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Creating Safe Spaces Within Extension Programs

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Abstract

Extension agents, educators, and specialists are challenged to find effective ways to ensure that our participants learn in program contexts that are inclusive and respectful of all people. In order to make our programs inclusive environments, it is important for us to be brave enough to disrupt statements that are demeaning and marginalize others. This article gives practical ways to deal with statements made by participants that are grounded in prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and scapegoating.

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Introduction

Extension agents, educators, and specialists are challenged to find effective strategies that can help ensure all participants learn in program contexts that are inclusive and respectful. Articles focused on diversity in Extension have addressed issues concerning inclusiveness within the organization (Schauber, 2001a; Schauber & Castania, 2001b), strategies for evaluating educational resources (Ingram & Radhakrishna, 2002), as well as approaches to engaging and recruiting underrepresented communities into programs (Thering, 2009; Hoorman, 2002). Recruiting is only the first step to being inclusive; the next step is to work on making our programs safe spaces for all people. One way to facilitate safe space is to learn how to proactively attend to marginalizing statements that may be made by our program participants about others.

What Is Marginalization?

Marginalizing statements can be made about race, ethnicity, nationality, age, class, gender, physical and mental ability, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and any intersections of these identities. These statements are usually negative generalizations and expressed through four attitudes: prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and scapegoating. Oftentimes these terms are used interchangeably; therefore, in order to ensure clarity, these terms are defined.

Prejudice

Prejudice is defined as the attitudes or opinions about a person or group simply because the person

belongs to a specific religion, race, nationality, or other identity. Prejudices involve strong feelings that are difficult to change. Prejudice is pre-judging. A person who thinks, "I don't want (name of group) living in my neighborhood," is expressing a prejudice.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are defined as the oversimplified generalization about a group of people. When people say that all members of a specific nationality, religion, race or gender are "cheap," "lazy," "criminal," or "dumb," they are expressing stereotypes. All groups have both cheap and generous individuals. All groups have individuals who commit crimes. To label an entire group based on the actions of some, is to engage in stereotyping.

Discrimination

When people act on their prejudices or stereotypes, they are discriminating. Discrimination may mean putting other people down, not allowing them to participate in activities, restricting their access to work or to live in certain neighborhoods, or denying them something they are entitled to by law.

Scapegoating

Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts can lead to scapegoating. Scapegoating occurs when a person blames an individual or group although the fault lies elsewhere. An example is, "We have high unemployment rates because Mexicans are taking all of the jobs!"

Understanding these four concepts can help Extension program facilitators be conscious and proactive, instead of passive and dismissive. Monitoring communication for expressions of prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and scapegoating requires that the facilitator be attentive to the group dynamics in their programs. Attentive facilitators can begin to recognize language and behaviors that could be perceived as offensive. Passively ignoring a comment does not diminish its negative effects; consequently, it can adversely affect those in your program, as well as influence how they evaluate you. Therefore, to help program facilitators proactively and tactfully interrupt offensive statements, practical strategies are outlined here to help make programs safe spaces for all participants.

Tools and Strategies

As a starting point, it is imperative to set up ground rules or guidelines before each program, workshop, or meeting. Ground rules set a precedent for positive, productive interactions. It also creates a reference point to prevent negative statements that could be made about others.

When faced with the challenge of addressing an issue, do so with thoughtfulness and composure. It is important that the facilitator's response to prejudice is nonjudgmental and non-confrontational. Placing guilt or publicly attacking a participant is likely to increase tensions and stifle further conversation and participation. Here are two suggestions given by *The Building Bridges Coalition,* for handling marginalizing statements.

A. Ask for more information. This gives the speaker an opportunity to clarify their statement and/or

gives them a chance to rephrase. It also allows time for the speaker to think about what they have said about others. Here is an example.

Speaker: "People who are gay should not be allowed to be parents."

Facilitator: "You said they should not be allowed. Not allowed by whom? "

B. Give the speaker information or research. That new information may alter their attitude. An example of this strategy is the following.

Speaker: "People who are gay should not be allowed to be parents."

Facilitator: "Did you know that research has shown no differences between the outcomes of children who have heterosexual or same-sex parents?"

These two approaches are only starting points. Other strategies given by Plous (2000) are the following.

- Use questions such as, "Why do you say that?" and "Do you feel that way about every person in that group?" As Fisher and Ury (1983) wrote with respect to negotiations, "Statements generate resistance, whereas questions generate answers…Questions offer no target to strike, no position to attack" (p.117).

- Arouse cognitive dissonance in the speaker by acknowledging the speaker's positive or compassionate self-image. An example of this strategy would be, "I'm surprised to hear you say that, because I've always thought of you as someone who is very open-minded."

- Tell the speaker how you feel. A statement such as, "It makes me uncomfortable to hear that," would be an appropriate response, rather than saying, "You shouldn't say that," which is instructive. The latter statement can be disputed, but the former cannot.

- Approach the speaker with respect rather than irritation or anger. Many prejudiced or discriminatory comments are misguided attempts at humor by speakers who do not view themselves as prejudiced; consequently, attempts to tell them that their statements are prejudice is futile.

Conclusion

The most common way that people enact prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, or scapegoating in our programs is by making statements that negatively generalize groups of people. Our programs can be more inclusive as we become brave enough to disrupt statements that are demeaning and marginalize our most vulnerable participants. Implementing these tools and strategies can help Extension educators manage the challenges that accompany facilitating programs that serve diverse populations.

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