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## Best Management Practices for a Successful Transition into an Administrative Role

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## **Best Management Practices for a Successful Transition into an Administrative Role**

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**Abstract:** Many successful county Extension educators aspire to "higher" positions in administration, such as a county director, regional director, etc. However, such administrative roles likely have more complex duties related to managing people and teams than faculty have experienced in their program assignment. This article provides essential management concepts and techniques to help faculty gain perspective and build a foundation for success in transitioning to an administrative assignment. Best management practices are shared that can significantly improve administrators' leadership skills and the likelihood of success in managing faculty and staff to maintain a productive, positive, and supportive office environment.

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### **Introduction**

Many successful county Extension educators aspire to "higher" positions in administration, such as a county director, regional director, and beyond. These administrative roles likely have more complex duties related to managing people and teams than faculty have experienced or been trained to address in their program assignment. This scenario often leads to increased stress among the administrator and others in the office, resulting in poor working relationships; reduced morale; and lower productivity, quality of programming, and public service. This stress may extend to workers' families and social interactions outside of the office. However, there are some management practices that can significantly improve administrators' leadership skills and the likelihood of success in managing faculty and staff to maintain a productive, positive, and

supportive office environment.

This article provides essential management concepts and techniques to help faculty gain perspective about administration as well as build a foundation for success in an administrative assignment. These practices are referred to as "best management practices" or BMPs because they are supported in commonly accepted training materials, scholarly publications, and management books. The primary intended audience is faculty members with program assignments who are considering, are transitioning to, or have recently begun a position with a significant administrative assignment that includes supervising multiple faculty and support staff.

## What Is an Extension Administrator?

An Extension administrator typically has both management and leadership responsibilities for the stewardship and advancement of the organization. An Extension administrator guides and directs people, ideas, and resources to achieve positive social, economic, and environmental impacts for people and their communities.

As an example of the necessary balance between management and leadership, the following are key administrative roles defined by Oregon State University Extension in position descriptions of county directors. Your institution will have similarly defined roles for its Extension administrators.

- **Organization Leadership**

Articulate and lead vision, direction, and priorities for Extension. Implement Extension's strategic plan to achieve goals and objectives. Establish and guide effective organizational structure.

- **Connective Leadership**

Link the university's expertise and experience with society's needs. Identify issues of critical importance; create opportunities for increased engagement between the university and communities; and acquire resources to develop and deliver relevant programs and learner services that address critical issues.

- **Stakeholder Relationships**

Develop and maintain positive communications with county, state, federal, and university decision-makers. Provide leadership for marketing Extension. Create and manage broadly representative citizens' advisory groups.

- **Personnel Management**

Recruit, orient, and retain diverse faculty and staff. Guide performance management systems and provide criterion-based performance evaluation. Support and encourage professional improvement of faculty and staff.

- **Financial Management**

Develop and manage budget to accomplish organization objectives. Report to all funding partners in a fiscally responsible and accountable manner. Lead strategic efforts to diversify funding to support existing programs and learner services and to build the capacity to address emerging opportunities.

- **Organization Development and Support**

Provide leadership for strategic planning. Work as a team member to develop and support organizational decisions and policies.

## **Are You Ready to Make the Move to an Administrative Role?**

Becoming an administrator often requires an adjustment of attitude as much as changes in duties. The Tools of the Trade article "Are You Ready to be an Administrator? A Self-Assessment to Help You Manage Expectations When Assuming a New Role" (Diem, 2011) highlights some of the differences in duties and perspective that may be involved when changing from a program-driven faculty member to one with significant administrative duties. Reviewing this list and assessing your comfort with the statements may help you determine if you're ready to serve in an administrative leadership role.

And remember, management practices, decisions, and leadership are highly situational and contingent. According to Sample (2002), "what works in one context in one period of time may not work in a different context in the same period of time or in the same context but different period of time; leaders are locked into a moment by moment struggle with the context and circumstances of his/her own place and time." However, knowing a few tested management practices to apply when appropriate can help the new administrator appear both wise and savvy.

## **Common Mistakes to Avoid and Best Management Practices to Adopt**

Below is a list of 10 common mistakes made by administrators, followed by recommended practices that help avoid or resolve these mistakes. These tested BMPs have been learned through training, research, and experience in helping the authors' transition to administrative roles, and they are supported by both the popular press and scholarly literature, with information gathered there applied and integrated within an Extension context. The list is presented in this manner to draw attention to the fact that administrators are often defined by their mistakes, and people tend to remember the negative management practices while the positive practices often go unnoticed. In other words, if things go well, you may not hear any complaints.

The list focuses specifically on internal issues and relationships that often represent the biggest challenges in medium to larger offices with a diversity of faculty/staff positions and people. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list, or a "one size fits all" list, but a list that will assist an Extension educator in transition to an administrative assignment. You are encouraged to try the BMPs, adjusting and shaping to fit your leadership style.

### **Mistake # 1â Form Opinions About People and Situations as Quickly as Possible.**

BMP#1â Make well-informed decisions; quality trumps speed. A common expectation of leaders is that they make decisions quickly and decisively; however, a truly effective leader needs to be able to see the shades of "gray" inherent in a situation in order to make wise decisions as to how to proceed. Managers should strive to hear and understand all the relative facts and arguments before making a decision. Our minds

tend to quickly categorize people, situations, and information into good versus bad and true versus false based on how our mind and body process past experiences with the current information. An effective leader must work hard to not make quick judgments and seek to thoroughly understand a person's thoughts or situation. Schaetti, Ramsey, and Watanabe (2008) refer to this mindfulness as "personal leadership"â taking control, or leadership, of our personal experience.

## **Mistake #2â Do Not Develop Working Relationships with Others in the Office.**

BMP#2â Foster collegiality and open communications within the office (Chatfield et al., 2004). Exhibit trust and respect in your interactions with faculty and staff; expect trust and respect among the faculty and staff as they interact with one another. Create activities that improve working relationships through informal conversations. These may include potlucks, parties, and providing time on a meeting agenda to share experiences or expertise related to a particular subject or issue. Look for opportunities in which faculty can work together to leverage efforts on team projects. Value and acknowledge the unique contributions of each team member.

## **Mistake #3â Talk first; Listen Later if You Have Time.**

BMP #3â Listen first; talk later. Many people feel they are good listeners, but they don't realize how much verbal and nonverbal communication they give that alters the conversation and their ability to truly listen and understand a person. "Listen first, talk later, and when you listen, do so artfully" (Sample, 2002). It takes a lot of practice and training to develop your "art" of listening where you seek to truly understand the thinking of others.

Sometimes people would like input on how to handle a particular situation or issue. It's helpful to clarify with the person whether he or she is expecting input or just needs a person to listen. After confirming with employees that they are open to feedback and would like input, serve as a coach when possible to help them resolve their challenges rather than rely on you to resolve everything (Hargrove, 2008).

## **Mistake #4â Do Not Work on Tasks in Support of Your Faculty and Staff, Disassociate Yourself from Them When Mistakes Are Made, and Remind Them of Their Mistakes When You Get the Chance.**

BMP#4â Help faculty and staff be successful; their success is your success. Administrators should view their job as working in support of their faculty and staff, as opposed to the common belief within Extension that all must survive on their own. If you are not familiar or comfortable with the concept of service leadership, learn more about how it can help you be a better administrator (Walker & Gray, 2009). When mistakes are made, help debrief to turn mistakes into learning situations. Identify when you could have helped, and take or share responsibility when appropriate.

## **Mistake #5â Never Set Clear Expectations Regarding Communication, Working Relationships, and Conflict Resolution Processes. Do Not Hold People Accountable for Their Actions.**

BMP#5â Set clear expectations regarding communication, working relationships, and conflict resolution processes. Set expectations early regarding communication, decision-making, working relationships, and conflict resolution, even if they seem completely obvious; such as, "I expect people to have positive

communications with each other, which does not include gossip." Hold people accountable for their actions while offering assistance and support (e.g., training, professional assistance) (Franz, 2004).

### **Mistake #6â Ignore Conflicts, and Expect Everyone Else to Do the Same.**

BMP#6â When conflicts arise, and they will, coach instead of trying to resolve for others (Ricketts & Rudd, 2002). Conflicts should be expected in any highly productive and diverse office because most conflicts are caused by misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication (verbal and nonverbal), causing one or more people to become offended. Resolving conflicts is hard work, but this hard work should be expected of everyone.

Administrators set the expectations and support others in meeting these expectations, as opposed to stepping in to resolve everyone's conflicts. Human resource professionals can facilitate discussions, provide training and create basic processes on how to work through conflict. You may also offer additional training and assistance, but expectations should be part of annual evaluations along with encouragement to resolve perceived and real conflicts. Keep in mind that positive working relationships should be expected but that this does not equate to requiring everyone to have positive personal relationships.

### **Mistake #7â Be as Secretive as Possible Regarding Decision-Making Processes.**

BMP#7â Be transparent in decision-making processes. Be as open as possible with decision-making processes, especially when it involves budgets and office operations. People are much more likely to accept changes in policies and practices if they understand and have input into how decisions are made. This is especially critical during transitions to new leadership and organizational changes (Bridges, 2003).

### **Mistake #8â Strive to Make All Decisions, Even Those That Have Nothing to Do with You.**

BMP#8â Share decision making as appropriate. Empower others to make decisions; work to decide when you need to make a decision and when to wait for others. Sample (2002) encourages leaders to "think gray" regarding decision-making. This refers to allowing time to think through decisions, making sure that you truly have to make a decision versus helping others to make it, and exploring alternative decisions including the possibility of empowering others.

### **Mistake #9â Do Not Establish a Plan of Work for the Office, or if You Do, Create It by Yourself with No Input from Others, and Force Your Office Staff to Carry It Out Throughout the Year.**

BMP#9â Create shared goals for office operations and outreach. Faculty and support staff may feel that you, as an administrator, expect them to work on projects that are low priority compared to delivering their programs. These may include participating in staff meetings, contributing to newsletters, and staffing a booth at a community event. Creating a plan of work for the office, with input from all employees, serves as an agreement to commit to work on particular items for the year (Franz, 2004). It also provides leverage for the administrator to ensure everyone follows through on commitments.

Plans of work can be created in a retreat-type setting, and they should include some type of needs assessment and prioritization process. You may choose to use or modify an existing organizational health survey to meet specific needs for the office. Plans of work may range in complexity and formality, but they should identify some goals and indicate some specific projects related to these goals.

## **Mistake #10â Do Not Conduct Thorough Evaluations of Your Leadership Skills, Including Self-Assessment, and Certainly Do Not Seek Assessments from Others.**

BMP#10â Evaluate your leadership. Self-assessments and feedback from others help you better understand your strengths, what others think, what could be improved, and what needs to be compensated for. This is sometimes referred to as "360-degree" or multi-rater feedback (Culp et al., 2009). Then follow up by seeking professional development opportunities that will help you grow and develop as an administrator. One option to consider is identifying a mentor or coach who can help guide your development.

## **Seek Guidance from Role Models, Mentors, and Coaches**

It's not uncommon for new administrators to feel alone, isolated, and underappreciated. It is a big contrast going from being a respected expert praised for quality performance to rookie status where expectations may be less defined and the knowledge base can feel gray and squishy. Often there is not one right answer, and your support group of subject matter peers is focused on program, not administrative details. The last thing you want to do is call your supervisor with yet another question. Where do you turn? Just as when you began your career as an Extension educator, you build a network of support among your new administrative peers and colleagues. Effective networks are developed and maintained in a climate of trust and equality (Maddy, 1992). Begin immediately forging relationships with those who can serve as role models, mentors, and coaches.

You can observe and learn from example, so identify positive role models who are in leadership roles within your organization. Look around. Who do you admire? Who appears to be thriving in the role of an Extension administrator? Notice how he or she presents ideas at meetings, takes leadership on important issues, and engages others in discussion for positive outcomes. You may like one individual's communication style and another individual's analytical skills. Watch, listen, and try some of the behaviors that you want to adopt. With time, you will find your style and your rhythm, adapting the behaviors you've observed to suit you and your situation.

Good mentors are worth their weight in gold. The modern image of the mentor as defined in the literature is a seasoned employee who passes on advice, often about the organization's cultural normsâ its basic values, beliefs, norms, and acceptable behaviors as well as the cultural artifacts such as myths, heroes, and ritualsâ to benefit and support the new administrator (Mincemoyer & Thomson, 1998). Again, look around the organization, and identify the person(s) you believe can best support you in the process of career growth and development. Seek someone who can teach, guide, and protect.

Your organization may have a formal mentoring program for new administrators. If not, don't be afraid to ask someone to serve as your mentor. Or ask your supervisor to help make the request. In all cases, the mentor and protégé must enter the professional relationship understanding that a dialogue is about to begin in which both individuals will learn, for their own benefit and that of Extension. The dialogue may last for a few months or for decades. With clear expectations and proper nurturing, a successful mentoring relationship can be established and maintained. The key to success may ultimately be the selection of a mentor who is willing to commit the time necessary to build an open and trusting relationship (Zimmer & Smith, 1992).

Performance coaching is a rather new concept within Extension, but has had success within the corporate world for the past two decades. Coaching is a way of working with someone to learn and practice a set of ideas that will make a difference in the person's performance. Sometimes a mentor can serve as a coach, but most often quality coaching is best when an individual has a well-defined coaching skill set. Coaching is about having the capacity to design and conduct a conversation that makes a difference in someone's performance and experience. Coaching is listening in a profound way and asking questions that cause new thinking and possible actions (Hargrove, 2008). As a new administrator, seek coaches who listen and ask thought-provoking questions when you want or need a performance edge. Check with your university; there may be a corps of trained performance coaches available on campus. Also check the web for other coaching resources in your area.

## Take the Next Stepâ You Can Do It

This article was not intended to scare you away from pursuing a position in administration. In contrast, the purpose is to offer a variety of insights and resources to help you make the transition from a program position to an administrative role. There are many reasons to consider an administrative leadership position. The main one should be your belief in and commitment to helping people and the organization they serve make a difference in their communities. This clear vision of why you serve as an administrator will help you continue to learn and grow as a leader and manager, and it will help you through the stressful times.

Successful administrators have found satisfaction because they are involved in a much wider variety of experiences and people than in their program position, and they feel satisfaction in helping others be successful. Successful administrators have found ways to be creative, joyful, and passionate in their new positions. Every person is unique in talents and skills, and therefore needs to define what works for him or her and continue to grow and develop new skills and practices.

The next time an administrative opportunity catches your attention, don't be afraid to step forward and weigh the possibilities. Good Extension administrators are in demand.

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