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Competencies Needed to be Successful County Agents and County Supervisors

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Competencies Needed to be Successful County Agents and County Supervisors

Abstract

This study describes the competencies that county agents and county supervisors in Arkansas believe are important for future success. Participants identified 57 core competencies, with character traits being the top-rated items. Having a farm background and 4-H experience were not ranked as highly important. The competency area Faculty/Staff Relations was rated as the most important for both agents and supervisors. Management Skills were ranked more important for supervisors, while Public Relations and Work Habits were rated more important for agents. Training should be provided to increase agent and supervisor competencies in those areas identified as very important.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service has been an agency for change and problem solving, and a catalyst for individual and social action for almost 100 years. At its creation, the rural, agrarian American population had a great need for educational assistance. The first county agents were itinerant teachers hired for their practical farm and home experiences.

However, lifestyles are radically different today than in 1914. The agency has had to adapt to societal changes and reorient itself to a fundamentally industrial and service-oriented population (Russell, 1995). Change has been necessary to meet the demands of society throughout the organization's existence. The role of the Extension agent has also changed over time, and the number of competencies identified for agents has increased (Beeman, Cheek, McGhee, & Grygotis, 1979; Maines, 1987; Gonzalez, 1982; Hahn, 1979; ECOP, 1987; ECOP, 1992).

The new technology of information gathering, exchange, and processing is forcing the Cooperative Extension Service into new roles away from the researcher-specialist-county agent-producer hierarchy that has characterized the technology transfer model (ES-USDA, 1988). In the future, the success of Extension programs will be determined to a large degree by the ability of the Cooperative Extension Service to keep highly qualified agents. The extent to which programming is effective in specific geographic locations will be largely determined by agents whose job responsibilities place them in direct contact with local people.

It will take a competent staff to meet the needs of the people and ensure the success of the Cooperative Extension Service into the 21st Century. Strother (1977) stated that the delivery of a high level of competence is the primary public justification for the Cooperative Extension Service. Therefore, it is imperative that the competencies of those agents deemed to be successful be identified and categorized for organizational success.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe:

- a. the competencies needed to be successful county Extension agents and county Extension supervisors in Arkansas,
- b. the competencies perceived to be the most important for agents and supervisors, and
- c. the differences in the perceived level of importance of competencies for county agents and supervisors.

Competencies were defined as knowledge, skills, or abilities required of the job.

The population for the study was county Extension agents in Arkansas in the program areas of agriculture, family and consumer sciences, 4-H, and community development. An open-ended, two-part questionnaire was distributed to all agents attending spring administrative conferences. Agents were asked to (a) list the competencies of successful agents and (b) list any competencies needed for successful supervisors that were different from those of successful agents. Additional demographic data on job assignment, gender and tenure were collected. A response rate of 87% was received.

Eight hundred forty-two separate statements of competencies were received. After duplications were removed, the competencies were summarized into common themes, resulting in 57 competency items. The responses were categorized by a panel of experts into the seven areas used in the employees' evaluation system:

1. program planning, implementation, and evaluation;
2. public relations;
3. personal and professional development;
4. faculty/staff relations;
5. personal skills;
6. management responsibility; and
7. work habits.

A second questionnaire was mailed to the agents and supervisors who were asked to rank each of the 57 competencies on a Likert scale from 6=very important to 1=least important for the competencies for successful agents and supervisors. All respondents who had worked for less than 2 years were excluded from the study, resulting in a total of 127 respondents being used in the study for an overall response rate of 68%. A Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .81 was determined for the 57 competency statements on the second questionnaire. The means, frequencies, and standard deviations were used to describe the respondents because this was a population study.

Findings

Great diversity of job assignments among the respondents was found. It was determined that 53 agents (41.7%) had one-half or more of their job assignment in agriculture, while only 38 (30.0%) of the family and consumer science agents had a majority of their assignment in this program area. The greatest diversity of job assignment was found for agents with a 4-H appointment. Only 40 (31.5%) had an appointment greater than 25% in 4-H youth development, while 62 (48.8%) had from a 5-25% appointment, meaning these agents had split appointments between two or more program areas. Fifty-six of the respondents (44.2%) had responsibility as the county supervisor, but 14 (11.0%) reported that this administrative responsibility accounted for more than 75% of their time.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents had more than 10 years of service, 37.8% having worked 11-20 years, and 26.8% having worked 20 years or more for Extension. Of those who responded to the survey, 79 (62.2%) were males, and 48 (37.8%) were females. Four of the female respondents had agriculture assignments.

Objective One

Objective One was to identify the competencies of successful county Extension agents and county Extension supervisors. From the total of 842 competency statements received, duplications were removed, and the competencies were cataloged into common themes. The result was 57 competencies that agents and supervisors regarded as needed for success. These are listed in

Table 1.

Table 1
Core Competencies Identified to Be a Successful County Agent and County Supervisor

Able to plan programs to needs	Ability to separate wants/needs
Involve people in program planning	Set goals
Execute programs to meet needs	Develop volunteer leaders
Teach decision-making skills to clients	Evaluate programs
Ability to work with key leaders	Accepted as a trusted advisor
Follow up on contacts	Public relation skills
Understands contribution of agriculture to community	Ability to locate and use outside resources
Ability to research and write	Ability to say "I don't know"
Committed to program	Communication skills - (oral and written)
Computer literacy skills	Continual self-improvement
Credible, respected	4-H knowledge
Good reading habits	Knowledge of Extension programs
Public speaking skills	Familiar with teaching & learning process
Subject matter competency	Willing to stay current in subject matter area/willing to learn
Work experience	Experience as a teacher
A former 4-H member	Fair, honest, trustworthy
Gives credit where credit is due	Interested in all program areas
Promotes and exhibit teamwork, is a team player	Farm background
Caring, serving, seldom say no	Flexible, willing to change, open minded
People skills, likes people, personable, willing to work with all types of people	Creative, innovative
Sense of humor	Positive attitude
Self-motivated, determined, dedicated	An extrovert, friendly, outgoing
Desire to make a difference	Ability to delegate
Give others freedom to perform the job	Ability to manage conflict, conflict resolution skills
Ability to make decisions	Record keeping skills
Ability to lead	Ability to train personnel
Time management skills, ability to solve many problems at once	Dependable
Efficient, organized	A professional manner, professional dress
Respond promptly to clients' requests.	

Objective Two

For Objective Two, county agents and supervisors were asked to identify those competencies that were the most important competencies for success. These were rated on a six-point Likert scale with 6=the most important competencies and 1=the least important competencies. The mean of each competency statement was calculated and placed in rank order to identify the most importance competencies for county Extension agents and county supervisors.

There were 34 competencies with mean scores of 5.00 or higher for the county agents and 45 competencies with 5.00 or higher for county supervisors. Only two competencies, being a former 4-H member and having a farm background, were rated below the median for both the agent and supervisor.

Character traits were considered to be the most valued competency for both the agent and the

supervisor. The competency dependable was ranked the highest by county agent, with a mean of 5.74, while supervisors felt that being fair, honest, trustworthy (Mean =5.90) was the most important competency. Management skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, decision making, giving credit, fairness, and delegation were ranked higher for the county supervisors. Personal development skills such as staying current in their discipline area, following up with clientele, commitment, and a positive attitude were ranked higher for county agents. When all of the competencies were evaluated, there were 27 statements that were ranked two standard deviations above the midpoint. These top-ranked competencies are listed in rank order in Table 2.

Table 2
Top-Ranked Competencies of County Agents and County Supervisors

County Agents			County Supervisors		
Competency	Mean	Rank	Competency	Mean	Rank
Dependable	5.74	1	Fair, Honest, & Trustworthy	5.90	1
Fair, Honest, & Trustworthy	5.70	2	Dependable	5.87	2
Credible, Respected	5.66	3	Gives Credit	5.81	3
Responds Promptly	5.65	4	Team Work Skills	5.79	4
Follows Up with Contacts	5.65	4	Works with Key Leaders	5.75	5
Teamwork Skills	5.63	6	Credible, Respected	5.75	5
People Skills	5.61	7	Manage Conflict	5.68	7
Stays Current	5.58	8	Responds to Clients	5.68	7
Programs Meet Needs	5.57	9	People Skills	5.67	8
Committed to Program	5.56	10	Makes Decisions	5.67	8
Positive Attitude	5.56	11	Allows Freedom to Do Job	5.66	9
Accepted as Trusted Friend	5.53	12	Public Relations Skills	5.64	10
			Committed to Program	5.64	10
			Accepted as Trusted Friend	5.64	10
			Interested in All Programs	5.62	13
			Follows up with Contacts	5.62	13
			Positive Attitude	5.61	15
			Execute Programs on Needs	5.62	16
			Knowledge of All Programs	5.59	17
			Understands Contribution of Agriculture in the Community	5.57	18
			Communication Skills	5.57	18
			Ability to Train	5.56	20
			Ability to Lead	5.56	20
			Ability to Delegate	5.55	21
			Self-Motivated, Dedicated	5.53	21
			Involves People in Planning	5.51	23
			Willing to Stay Current	5.51	23

Objective Three

Objective Three sought to determine if there were differences in the perceived level of importance of competencies of successful county Extension agents and county supervisors. Each county agent rated competencies important to be a successful county Extension agent as well as competencies needed to be a successful county supervisor. Alternatively, county supervisors rated each competency perceived to be successful as county Extension agents and as county supervisors. All competencies were categorized into the seven evaluation areas. The mean score of each competency area was used to determine the perceived differences in importance of each competency area.

The ability to plan, implement, and evaluate a local program is the basis of all county work. This process involves the identification of needs, the involvement of people in the planning process, and the evaluation of each program after implementation. As shown in Table 3(a), agents rated the program planning competencies as very important competencies for county Extension agents, with a mean score of 5.26, while the agents rated these competencies of lesser importance for supervisors, with a mean score of 4.99. However, the supervisors ranked the program planning competencies somewhat equal for agents and supervisors, with a mean score of 5.24 for agents and 5.22 for supervisors.

Working with the public has been an important aspect of the job since Extension's beginning and is still of great importance, as shown in Table 3(b). Both agents and supervisors rated the public relations competencies more important for the agents. The agents rated the competencies with a mean score of 5.31 for the county agent and the competencies for the supervisor with a mean score of 5.17. Supervisors rated these competencies as more important overall, with a mean score of 5.56 for agents and 5.47 for supervisors.

Both the agents and supervisors rated communication skills, computer literacy, subject matter competency, and other personal and professional development competencies higher for agents than for supervisors, as shown in Table 3(c). The mean score for these competencies was rated at 4.94 for agents, while the mean score for supervisors was 4.75, according to the agent ratings. However, there was little difference in the supervisors' rating of both groups, with a mean score of 5.03 for agents and a mean score of 5.01 for supervisors.

The Faculty/Staff Relations competencies were deemed to be very important to both groups. The agents rated the competencies with a mean score of 5.46 for agents and 5.32 for the supervisors. The supervisors rated the competencies with higher mean scores for both the agent and for the supervisor, with a mean score of 5.77 and 5.79, as shown in Table 3(d). These competencies included being fair, honest, trustworthy, giving credit where credit is due, an interest in all programs, and promoting teamwork.

Personal Skills competencies were rated as slightly more important for supervisors than for agents by both groups. These competencies included people skills, sense of humor, positive attitude, extrovert, friendly, outgoing, self-motivated, and caring. Table 3(e) shows that agents rated the importance of the personal skills with a mean score of 4.92 for agents and 4.94 for supervisors. The supervisors rated the competencies with a mean score of 4.99 for agents and 5.14 for supervisors.

Management responsibilities varied the greatest of the competency areas. Agents rated these competencies with a mean of 4.91 for agents and 4.46 for supervisors. However, supervisors rated these competencies higher overall, with a mean of 5.52 for agents and 5.57 for supervisors. While county supervisors are managing professional staff, the county agents have a major management responsibility for volunteer leaders. Table 3(f) illustrates this rating.

As shown in Table 3(g), agents rated the work habits competencies very high, with a mean score of 5.31 for agents and a mean score of 5.20 for supervisors. The supervisors rated this higher, with a mean score of 5.42 for agents and 5.51 for supervisors. These ratings suggest that all agents and supervisors feel they should be proficient in the competencies of time management, dependable, organized, and respond to clientele requests in a timely manner.

Table 3
Mean Rating of Competencies by Position

Competency	Position	Agents			Supervisors		
		N	Mean	Rank	N	Mean	Rank
a. Program Planning	Agents	67	5.26	4	55	5.24	5
	Supervisors	46	4.99	4	51	5.22	5
b. Public Relations	Agents	67	5.31	2	51	5.56	2
	Supervisors	45	5.17	3	55	5.47	4
c. Personal and Professional Development	Agents	66	4.94	5	51	5.03	6
	Supervisors	45	4.75	6	50	5.01	7
d. Faculty/Staff Relations	Agents	69	5.46	1	56	5.77	1
	Supervisors	47	5.32	1	52	5.79	1
e. Personal Skills	Agents	68	4.92	6	55	4.99	7
	Supervisors	47	4.94	5	51	5.14	6
f. Management Responsibilities	Agents	68	4.91	7	55	5.52	3
	Supervisors	45	4.46	7	52	5.57	2
g. Work Habits	Agents	69	5.31	2	55	5.42	4
	Supervisors	46	5.20	2	52	5.51	3

The importance of the seven competency areas was ranked using the average mean rating of all of the competencies within each area. As shown in Table 4, both agents and supervisors rate the competency area Faculty/Staff Relations as the most important competency area. The area Management Responsibility was rated as the second most important competency area for the supervisors but was rated as the least important competency area for the agents. Both agents and supervisors rated the areas of Work habits and Public Relations high being the second or third most important competency areas for both groups. Personal/professional development was ranked

as the least important competency area for both agents and supervisors.

Table 4
Mean Scores and Ranking of Seven Competency Areas

Competency Area	Agents		Supervisors	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
A. Program Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation	5.26	4	5.22	5
B. Public Relations	5.31	2	5.47	4
C. Personal and Professional Development	4.94	7	5.01	7
D. Faculty/Staff Relations	5.46	1	5.79	1
E. Personal Skills	4.92	5	5.14	6
F. Management Responsibilities	4.91	7	5.57	2
G. Work Habits	5.31	2	5.51	3

Conclusions

There is evidence of great diversity of job assignments across all program areas. Over half of the respondents have assignments in agriculture, and roughly one-third have assignments in family and consumer sciences. 4-H and community development are receiving fragmented attention as program areas, as indicated by small allocation of time in job responsibilities.

It is difficult to maintain strong, viable programs when one-half of the county agents have less than 25% appointed time to these areas. Diverse job assignments require diverse competencies. To be successful, agents must have increased technical competencies in more than one program area.

The agents with more than 10 years of service could be considered career agents who may have similar philosophies of Extension work. This may account for the similarities of ratings of competencies in this study.

Thirty-nine competencies were perceived to be of high importance for success. As society has changed and the rural, farm population has decreased, the need for practical experience has decreased as an important competency for agents. However, the educational level of today's audience has changed, and competence in agriculture and family and consumer science requires more specialized training. The need for specialized knowledge is reflected in lesser importance of the competency having a farm background.

Additionally, agents have assumed new roles to manage and train volunteers, to assist 4-H members with project work, to prepare for activities, and to maintain clubs as opposed to working directly with 4-H members. The higher rating of competencies in Management Responsibility and Faculty/Staff Relations, rather than the competency of being a 4-H member is evidence of this.

There was little difference in the perceived level of importance in four competency categories. Agents and supervisors agreed that Program Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation; Public Relations; and Personal and Professional Development were more important competencies for agents. Faculty/Staff Relations was rated the most important competency area for both agents and supervisors. This has become more important as Extension programs have shifted to issue-based problems where interdisciplinary team effort is required.

Additionally, Management Responsibilities were rated more important competencies for supervisors than for agents. This is a paradigm shift of training needs, which have historically focused on technical subject matter for all agents.

While shifts of competencies were found, Arkansas agents believe that a strong work ethic and character traits such as being dependable and fair, honest, and trustworthy will bring the most success for agents of the future. People skills, credibility, and earning peer/clientele respect will always bring success to our changing organization.

Recommendations

Competencies identified in the study as most important for the success of supervisors and agents should be incorporated into in-service training, especially management training for supervisors. A balance is needed between process skills and technical subject-matter training for all field staff. This study should be replicated using the Delphi method to help clarify words, phrases, and other subjective statements and to establish consistency of the ratings. The reliability of the competency statements should be improved by item refinement.

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