

helping committee members become more active

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It's often important that we in Extension help members of a committee (boards, task forces, groups) participate fully in that group's activities. Too often members drop out, become inactive, or in other ways lose their commitment to the group. What can be done about it? Social science investigations of this topic may not in themselves provide the entire answer. The Achilles heel of these studies is that they rarely identify specific ways in which the findings can be implemented within the role played by Extension personnel and with the particular types of committees served by Extension.¹

This paper suggests ways in which several key ideas that emerge from empirical research in the social sciences² can be used to help member participation. First, the term "participation in committees" is defined. Next, a number of circumstances are identified when help to the committee may be particularly beneficial. Then, five approaches to facilitating member participation are described.

"Participation in Committees"

Although this discussion fits many types of committees, the ideas apply most directly to a type frequently encountered in Extension work: relatively small groups of volunteers who come together to work on a task over a period of time. Before joining the group, some of the members may be only slightly familiar with each other.

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“Participation” refers to the willingness of a person to make comments or recommendations during meetings of the committee, share his ideas with others, and in many ways take responsibility for the group’s activities. Another side of participation is staying active in the committee over time—attending meetings, continuing to work toward the long-range goals of the committee, etc. The discussion, then, deals with the morale and the activity of individuals after joining the committee. Discussion of factors involved in a person’s joining the group initially can be found elsewhere.³

Opportunities to Help Participation

Obviously, Extension personnel should help member participation at all times. There are, however, several circumstances when such help may be particularly valuable.⁴ Direct action when these situations first occur may help the committee avoid widespread absenteeism, a lack of volunteers for projects, and other major participation problems in the future. One circumstance occurs when committee decisions are influenced more by the ideas of members relatively less knowledgeable on that topic than by the opinions of those better informed about it.

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Another situation is one in which there’s especially great variability from meeting to meeting in the “quality” of the committee’s performance. At times the group approaches a task quite efficiently and makes good decisions, while on other occasions it seems quite disorganized. A third circumstance occurs when members relatively well informed on a given topic are reluctant to lead discussion of it.

Helping Participation

Helping participation in committees involves more than simply making sure that each person has the *opportunity* to take an active role in the group. More importantly, the committee must develop an atmosphere in which people *want* to participate fully.

Progress Toward Goals

When a committee *thinks* it’s making reasonable progress toward goals *the members agreed on*, individuals tend to stay involved in committee activities.⁵ The benefit to participation comes from the feeling of progress, not necessarily from the progress itself. Whenever appropriate, then, ensuring the group’s awareness of their progress may help participation. Further, this point applies principally to goals or objectives the members agreed on. If only a few members have a particular objective *and the rest of the committee is “just going along,”* progress may not strikingly help participation. Beyond encouraging the committee to *select* a task of common concern to as

many members as possible, it usually helps individual members realize that their own concerns and the committee's objectives are related.

An opportunity for Extension personnel to make a valuable contribution to the group often occurs soon after the initial formation of the committee. At that time, it's especially critical that the new committee be made aware of its progress. Helping the group begin with a task that's both timely and relevant to the group's mission is often essential. Yet, if the committee selects as its first task one of monumental difficulty, members may not only fail to see progress being made, but also, if worst comes to worst, it may begin life with a "history" of failure. If the committee is tending to select such a Herculean struggle, Extension personnel may suggest to the committee that it start with a more readily "do-able" task. It may even be necessary to select a task that's not as crucial in its own right to the committee's major objectives. This more feasible task should be one that: (1) can be completed in a short period of time, (2) is at least moderately relevant and timely, (3) requires the input of all members, and (4) has easily visible results.

Similar
"Basic Values"

When members of a group *realize* they have similar *basic values*, the group's morale and cohesion often are high.⁶ "Basic values" here aren't opinions about topics such as what the committee should do next, or what's the best solution to a problem on which the committee is working. Basic values are beliefs about what's important and meaningful in life; for example, that providing children with a good environment is right, that education is needed in these times.

A member may not be entirely aware of the degree of similarity between his basic values and those of the rest of the committee. This is particularly true when the committee is first organized or when members come from a cross section of the community.

For example, this past year a series of meetings was held in one of Indiana's counties. Leaders from an urban community were asked to discuss their basic values with leaders from the more rural parts of the county. After the meeting, an urban leader mentioned that he previously "knew" that urban and rural residents wanted basically the same things in life. Yet he was quite surprised to find that he and these rural leaders were practically identical in their major goals in life.

What can be done? Simply encouraging members to discuss the objectives and regular activities of the committee may not bring out the similarities of basic values, although it may help. On the other hand, stimulating discussions about their childhoods and other past experiences or about the type of community that would be ideal for them may make apparent

the committee's agreement on basic values. Conversations about these topics could be encouraged fairly early in the life of a new committee. However, this might make people uncomfortable in the first meeting, so perhaps you should wait a meeting or two before trying this kind of a discussion.

A second approach is to stay alert to the importance of the members' awareness of their shared basic values. When new members join an established committee or when the committee has just had rather strong disagreements about a topic, it may be useful for the group to look again at the similarity of their basic values. Encouraging the group to talk simultaneously about their basic values, while reviewing the major purposes of the committee, may be helpful at these times.

We've assumed that substantial similarity exists in the basic values of committee members. Although this similarity may often be found in the committees Extension serves, members of a specific committee may not show such strong agreement. In this case, Extension personnel may well reverse the above suggestions (for example, discourage discussions about childhoods) and thereby, decrease the visibility of the value dissimilarity.

Helping participation in committees involves more than simply making sure that each person has the *opportunity* to take an active role in the group. More importantly, the committee must develop an atmosphere in which people *want* to participate fully.

*Appropriate
Committee Role*

When there's agreement about the relative leadership status of the members and the specific part each person plays in that group, the committee's morale and cohesion may increase. Participation in committee activities may be better when members aren't asked to operate in an "unstructured group."⁷

Extension staff may help by encouraging the development of an appropriate leadership and a clear role for each member in the committee. Direct questions to the committee about the role of each person, in combination with informal prompting of individuals to play particular roles, is often helpful. Such input to the committee may be especially beneficial when a committee is new or a substantial membership change occurs.

Several aspects of this task deserve note. First, the leaders of the committee's activities aren't necessarily leaders in the community at large. Although there often may be a tendency for people with higher prestige in the community to take more initiative in the committee than do those with less status, the community leaders may not invariably be the committee leaders.

Second, a person's role in the committee can change somewhat from one topic of discussion to another. The point,

though, is that the members agree on what part each is to play in a given topic area.

Third, the development of appropriate leadership may require that there be more than one type of leader in the committee. If a leader initiates many suggestions and in other ways prods the group towards its objectives, he himself may be irritating or may not reduce tensions caused by differences of opinion. Another leader may be needed to raise the group's spirits and reduce tension and disagreements. He may make statements agreeing with others, offer encouragement, introduce humorous comments, or point out that the group is progressing in the right direction.

The two types of leaders may be the same person or they may be different people. If the latter type of leader doesn't emerge naturally from the group, we in Extension may have to encourage someone to play the role or even play that role ourselves. If necessary, we may have to purposely recruit someone for the committee who can probably play that role.

*Ensure
Contact*

A few individuals may tend to band together and act as a "block vote" or in other ways try to direct the entire committee. Such splinter groups may readily develop when the committee is large or when it includes members of diverse backgrounds.

Contrary to popular belief, the existence of a splinter group doesn't necessarily harm overall member participation. A splinter group can allow a person in that group to feel he's contributing to the committee's activities. Further, such a group can sometimes help the progress of the larger committee when that larger committee is paralyzed by confusion, apathy, or disagreement. A splinter group becomes a problem principally when it tries to set goals for the entire committee and those goals don't coincide with the desires of other members.

What can be done when a splinter group is disrupting the larger committee? One approach is to put individuals in the splinter group in contact with *individuals* from the larger committee. Having a meeting between the entire splinter group and the rest of the committee is typically not the entire solution. In a larger meeting, the members of the splinter group often support each other and so stay together against the committee. A second approach is to use informal contacts and discussions of the entire committee, in the way discussed previously, to keep everyone aware of whatever similarity there is in the basic values of all members. Encouraging a group to "temporarily" select a different topic or task may provide a "breathing spell" during which the above can be accomplished.

*Opportunity
to Speak*

A person's commitment to the committee tends to be higher when he *feels* he had the opportunity to influence that committee's activities to a *reasonable* degree. What a person

finds “reasonable” depends on his past experiences and on his views of other people on the committee. People with substantial prestige in the community or those with expertise in the topic area often expect to have more impact on the committee’s activities than those who don’t. In general, though, almost everyone feels it reasonable to have at least some opportunity to influence committee decisions.

We in Extension can make several contributions in this regard. First, it’s obvious that members sometimes are unaware of the full scope of their opportunities to influence committee decisions. It’s important, then, to verify *continually* that each member is completely aware of his opportunities.

Second, contacting a member personally between committee meetings is often critical to his feeling that he has the opportunity to participate fully and that his ideas are important to the group. Finally, the committee may at times require explicit encouragement to set an informal “rule” that before a final decision is reached all members must have made at least one comment on the topic.

Summary

It can be difficult to find in the social science literature specific, concrete suggestions about how to help member participation in the types of committees served by Extension. In this light, five generalizations that have received substantial empirical support in the social sciences were examined. Selected from among the myriad possible ways of implementing these ideas, some approaches particularly appropriate to Extension efforts were suggested. A theme underlying many of these suggestions was to ensure members’ *full awareness*: of their own roles in the committee, of their similarity to others, and of movement toward their goals.

Footnotes

1. Fortunately, there are exceptions to this “rule,” for example, Jerry Robinson, Jr., and Roy A. Clifford, *Process Skills in Organization Development* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1972).
2. An overview of this research can be found in B. Aubrey Fisher, *Small Group Decision Making: Communication and the Group Process* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) and in Marvin Shaw, *Group Dynamics: The Psychology of Small Group Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).
3. A recent example is James L. Smith, “Group Cohesion: Key to Program Planning,” *Journal of Extension*, XII (Fall, 1974), 25-31.
4. A discussion of these circumstances appears in Norman Maier, *Problem-Solving Discussions and Conferences: Leadership Methods and Skills* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).
5. A highly readable review of the classic studies in this area is Richard Heslin, “Three Dimensions of Member Satisfaction in Small Groups,” *Human Relations*, XVII (No. 2, 1964), 99-112.
6. Illustrative support is documented in Joseph E. Grath and Irwin Altman, *Small Group Research* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

7. The opposite case may also occur. That is, when a group's leadership and communication is structured tightly and inflexibly, morale and participation may decrease when the committee works on certain tasks. The latter situation isn't treated here, for it's rather infrequently encountered in the committees served by Extension. One useful conceptual approach to this topic is Fred E. Fiedler, *A Theory of Leadership Effectiveness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
8. A useful discussion of the role of perceived freedom to participate in the overall productivity of a committee's efforts can be found in Ivan D. Steiner, *Group Process and Productivity* (New York: Academic Press, 1972).