

Youth Agent's Job: Critical Components

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Goyen studied five critical-task areas for youth agents: program development and execution, individual help and counseling, organization, interpersonal relationships, and public relations. His findings suggest that competence in areas of agriculture or home economics wasn't critical for youth agents to be effective. He concludes that youth agents need additional training in the behavioral sciences and in adult or extension education. The study also provides a way of looking at the "proper role" of youth agents.

What is an effective youth agent? What does he do? What factors in his work environment influence his success?

A clear understanding of a job is important to those expected to do the job. It's important to supervisors and administrators in recruiting, selecting, training, and appraising personnel. Each needs to know the aspects of the job related to effective performance.

I studied the work environment of county Extension youth agents by using the critical-incident method. The important aspects of the job and its environment related to youth agents' effectiveness were identified.

With the critical-incident technique, I could study the behavior of youth agents from their viewpoint as they performed their job.

Youth agents in 14 states¹ were asked to report two incidents—one in which they did something that was particularly effective and the other particularly ineffective. These are called critical incidents. A total of 1,425 incident reports were obtained by mail questionnaire from 752 respondents—a 69 percent response.

Critical Tasks

From the analysis of the critical incidents, 10 critical tasks for youth agents were identified. These critical tasks indicated, in behavioral terms, what youth agents felt they must do to be effective.

The 10 critical tasks were classified into 5 areas. They provide a general view of the important tasks of youth agents:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Program development and execution. 2. Individual help and counseling. 3. Organizational. 4. Interpersonal relationship. 5. Public relations. | <p>Program Development and Execution Tasks</p> <p><i>To Plan and Conduct Programs.</i> This task was most often related in critical incidents by youth agents (Table 1). It encompasses</p> |
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Table 1. Distribution of critical incidents according to the critical task of county Extension youth agents.

Critical tasks	No.	%
<i>Area I. Program development and execution</i>		
1. Plan and conduct programs	554	39
2. Deal with disruptions	111	8
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	665	47
<i>Area II. Individual help and counseling</i>		
1. Assist with personal development	167	12
2. Help with educational activities	125	9
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	292	21
<i>Area III. Organizational</i>		
1. Organize groups	102	7
2. Maintain groups	60	4
3. Further organizational understanding	144	10
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	306	21
<i>Area IV. Interpersonal relationships</i>		
1. Relate with clientele	73	5
2. Promote harmony	55	4
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	128	9
<i>Area V. Public relations</i>		
1. Facilitate public relations	34	2
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	34	2
Total	1,425	100

all aspects of planning and conducting events, contests, and other activities. It includes getting support, developing plans, and encouraging participation as well as supervising and coordinating.

The question may be asked: Why would incidents related to planning and conducting programs be identified as "critical?" It may be because of the difficult and complex nature of the task. Many factors must be considered. Success may depend on the agent's effectiveness in planning and working with others. A successful program has a favorable impact on people and reflects the agent's effectiveness.

To Deal with Program Disruptions. Dealing with program disruptions was also identified as a critical task. Agents were faced with handling situations like this: "One of the boys kept interrupting (the 4-H meeting) with cute remarks," "camper was loud and boisterous," and a "leader, in front of others, accused the judges of being unfair."

These incidents were critical because of the effect the youth agent's actions had on those present. It was difficult for the youth agent to know the appropriate action to take. Such incidents were usually unexpected and the agent sometimes overreacted—his training probably didn't prepare him for this.

Individual Help and Counseling Tasks

To Assist Individuals with Their Personal Development. Inci-

idents related to assisting individuals with their personal development were reported second in frequency. This task dealt with helping individuals overcome personal problems or improve their general attitude, personality, or character. As youth agents see it, part of their responsibility is to help young people. They're satisfied when young people mature and are especially pleased when they can take credit for it. In turn, they're disappointed when their efforts fail.

To Help Individuals Conduct Educational Activities. Incidents were also reported that involved helping individuals plan and carry out an educational activity. This meant counseling, training, and giving personal assistance in conducting a project, demonstration, or other activity. This task emphasizes the activity, while the preceding task centers on developing the person.

These incidents were critical because the youth agent's action often determined the individual's success or failure with an activity. And, such success or failure may have lasting influence.

Organizational Tasks

To Provide for the Organization of Groups. Membership often indicates the quality of the county 4-H program and thus is a symbol of the agent's effectiveness. Therefore, much effort is devoted to increasing membership by organizing new clubs. This task was critical because it involved dealing with unorganized

groups and persuading them of the desirability of organizing. It required contacting people the agent wasn't familiar with.

To Maintain Organized Groups. The task of maintaining groups encompassed activities designed to keep organized groups from disbanding. It included recruiting and selecting new leaders, providing individual organizational help and training for members and leaders, and removing undesirable leaders.

Incidents related to maintaining groups were critical because they were often difficult incidents to handle. Such incidents often resulted from some problem—an adult leader resigned; a conflict among members, parents, and/or adult leaders; or a lack of interest in the program. A solution to the problem may be complex. Maximum skill in dealing with people must be used.

To Help Individuals Understand the Organizational Philosophy, Objectives, Policies, Structure, and Procedures. The task of furthering organizational understanding involved helping members and leaders understand and perform their organizational responsibilities. It encompassed counseling and advising individuals about problems, ideas, or policies of the organization. A major aspect of this task was to help individuals understand the philosophy, objectives, rules, selection procedures, and criteria for competitive activities.

More ineffective than effective incidents were reported in perform-

ing this task. There are several possible explanations. The agents may not have been prepared for the incidents, the situation may have been tense, they may have been under the stress of conducting a competitive event, or they may have lacked empathy or understanding for the client. Here also the youth agent lacks training for coping with this type of incident.

Interpersonal Relationship Tasks

To Achieve a Desirable Relationship with Clientele. Relating to clientele was identified as critical. This task embodied actions aimed at maintaining or achieving rapport with the client. The task was critical because agents need to more favorably relate to others. The results of these incidents helped or hindered future relationships. The situations for these incidents were frequently tense and unexpected.

To Develop or Maintain a Desirable Relationship Among Clients. The task of promoting harmony among the clientele involved getting people to work together. There was often a conflict or disagreement among clientele in these incidents. The clientele may have been emotional. The agent needed the skill of a mediator. His actions determined whether the individuals involved would work together or not.

Public Relations Task

To Facilitate Public Relations. The task of facilitating public rela-

tions was identified infrequently. The performance or failure to perform this task influenced the goodwill of others toward the youth program and affected the support or involvement in the program. Youth agents need to be aware of the importance of public relations and to plan adequately for it.

Critical Social Conditions

The social conditions in critical incidents were analyzed to determine what factors may qualify, condition, and give direction to the job of the county Extension youth agent.

Clientele

Members of 4-H were involved in a high proportion of incidents. This proportion was higher than expected because of the national emphasis that youth agents should be working through adult leaders² and evidence from time-use studies³ that the agent spends between 9 and 24 percent of his time with members.

However, a possible explanation is that agents perceive their actions as more critical when they're interacting with youth than with adults. The results of their actions with youth may be more noticeable and occur quicker.

Youth agents reported more ineffective than effective incidents when adult leaders and parents of 4-H members were involved. Youth agents may have difficulty relating to adults. Youth agents don't always

appreciate the adult's role in the program or understand their viewpoint and concerns.

Clientele Groups

Unorganized groups (such as adults in a community, participants in a program, or parents of 4-H members) were more often involved in critical incidents than organized groups. Agents found it more difficult to deal with unorganized groups. Such groups were unstructured and sometimes unassembled. Frequently, the unorganized groups were associated with the complex task of planning and conducting programs or organizing groups.

In contrast, perhaps few critical incidents involved organized groups because they were structured; agents were prepared to work with them under familiar conditions.

Differences Among States

By using the critical components of the agent's job, this study provides a pattern to characterize the important aspects of the youth agent's work environment in each state (Tables 2 and 3).

For example, youth agents in California revealed that they see the critical aspects of their work environment predominantly in terms of program development and execution, working with adult leaders, and working with groups rather than individuals. In brief, youth agents in California depicted their job largely as that of an educational administra-

tor. This interpretation agrees with Duncan's finding about the California youth agents' concept of their role. According to her study, experienced youth agents saw their role as "teacher of adults," "organizer," and "coordinator."⁴

In contrast, youth agents in Mississippi and Louisiana saw the critical aspects of their work environment as that of helping and counseling individual members. They saw their job more in terms of a tutor.

Agents in other states viewed

the critical aspects of their job between these perspectives. Oklahoma and Texas agents were orientated to those in Mississippi and Louisiana. New York, Ohio, Michigan, Kansas, Missouri, and Indiana agents were oriented more in the direction of California agents. Indiana agents had a unique pattern among the states. They reported an unusually high proportion of incidents in which the clientele was an organized group. Agents in the remaining states—Maryland, New Jersey, and

Table 2. Distribution of the clientele in critical incidents according to their relationship to the Extension youth program by states.

State	Relationship to the Extension youth program					
	Members		Adult Leaders		Others	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
California	22	29	30	40	24	31
Indiana	43	47	10	11	38	42
Kansas	10	24	12	29	19	47
Louisiana	82	59	12	9	44	32
Maryland	21	51	8	20	12	29
Michigan	14	22	16	25	33	53
Mississippi	160	58	19	7	95	35
Missouri	18	20	25	27	49	53
New Jersey	20	40	13	26	17	34
New York	53	33	32	20	77	47
Ohio	24	36	11	17	31	47
Oklahoma	54	49	18	16	38	35
Texas	99	57	25	14	50	29
West Virginia	23	49	10	21	14	30
Total	643	45	241	17	541	38

Table 3. Distribution of critical incidents by critical-task areas* according to states.

States	Area I		Area II		Area III		Area IV		Area V		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
California	50	65	6	8	11	15	9	12	0	0	76	100
Indiana	49	54	8	9	24	26	9	10	1	1	91	100
Kansas	20	49	4	10	11	27	3	7	3	7	41	100
Louisiana	53	38	43	31	31	23	8	6	3	2	138	100
Maryland	19	47	6	14	12	29	3	7	1	3	41	100
Michigan	35	55	7	11	13	21	8	13	0	0	63	100
Mississippi	81	29	94	35	60	22	30	11	9	3	274	100
Missouri	41	44	8	9	30	33	10	11	3	3	92	100
New Jersey	28	56	6	12	9	18	7	14	0	0	50	100
New York	99	61	17	10	26	16	14	9	6	4	162	100
Ohio	43	65	7	11	10	14	4	7	2	3	66	100
Oklahoma	48	43	29	26	21	20	10	9	2	2	110	100
Texas	76	44	48	27	38	22	11	6	1	1	174	100
West Virginia	23	49	9	19	10	21	2	4	3	7	47	100

* Area I. Program development and execution tasks

Area II. Individual help and counseling tasks

Area III. Organizational tasks

Area IV. Interpersonal relationship tasks

Area V. Public relations task

West Virginia—viewed the critical aspects of their work environment between the two extremes.

The differences in orientation of agents among these states points out a limitation in generalizing about this research. These differences must be taken into account when comparing states or drawing implications of this study for a specific state.

Summary

This study strongly suggests that youth agents need additional training in the behavioral sciences to deal with the critical components of their work environment. More specifically, they need training in human development, psychology, social psychology, sociology, leadership, group dynamics, and counseling.

Agents would also benefit from more training in adult or extension education, program or curriculum development, program evaluation, educational administration, and educational psychology. Although technical competence in the areas of agriculture or home economics was used by agents in some of the incidents, this competence wasn't considered critical for the agent to be effective.

Extension administration should provide a comprehensive in-service and induction training program covering the behavioral sciences for all youth agents. Materials for individual study should be available to them. They should be en-

couraged to pursue graduate study. Consideration should be given to designing a curriculum especially for youth workers or recruiting youth agents from the behavioral science field.

This study also provides a framework for discussing the proper function of youth agents. If administrators feel the job has been incorrectly perceived by their youth agents, they should plan ways to clarify the desired functions of youth agents.

Footnotes

1. The 14 states were: California, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia.
2. Russell G. Mawby, "4-H and Y. M. W. Clubs," in H. C. Sanders, ed., *The Cooperative Extension Service* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 271.
3. "How 4-H Agents Spend Their Time," in G. L. Carter, Jr., and Robert C. Clark, eds., *Selected Readings and References in 4-H Club Work* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1961), p. 129 and James A. Beutel, "A Time Use Study of Selected California 4-H Club Advisors" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1959).
4. Dorothy E. Duncan, "4-H Club Advisors' Concept of Their Roles" (Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1957).