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How Do You Successfully Start Out in a County Position?

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How Do You Successfully Start Out in a County Position?

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Abstract: *Agents may find themselves working in a new location by choice or due to economic necessity. When changing counties, it is good to remember five basic steps; organize, meet, plan, produce, and balance to help get established in your new community.*

Recent changes in Extension may lead to some experienced county personnel faced with the challenge of successfully changing the county they serve (Schmitt & Bartholomay, 2009; McDowell, 2004; King & Boehlje, 2000). Because it may have been a few years since starting out, it may be good to reflect on how you originally got established in a county.

First, remember we provide an educational service to the public. Some sage advice from a retiring county agent to a new agent "No one will come to you for 'education' if you do not provide a service" still holds true today. Regardless of the push for scholarship (Smith, Hoag, & Peel, 2011, Schauber, Aldrich-Markham, Olsen, Gredler, Olsen, & Reichenbach, 1998), at the county level we serve our clients needs. Once people find you useful, then you can move to scholarly activities. Remember the quote from Zig Ziglar: "You can get everything you want out of life if you just help enough other people get what they want!"

How to successfully start out in a new county can be summarized into five steps: Organize, Meet, Plan, Produce, and Balance.

Organize

The first few weeks in a position are a great time to organize the office, figure out your resources, and meet your co-workers. Most will be walking into a system developed by a predecessor. It may or may not make sense to you. Remember the system of storing and retrieving information has to work for you when you are preparing to leave for a program and a client comes in asking for a quick answer. If your state has a filing system, learn it. If not, we suggest the system promoted by David Allen in *Getting Things Done* (2001).

Meet

Don't forget the legwork. Your clients are not going to come to you. You need to identify key stakeholders and go see them. Conduct a needs assessment. Ask them who they listen to. Ask where they have obtained the majority of the information they have acquired on different topics, especially those in your area of focus. Has the information been helpful? Where are the gaps? Get introductions from others. Provide them the opportunity to get to know your strengths and

your desire to serve the community. Your coworkers are a tremendous asset to you. Remember the value of your support staff in identifying people to meet.

Plan

Read predecessors' plans of work and report of results. If there is a program you do not see the need for or you don't understand its priorities, wait before you cancel it. Find out why it was done. Alienating a group of clientele starts the negative comment chain. Negative publicity takes more effort to overcome (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). Most people wait to make positive comments until they get to know you or you have been successful at helping them address their needs. They perceive what has been done in the past is your job. It does not have to stay this way over the long term, but it takes time to change that perception.

Build your new program over time, and have priorities evaluated by the advisory committee. It may not be in your best interest to make the program "yours" the first day or even the first year. Your program will evolve, but you were hired to fulfill the perceived needs that were left unfulfilled by the vacancy. In some cases this has been a person who has been there for 30 years or more and may have been highly respected. Trying to "replace" such a person can be a challenge.

Produce

Remember, you were hired or placed to fill the position because you had the strengths to connect with the majority of the clientele, continue valuable programs, create innovative programs, and bring new ideas to meet the needs of the community. You were perceived to be someone who could be welcomed by the overall community you were hired to serve.

Continue to seek new methods to meet your clients. What technologies are being used by clientele? Market your program and yourself. Extension agents live and work in a fish bowl—the smaller the population, the bigger fish you are. This means be professional. You will be able to relax with clientele (to some degree) with time. Learn from your clientele—they will be some of your best teachers.

Balance

Balance is a myth, at least equal balance. Starting out you need to build relationships. Building relationships requires spending time with people. Invariably that time is not during the workday. Once established then those relationships take less effort to maintain, but you need to build them first. Jump in, and help out! Make mistakes, learn from them, and move on. Pace and balance the best you can. It is better to be seen as someone willing to serve than one who says no. Use caution when saying no—especially at first. Request 24 hours to evaluate and return phone calls with a date for availability (wise advice from a long-time Extension secretary). You can always say, "I am not available then, but I am available (several months out)." If someone wants information and comes after a program to ask for it, ask them to call or email you. Have a plan in place to back up the note you invariably will lose.

Conclusion

Take time to enjoy your new adventure. Experienced agents tend to believe they can speed the process because of their experience. Experience can help speed program planning and preparation, but connections and reputation will still require time. Always remember to limit how often you refer to the previous places you have worked. People feel you want to change them into your previous clientele. Instead of saying "back in 'Old' County," you can say, "experience has shown me sometimes works." Follow the basic steps: Organize, Meet, Plan, Produce, and Balance. These steps should help you experience a smooth transition and find your new niche for success.

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