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Extension Staff Response to Increased Programming for At-Risk Audiences

Diane Klemme

University of Wisconsin- Stout, klemmed@uwstout.edu

Cheryl O. Hausafus

Iowa State University, haus@fcs.iastate.edu

Karen Shirer

Michigan State University, shierk@msue.msu.edu



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NEXT ARTICLE



Extension Staff Response to Increased Programming for At-Risk Audiences

Abstract

The study described here examined individual and organizational assumptions that contribute to or inhibit Extension staff's work with at-risk audiences. Three focus group interview sessions were conducted with Extension staff. Analysis of emerging themes identified a number of individual and organizational assumptions that inhibit the organization's ability to change. For example, the study showed that staff lacked clarity about the meaning of the term "at-risk" and staff questioned if the organization valued at-risk programs efforts. The study demonstrated that to create meaningful and sustained change in an organization, individual and organizational assumptions need to be exposed and alternative scenarios developed.

Diane Klemme

Associate Professor
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, Wisconsin
klemmed@uwstout.edu

Cheryl O. Hausafus

Associate Professor
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
haus@fsc.iastate.edu

Karen Shirer

Assistant Professor
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan
shirek@msue.msu.edu

Introduction

From its conception in 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service has concentrated efforts to increase agricultural production and aid farmers with agriculture-related issues. In the 1920s and 1930s, Extension employed content specialists to develop programming in the areas of clothing, food, home furnishings, home management, and health (Schwieder, 1993). And in the 1950s, Extension increased programming efforts in the areas of conservation development and use of natural resources, management of farm and home, family living, youth development, and leadership development (Schwieder, 1993).

However, during the last two decades, Extension leaders at the federal level have recognized the need to make substantial changes in Extension programming if the organization is to remain viable (Anderson & Bloome, 1995). Demographic numbers continue to reflect a decrease in rural and farm populations and to raise questions about Extension feasibility and the need for large federal financial support (Pins, 1998). A Futures Task Force to the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy or ECOP (1987) study recommended Extension programs move away from the traditional discipline-oriented/needs approach to programming and provide cross-disciplinary and issue-based programming.

One example of this new programming approach is the Children, Youth, and Families At Risk (CYFAR) National Initiative of 1990. This initiative seeks to collaborate with other organizations to

deliver educational programming to non-traditional audiences.

Some Extension leaders felt attempts to support the National Initiatives were meaningless if corresponding changes did not occur in the organization. Changes were needed in staff attitudes and actions, programming model and delivery, management and leadership, and allocation of resources to better integrate and support programming efforts. In addition, some staff felt Extension's public image would need to change in order to attract new clientele to the programs.

Argyris (1997) identified the difficulty in realizing organizational change without changing individual behavior simultaneously. A fundamental barrier to individual change is one's inability to reflect on the present and take an objective view of current events. Lindblom (1997) proposes that individuals can't be objective because their deep-seated assumptions limit their ability to rationally address issues. Individuals can overcome this deficiency by continuously critiquing their actual behaviors against their intended behaviors. This critiquing process leads to the identification of any errors, and individuals can correct the errors by changing the assumptions that led to the error (Argyris, 1997; Kovoov-Misra, 1996).

This process can also be used by members of the organization to identify and correct errors in the organization by changing the policies, procedures, or organizational assumptions that led to errors (Trahan & Burke, 1996). Organizational changes can be sustained only when the assumptions that supported the old behavior are changed (Argyris, 1997). A goal of the study described here was to identify and examine individual and organizational assumptions that contribute to or inhibit Extension staff work with at-risk audiences.

Methods

In an effort to understand Extension organizational climate and individual Extension staff members' response to increased programming for at-risk audiences, three focus groups were interviewed. Extension staff directly involved in at-risk programming efforts and staff not directly involved in at-risk programming efforts were recruited. This mix of staff was served to provide a diversity of opinions and attitudes toward at-risk programming (Berg, 1998; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Krueger, 1994). Potential participants were contacted by telephone and asked to participate. Participants included County Extension Education Directors and field specialists in the areas of youth development, community development, and family and consumer sciences.

The focus groups held in eastern and western Iowa had seven participants; the group held in central Iowa had six participants. Participants included nine males and 11 females. In order to assure the consistency in discussion among the three focus groups, a script was developed. The initial script was shared with several Extension staff who had experience developing and conducting focus groups and working with at-risk programming. The script was revised to incorporate their suggestions.

The focus group script included the questions that asked participants about their experiences working with at-risk audiences, characteristics of programs that were exceptionally good at working with at-risk audiences, characteristics of people who were exceptionally good at-risk audiences and staff who were exceptionally good working with at-risk audiences, and similarities and differences of working with at-risk versus less vulnerable groups.

Questions also asked participants to identify barriers or roadblocks in working with at-risk populations, what factors might influence more staff to work with at-risk audiences, what knowledge, skills or attitudes staff need to work with at-risk audiences, and what types of training would help individuals with their work with at-risk programming efforts.

The assumptions identified in the study emerged after a detailed analysis of the focus group transcripts. The researchers reviewed the three focus group transcripts for the prevailing and persistent responses to questions. These assumptions represent the predominant and recurring sentiment of focus group members' attitudes about Iowa State University Extension (ISUE) organization, at-risk audiences, and at-risk programming efforts. The software program *Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching, and Theorizing (NUD*IST)* (Richard & Richard, 1994) was used to manage the transcripts and trace the development of themes.

Results

All the assumptions identified in the study appeared to limit ISUE staff work with at-risk audiences and limit the organization's ability to change. No assumptions emerged that seemed to support or encourage an increased effort for at-risk programs. This section identifies the six prevalent assumptions, participants' quotes that portray the assumption, and potential targets for change. These findings provide a beginning framework toward increasing ISUE staff capacity to program for at-risk audiences.

Assumption 1: A lack of clarity about the meaning of the term "at-risk" offers Extension staff a justification not to provide at-risk programming.

Each one of us around the table, who are our colleagues, have a different definition what

it means if you're at risk, then how can we focus on programming and with at-risk if there's not one very concise, easy to remember definition. . .

I would offer, also, that a child from a relatively stable family that is, that has suitable income to meet needs doesn't have a lot of the commonly held indicators of risk, that child in that family, if he or she is watching an average of seven hours a day of television that child is highly at-risk.

Assumption 2: At-risk populations cannot help Extension gain political or monetary support for their program.

Extension is becoming an increasing political organization. For its very survival Extension is more political savvy and active. And yet the programming to children, youth, families and communities at-risk is giving resources to the least politically powerful among all of our constituents. It's on the scale of political power; the folks that I think we're talking about here today are politically powerless as any in the country. And yet, Extension cannot use this work with children, youth and families at-risk for political gain. . .

What I heard too, is my participants don't vote. So why work with people who can't, who are not going to vote to pass the referendum. We need to work with people who are going to vote like the master gardeners.

These participant's quotes reflect the recurring theme that staff are unclear about the term "at-risk." Also, staff are clearly aware of the political nature of the country and assume they must work with individuals who have political power. The second assumption suggests that the current staff prefer to provide services to individuals who support the organization's activities; however, Extension is a public organization and is mandated by law to serve all populations and staff need training opportunities that change perceptions and philosophies about working with at-risk audiences.

The first and second assumptions demonstrate the need to change the staff skills, values, attitudes, and behaviors, and reflect the difficulty in accomplishing organizational change without changing individual assumptions (Argyris, 1997). Key strategies used to change individual assumptions include selective promotion, training, or termination of employees (Kovoor-Misra, 1996; Stewart, 1989; Trahan & Burke, 1996). ISUE can provide staff training that clarifies the definition of the term "at-risk," identifies the needs of the at-risk audience, and develops collaborative skills.

Assumption 3: A different programming model is needed for at-risk programming efforts.

I think community cooperation; involvement of a lot of different agencies is almost essential to make something successful.

It's developed within and by the community.

We like to think we're in the expert role. And I don't by any means [think] that's an appropriate role here.

We're trying to talk to folks that are at-risk, saying, "This is what you need to do to solve your problem". . . this is very, very difficult to do.

Another recurring theme throughout the focus group interviews was the inability of the current "expert" program development model to address the challenges of at-risk programming efforts. The current "expert" model limits community cooperation, and staff may not perceive themselves as "experts" in this area.

Program development is part of the organizational structure that includes management practices and the various systems of the organization such as the communication system, reward system, and work design. Key strategies in changing the organizational structure include developing or redesigning the structure and the various systems involved (Goodstein & Burke, 1991; Kovoor-Misra, 1996; Stewart, 1989; Trahan & Burke, 1996).

If ISUE adopts a program model that is more collaborative, individuals within the organization will need new knowledge and skills to effectively participate in program development. The present Extension culture that supports the "expert" model will need to be replaced, and leadership will need to adapt work tasks and systems to accommodate changing staff roles in program development and delivery.

Assumption 4: The current Extension leadership does not support at-risk programming efforts, and this limits at-risk programming.

For some it's the incentive system. Are they judged on their quality and quantity of work - how many at-risk children, youth and families they're working with?

I'm housed here and here are those three pregnant teens that are there, two hours from home. That's four hours, and hour for the program. And you get there and oops, one of them wasn't feeling good, and the other one, the road were too ice. So you have one of

them there. . . . Your administrators say, "and where is your impact?" And I've never really had any of them say that, but there are times you wind up thinking: "Boy, I'm suppose to be show impact. . . . to wind up working with some at-risk families or individual in more rural areas, the need may be every bit as great or even greater because they can be that isolation factor. So how do you balance five hours for one person versus you could travel 10 minutes and have gotten 20.

These are just two of the many participant responses that suggest the leadership within the Extension organization did not support at-risk programming efforts but that if there were visible support by ISUE leadership, at-risk programming efforts would increase. The organizational management/leadership includes the mission, vision, strategies, and personal styles of individuals in management and leadership, and key strategies in changing the leadership include replacing existing leaders or re-tooling current ones (Goodstein & Burke, 1991; Kovoov-Misra, 1996; Stewart, 1989; Trahan & Burke, 1996).

ISUE may opt to increase at-risk programming efforts by removing non-supportive leadership or modifying existing leadership to reflect support for working with at-risk audiences. Leadership is viewed as a "transformational" target (Trahan & Burke, 1996), and changes at this level usually lead to changes in the organization's structure and members.

Assumption 5: At-risk programming efforts are not viewed as part of the regular Extension work.

Does it ever seem to you like if we're going to work with children, youth and families at-risk that it has to be something we go out and find money or resources. If it's not an at-risk program, well, then it just seems to be part of the Extension world.

"It doesn't meet the Top 100." I mean, I go through needs, I go through programs, I go through matching and priorities and what clients want. And it, by the time you do all the organization's priorities and each field specialist priorities and campus specialists' priorities and ongoing programs and what the clients are say, plus what you want to do, you know, that factors in too. What you want to do, that type of talk [at-risk] hasn't gone on my list.

Assumption 6: The primary mission for Iowa State University Extension is agriculture.

It's a paradox that in Iowa, political, we have to keep telling the legislature that we haven't abandoned Ag. At the national level, we have to keep telling Congress and the people in Washington, D.C. that we're more than Ag.

We're talk here politically, can that really happen? So we can talk all it all we want. But I'm sensitive to what our major portion of our funding pie. And that's an agricultural standpoint here in Iowa. I'm concerned about the push-pull. One state representative has the philosophy that the youth programming is to be how we keep our youth within the state involved in agriculture.

The last two assumptions affirm that the Extension culture neither views nor values at-risk programming efforts as part of the customary work of ISUE. The organizational culture includes the unwritten rules and overt behavior patterns of the organization, including the values and basic assumption that agriculture is the primary focus of the organization (Schein, 1990). The key strategy for changing the organizational culture is for the members to identify and change the policies and procedures within the organizational structure and leadership that hinder the organizational change process (Argyris, 1997). The organizational culture is viewed as a "transformational" target, and changes at this level usually lead to changes in all areas of the organization (Trahan & Burke, 1996).

Summary and Recommendations

A preliminary report of these assumptions was shared with the Families Extension staff and the Expanded Family Nutrition Education Program staff at their separate in-service session. Each of the groups reflected on the initial findings and identified strategies for ISU Extension to implement in order to increase at-risk programming efforts. Some of the following recommendations came from these information sharing and strategy sessions. Recommendations included the following.

- Hire new staff who are able to blend strong facilitative skills with subject matter expertise.
- Provide collaboration training for Extension staff and community partners.
- Dialogue with staff about perceptions and philosophies for working with "at-risk" citizens.
- Help staff with the assets or strengths approach to educational programming to compliment the deficit or needs approach.
- Explore ways to involve at-risk audience in defining needs, planning programs and participating in educational activities.
- Reward staff who do innovative programming with children, youth, and families at risk.

- Determine best use of existing resources--monetary and non-monetary--for at-risk programming.
- Foster communication at all levels of the organization and with external partners.
- Develop a unified and focused message to all of Extension and our partners about our role on at-risk programming.
- Encourage upper administration to show support for "at-risk" programming.
- Recruit Extension council members who represent or are from "at-risk" groups.
- Ask citizens from "at-risk" groups to serve on referendum committees.
- Reacquaint Extension staff with our historical mission of bringing education to the disenfranchised.
- Use critical thinking to address assumptions and beliefs about "at-risk" issues and programs.
- Encourage all staff to participate in the poverty simulation.
- Write and broadly share impact statements about current CYFAR program efforts.

The results of this study may not be applicable to other Cooperative Extension Services and do not imply these assumptions are prevalent in all Cooperative Extension Services. Argyris (1997) noted that prevalent and persistent organizational and individual staff assumptions will only change after examining the limiting and contributing assumptions of the *specific* organization. Organizational changes can be sustained only when the assumptions that supported the old behavior are also changed (Argyris, 1997).

Conclusion from the Study

The CYFAR Initiative called upon ISUE staff to expand services to non-traditional audiences, and current staff seemed to be struggling with issues on how to expand current services or develop new services to reach this audience. This study demonstrated that for Iowa State University Extension to create meaningful and sustained change in expanding at-risk programming efforts, individual and organizational assumptions need to be exposed and addressed. Staff must be provided with training opportunities that change assumptions about working with at-risk audiences.

Focus group participants identified items within the organizational structure, the organizational leadership, and the organizational culture that they perceived needed to be changed before at-risk programming efforts would increase. Thus, the study recognized that providing additional staff development training or new job descriptions was not sufficient in itself to sustain organizational change. Issues related to organizational culture, structure, and leadership must also be addressed in the change process.

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