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Extension's Role in Responding to Community Crisis: Lessons from Klamath Falls, Oregon

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Extension's Role in Responding to Community Crisis: Lessons from Klamath Falls, Oregon

Abstract

Extension has a long history of support for communities, primarily through programs such as agriculture and 4-H. When an entire community faces a crisis, however, the needs of the community can expand beyond the goals of a specific program. In the summer of 2001, Klamath Falls, Oregon experienced a crisis when a federal decision eliminated irrigation water to over 1200 families farming more than 220,000 acres. The Klamath County Extension Office recognized the role they could play and organized and facilitated three countywide meetings to identify needs and strategies for action. The actions that evolved from the meetings were substantial, and the Extension office learned several key lessons about responding to crisis.

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Introduction

The history of Extension is about helping people by providing objective information. To provide this information, the Extension Service in each state develops programs. In Oregon, the programs are agriculture, forestry, family and community development, 4-H/youth, and marine/Sea Grant. There is an informal, overarching program in community development. The challenge for Extension is to provide, through its programs, information necessary to help individuals and communities succeed. Changes in economics, demographics, technology, and the environment challenge Extension faculty, as we begin the 21st century, to provide information that is useful to a changing audience, with changing technology, in a changing world.

These changes are, from an historical perspective, very rapid. Sometimes they are extremely so, and a crisis ensues, as Klamath Falls, Oregon recently experienced. The changes there were abrupt and severe, involving several agricultural communities. This article is about how the

Klamath Extension Service responded to a crisis in their community in the summer of 2001 and about what lessons were learned that may be of value to other offices and communities.

Background

In April 2001 the Bureau of Reclamation determined that it could not release the normal allocation of water from Klamath Lake to farmers in the Klamath Irrigation Project. In a period of drought, the Bureau found that the water was needed to protect two species of endangered fish in Klamath Lake. The effect was that over 1,200 families, farming over 220,000 acres, were without their normal irrigation water for the summer of 2001.

The irrigated lands, to the southeast of the city of Klamath Falls in Oregon and California, had been settled in the early 1900s under the federal Homestead Act. A supply of water was assured by federal agreement, and water flowed each summer for over 90 years, until the summer of 2001. With irrigation, the lands of the region produced a variety of forage crops as well as barley, potatoes, and onions. The people and economies of three small towns in the region--Merrill and Malin in Oregon and Tulelake in California--are highly dependent upon agricultural production.

The decision to not allocate water had an immediate and very dramatic impact on farmers who could not water crops. Most chose not to plant crops and tried to find alternative sources of water, mainly from wells, to preserve their perennial crops, such as alfalfa, through the season. As the farmers withheld investments to plant their summer crops, the impacts spread to the local businesses and communities, and then to the community of Klamath Falls and eventually to the county and region.

As the crisis in the communities increased, the faculty of the Klamath County Extension Office recognized that their traditional "technology transfer" information was of little value in this situation. The office faculty are specialists in such fields as livestock, forage, crops, horticulture, natural resources, 4-H/youth, and nutrition education. The specialists soon realized the crisis put their present informational programs "on hold" until the larger crisis for individuals and communities was addressed.

Extension and Crisis

Historically, the Cooperative Extension Service has responded to the problems and crises of communities. This includes responsiveness to small-scale problems such as local economic depressions and regional drought conditions to more nation-wide crises, especially the Great Depression and national efforts during both world wars (Rasmussen, 1989; Vines & Anderson, 1976).

1980's Farm Crisis

During the farm crisis of the 1980s, Extension played a significant role in helping communities recover. Extension's efforts included stress management workshops, family farm communication seminars, intergenerational farm transfer sessions, couples retreats, farm family support groups (Williams, 1998) as well as programs on financial management and marketing skills (South Dakota, 1996). The farm crisis caused severe stress among farmers and farm families (Williams, 1998), and Extension responded by organizing more intensive intervention for farm families. The University of Missouri trained mental health counselors to provide stress management and social service coordination (Meeker, 1992). Iowa State University Extension was able to secure funding to provide long-term (6-9 weeks), one-on-one outreach education to farm and rural families facing severe stress (Viegas, 1998). In other circumstances, Extension formed partnerships to offer valuable services such as a 24-hour Stress Management Hotline (South Dakota).

Extension has also responded to short-term crises during flooding (North Dakota, 1997), drought (Chenoweth, 1991), and even child abduction (Stark, 1990). In most of these incidences, Extension's primary role was to provide reliable information. This information was delivered by radio (addresses and question/answer sessions); television (interviews and informational segments); Web site links; and fact sheets, information packets, and other publications.

Research has supported the use of these techniques in dealing with community crisis. University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted a survey to assess the impact of the farm financial crisis (Williams, 1996). The survey indicated that churches and Extension were perceived as being more responsive to farm families than the helping agencies--social services, community action, health care agencies, mental health agencies--in the community. Williams explains this result in part by farmers' lack of awareness of helping organizations and by farmers' pride, which created a barrier to accessing services. In addition to the techniques listed earlier, Williams recommends Extension connect farmers with assistance by networking with agencies, publicizing these agencies, and by training these agencies on how best to respond to farm families in distress. Other reports have surmised that Extension's success in aiding farmers in crisis is due to the trust developed over many years of collaborating on rural issues (Meeker, 1992).

Helping People Help Themselves

Extension faculty have also developed tools to enable community members to help themselves during times of crisis. Conway, Corcoran, Duncan, and Ketchum (1996) developed *Towns in*

Transition: Managing Change in Natural-Resource Dependent Communities as a video and study guide for community leaders for periods of crisis and transition. The guide highlights actions a leader can take, especially:

- Finding ways of helping community members feel more in control of their future, feel more competent,
- Communicating frequently and consistently,
- Making use of task forces and short range goals for community members to aim for, reach and celebrate, and
- Questioning the "usual", including one's own role.

This type of education suggests an emerging role for Extension professionals. Patton and Blaine (2001), in their article "Public Issues Education: Exploring Extension's Role," state that Extension professionals may be uncomfortable dealing with value-based conflicts (similar to the one in Klamath County) in which research-based (technology transfer) information addresses only a small part of the issue. Rather than providing technical information, the Extension professional may need to assume a facilitator or "process expert" role to help a community recover from crisis.

In his critical review of the modern Extension Service, *Land-Grant Universities and Extension: Into the 21st Century*, author George McDowell (2000) argues that Extension is in the process of renegotiating its "social contract" as it searches for the best way to serve in the 21st century. Nationally, Extension must broaden its program portfolio to better engage the society it serves. "Engagement means staying attuned to the issues faced by people" (p.196). The Klamath situation provides an example of just such engagement and serves as the foil for proposing some general guidelines for responding to crisis in a way that is both timely and effective.

From a decision-making perspective, the role of the facilitator in a time of crisis is to help the community go through the steps of problem resolution as a group. This challenge, then, is to help the group understand values at risk and to set goals, to gather information to better understand the situation, to generate opportunities for resolution of the crisis, and to make a decision (Gallagher, 1987; 2002).

Klamath Response

The initial response of the director of the Klamath County Extension Office was to contact specialists in the Office of Personnel and Organizational Development (OPOD) in the statewide Oregon State University Extension Office. OPOD is the professional development branch of the organization that provides training in leadership, evaluation, adult education, diversity, and volunteer program development. Several OPOD specialists also design and facilitate community meetings for county offices, and, in 2000, two OPOD specialists helped conduct an assessment of needs in all 36 Oregon counties
<<http://osu.orst.edu/extension/opod/needsassessment/needsindex.html>>.

This assessment provided Klamath faculty with the experience of engaging the broader community in a general--"outside the box" of a particular program--discussion.

As the water crisis in the Klamath developed, Klamath faculty and OPOD specialists designed a series of three needs assessment and resolution meetings, called "Klamath Community Assessments."

Meeting 1

The office director sent invitations to about 50 community leaders, representing businesses, agencies, non-profits, and interested citizens. The meeting, held June 13, attracted 35 participants. The points in the discussion, borrowing the 2000 assessment of needs process previously conducted in the county, included:

1. Introductions (10 minutes)
2. List of Accomplishments (15 minutes)
3. List of Trends (15 minutes)
4. List of Barriers (15 minutes)
5. Question: "What does your community need, in the next 2 to 3 months, to move towards a viable future?" (60 minutes)
6. Alternatives (30 minutes)
7. Multi-Voting (10 minutes)
8. Discussion of "X by Y" (15 minutes)
9. Evaluation and Closure (10 minutes)

Using these steps the group identified four broad needs:

1. Improve information and coordination,
2. Pursue justifiable compensation (for water not delivered),
3. Increase scientific accountability, and
4. Increase public/national awareness.

The group concluded the meeting with specific action items (X by Y) for each issue.

Meeting 2

The second meeting was held on August 2. The process in this gathering, which attracted 25 participants, began with introductions, followed by an update of "needs and actions" identified in the earlier meeting. The group reported several major successes. For example, the county government created the Klamath Disaster Resource Center to coordinate information and respond to the crisis. Also, Oregon State University initiated, with the University of California, a process to provide a scientific assessment of the environmental, social, and economic impacts of the lack of water. And major progress was made on getting the issue before the national media.

After review of the progress to date, the facilitator moved the group to step 5 with the question: "What is needed in the Klamath Community to help sustain itself in the next year?" This question moved the focus of the assessment beyond the 2- to 3-month time frame from the first meeting. The participants, working initially in small groups and then as a whole, identified seven columns of needs:

1. Community spirit,
2. Youth support,
3. Water certainty,
4. Financial counseling,
5. Public policy,
6. Basic needs, and
7. Compensation.

Working in self-selected groups, participants then completed the remaining steps and identified alternative ways to meet the needs. A set of 20 action (X by Y) items were identified, some as simple as holding a community potluck to build community spirit and others more involved, such as engaging the county commissioners to appoint an advisory group to promote public policy. One action item was for the OPOD office to provide policy education, and a training session was held the next month.

Meeting 3

A third meeting was held September 26. After introductions, the dozen participants reviewed successes related to the action items. The successes were numerous, including:

- A community potluck that attracted 60 people,
- Bringing the "Ag in the Classroom" program to local schools,
- An agreement by the local medical service provider to withhold billing for farmers,
- A grant for over \$100,000 from two foundations to provide winter clothing for children,
- A \$.5 million road improvement program that provided work for 40, and
- Expansion of the food bank and food stamp program.

Despite the smaller group, it was clear that critical participants were present, that earlier participants had worked together creatively, and that a good deal of work had already been accomplished.

The facilitator then led the group through a review of recent events (this meeting followed the September 11 tragedy) and the current state of the community. Participants noted how vulnerable they felt to world problems but how strong they felt as a community. They felt that the confrontation that had been building to forcefully open the head gates that control the irrigation water was now over and that there was renewed opportunity for working together.

There were new aspects to the crisis, such as the lack of recharge from irrigation water causing shallow wells in the region to go dry, thus requiring families to haul all of their water. This new aspect of the crisis led to a request for more information about ground water, and economic impact information being developed by Oregon State University was needed to help with measuring the value of the water not delivered. This meeting closed with a strong sense that the

mission of the meetings was accomplished; the series of meetings had met their objective to help the community identify needs and means to resolve them.

Lessons Learned

In review of the outcomes of the meetings, it is not clear that the successes in the community would have occurred without Extension facilitation. Certainly, many parties encouraged cooperation and action. It is clear, however, that several key contacts were made and several key opportunities were discovered in the Extension-facilitated meetings. Further, it was clear that the energy developed at the meetings was helpful in identifying tasks and people willing to do them. In review of the sessions, participating faculty identified the following five lessons learned.

First Lesson: Start Early

Start early! When a crisis develops rapidly, as it did in the Klamath Basin, it is desirable to be active quickly. The first meeting of the community leaders was held about 2 months after the decision to withhold water was made. This was sufficient time for the initial dust to settle and at the time when people were starting to care about "what to do now" It could be argued that Klamath Extension might have anticipated the crisis and been a voice to warn people. Indeed, Extension offices across Oregon are now beginning to recognize that they may wish to begin engaging people before the issue takes on crisis proportions.

Second Lesson: Involve Community Leaders

Get a broad group of community leaders involved. Participants in the meetings were people recognized for their leadership qualities in a great variety of areas, and some were associated with Extension programs. The breadth of participation enabled the group to identify the full range of values, to gather a great variety of information, and to generate a much broader array of alternatives. Interestingly, although the Klamath Basin is known as a small community, many participants knew each other by name and sight but had never worked together. The series of meetings encouraged new acquaintance and developed a host of new leaders familiar with Extension.

Third Lesson: Keep Meetings Focused

Keep the schedule and the meetings focused and productive. We chose to hold community meetings every 6 weeks to have early progress reports on the "X by Y" items and to keep the group energy high. Also, the meetings were managed with a moderately tight agenda so that we did not "just sit around and gripe" about the issue, but moved toward "what are we going to do about it." By concluding each meeting with the X by Y session, we hoped people would see that the time spent was worth their while.

Fourth Lesson: Start Meetings on a Positive Note

To give the meeting a positive, forward-looking feel, we started each meeting by looking at past successes. During the initial meeting, the community members quickly listed a range of "accomplishments" over the past few years--such as completing a new ice rink for youth. This strategy, which is part of a problem-solving method called "appreciative inquiry" (Hammond, 1998), promotes a positive atmosphere that reduces the tendency of people in crisis to focus on the negative. At the second and third meetings, we began with successes to continue this sense of accomplishment and positive outlook.

Fifth Lesson: Use Trained Facilitators

It was desirable to have trained facilitators to help design and guide the initial meetings. The facilitators modeled the process in the first meeting, and, by the third meeting, the Klamath faculty were prepared to run the meeting alone. One of the key tasks of the facilitators was to remain neutral in a situation where it was necessary to honor different points of view. The facilitators anticipated and allowed a measure of "venting," but then guided it into positive energy and action. In many respects, the meetings served as a forum for an "attitude adjustment" for citizens and a training session on meeting facilitation for faculty and staff.

Conclusion

As a Klamath office faculty member quipped at the start of this project, "Helping a farmer with an irrigation system design isn't very useful when the water is turned off." Increasingly, due to the rapid changes in the world around us, there will be a need for Extension to help people respond to crises outside program areas. The day that Extension faculty can remain specialists, dedicated solely to their specific crop or program, is probably over. There is a growing challenge to make sure that the existing Extension programs are relevant. In situations that require synthesis, the existing programs may function too much as silos, and it is between the silos where the problems and solutions reside. The three meetings facilitated by Klamath Extension provided a way for faculty to see the broader concerns of the community and to discover some methods to help address those concerns.

Where We Are Today

Community response to the water allocation was varied and in some cases led to public protest, resulting in national attention on the issues. Secretary of Interior Gail Norton responded by releasing 75,000 acre-feet of water to the irrigation project. The federal government provided \$20 million in payments to affected farms. Farmers and state agencies in California and Oregon drilled new wells that provided additional irrigation water.

The farm community continues to live with the uncertainty of secure water delivery for irrigation. Federal agencies, led by the Bureau of Reclamation, and community organizations are continuing attempts to resolve issues related to endangered species and irrigation. The National Academy of Science in *Science and the Endangered Species Act* (1995) summarizes that "approaches must be developed that rely on cooperation and innovative procedures" to resolve endangered species and natural resource conflicts. Extension can provide relevant programs that support these needed cooperative and innovative approaches.

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