative, nonprogrammed) decisions would be made toward the top.

Numerous recommendations concerning the structuring and regulation of information flow within the decision chain have been made without regard to the question of whether or not innovative behavior is desired. Little attention appears to have been given to the purpose of the communications, or to the expected consequences of structural changes (changing the decision chain). Area specialists have been assigned to work directly with clientele, thus receiving problems direct; in other cases an intermediary has been established to filter out routine problems. If a staffing pattern is followed which places a filter in the channel so that only the "exceptions" (or hard problems) pass through, then increasing the flow from the people to the filter and then to the appropriate area specialists appears rational. Building facilities for easy and quick communication, such as radio-telephone, between clientele and area specialists (who are expected to make more innovative decisions) increases the forces that drive out the desired behavior (innovative decision making). The complexity of the staffing question should be abundantly clear because of its interdependency with job expectations and communications patterns.

Some Implications for Extension

New staffing patterns being tried in Extension organization provide an opportunity to focus on the question of producing innovative decision making. Various devices have been used to replace human decision makers as filters of the more routine problems. Examples are pre-recorded telephone messages and self-selection bulletin boards. Devices such as visuals and computers with programs for problem identification and solution appear worthy of consideration, especially where secretaries or subprofessionals are used. The preparation of notebooks containing answers to timely questions and the use of visuals for insects, diseases, and plant identification appear worthy of consideration for use by professional and subprofessional staffs. These devices would increase the scope of decision-making ability by the filter.

Some argue that Cooperative Extension should not be making the programmed-type decisions. Whether they should or not is a highly philosophical question. They are doing it; and further, resources are being committed to the preparation of highly programmed decisions in the form of recommendations for such things as seeding, spray-

ing, and fertilizing. The pressing question is how to get these decisions to the clientele in the most efficient manner.

Planning changes in organizational performance prompts questions such as: What type of decision-making competence do we now have? What additional decision-making ability is desired? How do we place our decision makers in the communication channels so the staffs' effort is directed toward the greatest desired performance? For example, if we are launching an expansion program with urban youth, the competencies of an anthropologist might be desired. The most efficient staffing pattern, if innovative decision making is desired, would place him at the apex of a decision chain. Rather than being in direct contact with clientele he would be linked with six to ten decision channels who were in contact with clientele. In such a role, he would be a special programmer concerned with the values and norms of people. The field personnel (the decision channels with which he would be linked) would screen out the routine questions, permitting optimum anthropological input to program development and evaluation. In this arrangement, writing, research, and staff development skills would be essential. If, however, the anthropologist were assigned to work directly with clientele, these skills would not be so paramount as the ability to establish working relationships. His program development output could not be expected to be the same in these two possible arrangements.

The theory has application beyond the personnel office or the organization's chief administrative officer. Administrators of local Extension offices can effectively increase the relative amount of non-programmed decision making through either reassignment of tasks or staffing positions with new competencies. Granting the difficulty of changing staff performance, appropriate changes in the flow of communications coupled with training can substantially increase innovative behavior in a unit. Assignment changes can take the form of one person rather than two or more handling incoming telephone calls and visitors, while other staff members direct their efforts to complex problems and preparation of correspondence and program materials.

If routine correspondence of an administrator or educator is handled by a less skilled and less costly staff member, more time is available for the scarce innovative behavior. But what about new competencies? Often, the ability and motivation of secretarial and subprofessional staff foregoes any enlargement of the job or increase in nonprogrammed decision making. Such staff members perform well in highly specific roles where limited search for answers is required. Consequently, changes in unit performance (especially if in-

creased innovative decision making at a minimum of increased staff cost is required) will result in selection and placement of a more qualified secretary, subprofessional, or beginning professional.

Misguidance in staffing is exemplified when a staff member with a B.S. degree is replaced by one with an M.S. or Ph.D. and the new staff member remains at the same level in the decision chain for the implied purpose of increasing the organization's innovative decision-making capability. Granted, higher academically qualified personnel can be assumed capable of a greater range of program decision making, many of which would not be programmed for less qualified staff. However, the decision for continually placing more highly skilled and trained personnel in the same organization or decision structure appears misguided if not irrational. Such structures result in the same type of time consuming, routine, and unchallenging questions bombarding the new decision maker. Little or no additional goal accomplishment can be anticipated, and either degeneration of morale or vivid adaptation to routinized schedules of performance results.

Summary

Decision-making behavior by area specialists and county agents can be placed on a continuum from completely programmed to nonprogrammed. Highly trained professional personnel are spending a sizable percentage of their time performing tasks which could be performed by personnel with less training. Efficient staffing, because of position or decision center interdependence, dictates detailed and long range planning of staffing patterns.

Failure to recognize the interdependence of positions or decision centers leading to impulsive staffing sets the stage for potentially serious problems. What are the anticipated consequences of unplanned, tradition-bound, short-range staffing decisions? Clearly increased interpersonal conflict, loss of morale, and increased staff turnover are likely, with tragic loss from misused human resources enduring. If traditional staffing patterns—concerned solely with attention to subject matter and functions—continue, it appears questionable that optimum efficiency and effectiveness will result.

Increased innovative or nonprogrammed decision making will be critical to successful organizational performance. The pressure for increased comprehensiveness of Extension program—as reflected in recommendations of the Joint Study Committee Report—demands increasingly rapid shift to more highly nonprogrammed or innovative decisions within an increasingly broader scope of content.