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Replacing a “Legend.” When most people think of legends, they think of political and sports personalities. However, a close look at practically any occupation would reveal those who would qualify as legends. The Extension Service also has its share of legends. I define a legend as any county Extension agent who has occupied a position long enough to establish a lasting relationship, whether positive or negative, with the community and clientele.

Extension agents could achieve legendary status in many ways. However, this status is informal and bestowed only by clientele and/or community. This status is also usually limited to the geographical boundaries of the county or area. Administrators and supervisors can't grant this status.

Whether agents achieve legendary status or not isn't my concern here. The important issue is whether special consideration be given when filling positions held previously by legends. I'm convinced that some consideration must be given or neophyte agents can expect months, maybe years, of frustration and disappointment.

Neophyte agents could encounter problems when replacing legends. These problems include, but aren't limited to: (1) legends have established credibility for their expertise, (2) legends have developed close ties with the community, (3) legends' acceptance of new and innovative cultural practices have been diffused throughout the community, (4) legends' interpretation of policies and procedures could be different from their original intent, (5) some legends have provided services rather than educational programs, (6) some legends have established codes of conduct and/or dress that might be outdated, (7) some legends continue to function informally as Extension agents after their retirement, (8) some legends have set performance standards that are difficult to reach in short periods of time, and (9) no information about replacing legends is given during new agent orientation and induction training.

Relatively new agents often find their formal education and orientation ineffective in establishing programs and generating community support. This is true regardless of the type of induction training received. These agents should take a close look at individuals who held these positions before them.

If an agent was a legitimate legend, several general characteristics should be obvious to the careful observer. They include: (1) active program advisory committees; (2) close working relationship with county government; (3) active in numerous social, fraternal, and civic organizations; (4) active in community educational, religious, and recreational activities; (5) respected and admired by youth and adults; (6) well-known by the business community; (7) adequate monetary support for annual activities and programs; (8) goes beyond the call of duty to help clientele; and (9) longevity in the position.

Most Extension legends would also rate high on the intangible qualities identified by Ramsower in 1925.¹ Ramsower conducted a study to determine some of the outstanding qualifications of the most successful agents in comparison with the least successful agents. His conclusions indicate that the 20 qualities considered were found in varying degrees in all agents. However, the superior agents rated high in intergrity, perseverance, faith, ability to plan, initiative, vision, and courage. No significant difference existed between agents in their technical knowledge. The findings of this study are consistent with my belief that most Extension agents are employed because of their formal education and experience and without regard for the intangible qualities listed above.

I'm not suggesting that a replacement for a legend be a clone. However, it's important that new agents are aware of how their predecessors were perceived. This perception could serve as a guide to establishing the rapport necessary to gain clientele and community support, especially if they've replaced legends.

Footnote

1. Clarence B. Smith and Meredith C. Wilson, *The Agricultural Extension System of the United States* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1930), p. 55.