

measuring the performance of extension educators

Maynard C. Heckel

One of the most difficult tasks of supervisors and administrators is trying to accurately measure the performance of Extension educators. Part of the reason for this is obviously due to the complex nature of Extension education. Complexities such as the variety of educational methods used, the varied clientele, and the broad spectrum of subject matter are but some of the elements.

Complications

What Approach?

Even though the task is difficult, it's essential that we continue to explore various approaches that yield personal and professional satisfaction to the individual whose performance is being judged, as well as providing the evaluator with what are considered adequate indicators of effectiveness.

What Learned?

A further complication in performance evaluation rests in the difficulty we have in adequately measuring what the "student" has learned. Since we don't deal with a captive audience in Extension, exposure to our Extension educational efforts is sometimes quite brief. So, we can't always follow our "learners" from the beginning to the end of any particular educational process. Thus, it's difficult to identify the specific impact we might have had on bringing about behavioral change.

As we look at the results of Extension education, we find ourselves dealing with such terms as quantitative and qualitative measurement. Here, again, we realize that much of our Extension educational effort, hopefully, has a qualitative effect, and thus intangibles come into play. When we deal with quantitative measurements, we sometimes feel more comfortable in showing results of our teaching.

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What Style?

Exploring more closely the varied teaching styles of Extension educators, we quickly discover that what works for one Extension educator may or may not work for another.

We have effective Extension educators who are low-keyed. We have effective Extension educators who exhibit a great deal of overt enthusiasm. We have effective Extension educators who use the lecture approach, while others rely strongly on the group process. We have effective Extension educators who are heavily research oriented and effective Extension educators who have great strengths in the applied aspects of their subject. We have effective Extension educators who use visual aids well, as well as effective Extension educators who never use visual aids—and so it goes.

Variety of effective teaching styles is inherent in characteristics of good teachers as described by Betty Siegel.¹ Siegel indicates that teachers usually have adequate background in the subject matter being taught, but says good teachers must also: (1) believe they're good, (2) believe other people are also good and able, (3) see things from the other person's point of view, (4) find their role as freeing and not restricting, and (5) find their own authentic way.

These characteristics imply that effective Extension educators must possess some special ingredients drawn from basic human relations as well as possessing a knowledge of subject matter and teaching methodology.

Expectations

Due to the complexities inherent in the evaluation of Extension educators, it has been extremely difficult to minimize subjective judgment in the evaluation process. And, I'm not sure that this can ever be ruled out, or should be. It's essential, however, that there's clarification of job expectations in the mind of the person to be evaluated, as well as in the mind of the individual who will exercise subjective judgment in the evaluation process.

It's important, however, that such expectations not impose restrictions on the individual and the individual's particular style. Therefore, it's necessary that expectations be developed around the individual once his/her strengths and weaknesses have been identified.

In any case, if an individual doesn't really understand what's expected of him/her, then measurement of performance is a rather useless exercise.

Extension educators can find themselves in a very difficult position because of the wide range of expectations that are imposed on them due to the very nature of the job. A challenge

to the professional Extension educator is developing the ability to sort out expectations and establish the level of importance of these expectations.

Extension educators aren't only concerned about the direct reaction of their colleagues and their supervisors and administrators, but are also affected by expectations of other agencies, a variety of advisory groups and councils, clientele who sometimes represent a wide variety of subject-matter interests, and individual and group needs. Inexperienced Extension educators must be given some help in coping with the maze.

Approaches

When we explore the literature to determine the variety of approaches used to measure educator effectiveness, we can glean some thoughts from those involved in formal classroom teaching that can well apply to the more informal approach taken by Extension educators.²

Visitation

One method described is that of classroom visitation. The notion of classroom visitation certainly has application to the Extension educator. Those people measuring performance should spend more time on site to see how effectively individuals do—in fact, how they conduct meetings, workshops, office visits, farm and home visits. It's important that, following such observations, the evaluators discuss the strengths and weaknesses exhibited by the Extension educators.

Self-Appraisal

Self-appraisal is another approach that has some merit. Self-appraisal can be particularly valuable if some predetermined performance goals have been agreed on between the Extension educator and his/her supervisor. Through self-appraisal, the individual can first make a judgment that can then serve as a basis for further discussion with the supervisor. And, having a point of reference, such as performance goals, is highly essential if self-evaluation is to be beneficial.

Plan of Work Review

The Extension educator should function in relation to a plan of work. Thus, a review periodically of the plan of work and the goals reflected in the plan of work can be a valuable aid to performance evaluation. This can be accompanied by review of data available through SEMIS (State Extension Management Information System), which provides an indication of the extent of activity, number of people reached, and kinds of subject-matter areas included in the individual's program. Reviews of this nature should be related to agreed-on criteria.

If the plan of work is to be used as a partial basis of performance evaluation, it's essential that the Extension educator's supervisor provide some indication of the quality of the plan of work when it's first submitted, as well as to follow up with subsequent discussions with the staff member to determine progress that's being made toward goal achievement during the course of the year.

"Student" Input

Relating "student" input to the evaluation of Extension educators has been neglected far too long. Much of the evaluation is performed by immediate supervisors who think they know how clientele respond to particular Extension educators. Possibly, however, they may have far too little evidence, or have too little input from the staff member's "student body" to truly have an adequate basis for evaluative decisions. In this regard, I'd encourage more contact between program supervisors and clientele.

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Group Sampling

One way to get clientele appraisal is to periodically sample groups of people who are exposed to various major program areas within Extension. Make contact with these individuals through personal, telephone, or mail interview based on some predetermined questions. It's also possible to discuss agent performance with various members of advisory councils and committees who may work closely with Extension educators. Getting unbiased input is difficult and yet any input from clientele may be a valuable additional source of information.

Peer Evaluation

Lastly, peer evaluation can be of real value. Here, it may be quite possible to have Extension agents provide some input into the evaluation of specialists who work closely with field staff and, in turn, specialists may well have some input into *the evaluation of the field staff.*

In all cases, well thought-out questions and clearly established criteria are essential.

National Study

Currently, there's a national study underway directed toward further refining approaches to Extension agent selection and performance appraisal. This study, being conducted by the American Institutes of Research, and guided by an ECOP Task

Force on Performance Appraisal, is comprehensive. It involves some eight pilot states, with heavy emphasis on staff input.

The results of this study should provide information of value at all levels of the organization in dealing with the complex tasks of clarifying expectations and measuring effectiveness of the total educational process. Further, this study should result in the development of instruments that can be validated, thus providing some assurance that the instruments used do, in fact, measure what they purport to measure.

Summary

In summary, let me stress that we have, in no way, arrived at perfecting approaches to performance evaluation of Extension educators. This must be a long-range goal and one that we continue to work toward over time. As we proceed to refine our methods, total staff involvement is absolutely essential.

Footnotes

1. Betty Siegel, "Quest for Quality" (Speech presented at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, April 21, 1977).
2. Kenneth E. Eble, *The Recognition and Evaluation of Teaching* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Project to Improve College Teaching, 1971).