Is Our Service in Vain? Relevant Roles of an Extension Service as Perceived by County-Level Employees

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Abstract

Agriculture continues to be the primary focus of most Extension organizations, although farming operations decreased significantly between 1950 and 1997. Extension organizations have been encouraged to redirect program focuses to be inclusive of nontraditional audiences and to remain vital. These organizations should identify and adopt new roles to avoid an impending demise. This article summarizes research conducted to identify relevant organizational roles as perceived by county-level Extension employees working for an Extension service in the Southeastern United States. These roles can be used as a foundation for planning and implementing programs that are conducive to the needs of today's clientele.

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Introduction

According to West, Drake, and Londo (2009), "extension is at a crossroad" (p. 2) and should redirect programming focuses to remain vital. Although farming operations decreased significantly between 1950 and 1997 (USDA, 2012), most Extension organizations in the United States maintain a heavy agricultural focus (West et al., 2009). Harder, Lamm, and Strong (2008) warn organizations of an impending demise if they fail to identify and adopt new roles. Therefore, a shift in primary program focus is necessary for Extension to remain vital in a changing society (Robinson, Dubois, & Bailey, 2005). This article summarizes research conducted to identify relevant organizational roles as perceived by county-level Extension employees in the Southeastern United States. The identified roles can be used by Extension organizations as a foundation for planning and implementing programs that are conducive to the needs of today's clientele.

Literature Review

Transformational learning theoretical framework guided the study reported here. Transformative

learning occurs when individuals change their old ways of thinking and understanding to be more inclusive and open to new ways of thinking (Mezirow, 1997, 2003). The county-level employees involved in the study were acclimated to traditional operations of the local Extension system. Thus, transformative learning strategies allowed them to objectively analyze inconsistencies between current county-level roles and clienteles' needs and to offer suggestions for more relevant roles.

The best ideas for organizational change sometimes reside within grassroots employees (Atkinson & Butcher, n.d.; Moon, 2008). Organizational change initiated at the grassroots level is known as "Bottom-Up" (Clampitt, 2010). Employee involvement in organizational change boosts employee performance, productivity, accountability, and responsibility (Barklay, 2009; Kim, MacDuffie, & Pil, 2010; Smith & Torppa, 2010; Wooddell, 2009). Because grassroots employees are essential for effective organizational change, county-level employees were exclusively targeted for this research study.

Methodology

A qualitative, descriptive research approach was used for the study. The research question was: What roles(s) should the state Extension service assume in a changing society as perceived by employees working for the organization at the county level?

Other guiding questions were:

- Why is the organization more effective in some geographical areas of the state than in others?

- Should the organization decrease its agricultural focus in counties where agriculture is not the top programming need?

- How can the organization increase its effectiveness in counties where agriculture is not the greatest concern?

- What actions should the organization take to ensure equal program accessibility?

- Should the organization assume new roles to increase program impact?

The purpose of the research question was to identify roles relevant to clients' current needs. Responses to the guiding questions were used to analyze the organization's context and to clarify roles generated from the research question.

Forty employees representing all county-level positions (county coordinators, agriculture agents, family and consumer science agents, 4-H agents, program assistants/associates, and office associates) with at least 5 years of work experience were invited to participate. Involving grassroots employees in organizational change efforts is appropriate because they are ultimately responsible for making change work and are affected by it most (Barklay, 2009). Two data collection methods were used: open-ended, electronic surveys via Survey Monkey® and follow-up, face-to-face interviews. The survey was pilot tested before use.

Questions asked on the survey were:

- What are the top programming priorities for the organization?

- What programs seem to be near the bottom of the priority list?

- What are the organization's current roles at the county level?

- How effective are these current roles with today's clientele?

- What new roles should be assumed by the organization?

- What can the organization do to improve its effectiveness in the local community?

- What can the organization do to improve relationships with stakeholders and clients?

- What does the future hold for the organization?

The final response rate for the survey was 60% (24 participants). Position titles for respondents were 30% family and consumer science agents, 25% county coordinators, 20% 4-H youth agents, 15% office associates, 5% program assistants/associates, and 5% agriculture agents. Incentives were awarded to all who completed the survey ($5.00 Walmart electronic gift cards). All eight participants chosen for follow-up interviews participated (100% participation rate). Interview participants' demographics were 50% family and consumer science agents, 39% 4-H youth agents, and 12% county coordinators. Each session was audio taped and immediately transcribed. Transcripts were member checked. Data were analyzed using Microsoft's OneNote. Traditional qualitative processes of coding, categorizing, and thematic development were employed. Findings were triangulated for validity and credibility.

Research Findings

The first four survey questions analyzed the current organizational context. The final four generated suggestions for the organization's future outlook. Samples of collected responses for each question and their category labels are listed below.

1. Rankings of program priorities: 4-H youth development (4-H), Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR), Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), and Community Resource Development (CRD).

2. Programs near bottom of priority list: FCS, CRD, ANR, and 4-H.

3. Current organizational roles: "provider of research-based information," "education," "training," "encouragers of change," "meeting needs," "answering questions," "serving everyone," and "equal treatment."

4. Effectiveness of current roles: "very effective," "quite effective," "effective," "somewhat effective," "good," "not nearly as effective as they could be," and "to be effective, you have to meet the needs of the clients."

5. New roles at the county-level: "don't know," "4-H," "FCS," " CRD," "enhancing existing roles," "existing roles are relevant," "roles should be based on county needs assessment," and "more outreach."

6. Improving organizational effectiveness:

   - competent employees: "trained employees" and "hire good agents ..."

   - visibility: " . . three agents in each county"

   - community partnerships: " ... form partnerships within the community."

   - communication: " ... communicate what [Extension] can and cannot do ..."

   - curriculum development: " . . provide researched-based program curriculum."

   - marketing: "advertise often ... word of mouth."

   - technology: " ... stay current with all of the cutting edge technology."

   - evaluation and needs assessment: " ... program based on community needs."

   - community outreach: "Reach out to the ENTIRE community ..."

   - change: " ... keep up with ongoing changes ..."

7. Improving stakeholder relationships:

   - competent employees: "trained employees," and "return calls in a timely manner."

   - communication: "... monthly newsletters," "make clear what the focus of Extension is."

   - stakeholder involvement: " ... keep them involved," and "show appreciation."

   - visibility: "more county involvement and visibility" and "local agents are the best way to win stakeholders."

   - community partnerships: "attend community meetings."

   - Marketing: "advertise programs more" and "... flyers, postcards, TV appearances."

8. Future organizational roles:

   - competent employees: "We will strive and thrive with the right people working."

- meet clients' needs: " ... Extension will be around for many years ... as long as we give the people what they need."

- change: "We can't keep doing things the same way ..."

- prove its own worth: " ... I believe that if we want to continue to receive federal funds, we must show we are valuable ..."

- marketing: "I feel the future is bright, but what we do needs to showcased more and appreciated more."

- community outreach: "Increased population in the underserved communities."

- Technology: "Extension needs to inform and educate people ... as advanced as our society is getting, not everyone is as caught up and accepting of it."

- keep doing what we're doing: " ... more of the same programs so we can reach more people."

The guiding questions listed above in the methodology section were asked during follow-up interviews. These questions helped to inform data collected on surveys and to collect supplementary data. Below is a summary/sample of responses for each question. Data from interviews were sorted into pre-established categories (evaluation and needs assessment, marketing, visibility, communication, community outreach, and stakeholder involvement).

1. **Current roles in program implementation:** county coordinators primarily assess programming needs, area agents have limited or no input in program planning at county-level, FCS and 4-H use subject-area advisory councils to assess needs.

2. **Why is the organization more effective in some counties:** agents, county characteristics, and program visibility.

3. **Decreasing Ag focus in counties with nonagricultural priorities: "**if the need is family and consumer sciences, then ... increase the focus and decrease the agriculture focus."

4. **Increasing effectiveness in counties with nonagricultural focuses:** share success stories, emphasize priority needs, and market priority programs.

5. **Increasing equal program accessibility:** conduct workshops at different times of the day, market programs in underserved communities, attend community meetings, advertise using all available resources and media outlets, recruit members of underserved communities to serve on advisory boards, etc.

Data with repetitive and similar categories were merged to form six broad themes. Those themes/roles are listed below.

- **Competent Servants** refer to employees who are well trained and knowledgeable of subject matter and the community. These employees "return calls in a timely manner" and "go way beyond the call of duty." They provide resources and answers to questions that are based on sound, research-based information.

- **Doers of Change** describes the role of local Extension staffs to "keep up with ongoing changes" and to be willing to accept change. Doers of change use technology to communicate with clients and for program planning, promotion, and implementation.

- **Equal Opportunity Providers** defines the agent's role of making programs and resources available to all audiences without discrimination. It requires agents to conduct activities in rural communities to reach underserved populations and to be more "inclusive" of "nontraditional audiences." Additionally, equal opportunity providers seek input for program planning from members of underserved audiences by encouraging them to participate on advisory councils, etc.

- **Providers of Needs** describe the county employee's role of meeting clients' needs. Agents assess needs using executive boards, advisory councils and personal observations. Agents are also diligent in planning appropriate programs around clients' unique needs.

- **Community Mouthpieces** refer to employees who market programs, are visible in the community, and who publically communicate program successes. To fulfill this role, agents should effectively market programs using all media outlets with a variety of methods. They should practice "frequent and consistent communication" to keep stakeholders "aware of updates and changes within the Extension service."

- **Community Engagers** interact with the local community. They form "community partnerships" and seek "stakeholder involvement" in program planning and implementation. Community engagers serve on local planning committees, attend community meetings, and show appreciation for volunteers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research reported here sought perceptions of 40 county-level employees regarding relevant organizational roles. Participants were diverse in race, gender, job titles, and geographical locations within the state. A Bottom-Up approach was used to gather data from grassroots employees. Eight questions were asked on the electronic survey. Interview questions were asked to inform data collected on the survey and to collect supplemental data. Although some participants failed to directly respond to survey question five, "What new roles should be assumed by the organization?," suggestions for relevant roles were inferred from responses to other questions. The roles identified from the data were not entirely new to the organization. However, county-level employees can focus attention on roles deemed most relevant at the county-level. Because the research gathered perceptions for relevant county-level roles, actual clientele may have disclosed more profound responses. Using grassroots employees (county-level employees) was feasible, however, because change is often initiated at the grass-roots level. Furthermore, conducting the research with clients

throughout the state was difficult because mailing lists were not readily available.

Research on relevant county-level roles is limited. The study reported here adds to literature in that area on a national and local level. Identified roles can be a foundation for planning and implementing relevant programs. The study could also be replicated in other states or with clientele within the Extension system used for the research.

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