

editor's page

The Right To Be Unique

The often-quoted statement that "Every man is like all other men, like some other man, like no other man" is accepted by most educators as being true or at least a reasonable basis for dealing with people. They agree that each of us is a unique individual.

The real dilemma comes when we begin to put this idea into practice. We may believe that each person is unique, but the procedures and practices we establish to facilitate organizational processes don't reflect this belief. Efficient management practices can limit the creative practices of others and cause them to respond as if they're like all others.

Let's look at two examples: If you recently filled out an application for employment, did it permit you to emphasize your uniquenesses or were you expected to fill in the blanks and as a result not share with your prospective employer the things that were uniquely you? Were you able in the last class you or a member of your family were enrolled in to bring your uniqueness into the classroom or were you expected to fit into a preconceived set of expectations?

In Extension, where we're committed to the development of people, we need to examine our actions carefully. Are we guilty of saying that each person is unique and then proceeding to act otherwise? My experience makes me believe that at times we inadvertently fail to let both staff and clientele express their uniquenesses. Let's explore some possibilities.

Are supervisory personnel free to use their unique capabilities as they evaluate programs and personnel? Or are they expected to follow specific procedures designed to ensure that evaluation is uniform and consistent from person to person, county to county, and program to program?

When you did your last annual report were you able to present the information in a manner that enabled you to uniquely report your activities? Or did you have to make it conform to precise format requirements and, therefore, it did not reflect you or your program?

Do 4-H members have an opportunity to demonstrate their uniqueness in their record books or demonstrations? Or are they expected to follow specific guidelines and as a result they can't be creative and express their own special competencies?

When you help clientele make applications for recognition, whether it be leadership, community development, or 4-H, are they able to express their special qualifications? Or are the specifications so precise that their application looks like every other application?

It's easy to stifle originality and the application of unique competencies. Often we're victims of our experiences. With the *Journal of Extension*, we have trouble getting authors to let the content of their article or their unique competencies dictate the style and format of their manuscripts. Some feel that they must use the standard thesis format, even though we say otherwise. We want authors to use their uniquenesses to provide the structure of their work. It'll make more exciting reading and we believe the readers and the authors will be more satisfied. We have a problem convincing authors of this because their past experiences tell them that journals expect a standard thesis format.

The establishment of precise procedures, forms, guidelines, or requirements are one means of facilitating efficiency and ensuring consistency when different people are involved. It's not an attempt to limit creativity or to stifle the uniqueness of people, but often it does. We must have standards, we need to be consistent, and we need to be more efficient. Rules, forms, procedures, and standards can, if they're designed properly, permit flexibility and help capture the uniqueness of each person, project, or activity.

Take a look at your work. Are you limiting the right of people to be unique? Are you subtly encouraging uniformity and sameness? All of us have a right to be unique.

JP