

developing effective advisory councils

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A necessary ingredient for success in Extension programming is the active participation of a cross section of people in developing and carrying out its programs. One of Extension's basic purposes is to help local people identify their opportunities and solve their problems. The truly outstanding Extension programs are usually those where local people understand this purpose and use the Extension agents as resource people instead of waiting for the agents to show the community *what should be done*.¹

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Advisory Council System

There are many ways local people can band together and use Extension to serve their needs. One plan that may be used is the Extension advisory council system. Effective advisory councils can help ensure that local needs and priorities are at the core of Extension programs.² But even if an Extension advisory council is representative of the people and their needs, unless the council is given the necessary information and training to carry out its duties, its potential for community improvement won't be realized.

I worked as a graduate student for a year in the Center for Community Education at the University of Florida. During that time, we received many requests from various educational groups, including Extension, for workshops and materials relative to advisory councils. It became my responsibility to help meet those requests.

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As I worked through the mounds of available materials on councils and tried to develop my own, I perceived a need for a basic framework to plug information and ideas into so that council training could be delivered in an organized, systematic way. Such a framework could serve in several capacities:

1. For a new council, in generating awareness of the components that must be addressed within a council.
2. In establishing short- and long-term goals for becoming more effective.
3. *By an already existing council, in evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the council.*
4. For in-service training related to identified needs within the council.

The Model

As a result of the reviewing and categorizing of existing materials, coupled with my own experiences and observations, the model in Figure 1 evolved as a framework for organizing the components present in a council.

The model is divided into three parts: (1) structural components, (2) programming skill components, and (3) group process skill components. An absence of, or weakness in, any of the three areas will result in an ineffective council.

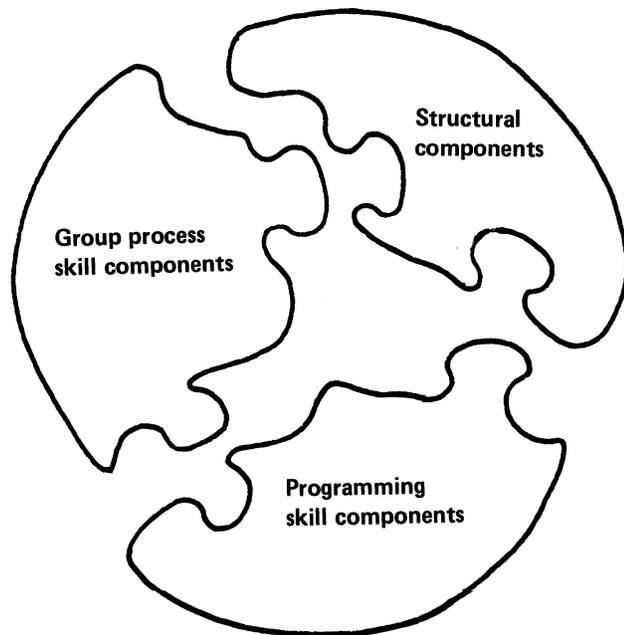


Figure 1. Model of generic components in organized council.

*Structural
Components*

The structural components section refers to the general framework of the council—the legalities and technicalities. A tremendous waste of citizen wisdom occurs if the procedural mechanics of an advisory council are unsound. Even enlightened participants become frustrated by an ineffectively operating advisory council and will expend their energies elsewhere.³ For councils to function effectively, the following structural components should be considered:

1. General context of council within total system:
 - a. Extension organizational structure.
 - b. Role definitions of members of organization.
 - c. Philosophical, historical, and economical foundations.
 - d. Policy and law relative to councils.
2. Council levels (overall, program area, ad hoc committees, etc.):
 - a. Structure.
 - b. Roles and functions.
3. Purposes of councils:
 - a. Program development.
 - b. Personal development.
4. Power and limitations.
5. Bylaws.
6. Membership:
 - a. Selection.
 - b. Tenure.
 - c. Retention.
 - d. Council size.
7. Officers:
 - a. Selection.
 - b. Tenure.
 - c. Duties.
8. Meetings:
 - a. Agenda.
 - b. Time.
 - c. Place.
 - d. Frequency.
 - e. Notification.
 - f. Follow-up and dissemination.
 - g. Parliamentary procedure.

*Programming
Skill
Components*

Programming skill components refer to the actual work of the council. Council members must know about programming to effectively do what they're organized to do.⁴ Members need to know how to prioritize goals and objectives that grow out of needs assessments and situational statements. They should be given the tools for helping the agent plan

appropriate tasks for reaching long-range and annual goals and objectives. By so doing, they help legitimize both the agent and the programs. And their role in evaluation can be invaluable if they know how to carry out the process effectively.

In addition, working in programming provides an excellent training ground for both adults and youth who have the opportunity to participate in such an experience. What better way to generate community awareness and leadership opportunities than by training people in how to identify and solve their own problems. Membership, in this context, becomes a meaningful activity.

Programming skill components include:

1. Conducting needs assessments.
2. Setting goals and objectives.
3. Planning appropriate tasks.
4. Evaluating.
5. Disseminating.

*Group Process
Skill Components*

The third area, one that is often overlooked in expecting people to function effectively as a council, is group process skills.⁵ How do people feel about being in a group? How do they react and relate to one another? Are they able to blend their individuality into a synergistic relationship? These questions are addressed by the following group process skill components:

1. Listening.
2. Speaking.
3. Feedback.
4. Trust and openness.
5. Influencing.
6. Productivity.
7. Problem solving.
8. Group maintenance.
9. Understanding roles.
10. Membership.

The specifics for the individual components identified under the three major areas should be developed by each council according to its own needs. These results could be combined into a handbook that could serve as an information/training guide for both new and old councils. But the main purpose of the model is to provide a framework for addressing advisory council needs in a systematic, organized way so that efforts aren't piecemeal and unrelated.

Summary One of Extension's basic mandates is to help people identify resources and solve their problems. The educational value of our programs lies in both the content of the programs and the process of developing them. Advisory councils reflect a viable method of ensuring that programs are relevant to the needs of the community. Informed, well-trained advisory councils result in a cadre of individuals who are able to multiply the effectiveness of Extension programs by providing community leadership in the process of planned change.

- Footnotes**
1. *Guidelines for Extension Councils* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, College of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, 1975).
 2. *County 4-H Council Handbook* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1979).
 3. James W. Popham, *Advising Schools: A Handbook for Concerned Citizens* (Los Angeles: Instructional Objectives Exchange, 1977).
 4. Bond L. Bible, *A Guide to Effective County Extension Advisory Committees* (Columbus: Ohio State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1963).
 5. William H. Drummond and Anna Nuernberger, *Improving Community Council Collaboration* (Gainesville: University of Florida, Teacher Corps Project, 1976).