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## Using an Initiative to Focus Programming Efforts: A Case Study of the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative

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## Using an Initiative to Focus Programming Efforts: A Case Study of the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative

### Abstract

Extension is facing many challenges, including increasingly complex and changing societal conditions. One method to address these challenges is to implement targeted efforts around programmatic or organizational themes organized as an initiative. We use the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative as a case study to illustrate how the process of focusing and redirecting programming efforts can be an effective strategy for addressing issues important to Extension clientele. We also describe in general the benefits of using a change process or model to organize such efforts and specifically how Kotter's (1996) model fits well with our concept of an initiative.

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## Introduction

Extension is facing many challenges, including increasingly complex and changing societal conditions. In his 2009 book, George Morse made the case for Extension's "money and mission crisis," stating "Extension faces very difficult times ahead, being asked at every front to expand its reach and quality, but to do so on fewer resources" (p. 4). Morse and others (Hoag, 2005; Lamm & Harder, 2009) have suggested that Extension needs to focus more, to target audiences, to document results, and to build political support. One method to address this challenge is to implement targeted efforts around programmatic or organizational themes organized as an initiative. Using a change process or model is a means to organize this effort. One such model developed by John Kotter (1996) fits well with our concept of an initiative, and we use it to illustrate how to organize an initiative process.

The goal of this article is to share our experiences in developing an Extension program initiative. First, we identify characteristics of initiatives in general and how they relate to organizational change. Next, we use the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative as a case study to illustrate how the

process of focusing and redirecting programming efforts can be an effective strategy for addressing issues important to Extension clientele. Finally, we summarize lessons learned and provide recommendations for applying a similar process in other areas of Extension programming.

## What Is an Initiative?

Initiatives give special emphasis to issues of importance (Betts, Peterson, & Roebuck, 2003) and seek to catalyze change (Fugate, 1996). Initiatives allow an organization to respond to critical public issues (Johnsrud & Rauschkolb, 1989; Walker, 2003), provide direction for educational programming (Betts et al., 2003; Waltemire, 1990), address underserved audiences (Betts et al., 2003; Felhis, 1992) and strengthen the organization's capacity to deliver educational programs through infusions of training, technology, and resources (Betts et al., 2003; Davis, Burggraf-Torppa, Archer, & Thomas, 2007; Porter, DeVaney, Poling, Stum, & Schuchardt, 2005). Examples of national initiatives in Extension that appear in the literature are Children, Youth, and Families at Risk ([CYFAR]; Betts et al., 2003; Marek, Byrne, Marczak, Betts, & Mancini, 1999) and Financial Security in Later Life (Porter et al., 2005). In addition, there are examples describing state level adoption of national initiatives: Decisions for Health (Williams, 1997), child care (Walker, 2003), and 4-H Science Engineering, and Technology or SET (now 4-H Science; Barker, Grandgenett, & Nugent, 2009; Ewers, 2010).

These initiatives involved multiple program strategies, shared resources, and aggregated evaluation strategies to document impact and increase visibility. Initiatives often require work with teams and diverse partners. They may build on existing programmatic efforts or take the organization in a new direction. In either case, there is likely a need to provide a rationale for the added emphasis or shift in focus.

Initiatives can produce results for Extension clientele as well as for the organization. For example, Walker (2003) described how efforts that were once unfocused, uncoordinated, and unsupported became integrated and systematic as a result of a state-level child care initiative. At some point, an initiative can be "graduated"—when it has achieved its objectives and become institutionalized within the organization (Betts et al., 2003). In fact, organizers are encouraged to begin with such longer-term outcomes in mind (Mancini, Marek, & Brock, 2009).

## Using a Change Model

An initiative is by definition a process of change, and hence looking to successful models to facilitate this process could help an organization reach its goal more effectively and efficiently. In our search for articles on initiatives in the *Journal of Extension*, we found references to evaluation models (e.g., McCann, Peterson, & Gold, 2009), but we did not find any that mentioned using a specific change model to guide an initiative. Although following a change model step by step does not necessarily ensure success, it does provide guidance and structure to a complex and challenging endeavor.

The eight-step model presented by John Kotter (1996) in *Leading Change* is one way to plan for and frame the process of creating change. Although we did not set out to use this model for our initiative, as our team reflected on what we had done, we identified that we had engaged in a similar process. We share our experience so that others might benefit from our after-the-fact reflection, and

we encourage others to use a change model from the start. An overview of Kotter's model can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Kotter's Eight-Stage Process of Creating Major Change

Stage Name	Brief Stage Description
Establish a Sense of Urgency	Examining the market and competitive realities  Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities
Creating the Guiding Coalition	Putting together a group with enough power to lead the change  Getting the group to work together like a team
Developing a Vision and Strategy	Creating a vision to help direct the change effort  Developing strategies for achieving that vision
Communicating the Change Vision	Using every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategies  Having the guiding coalition role model the behavior expected of employees
Empowering Broad-Based Action	Getting rid of obstacles  Changing systems or structures that undermine the vision  Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions
Generating Short-Term Wins	Planning for visible improvements in performance, or "wins"  Creating those "wins"  Visibly recognizing and rewarding people who made the "wins" possible
Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change	Using increased credibility to change all systems, structures, and policies that don't fit together and don't fit the transformation vision  Hiring, promoting, and developing people who can

	<p>implement the change vision</p> <p>Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents</p>
<p>Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture</p>	<p>Creating better performance through customer- and productivity-oriented behavior, more and better leadership, and more effective management</p> <p>Articulating the connections between new behaviors and organizational success</p> <p>Developing means to ensure leadership development and succession</p>
<p>Note. Kotter (1996)</p>	

## Case Study: The Ohio Workforce Preparation Initiative

The idea for the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative took shape when several Ohio 4-H professionals realized that although there was evidence that participants in 4-H programs developed important life skills, the program efforts and documentation of impacts in 4-H workforce preparation were somewhat fragmented. It seemed that a more intentional approach would add value to our existing programs, as well as stimulate more innovative approaches and allow better documentation of results. We also believed that to be most effective, we should intentionally link our work with young people to specific workforce preparation content and outcomes.

### Initiating Action and Gaining Support

Taking action to develop the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative was born out of the need to connect our positive youth development programming with workforce preparation, the existence of an underutilized resource pool, and administrative and stakeholder support. As we were beginning our initiative, we reviewed what had been written about the skills gap (Levy & Murnane, 2006; Murnane & Levy, 1996; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991) and the opportunity that out-of-school time programs have to address this gap (Schwarz & Stolow, 2006). Our understanding of the literature coupled with our belief that workforce preparation was a complementary and developmentally appropriate approach for engaging our older youth gave us a compelling call to action. This would be what Kotter (1996) calls "developing a sense of urgency."

However, bringing ideas to action does not come without costs. Ohio 4-H is fortunate to have endowed funds directed toward workforce preparation that were historically being underutilized. Both 4-H program administration and the Ohio 4-H Foundation were supportive of adding focus to the distribution of these funds and building a new language and framework around workforce preparation.

Therefore, in 2006 we applied for a grant from the Ohio 4-H Foundation to support a half-time position for 3 years. We proposed to fund an existing Extension professional who would dedicate his or her time to launching a workforce preparation initiative within 4-H. Although the foundation had never used funds in such a way, we were able to make a convincing case, and they agreed to fund the position. The individual selected for the position had experience conducting workforce preparation programming and working with complex partnerships. He was able to provide leadership necessary to move the issue forward. Dedicating a significant portion of someone's time ensured that the initiative would have a champion and would continue to make forward progress.

## **Assembling a Team and Establishing Goals**

As others have noted, teams can be essential to accomplishing an initiative's goals (Kotter, 1996; Walker, 2003). A Workforce Preparation team was assembled to serve as a guiding coalition to follow through on the initial vision. This team worked towards addressing current concerns about employees entering the workforce with a lack of skills needed for success in the workplace.

The goals of the Workforce Preparation team included:

- Providing an overarching framework to guide the investment of resources and set the overall direction of workforce preparation programming;
- Developing marketing tools and strategies, targeted to both internal and external audiences, to increase awareness and link workforce preparation programs within Ohio 4-H and Ohio State Extension;
- Developing and disseminating programming models, curriculum, and resources that would improve and expand opportunities for workforce preparation programming;
- Conducting training that would assist Extension professionals to increase their awareness of and knowledge of workforce preparation issues, concepts, and programming strategies;
- Creating consistent evaluation tools and strategies to improve the quality and consistency of 4-H workforce preparation program evaluation efforts to better document and share results; and
- Securing the necessary funding to support programming priorities within the workforce preparation framework.

After reviewing the research on workforce skills and adolescent employment, the team set out to describe what is known about 21st century skills and portray components of workforce preparation in the context of best practices in positive youth development. We also considered a variety of ways to convey the message that youth develop applied skills such as communication, teamwork, and decision making as well as subject matter and technical skills through their 4-H experience. Whether in the form of a white paper, a literature review, a survey of existing programs and curriculum, or some combination, this is a step that many initiative teams undertake. Broadly, our team's tasks included researching the issue and synthesizing major points; gathering input from key stakeholders

from within our organization, other public agencies, and the private sector; developing program delivery and evaluation strategies; and creating the educational resources needed to support the team's work.

## Creating a Framework

As the team's focus turned to program development, an organizing framework was needed to connect what might otherwise seem like a random collection of events and activities. We focused on a concept of workforce preparation involving a network of programs designed to help young people explore career opportunities, acquire applied skills, develop work readiness competencies, and gain experience in the workforce. Such a conceptual model would enable others to see that although workforce preparation programs engage youth through distinct experiences, they were ultimately connected to a common set of principles. Our concentration of workforce preparation programs was not simply on getting a job, nor was the focus to prepare youth for specific jobs. Rather, through intentional programmatic efforts, we wanted to encourage youth development professionals to create authentic learning experiences that complemented the formal education system and facilitated the development of skills necessary for success in the 21st century.

The goals of workforce preparation programs were to introduce young people to the world of work and to develop the skills necessary for employment success through active participation in learning experiences. To most effectively achieve long-term results, we wanted workforce preparation strategies that would build on an early foundation of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences. The result of this discussion was the *Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Overview* (Arnett et al., 2006) and a synthesis of the literature on 21st century skills (Cochran & Lekies, 2009). Both introduced some consistent terminology relative to workforce preparation (e.g., work-based learning) that allowed for understanding key features of programs. The focus of this phase of the initiative was to lay the foundation for creating the programs, not to actually create them yet.

## Quantifying Key Outputs and Outcomes

When assessing an initiative's progress, it is helpful to think in terms of both outputs and outcomes. Outputs are the measures of activity and participation, whereas outcomes measure the results from these efforts (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003). One of the first products created was the *Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Overview*, which was designed as a guide for Extension professionals to align their programming efforts around 21st century skills. Later that year, the team used the *Overview* as the basis for funding priority recommendations to guide investment of Ohio 4-H Foundation funds that were designated for workforce preparation programming. Exhibits, conference presentations, reports, journal articles, and a website to support the initiative were also developed.

Developing these resources enabled us to use existing funding more effectively. For example, these efforts provided funds to counties through a mini-grant model to implement a financial literacy program and to collect evaluation data (Ferrari, Bateson, Hudson, Bridgeman, & Cochran, 2010). They also added value to existing programs by incorporating work-based learning concepts and strategies (see Arnett, Lekies, & Bridgeman, 2008; Cochran & Ferrari, 2009). Multiple evaluation efforts were conducted on financial literacy (Bateson, 2009); workforce skills of 4-H club members

(Bennett, 2009); and camp counselors' workforce skills (Ferrari & Arnett, 2012; Ferrari et al., 2010; Ferrari, Arnett, & Bateson, 2010). The important aspect of this focus on evaluation was using a common evaluation method and tool that could aggregate data and demonstrate impact at both the county and state levels. Other outcomes included developing an internship pilot program for college students working in Extension offices, conducting training for Extension professionals (Davis, Cochran, & Thomas, 2009), and obtaining additional grant dollars.

## Sustainability

The evaluation data collected was one factor in the Real Money. Real World. financial literacy program's selection as an Ohio State University (OSU) Extension Signature Program. Signature programs were identified in the 2008 OSU Extension Strategic Plan as being successful, replicable programs that reflected OSU Extension's capabilities and are interdisciplinary in nature. Because its selection as a signature program, additional resources were made available to support program implementation and gain additional visibility with stakeholders. The groundwork laid through program evaluation was continued, but with new leadership. This infusion of additional resources enabled initiative members to turn their focus to other projects, specifically applying work-based learning principles to camp counseling. We embarked on a pilot program similar to Real Money. Real World. By using mini-grants and statewide leadership, we collected 3 years of program evaluation data and developed a toolkit of resources to aid with program implementation for camp counselor training (see Ferrari & Arnett, 2011).

## Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The process we followed has implications for others who want to accomplish similar goals with their Extension programming. From our experience, an initiative approach is a way to generate focused efforts around a change process that leads to addressing important issues. As we reflected on the Ohio Workforce Preparation Initiative and the organizational outcomes we observed over its course, we realized Kotter's (1996) model was applicable to understanding our process. We share our observations to benefit others who might be considering how to create organizational change. We use Kotter's model to frame our conclusions.

- Establish a Sense of Urgency—Focusing on a contemporary issue like workforce preparation enabled the organization to make investments in certain areas, begin to show focused programming, and document impact in a historically unfocused program component. This meant devoting enough resources (whether new or redirected) to a new focus and sustaining them long enough to see culture change and results.
- Creating the Guiding Coalition—Dedicating a portion of someone's time to provide leadership to the project, using a team approach, and creating a larger advisory committee that included internal and external stakeholders to gather input and get feedback were all important in sustaining efforts and building support.
- Developing a Vision and Strategy—Using a framework laid the foundation for our work. We developed a working knowledge of the current research base. Sufficient time was allowed up front

for concepts to be developed, shared, revisited, and discussed. The *Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Overview* was then used to drive decisions, make targeted investments, develop curriculum and resources, and focus programming.

- **Communicating the Change Vision—**Relationships and communication with key stakeholders are important if you hope to change existing practices (e.g., receptivity to paying stipends to teens, changes in grant making process). Our early success in redirecting resources and developing innovative practices would not have occurred without a solid foundation of communication and support with all stakeholders involved.
- **Empowering Broad-Based Action—**Working under the umbrella of the initiative generated a feeling of collective energy that served as a catalyst for action. That is, the initiative was successful in helping our educators and stakeholders to view what otherwise might be seen as fragmented efforts as part of a comprehensive, intentional approach to workforce preparation programming. This initiative has and continues to change the way people think about and talk about their Extension work and create energy, enthusiasm, and a feeling that educators are contributing to something larger than their local work. Having a focus positioned us for increased external funding. We were ready when funding opportunities became available (e.g., opportunities for funding for applied research and programming).
- **Generating Short-Term Wins—**By taking a pilot program approach, we took incremental steps to success and built on lessons learned from each previous effort to end with a better product overall. We were also fortunate to have early adopters gain national recognition for their workforce preparation programs, thus increasing credibility for other initiative efforts.
- **Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change—**For us, the decision to focus on a specific program or curriculum was positive. Because of a good fit between the current literature and the needs of youth in Ohio, our team decided that one focus area would be financial literacy. We used an existing Ohio 4-H curriculum and conducted a three-year pilot. *Having Real Money. Real World.* recognized by the organization as a Signature Program and resourced by another group created an opportunity to re-invest the energy of the initiative to embark on another successful 3-year pilot using a similar process, this time applying work-based learning principles with the camp counselor program.
- **Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture—**Due to the framework, language, outcomes, and results of the initiative, workforce preparation is now regularly at the top of the list of priorities for Ohio 4-H professionals. Because of these efforts, the skills for success in the 21st century workforce are now synonymous with outcomes of positive youth development in Ohio 4-H. Also of note, the mini-grant process developed by the initiative has been used for a number of other grant opportunities by the Ohio 4-H Foundation.

Since 2006, the Ohio 4-H Workforce Preparation Initiative has been successful in helping our Extension professionals and stakeholders view what might otherwise have been seen as fragmented efforts as part of a comprehensive, intentional approach to workforce preparation programming.

Using a similar process or a change model such as Kotter's (1996) can significantly help Extension organizations to address the challenges laid out by Morse (2009) of doing more with less. By using an initiative approach, organizations can create capacity by directing resources and moving from a mentality of surviving to thriving. We are pleased with our efforts to create this initiative and would strongly encourage the use of a similar method to affect positive change through Extension programming for other local, regional, or national Extension efforts.

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