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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Can I Breathe Yet? Reflections on My First Year in Extension

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Abstract: Gain insight into the rewards and challenges of Extension through the eyes of a novice 4-H agent. Exhilarating yet exhausting, a whirlwind of opportunities, issues, and adjustments confront new Extension personnel as they acclimate to the unique Extension environment and lifestyle. There are lessons discussed here that will advise both new personnel and their supervisors about life in our world of Extension from the novice perspective.

Welcome to the world of Extensionâ it definitely isn't boring! This is one of the first lessons I learned as a new county 4-H agent, that the only predictability of Extension is its unpredictability! It's exhilarating! It's exhausting! It's amazingly rewarding! I've learned too that this lifestyle is difficult to describe to people on the outside. Those who know me are relieved I have a job in this economy, but they glaze over when I attempt to explain my work. While I can't yet deliver the perfect elevator summary, I can outline some of what I've learned this fleeting first year.

Hitting the Ground Running

They said to "hit the ground running." While I didn't understand what this truly meant, I soon learned that this phrase strikes fear in the hearts of new Extension personnel. It could be a) *Kind advice*: You need to start out working really hard. It could be b) *Intimidation*: As in "so and so hit the ground running," meaning they started at full capacity and you'd better too. It could be c) *Threatening*: If you don't start out full speed you're going to fall flat on your face, and that'll really hurt. It could be d) *Foresight*: This job is so demanding you should start running away and never stop. Or it could be e) *All of the above*. It's funny, I may not be able to assess my own ability to hit the ground running, but I do know that I'm running as fast as I can!

Volunteers

I found that people love what I do and want to be a part of it, want to join, want to contributeâ well, you get the idea. However, when I try to get actual commitment from those perfect volunteers, they've found other bandwagons to hitch onto. Never mind, I've learned from this pattern of behavior to identify those who really do want to work with me, so all is not lost. Volunteers can be the lifeblood what we do, yet they can also create the toughest challenges. I always try to remember that they really do mean well, even though they can drive me to distraction!

Time Management

Interruptions are so constant that it might be easier to plan to be interrupted. I might get more done that way! I now recognize how valuable my time is, and more important, that it is finite. It is the nature of our work that we're pulled in a multitude of directions, (it's not boring, and that's why we love it, remember?). I find that some days I can stay on top of my workload and that some days I only dream of it. I am also mindful of others' time; I try to ensure that I deliver what I promised.

Best of Good Intentions

Believe that EVERYONE, volunteers, coworkers, peers, stakeholders, etc., has the best of good intentions, and it will save a lot of heartache. These (well-intentioned) souls usually have much to say, and I hear the word "should" a lot. I know it is important to listen to the advice of othersâ they've learned from their own efforts and mistakes as I do, too. Nevertheless, I can't forget that grain of salt. All people have their own perspectiveâ or axe to grind!

Wise Choices

Early on I was advised to start by "picking fruit from the lowest branches"; in order to get a feel for community needs it helps to work with those who first reach out. However, this pulled me in many directions. I'm learning that we can't do everything asked of us. Programming must be focused and planned, with ongoing program assessment to direct future work, resulting in more successful, sustainable results. I'm learning not to belabor lost opportunities, but celebrate and build on the successes. It still amazes me how doors open onto unexpected new opportunities.

Balance

I've learned that this is one of the biggest Extension secrets: you can't. If someone does figure out how to do this successfully, please contact me immediatelyâ well, when you get the chance. Extension is a lifestyle choice that regularly challenges maintaining a life balance. Sometimes it sure is tough to remember whether weekends belong to 4-H or to my family. Sometimes it's both, and at others it's neither! The biggest challenge is adjusting to this reality, and maybe one day I'll be able to roll with it to the extent that I don't lose too much sleep over it. It certainly will be less painful that way!

Patience

I began my position as an Extension agent feeling confident. I had a strong sense of my potential to serve the community, with grand ideas on how to access enthusiastic collaborators and establish meaningful programming. Yet after a year spent frustrated with false starts and pulled in multiple directions, I'm able to refocus my efforts and gain ground, which is encouraging. I know that there are amazing opportunities for developing programs in my county community; I just have to determine what programming to offer them, how to pay for them, and how to staff them. It's not so easy! But a dose of patience also helps. It amazes me now how much I've already learned; some things that seemed so difficult to understand only a year ago are now a natural part of what I do.

I'm a true 4-Her because I, too, have to learn by doing, and this is evident in the lessons learned in my first year as a county 4-H agent. Therefore, I start this second year looking at the work of Extension through humbled eyes, feeling like I know far less than I did when I started, yet recognizing I've come a long way. I

trust this second year and those that follow will bring more opportunities for successful contributions to the growth and development of the communities that I serve. I intend to keep running, and, I hope, I will be able to breathe a little more!

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