

is program planning just a ritual?

Arthur E. Durfee

A new word is appearing in the Extension lexicon these days. It's "accountability" and it's found sprinkled through recent addresses by administrators in sentences like these from a recent talk by a director of Extension: "More efficiency and certainly more accountability will be called for. . . . The need for accountability is upon us in a very real sense. . . . It is here to stay; . . ."

It's also a word that's heard more frequently in discussions among practitioners of Extension as they consider facts of life surrounding them. Sometimes it crops up in critical discussions by outsiders talking about Extension; for example, this recently overheard comment: "No one in Extension is ever held accountable. Plans are submitted, but there's no follow-up to see what the planner accomplished."

Like other words that spring into popular usage, "accountability" probably has different meanings for different people—or in different contexts. For some, it may mean an agency has to file a report before it gets its next appropriation. As the director quoted above said, ". . . several states are having their monies withheld for lack of simple accountability reports."

But, there's also personal accountability in which a person is answerable for the discharge of responsibilities. Or, as Webster puts it, "liable to be called to account—answerable."

In an attempt to challenge our individual and collective thinking, let's advance the proposition that Program Planning (the capitalization is deliberate) isn't proving to be very productive or satisfying for the majority of Extension professionals. Let's admit, too, that Program Planning has taken on some of the characteristics of Voodooism—"a religion . . . characterized by propitiatory rites." Program Planning has tended to become a ritual. Committees are called together,

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subcommittees are appointed, the situation is studied, data are gathered, research is reviewed, experts are called in, local authorities interviewed, and, eventually, plans are written. But someplace along the line, for many Extensioners, the ritual has become an end in itself and the participants frequently complete it without any feeling of satisfaction. In fact, audible sighs of relief can be heard given covertly or overtly as everyone gets back to work while programs and plans are mimeographed for whichever dusty file room has been established to receive them.

Of course, these comments are exaggerated—somewhat. Of course, many examples of effective planning are available. Of course, there have been many incidents in which planning groups broke new ground, developed new insights, kindled enthusiasm, or marshalled community support. And each of those incidents was a thrilling experience for the Extension professionals involved. But which is the exception and which is the rule?

Concern over the tendency for planning to be a dull, routine, uninspired waste of time has led to research in planning. Theses by graduate students adorn the shelves of institutions from coast to coast. They've analyzed committee selection, committee structure, planning methods, and other aspects. Nationally, there have been campaigns to upgrade planning or just give it a new name.

Perhaps the stress on Program Planning has been counter-productive. Not that planning isn't essential and productive, but by putting capital letters on it, figuratively, Extension has overemphasized it as an end in itself instead of a means to an end. Perhaps it's time to shift emphasis from planning to accountability; not to do away with planning, but to improve it.

In exploring this possibility, let's identify two kinds of accountability: (1) that of everyone who supervises others and (2) that of each Extension professional, regardless of position.¹

Accountability Questions

Question #1

In a new approach, based on accountability, every supervisor would be accountable for asking a series of questions during the year. Each and every professional would also be accountable for asking some questions and seeking to answer those asked personally, as well as those asked by his or her immediate supervisor. The first one, asked by the supervisor at least once a year of each person supervised would be: "What are you going to accomplish this year?"² Each Extensioner (agent, specialist, supervisor, or administrator) would be expected to have asked that question of himself or herself and be able to reply: "Here are the 5 to 10 major

accomplishments (or objectives) I should be held accountable for during the coming year in addition to keeping routine aspects of my work on an even keel.”

That exchange may seem familiar and routine because it has been taking place year after year in most states. It has been built into the basic Program Planning effort and has resulted in the submission of programs and/or plans of work. In most situations, that's where Program Planning ended unless the individual worker or team followed through. Occasionally, a district supervisor or other state administrator has startled the individual worker or county staff by giving evidence of studying the plan, understanding it, or even having a suggestion or question regarding it. One could wonder how many directors have ever followed through with the plans submitted to them by supervisors or assistant or associate directors.

Again, we're letting some exaggeration creep in for the sake of emphasis, but it would be interesting to know of instances where there's a history of useful follow-up to programs and plans of work submitted to the state office. A frequent lament of field and specialist staffs is “no one ever reacts.”

Question #2

Accountability for each individual in Extension ought to require an answer to a set of questions like: “How do I know these are important objectives?” “What alternatives did I consider?” “What's my evidence?” But they ought not be merely rhetorical questions. The person's immediate supervisor should be accountable for asking those kinds of questions in a consulting, helpful way and expecting good answers. (The supervisor should also be accountable for being able to distinguish between “good” and “fuzzy” answers.)

This suggestion begins to encounter resistance or fears related to academic freedom, individual responsibility, freedom with responsibility, autocratic or top-down administration, etc. The supervisor or administrator who lacks the skill to press the questions in a way that's helpful, stimulating, and motivating rather than threatening may be in the wrong position. In most instances, the questions will be threatening only to those individuals who haven't thought about them and need to do so. Furthermore, the supervisor or administrator who lacks the courage to press vigorously until good answers are given and good action taken is failing a test of accountability.

Question #3

The third exchange in accountability has different questions for the subordinate and for the supervisor. Each Extension professional should be accountable for devising his or her plan for meeting the objectives, for seeking new and innovative approaches, for improving teaching techniques, and for

enlisting and giving cooperation. This should come in answer to one's own question, "How can I accomplish the objectives I have committed myself to and have agreed on with my supervisor?" Related questions might be: "Which methods will reach a maximum number of audiences with maximum effectiveness?" "Who else in Extension may have related objectives, and can we cooperate in some way?" "What other groups or agencies might be able to help?" There are, of course, many questions that flow from these as the Extensioner seeks to maximize the impact and effectiveness of efforts and time.

The supervisor's questions are different: "How can I be helpful?" "What support or resources will you need?" "What should I do or stop doing to facilitate your efforts?" As a stimulator, the supervisor should also be asking good questions about methods to challenge, excite, and help the worker design an innovative and aggressive plan of action.

Question #4

The fourth question in accountability is a joint one as the supervisor and Extension professional ask themselves: "When, how often, where, and how will we get together to review progress, identify problems, agree on modifications in objectives, if necessary, and marshal any needed resources?" Answers should be specific, agreed on, and put in writing for each of the two individuals. The reviews aren't inspections, but should be searching consultations led primarily by the subordinate as he or she seeks to analyze results and failures with the help of the supervisor.

At the same time, the supervisor must be asking himself or herself: "How am I going to keep in touch?" "What can I do between reviews to be helpful and stimulating?" "How do I help the individual gather facts, make judgments about program needs, and progress?" "What do I know about this person's capabilities, needs, interests, and potential?"

Question #5

The next questions arise at the agreed-on reviews of progress. They're also asked mutually by the supervisor and the Extension professional: "What evidence do you have about success or failure?" "What have been the successes so far?" "Why the success?" "What failures have been experienced?" "Why?" "What problems or obstacles have been encountered and what was and can be done?"

The supervisor is accountable for helping the individual ask the questions and seeking their answers. He or she is also accountable for pursuing the questions: "Was I helpful?" "In what way wasn't I helpful?" "Are other parts of the organization being supportive?" "Are resources adequate?"

As a consultant and stimulator, the supervisor is hoping to establish a climate in which the individual Extension

professional will be using the opportunity to live up to his or her own accountability for making a thoughtful analysis of progress. If that doesn't happen, the supervisor may need to reexamine his or her methods and skills. The supervisor is accountable for making certain that the review results in clear summaries of progress, failure, and problems and causes of each. Without interfering with the individual's accountability for developing his or her own plan, the supervisor is accountable to his or her supervisor for being sure that the subordinate has a plan.

Question #6

At the end of the year (or other agreed-on period), the supervisor is accountable for asking: "What have been your accomplishments *toward the goals agreed on at the beginning of the period or as modified during the year?*" "What's your evidence?" Related questions might be: "Are you pleased or satisfied?" "What did you learn from the successes and failures?" "How have you grown in the process?"

Obviously, each individual should be accountable for asking these questions of himself or herself and for answering them as definitively as possible. But accountability in an organization should provide opportunity for each individual to discuss those questions and answers with an immediate supervisor. Knowledge that such an opportunity is a certainty should help make program planning meaningful and useful to many Extension professionals who now find it a bore. This is as true of supervisors and middle managers in the organization as it is for agents.

Question #7

The final question in accountability may be: "How can the accomplishments be reported to all of those who have a right or a need to know?" But if the other accountability questions haven't been confronted carefully, thoughtfully, and consistently at each level of the organization throughout the year, there will be less to report.

Summary

Accountability, understood and maintained through an Extension organization, offers a way of bringing life to the program development process. The failure of supervisors to follow through with helpful interest and discussion (and hard-nosed questions) has had a debilitating impact that results in too many programs and plans of work being shelved and forgotten. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to have the challenging help of a skillful and persistent supervisor knows how helpful it is. It must start at the top, with the director finding time to use an accountability approach with his immediate staff and they with middle management. The process will be functional when it reaches and involves every first-line supervisor (agent) in county offices.

Footnotes

1. The term “supervisor” is used in this paper to include any individual who has leadership oversight for one or more other people—not just those with supervisory or administrative titles. The head of a two-person office is included as is the director of Extension. The term “Extension professional” includes each and every individual—including those who also wear a supervisory hat either part-time or full-time.
2. Let’s not quibble over length of the period. It could vary with circumstances—usually a year, but in some instances a shorter or longer period might be appropriate.