

agents' organizational commitment

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An increasing interest exists among professionals, both in industry and education, concerning the concept of commitment. Assessments have been made of the commitment of such professionals as scientists, nurses, and teachers to their employing organizations.¹ However, information wasn't available concerning the commitment of agents in Cooperative Extension Service.

How committed are agents to Extension? What factors are related to agents' level of commitment? Why is it important to have a high level of commitment among Extension agents?

... While the level of dedication among all agents appears high, Extension should strive to maintain a climate that fosters highly committed agents whose primary interest is in serving their clientele.

Commitment means dedication and is defined as the extent to which an employee has a strong belief and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, is willing to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and has a strong desire to stay in the organization.

Logic tells us that the organization and clientele will realize greater productivity from agents who have pledged

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themselves to be of greater service. Also, according to research, a higher level of commitment results in lower rates of absenteeism and turnover.² These lower rates, of course, mean less interruption of services in local communities.

A knowledge of the factors related to the level of commitment among Extension agents should enable Extension administrators to develop policies and county agents to incorporate practices for enhancing organizational commitment, as well as answer the questions posed above.

The primary purpose of our study was to determine the major factors related to organizational commitment among county Extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service (OCES).³ The framework for the study was based on a model by Steers.⁴

Methodology

The sample for the study was 108 randomly selected county agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. Included were 37 agriculture agents, 36 home economics agents, and 35 4-H agents. Of the agents surveyed, 96 (89%) responded with usable data. Respondents included 33 agriculture agents, 31 home economics agents, and 32 4-H agents.

Information was collected by a mail questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section was designed to provide background information about the agents. The second, measured job characteristics adapted from an original questionnaire developed by Hackman and Lawler.⁵ Cronbach's alpha reliability scores ranged from .55 to .87 for the 4 job characteristics subscales.

The third section was adapted from work experience scales developed by Buchanan.⁶ Reliability scores ranged from .76 to .88 for the 7 work experience subscales. The final section, developed by Porter and others,⁷ measured organizational commitment. The reliability of the organizational commitment questionnaire was .90.

The Study

Best Single Predictor

Self-image reinforcement was the factor found to be most highly related to organizational commitment. All people possess a self-image, which is an idea or general notion they have of themselves or of their role. When agents had the feeling that the Cooperative Extension Service encouraged them to behave in ways that represented their true feelings or attitude, they scored high on self-image reinforcement and also reflected a higher level of commitment to the OCES. However, when agents viewed the organization as encouraging them to act in ways different from their notion of their role, they tended to score low on organiza-

tional commitment. The coefficient of correlation between the 2 scores was .70.

Other Useful Predictors

One goal of the study was to identify factors that might be used to predict one's level of organizational commitment. In a multiple regression analysis, five factors were identified as useful predictors: personal importance, group attitudes, job autonomy, gender, and tenure.

Personal importance reflects the extent to which agents felt they were making significant and appreciated contributions to the organization. Those who felt their work was valued were more highly committed to the OCES.

Group attitudes implies the extent to which agents perceived their peer group as having positive attitudes about the OCES. Those agents who perceived other agents as being more positive in attitude were more dedicated to the organization than those who perceived their peer group as less positive in attitude.

Job autonomy indicates the degree to which one's job is viewed as providing substantial freedom, independence, and discretion in scheduling of work and in determining the procedures necessary to accomplish organizational goals. Agents were more committed to the OCES if they perceived a high degree of autonomy in their work. Agents perceiving less autonomy were less committed to the organization.

Gender was also related to organizational commitment. A higher level of commitment existed among the female agents than the male agents. This finding was consistent with the results of previous research on other organizations showing that females were more committed as school teachers and registered nurses.⁸

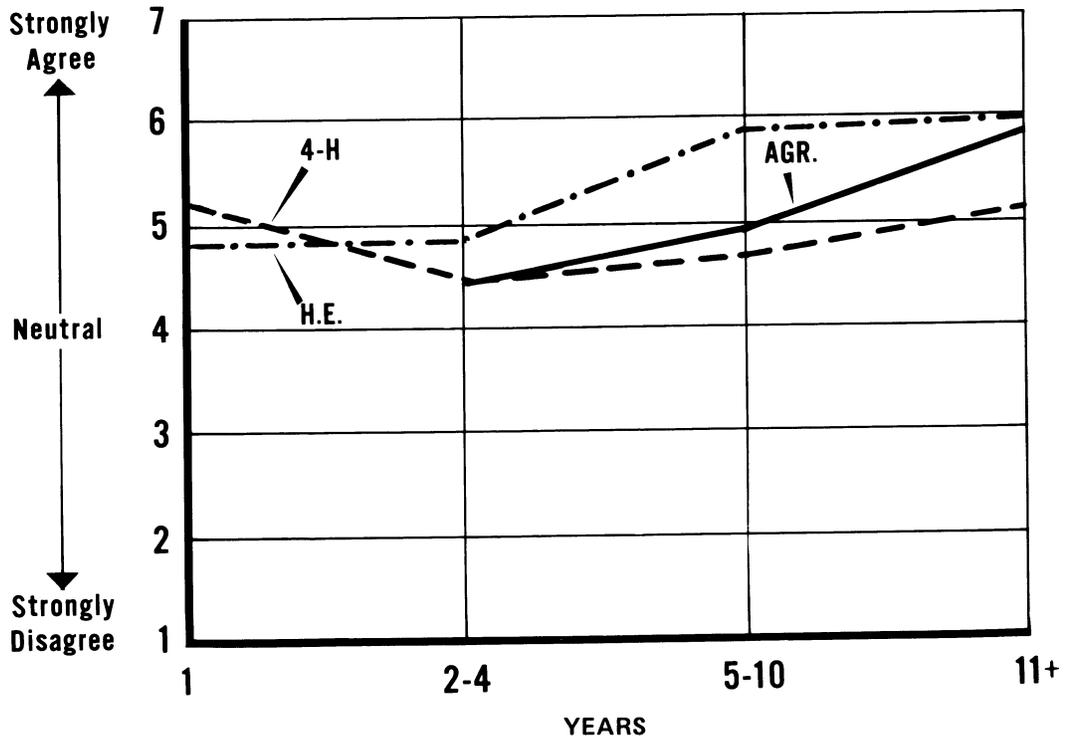
Tenure was defined as the number of years one had worked as an Extension agent. Organizational commitment increased with increasing tenure.

Program Areas of Agents

The overall level of commitment of all agents was 5.13 on a 7-point scale. Agriculture agents, home economics agents, and 4-H agents were studied to learn whether differences existed in their level of organizational commitment. Levels of commitment were 5.32 for agriculture agents, 5.43 for home economics agents, and 4.64 for 4-H agents. Figure 1 illustrates the interaction of program area and tenure on level of commitment.

Agriculture and home economics agents didn't significantly differ in their level of commitment to the OCES. However, 4-H agents reported significantly ($p \leq .05$) lower commitment scores overall than those working in agriculture and home economics. This could be because a larger

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Note: No ag agents were in the sample with one year of tenure or less.

Figure 1. Agents' perception of their Extension commitment.

percentage of 4-H agents have less tenure. It was puzzling to find the level of commitment of 4-H agents decreasing after the first year and then increasing at 5 years tenure and beyond. Perhaps this initial decline in the level of commitment is due to unrealistic initial job expectations.

Summary and Implications

Extension agents and administrators could have some impact on the overall feeling of dedication to the Cooperative Extension Service. Factors that might be influenced by adjusting the organizational climate include *self-image reinforcement, personal importance, group attitudes, and job autonomy*. The lower level of commitment among 4-H agents with 2-4 years tenure as compared to those with 1 year might be resolved with better orientation of new agents to the job and organizational expectations. While the level of dedication among all agents appears high, Extension should strive to maintain a climate that fosters highly

committed agents whose primary interest is in serving their clientele.

Ohio State initiated steps to incorporate the findings of this research on a state and county level by the following action:

1. A state meeting was called by Central Administration and attended by all members of the administrative cabinet. At this meeting, the data were presented with open discussion afterwards. The consensus of the group was to work on the areas of self-image reinforcement, personal importance, group attitudes, and job autonomy. This intent would be accomplished both by the leader, personnel development, and area supervisors through state and area in-service meetings, over the next three years.
2. The results of the study would be shared statewide with faculty and staff in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.
3. County staff conferences would be encouraged by the area supervisors on the theme of organizational commitment, especially in the areas of self-image reinforcement, personal importance, group attitudes, and job autonomy.
4. A follow-up study is planned in three years to see if the above practices of increasing organizational commitment have had the intended impact for the Ohio Extension Service. The study will further examine factors influencing absenteeism, agent turnover, and overall commitment.

Footnotes

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