

improving interagency teamwork

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The Cooperative Extension Service has many of the same needs and problems as any intergovernmental organization that tries to bring together agency representatives, local government officials, and citizens. This study of a successful interagency organization highlights factors that help or hinder teamwork in an interagency setting. Because Extension has much the same need for teamwork, the findings of this study can be applied to Extension activities.

To obtain a greater understanding of why interagency teamwork is effective in some instances and not in others, a detailed study was conducted in Virginia. The study focused on the Roanoke Valley Council of Community Services (RVCCS). More than 80 private and public agencies cooperate with the council in voluntarily coordinating community services.

Problem

Interagency teamwork is important for several reasons. First, most governmental areas have a fragmented political system featuring multiple decision-making centers and multiple service delivery mechanisms.¹ A way must be found to bring these fragmented groups together and to fill the institutional vacuum at the regional level. Second, many aspects of local development are related to similar efforts in neighboring communities to broaden development programs within a larger area.² Third, organizations are more motivated to protect their own "empire" than to serve their own community; they're interested in only modest change, at best.³ Their

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perceptions must be expanded if the community is to be well-served. Fourth, only if a community service is coordinated with other services to achieve economic development, can such development reach its full potential.⁴

In spite of the above need for interagency teamwork and the organization and staffing of 22 regional planning district commissions in Virginia, there's considerable lack of awareness and acceptance of the use of interagency mechanisms among many agency representatives, local government officials, and citizens.

In contrast to this, the Roanoke Valley Council of Community Services, which serves 6 of the 9 localities included in the regional planning district area, has been operating cooperatively and effectively since 1959. This regional council is a unique organization because the involvement of community leaders and agency participation is voluntary, not mandatory.

Virginia Study

The RVCCS was selected for study because of the unanimous agreement identified among non-council members that RVCCS was a highly effective non-mandated volunteer interagency council. The council is funded by the United Fund with four full-time staff people and a half-time person. The RVCCS Board of Directors consists of 23 people from the 6 jurisdictions it serves.

Forty of the 83 agency representatives of RVCCS, 20 board members, 7 local officials, and 3 staff members were interviewed. To determine selected factors that help and hinder interagency teamwork within the council, the interview method was used to gather the data with subjects responding to close-ended and open-ended items on the instrument. Four different statistical methods were used in analyzing the data—profile analysis, chi-square, one-way analysis of variance, and percentages.

Findings

The following factors enhanced the council's operation and effectiveness.⁵

Helpful Factors

1. The leadership of the council helped its operation and effectiveness. The Board of Directors was composed of community leaders who were well-respected by citizens throughout the community. They were committed to working cooperatively on problems and needs of all socioeconomic segments of the community. The council director and staff were believed, by the other partners, to be competent and capable, and they had knowledge of the community power structure and needs. The director and staff perceived their role

- as bringing together people, resources, and needs.
2. The actual involvement of community leaders in the operation of the council helped bring together resources from different agencies in solving related problems. The agency heads, local officials, board members, and staff were in unanimous agreement with the roles the community leaders perform.
 3. The council had a good record of improving inter-agency teamwork and reducing duplication of effort. It was perceived by the agencies, local governments, and citizens as a creditable organization.
 4. The council was seen by the partners as an effective facilitator of interagency teamwork. Therefore, the majority of the agency partners cooperated because *they wanted to, and not because they had to. This* helped create and maintain wholesome working relationships.
 5. Agency members strongly agreed that the council's roles were: information exchange, study and analysis, program initiation, program evaluation, making recommendations, consultation, and facilitating coordination. The partners agreed that the council should coordinate agency programs, but they strongly agreed that the interagency mechanism should be a *facilitator of coordination.*
 6. There was general agreement among the agency partners regarding the overall goals of the council.

*Hindering
Factors*

Here are the factors that hindered the council's effectiveness:

1. The council's informal working relationship with the agency heads limited regular communication and personal contacts between the board, paid staff, and agency heads. This limitation seemed to contribute to less trust among the agency heads involving the council's operation.
2. The agency heads had a general understanding of the overall goals of the council, but their understanding of the goals wasn't as clear as the council staff's and board members'. This lack of clarity of goals by the agency heads hindered the operation and effectiveness of the interagency mechanism.
3. The board members, staff, and local officials perceived the council as more cohesive and prestigious than the the agency heads perceived it.

4. The lack of involvement of more agency heads, consumers, black women, and low-income people in the operation of the council appeared to hinder its effectiveness. This seemed to be more a question of how to involve these people. Studies have shown that to meet effectively the needs of the poor, strong commitment is necessary from the non-poor. Such strong commitment from the non-poor was evident from the involvement of the board, staff, and local officials.

Although community leaders who reflected the needs of low-income people were members of the board, low-income people themselves weren't represented. Periodic meetings with low-income recipients of community services could be a method of securing more low-income involvement, since they greatly benefited from community service programs.

Implications

From these findings, other important implications regarding the interagency teamwork concept were evident.

First, the council uses a formal indirect interagency model, with the staff and community leaders maintaining a formal and regular relationship and the agency heads maintaining an informal relationship. It appears that there are, at least, two other possible interagency models that could be used. One is a mechanism that's composed of only agency heads and/or agency representatives. This model would rely on agency personnel to plan, implement, and evaluate interagency programs. A second interagency model is a mechanism that includes agency representatives and community leaders in a formal and regular relationship. The agency representatives and community leaders would cooperatively plan, implement, and evaluate interagency programs.

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Second, several factors—goals, communication, leadership, and group effectiveness—are important in the effective operation of the council. *Therefore, these factors should be given adequate consideration in implementing voluntary interagency teamwork.*

Third, the roles of the council outlined in this study could ~~be used~~ by most voluntary interagency mechanisms in establishing their philosophy and goals, and should help councils in coming to grips with related community needs.

Fourth, the four roles of community leaders—serving on the board, participating in meetings and decisions with agencies, assisting agencies and citizens in working together, and assisting in coordinating interagency efforts—need to be considered when community leaders are involved in an interagency mechanism on a formal basis. Thus, community leaders could be made aware of their roles and readily involved in interagency teamwork.

Fifth, helping agencies and citizens in working together and participating in meetings and decisions with agencies appear to be appropriate roles for local elected officials in a voluntary interagency mechanism.

Teamwork Guidelines

This study offers considerations for use by Extension both internally and externally in developing teamwork. These considerations relate to goals, communication, leadership, and effectiveness.

1. Set realistic goals that:
 - a. Are clearly understood by all participants.
 - b. Reflect a shared sense of purpose of the participants.
 - c. Are responsive to changing needs of the community council, participants, and citizens.
2. Establish and maintain open communication among all participants:
 - a. To allow a free sharing of ideas.
 - b. To build adequate trust.
 - c. To promote understanding of the ideas that are presented by the members, as well as an understanding of the various agency programs.

When the above factors are operating, there's an acceptance of the ideas of various agency participants. This doesn't mean there won't be different points of view, but the team has matured and good human relations skills are being used so each point of view is considered in goal formulation and decision making.

3. Recognize that the leadership, to a large extent, determines what's accomplished. Therefore:
 - a. It's desirable that the leadership be shared by the participating members and not controlled by a few.
 - b. Competition among the various members should be minimal with all members focusing on problems that relate to their mission and responsibilities.
 - c. It's desirable to have the participating agencies and individuals provide resources to achieve a more effective use of resources.

4. Evaluate the effectiveness of teamwork by asking the following questions:
 - a. Is there acceptance of the various group members of the team?
 - b. Do group members view the team as being successful relative to its goals and mission?
 - c. Are the members willing to sacrifice time to be active participants in the work of the team?
 - d. Do the team members and community perceive the council as having a good image?
 - e. Is the team able to resolve conflict and make difficult decisions?

Summary

Teamwork is as important in Extension as it is in any agency that works with a variety of interest groups. Extension is an organization with many of the same problems that plague interagency teamwork. A lack of teamwork between the program areas in Extension can lead to fragmentation and overlap of program efforts that hinder the development of the best programs for meeting clientele needs. By examining our Extension program areas in view of the findings of this study, we can improve our delivery of services to communities.

Interagency teamwork is becoming more important in view of tight budgets for agency programs. Extension is increasingly being asked to help in the organization and maintenance of community councils. Developing teamwork between agencies is a way for Extension to develop comprehensive programs that are more effective in achieving community goals. An awareness and application of the findings in this study can help Extension both internally and externally in the development of more effective interprogram and interagency teamwork groups.

Footnotes

1. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Regional Decision-Making: New Strategies for Substate Districts* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 13.
2. National Area Development Institute, *Guide to Federal Programs for Rural Development* (Arlington, Virginia: Community Development Service, 1973), p. 9.
3. Jack D. Minzey, "Community Education: The Facilitator for Others To Do Their Thing," *Leisure Today* (April, 1974), pp. 4-5.
4. John C. Kavanough, *Community Development Policy* (Chicago: Farm Foundation, 1967), p. 29.
5. Harvey W. Shelton, "Relationship of Selected Factors to the Facilitation of Interagency Teamwork" (Ph.D. dissertation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, 1976).