

# forum

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*In Pursuit Of Objectivity.* Objectivity among Extension staff members faced with controversial issues raises an interesting theoretical question. When Extension professionals evaluate actions and alternatives, they often come to the conclusion that objectivity, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. It seems that a dictionary definition of objectivity (the act of expressing or involving the use of facts without distortion by personal feelings or prejudices) often differs from what's accepted by society.

Extension staff members can't escape the fact that they possess personal standards and/or prejudices developed over a period of years. S. I. Hayakawa, in his book *Language in Thought and Action*, states ". . . by the process of selection and abstraction, imposed on us by our own interests and backgrounds, experience comes to all of us already slanted." This concept represents a serious barrier to being completely objective.

Other obstacles to complete objectivity are political and sociological forces in society that may not follow standard codes of objectivity as set up by the scientific community. An example is the handling of the 2, 4, 5-T (chemical defoliant) issue by some television broadcasting companies. A documentary series of interviews was conducted with uninformed individuals who alleged that goats and ducks were rendered abnormal by use of the product in that locality. Other individuals alleged that birth defects in children born to mothers in the area had been caused by the chemical.

Broadcasting these opinions into millions of homes as a documentary presentation rendered the information credible. Whether true or not, they must now be dealt with objectively as a fact, because millions of people believe them. It seems that the criterion for getting information accepted isn't how accurate that information is, but how efficiently and effectively it's delivered to the public.

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Hayakawa says that

. . . even in a world such as we have today, in which everybody seems to be quarreling with everyone else, we still to a surprising degree trust each other's reports. We ask directions of total strangers when we are traveling. We follow directions on road signs without being suspicious of the people who put them up . . . and the information is correct most of the time.

Extension professionals often become frustrated because they feel they're asked to perform by a different set of rules than are other members of society. While they must stick to proven facts, others are using half-truths and insinuations to sway public opinion.

Over the years, Extension staff members have been encouraged to be change agents, which places them in the role of being advocates. If a subject under consideration is controversial, this position may place them in open conflict with those who can benefit by supporting other viewpoints. Extension professionals may then be accused of lacking objectivity even if they're scientifically correct. The person holding an opposite viewpoint can accuse the scientist of lacking objectivity when he fails to consider other viewpoints with the same level of validity. Objectivity then becomes a weapon.

Objectivity in contemporary society takes on different shades, like a chameleon changes color when it moves from one background to another. The following definitions may help illustrate this point:

*Scientific objectivity:* The factor under consideration has been tested and found to perform consistently under defined conditions.

*Socioeconomic objectivity:* The factor being considered can be expected to bring benefit either socially or economically to a majority of those in a position to benefit.

*Political objectivity:* The factor when applied will serve to benefit the positions of those in charge or those put in charge by the results.

The highest level of frustration results when those accustomed to scientific certainty are faced with socioeconomic or political objectivity.

The call to be objective in an unobjective world may be hard for staff members, but it doesn't need to diminish performance. Idealism and reality clash daily in our lives, and we must make adjustments to ensure a degree of order. Objectivity isn't always relegated to the highest priority level in a competitive society, but it must exist at a minimal level for order to be maintained.

Extension professionals are expected to function objectively because they're charged to do so as public servants, and the issuing of technically or socially incorrect information isn't acceptable.

The following theoretical exchange is in anticipation of what might occur between an Extension supervisor and staff member.

QUESTION: *(Staff member) Do you consider it more appropriate for an Extension staff member to be objective scientifically, socioeconomically, or politically?*

ANSWER: *(Supervisor) Yes!*