

forum

Norman E. Tooker
*Extension Specialist,
Agricultural Education,
University of Nebraska—
Lincoln*

The Extension Office Secretary: Your Key to Productivity. Your most important co-worker in an Extension office may be your secretary. Secretaries are as important to the functions of your organization as the Extension staff for whom they work. Efficient, capable, and well-trained secretaries, working with modern equipment in pleasant surroundings, can greatly increase the productivity of your office. Secretaries are in the forefront as far as visibility and public relations for Extension. Meeting the public and helping them with their problems is an important function of a secretary. Knowing

which requests to answer and which ones to refer to someone else is part of the secretary's decision-making role.

Several theories related to human resource management have emerged in recent years indicating that if people are allowed to make some of their own decisions on how their job will be done, they'll be more innovative, more productive, and happier than if they're not allowed to do so.¹ The potential of the average human being is far above that typically realized in business and industry today.²

Here are some things you as a Extension staff member can do to enhance the productivity, job satisfaction, and positive image of your Extension office secretary.

Training and Orientation. The selection of well-qualified people is important. However, new secretaries need to receive orientation and training on the job as it relates to your specific organization. They should receive some of the training or orientation from individuals for whom they work. However, much of it can be planned and delegated to secretaries who are already on the job. The training should be extended over several days or weeks to give the new person a chance to absorb the volume of information we inflict on new people. Training or orientation will be different for a secretary who's starting a first job than for an experienced person. The work assignments should be carefully delineated.

Delegation. Perhaps the most important part of delegation is to give "appropriate jobs to appropriate people." Secretaries should know what their realm of responsibility is and know the area in which they're expected to function. A secretary who's new on the job may need additional specific direction as jobs are delegated. However, a well-trained secretary will be able to plan and function within his/her realm of responsibility. Then, "appropriate jobs to appropriate people" can be funneled accordingly with a secretary making some of the decisions on how the job will get done.

Managing the Work Load. Most secretaries prefer to manage some of their own time and organize their day's work so that they can work more efficiently. Extension staff can help in managing the work load by giving the secretary plenty of *lead time*—by doing dictation, going through mail, and assigning tasks early in the morning so the secretary has the rest of the day to organize the work load and complete tasks.

The Working Environment. Someone has said that "office equipment is cheaper than secretaries and secretaries are cheaper than administrators. Therefore, we should properly equip our secretaries and make use of their potential." Such things as

pleasant surroundings, attractive desks and chairs, good storage and filing facilities, electric typewriters and calculators, word processing machines, and computer terminals can greatly improve the efficiency of a secretary. In the task of mailing letters, mechanization or self-mailers can help increase efficiency. Even proper location of machines within the office add to the secretary's efficiency.

Personal Relationships. Relationships between secretaries and other staff members should be kept on a professional level. However, secretaries need to know they're appreciated and their work is vital to the organization. Secretaries can be recognized in many ways, but the most important recognition is a pleasant "thank you" or a positive comment about a job well-done. The creation of an area of responsibility within which a secretary can make decisions and function can do much to improve morale and productivity.

Summary. While most of the items discussed here should be standard office practice, they're often overlooked or neglected over time as we become careless in our daily routines. Perhaps these few tips can help you improve the effectiveness, morale, and image of your most important Extension co-worker—the Extension office secretary.

Footnotes

1. Arnold S. Tannenbaum, *Social Psychology of the Work Organization* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1969).
2. Douglas McGregor, "Theory X and Theory Y: The Integration of Individual and Organizational Goals," in *People and Productivity*, Robert A. Sutermeister, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1969).