

Counseling: Another Dimension in the Agent's Role

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Trent and Donohue suggest that for many years county Extension agents have been performing the role of a "counselor" without knowing it. They present a case for it being a valid function with a real need existing for people to have a sounding board—someone to listen to them. They don't propose that Extension agents become professional counselors, but that courses in the field of human behavior be included in their graduate training programs to fill this void.

One of the most important roles of the county Extension agent is that of a counselor. Yet few agents readily admit how much their responsibilities and actions parallel those of counselors. It's like the man who discovered at age 70 that he'd been speaking "prose" all his life.

The basic objective of Extension has been "to help people, through education, to recognize and solve their own problems." To reach this objective, obviously more than mere dissemination of information about agriculture and home economics has been required.

It may just be that Extension's most important service is providing sympathetic, competent, professional people willing to listen and

respond to others' problems and needs.

Professionally trained counselors and psychiatrists are scarce and the county Extension agent may be the only one in the county many people feel they can turn to with their problems. The agent must be aware of his limitations as a "counselor" and should encourage the individual to see his family physician if the problem seems especially severe.

Every individual needs access to someone he can confide in—someone who respects him and will keep his confidences.

Often clients don't really want advice from Extension agents, but just need someone who will listen impartially and allow the individual

to sort out his problems.

Most people are reluctant to seek professional counseling. Many wouldn't use this service even if it were available. Consequently, physicians, clergymen, Extension agents, and other adult educators often find themselves heavily involved in the process of counseling.

The Agent's Role

In a counseling situation, the Extension agent is another human being. He listens. He questions. He responds. He tries to communicate with another person, one who's concerned about something at the moment. The agent's objective is to help the person recognize his problem and if possible, arrive at a realistic solution. The Extension agent doesn't substitute counseling for giving information (one of his major roles); information giving may be an integral part of any counseling situation. Often, the client may need additional subject-matter information to solve an immediate problem. The agent must be himself and allow his client to do the same.

Counseling in its broadest form is a unique method of individualized teaching. It has been used by county Extension agents since the beginning of Extension work. It's a major component of such methods as farm and home visits, office calls, telephone calls, and informal conversation. It reached its peak as a method during the late 1950s and early 1960s when national emphasis was focused on Farm and Home Development.

Hahn and MacLean define counseling as a:

... process which takes place in a one-to-one relationship between an individual troubled by problems with which he cannot cope alone, and a professional worker whose training and experience have qualified him to help others reach solutions to various types of personal difficulties.¹

Counseling is defined more generally by McCain as:

... a face-to-face relationship between two people in which one person attempts to assist the other toward self-understanding and self-determination.²

Nature of Counseling

Techniques in counseling are useful, but they can't be substituted for knowledge about communication, sensitivity towards others, and the personal attitudes of the agent.

Blocher summarizes three generalizations about the nature of counseling relationships that should be helpful to the county Extension agent as he considers his role as a counselor. They are:

1. The capacity to develop counseling relationships is more attitudinal than cognitive and technical. As a rule, techniques alone aren't adequate for building relationships.
2. There's no single formalized "counseling relationship." Rather, each counselor has to discover the particular kind of interpersonal relationship that

will enable him to be most helpful to his client.

3. The key to developing effective counseling relationships lies more in sensitivity to other's reactions and flexibility of responses rather than in rigidly trying to implement a preconceived stereotype of what the counselor should be.³

Competencies Needed

To be an effective counselor, an Extension agent must understand the field of human behavior. Specifically, he must understand that real motives of clients often are hidden and that problems brought to him may represent mere symptoms of more difficult problems. He shouldn't hesitate to refer a client to a physician.

Westervelt has suggested that the competencies needed by the counselor in adult education are:

1. Skill in the techniques of counseling.
2. Skill in acquiring and disseminating educational and occupational information.
3. Some understanding of learning theory and adult learning characteristics of counselees.
4. Some understanding of the sociological and psychological characteristics of counselees.
5. Understanding of the nature of the system (or systems) in or with which the counselor will be working.⁴

Proficiency in these competency areas unquestionably would be valuable to the Extension agent in counseling, but more important is his skill in interpersonal communication.

Suggestions for Agent Training

Counseling may be the most important single role of the county Extension agent and normally it's the area he usually has received the least professional training in.

In the past, the Cooperative Extension Service has concentrated its training efforts on subject-matter and "surface"-type training in teaching methods. If counseling is such an important role, agents should be given the opportunity to fill this void in their education through individually planned induction, in-service, and graduate training programs.

Footnotes

1. Milton E. Hahn and Malcom S. MacLean, *Counseling Psychology* (New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), p. 6.
2. Robert F. McCain, *Effective Counseling on the Job* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Extension Service, 1960), p. 2.
3. Donald H. Blocher, *Developmental Counseling* (New York, New York: Ronald Press, 1966), pp. 3-10.
4. Esther M. Westervelt, "Counseling in Adult Education," in *Continuing Education for Adults* (New York, New York: Syracuse University, University College, 1969), p. 2.