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Systematic Assessment of Resistance to Extension Organizational Change: Evidence from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System

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Systematic Assessment of Resistance to Extension Organizational Change: Evidence from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Abstract

This article provides a case-study example of how Extension administrators may help their organizations advance toward institutionalization of change and restructuring through systematic participation of agents and specialists in change assessments. Citing two change assessments in the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, this article offers a framework Extension administrators can adopt to decrease resistance to organizational changes. Action steps are discussed in terms of identifying specific changes resisted and embraced by Extension stakeholders. Though this participative approach does not guarantee complete acceptance of changes by organizational stakeholders, the approach can help evolving Extension organizations advance toward sound institutionalization of changes.

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Introduction

"Rebirth, renewal, and rightsizing!" These three words are all too familiar depictions of organizational changes occurring in the U.S. Cooperative Extension System (Harriman & Daugherty, 1992). Factors such as advances in technology, changes in the numbers and types of clientele, increased operating costs, and reduced funding require significant changes in resource allocations, organizational structure, and the way Extension conducts its business.

As predicted by Harriman and Daugherty, the future of the Cooperative Extension System will be significantly different from the past. Future changes will be more challenging to predict and require greater and faster adaptation. To be successful in this type of rapidly changing environment, future Extension leaders must not only know what types of changes are needed, but they must also have the tools and skills to implement change such that resistance decreases and "buy-in" increases with clientele and employees.

What action steps can be taken toward institutionalization of change in hopes of minimizing internal resistance particularly? An initial step administrators can take toward minimizing resistance to change calls for assessment of changes through the eyes of change targets, i.e., affected employees. Such an approach helps to primarily identify specific areas of resistance, and though not guaranteeing complete acceptance of change by organizational stakeholders, the participative assessment approach can potentially help evolving organizations advance toward sound institutionalization of change (Armenakis, Harris, & Feild, 1999; Di Pofi, 2002).

This article provides a case-study example of how Extension administrators can potentially help

their organizations advance toward institutionalization of change and restructuring through systematic participation of agents and specialists in change assessments. Over the past 20 years, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) has experienced several organizational transformations due to changes such as proliferation in technology among ACES employees and clientele, rapidly increasing complexity of subject-matter areas, reduced funding, and increased expectations of federal funding partners. As a result, many fundamental changes in the ACES structure and programming have been implemented to adapt to the changing times, to meet changing needs of Extension stakeholders and to better serve clientele.

This article discusses systematic qualitative and quantitative procedures for assessing Extension employees' resistance to organizational changes via analysis of two ACES change efforts: (a) implementation of a new programming model and (b) organizational restructuring efforts. For each change effort, assessment methodologies are discussed to provide a model for identifying specific functional and structural changes resisted and embraced by agents, specialists, and other Extension stakeholders. Again, though this participative approach does not guarantee complete acceptance of change by organizational stakeholders, the approach can potentially help evolving Extension organizations advance toward sound institutionalization of change (Armenakis, Harris, & Feild, 1999; Di Pofi, 2002).

Necessity for Systematic Assessments of Organizational Changes

For many Extension practitioners, systematic research is oftentimes considered ominous in nature and reserved only for "ivory tower academics" (Diem, 2002). However, high rates of failure of organizational change efforts are partially explained by the failure of organizations to carry out well-planned initial systematic assessments based on accurate data (Harrison & Shirom, 1999). Collection and analyses of such data, according to practicing organizational development professionals, are best when assessment efforts are systematically comprehensive and unbiased (Armenakis, Harris, & Feild, 1999).

Moreover, one way Extension administrators can accurately assess employee adoption of change efforts is utilization of systematic quantitative and qualitative assessment methods. A quantitative assessment focuses on formal measurement, categorization, and summarization of a situation using numbers and labels (Diem, 2002). On the other hand, a qualitative assessment typically captures a more informal, broad, and thorough description and explanation of a situation without necessarily quantifying results.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are oftentimes utilized by organizations in assessment efforts because the methods provide complementary information (Diem, 2002). [For additional information on quantitative and qualitative research methods, see Campbell and Stanley (1963), Hagen and Thorndike (1977), and Wentling (1980).] Citing examples of systemic quantitative and qualitative change assessments, this article offers a framework Extension administrators can adopt to potentially decrease resistance and to advance toward sound institutionalization of organizational change.

Assessment One: A New Programming Model

Before 1997, ACES programming designed to address Extension program areas was typically performed by individual staff members. However, in 1997 a new model of programming--the Extension Team Project (ETP) Driven Model--was implemented, replacing individual plans of work with Extension team projects. This new model of programming called for specialists, i.e., university faculty, to work with agents to develop and implement educational activities. In addition, to provide funding partners with measures of accountability and, therefore, funding validation, a new program management process was developed and implemented to manage program planning, reporting, evaluation, and accountability processes. The new program management process required Extension staff to use an Intranet to report details concerning project development, completion, and evaluation.

In 2003, to identify areas of resistance to these programming changes, the ACES administration instituted qualitative and quantitative assessments of agents' and specialists' adoption of the new programming model and reporting, evaluation, and accountability processes. The assessment combined the collection and analyses of qualitative and quantitative data in order to reduce the likelihood of diagnostic bias in the assessment. Data were collected in two phases.

First Programming-Change Assessment Phase: Open-Ended Interviews

The first phase of data collection entailed a qualitative assessment with interviews of a percentage of randomly selected campus-based and field-based Extension agents and specialists at Auburn University and Alabama A&M University, two primary components of ACES. First, an outside researcher randomly selected and contacted interviewees to schedule telephone and in-person interviews. During interviews the researcher then asked respondents to share open-ended strengths and weaknesses of the new programming model and reporting, evaluation, and accountability processes.

Assured that all responses would be kept anonymous, interviewees immediately provided very honest and thorough descriptions of sentiments regarding strengths and weaknesses of ACES programming changes. For example, indicating support and adoption of some programming changes, interviewees explained strengths such as the convenience and efficiency of the required online planning and reporting. On the other hand, indicating resistance to some changes, interviewees also specified weaknesses such as the need for balance of state-driven versus county-driven programming.

Once all interview data were collected, the researcher began data analysis by categorizing interviewees' statements identifying strengths of programming changes according to reoccurring themes. A resulting table was produced to indicate reoccurring themes and percentages of interviewees who shared responses represented by the themes. See Table 1 for a sample table.

Table 1.
Sample Table of Categorized Strengths of Programming Changes

Identified Strengths:	% of All Interviewees
1. Convenient and efficient online planning/reporting	##.##%
2. Improved communication throughout ACES	##.##%

In addition, interviewees' statements identifying weaknesses of programming changes--areas of resistance--were categorized according to reoccurring themes and reported in a table similar to the one given above. See Table 2 for a sample table.

Table 2.
Sample Table of Categorized Weaknesses of Programming Changes

Identified Weaknesses:	% of All Interviewees
1. Poorly-scheduled training	##.## %
2. Unimproved accountability	##.## %

To further assess adoption of the programming changes, each theme representing an identified strength or weakness of a programming change was further categorized as one of three types of "organizational-change-climate" factors: a causal, intervening, or outcome factor (see Likert, 1961, 1967). As suggested by Likert, change agents--i.e., organizational leaders--control causal factors, which consequently affect intervening factors that ultimately result in desirable or undesirable outcome factors. Thus, each theme representing an identified strength of an ACES programming change was categorized as one of the following:

- A strength causal factor--that is, a factor positively impacting agent and specialist attitudes and subsequent outcomes regarding programming changes;
- A strength intervening factor--that is, a factor reflecting positive agent and specialist attitudes, motivations, and emotions regarding programming changes; or
- A strength outcome factor--that is, an end-result behavior representing positive organizational performance. See Table 3 for a sample table of results.

Table 3.
Sample Table of Strength-Causal, Strength-Intervening, and Strength-Outcome Factors

Identified Strengths:	% of All Interviewees
1. Convenient and efficient online planning/reporting (causal)	##.## %
2. Support felt from leadership for program	##.## %

management system (intervening)	
3. Improved communication throughout ACES (outcome)	##.## %

Finally, each theme representing an identified weakness of programming changes--areas of resistance--was also further categorized as one of three "organizational-change-climate" factors (Likert, 1967):

- A weakness causal factor--that is, a factor negatively impacting agent and specialist attitudes and subsequent outcomes regarding programming changes;
- A weakness intervening factor--that is, a factor reflecting negative member attitudes, motivations, and emotions regarding programming changes; or
- A weaknesses outcome factor--that is, an end-result behavior that represents negative organizational performance. See Table 4 for a sample table of results.

Table 4.
Sample Table of Weakness-Causal, Weakness-Intervening, and Weakness-Outcome Factors

Identified Weaknesses:	% of All Interviewees
1. Poorly-scheduled training (causal)	##.## %
2. Low morale (intervening)	##.## %
3. Unimproved accountability (outcome)	##.## %

Second Programming-Change Assessment Phase: Online Survey

Results of the first phase of the ACES programming assessment provided an unbiased, accurate frame of reference for the second phase of data collection--administration of an online survey designed to further investigate resistance to programming changes. Specifically, the open-ended interview data collected in the first assessment phase would enhance understanding of the evolving programming process by providing unique perspectives that would disclose underlying employee rational used in making quantitative judgments in the online survey. Thus, the second phase of the programming assessment involved use of an online survey (posted on an Intranet) addressing several programming issues identified in the first assessment phase.

ACES agents and specialists were invited by the administration to voluntarily and anonymously complete and submit the online survey, which was designed collectively by the outside researcher and administration personnel based primarily on data collected in the first assessment phase. The survey asked respondents to rate agreement with approximately 10 statements about specific programming changes using the following scale: "1" for "strongly disagree," "2" for "somewhat disagree," "3" for "somewhat agree," and "4" for "strongly agree." Also, the survey asked respondents to share any strengths and weaknesses of programming changes.

At the conclusion of the survey's administration, the researcher analyzed the data by calculating and reporting for each survey item: (1) the average rating and (2) the standard deviation of each respondent's rating from the average rating. These numbers were computed for each item in order to then quantitatively gauge respondents' sentiments regarding programming changes. [Recall that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are oftentimes utilized by organizations in assessment efforts because the methods provide complementary information (Diem, 2002).]

Sample survey results are as follows:

- Survey item: The on-line sign-up and reporting process and on-line success stories should be used as part of individual performance appraisals.
Average Rating = 1.6218 = Strongly Disagree-Somewhat Disagree
Standard Deviation = 0.9914
- Survey item: Online success stories are a good way for me to know what my colleagues across the state are doing.
Average Rating = 2.1176 = Somewhat Disagree
Standard Deviation = 0.8942

Finally, open-ended strengths and weaknesses shared by survey respondents were analyzed exactly as interview data was analyzed in the first assessment phase. Results of this qualitative data and the quantitative survey data analyses generally reiterated strengths and weaknesses identified in the first phase of the assessment. To this end, use of both quantitative and qualitative change assessments permitted the ACES administration to particularly capture without bias areas of resistance to functional and structural changes--a critical step toward sound institutionalization of organizational change (Armenakis, Harris, & Feild, 1999).

Assessment of Organizational Restructuring

Acceptance of organizational change from ACES agents and specialists was a necessary condition for implementing future transformations not only in the way ACES does business, but also in its organizational structure. Thus, following the two-phase assessment of programming changes, the ACES administration attempted cultivation of more member participation in change efforts, assessments, and decision-making, with particular attention to increasing agent and specialist participation in assessments of both programmatic and organizational changes regarding future restructuring. Evolving organizations lacking active employee participation in change efforts unfortunately hamper smooth institutionalization of change efforts (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999).

As is the case with many Extension programs around the country, ACES is forced to consider redirection and reallocation of staff and resources in response to evolving changes in both internal and external environments. Significant internal and external factors influencing Extension operations in Alabama include proliferation in technology among ACES employees and clientele, rapidly increasing complexity of subject-matter areas, reduced funding, and increased expectations of federal funding partners.

As a result, the process for developing and implementing ACES restructuring plans began in October 2002 with the naming of a Strategic Development Action Team (SDAT) to implement the recommendations from a year-long strategic planning process. The SDAT was divided into three workgroups, each addressing one of three issues: redirection and reallocation of resources and staff, internal training, and funding for new programs. Taking an initial step toward institutionalization of SDAT-proposed restructuring initiatives, ACES stakeholders were called upon to play active roles in change efforts to help decrease resistance and foster institutionalization of restructuring changes.

Various assessments have been taken by the SDAT between 2002 and the present to assess resistance to proposed restructuring changes. For example, the SDAT solicited open-ended input from both in-state and out-of-state Extension employees through phone calls, face-to-face meetings, and group meetings. In addition, organizational models from other states were considered, and extensive input was received from respective agents. Upon the SDAT's development of the propositions for ACES' restructuring, the propositions were posted on multiple occasions (as updated) on an Intranet in order to offer ACES employees the opportunity to review propositions and share open-ended comments of support and/or resistance. The ACES administration also captured feedback from stakeholders in meetings held with field staff across Alabama, Extension-funded faculty and specialists at Alabama A&M University and Auburn University, and representatives of Extension clientele organizations.

Armed with input from critical stakeholders, the ACES administration and SDAT considered proposed restructuring initiatives in terms of the solicited feedback. Though acquisition of the feedback did not guarantee smooth institutionalization of the restructuring changes, areas of resistance to the changes were identified and subsequently considered in restructuring change efforts. For example, one concern of ACES stakeholders was the proliferation of the use of technology in ACES, which is illustrated by over 2.5 million annual visits to the ACES Web site, as well as on-line publications being viewed and/or downloaded over 1.3 million times per year. Such immediate access to ACES information creates a need for costly technical support personnel and greater Internet connectivity. To address this concern, restructuring initiatives were to then be designed to make better use of new and emerging technologies.

Another example of stakeholder feedback considered during institutionalization of restructuring changes was concern for the increasing complexity of program areas and clientele. To address this concern, restructuring initiatives were to then be designed to allow ACES employees to focus in specific areas and to develop more in-depth area expertise in program areas. In addition, to address ACES members' concern for gaps between research and practice in Extension programming, restructuring initiatives were to be designed to create stronger operational links between academic research and educational programming in the field.

Summary

This article discussed examples of systemic quantitative and qualitative change assessments in order to offer a framework Extension administrators can adopt to potentially decrease resistance and to advance toward sound institutionalization of organizational change. To this end, the following action steps are recommended in order for Extension administrators to carry out more systematic, unbiased, and comprehensive assessments of adoption of organizational changes:

- Seek assistance from academic researchers in the design and administration of data

collection procedures;

- Seek open-ended, qualitative stakeholder input regarding strengths and weaknesses of organizational changes via informal interviews in which interviewees' anonymity will be maintained;
- Seek quantitative stakeholder input on strengths and weaknesses of organizational changes by utilizing surveys administered and completed via available media; and
- Seek assistance from academic researchers in analyses of data collected from change assessments.

Conclusion

Research-generated knowledge is critical to successful operations of the U. S. Extension system. In times of great change and restructuring, Extension's research-generated knowledge must in part be derived from unbiased quantitative and/or qualitative research methods fostering accurate assessment of adoption of change efforts. Failure to allow active participation of Extension employees in change efforts may result in maladaptation to critical change initiatives and, hence, a lack of willingness to leave behind that which may hinder Extension from successfully adapting to the times. As so aptly concluded by Harriman and Daugherty (1992) and initially quoted by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983), "The change master is partly a historian who knows which pieces of the past to honor and preserve while moving toward a different future, but that is not the same as letting the past define the future."

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