

County Extension Administration

Current trends toward assigning administrative responsibilities to a member of the county staff suggest the need for clarifying what is involved

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HAVE YOU EVER critically analyzed the competencies that are required for an administrative position? Have you ever speculated whether you have the qualifications and the experience for such a position? There are pertinent questions because we continually are witnessing changes in the administration and organization of the Cooperative Extension Service at both state and county levels. The most noticeable change is the trend toward appointing a staff member as county director, chairman, coordinator, or similar title. If you were to be appointed to such a position, how would you view this job? Would you need additional training to function effectively in this capacity or would past experience suffice?

Situation

Extension agents generally have had undergraduate training in technical agriculture or home economics. While in college many did not anticipate Extension as a career. Those who did may have taken a general course in Extension, but little was offered that would relate to Extension administration. After graduating from college some went directly into Extension work; others gained experience in related fields. Those with teaching experience probably studied most about educational methods, psychology, and administration because these are required for the teaching profession.

Recognizing changes that are taking place in Extension administration at the county level, this article will attempt to (1) examine the nature of administration, (2) identify some of the bases for

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administrative competence, (3) try to bring into focus factors to consider in defining administrative responsibilities, and finally, (4) suggest approaches to strengthen the administrative posture of Extension personnel. No attempt will be made to prescribe a scheme for coordinating a county staff—rather, an effort will be made to provide a framework for understanding what is involved. Other aspects of the subject will be treated in subsequent issues of the *Journal*.

In treating this subject, the terms county administrator, coordinator, chairman, and director will be used interchangeably. It will become obvious from this presentation that the county Extension administrator may be in a position of conflict. Even when he exercises his best judgment in a most democratic manner, often there will not be consensus among those involved.

NATURE OF ADMINISTRATION

If we should study the problems we encounter in everyday responsibilities and attempt to identify a systematic, efficient manner of approaching solutions, we would be involving ourselves in administration. But our conception of administration can become fuzzy if we get too specific in its application or try to define it in exacting terms; it is not an exact science but is defined in many ways. Newman expresses it simply as the guidance, leadership, and control of efforts of a group of individuals toward some common goal. He says the good administrator is one who enables his group to achieve its objectives through a minimum expenditure of resources and efforts and with minimum interference with other worthwhile objectives.¹

Organization is used many times to mean the same thing as administration. But when used as a noun the term organization is most commonly thought of as the arrangement of related parts into a whole. Regardless of the type of organization studied, administration is necessary. And even though each type of organization has its own framework and peculiarities, there are common elements that deserve study and scrutiny.

The nature of administration can vary widely—from democratic to autocratic; however, determining where the democratic starts and the autocratic stops may not be easy. To illustrate, Campbell and others suggest a contrast between the role of the president of a democratic state and the ruler in an autocratic one—such men as

¹ William H. Newman, *Administrative Action* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 1.

Eisenhower and Roosevelt with Stalin and Hitler. The contrast is obvious, they contend. It is when we attempt to distinguish between Eisenhower and Roosevelt—or between Eisenhower as a military leader, a university president, or as President of the United States—that the picture becomes much less clear.²

The performance of an administrator will remind us many times of the rigid type of leadership characterized by military command; however, in Extension we are concerned with the kind of administration that will provide educational leadership for a group of professionally competent individuals who have attained some degree of success within their own right. It becomes increasingly difficult, in examining this more desirable type of leadership role, to identify circumstances under which an administrator should involve, consult, and advise with his associates in reaching decisions. As in all organizations, situations are likely to arise in educational agencies when the leader or administrator finds it necessary to be arbitrary in making decisions, making them largely on his own judgment. Clarifying such varied circumstances—or agreeing that such situations do, in reality, exist—often gives rise to disagreement.

Communications

Regardless of the type of leadership involved, effective administration will hinge in many respects on the adequacy of communications. Much attention has been devoted to this subject in Extension in recent years—but mostly in terms of communicating with clientele. In order to upgrade organizational effectiveness of Extension, communication must be considered significant as a component of the administrative process.

Perhaps the best way to assure good communications is through staff conferences. The smaller the staff the more informal the conference can be. Usually when the staff numbers five or more, regularly scheduled conferences are needed. Such conferences can be devoted to program problems and their solutions, to promoting the ongoing program, to changes in program effort, to exploring new program areas, or to activities of the staff. Since there are other communication methods that should be used in addition to the conference, this discussion can only be considered suggestive of what is involved and of its importance. Needless to say, competence as a communicator may well be one of the factors that discriminate between effective and ineffective administrators.

² Roald F. Campbell, John E. Corbally, Jr., and John A. Ramseyer, *Introduction to Educational Administration* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1958), p. 20.

BASIS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE COMPETENCE

Extension directors and training leaders are demonstrating an increasing concern over the effectiveness of administration in Extension. This is evidenced by the fact that more and more Land Grant Institutions are establishing graduate degrees in Extension Education or Extension Administration. Also, within the past few years regional and state Extension schools have offered specific courses in county administration. Such work is not designed just for those with administrative titles; every position in Extension, whether it be county agent, home demonstration agent, 4-H agent, or an agent in a specialized field, has some administrative duties and responsibilities. The degree of administrative responsibility attached to a specific position may vary, but all personnel should have an understanding of the competencies required in order for a staff to be effectively coordinated. Each staff member also needs to be conversant about the organizational arrangements necessary to make coordination possible.

It is generally agreed that the focal point of Extension is the program at the county level. The development of an operational framework for such a program is an administrative responsibility. An agent who is the only Extension employee in a county has no problem in developing and operating within such a framework. He knows how his public accepts the program—he is in direct contact with them in all aspects of the program. Budget requirements are fairly simple. However, it may become so complex with larger staffs that some one person must be charged with coordinating the operation. But even in such circumstances as these, results are dependent upon the efforts of all members of the staff.

Significance of Experience

Generally, the present pattern is to designate a county agent as administrator or chairman of the staff. And in most instances no additional training is required. Most of us so designated may feel confidently prepared for such a job because of our years as a successful county agent. We may take pride in the fact that we have great quantities of "common horse sense" and should be able to solve any problem that confronts us. We consider the experience we have had to be a good teacher. However, there is some question as to whether our experiences have, in fact, been the desired ones. For example, Roethlisberger says that, astonishingly enough, experience "seems to teach different people different lessons. It often

teaches the 'wrong' as well as the 'right' reason. The school of hard knocks makes criminals as well as business men."³

We recognize that common sense works all the time but we cannot always be sure of the direction—sometimes the direction may be wrong. It may be that we could more confidently expect acceptable directions if practices in the scientific theories of administration were considered. Argyris argues that, contrasted to common sense theoretical formulations, a scientific theoretical framework is public, not private; that it is systematic, not random; that it does not permit prejudices to enter; and that it is continuously tested, not by one but by many.⁴

This is not to say that common sense and experience are worthless as preparation for administrative positions. Two studies of administrative personnel in General Electric⁵ lead to the conclusions (1) that experience is a good teacher, but can be even better with additional formal training; and (2) that experience is a good teacher if those assuming training responsibilities are competent. In one of these studies 90 per cent of the managers interviewed said that their most valuable experiences and training came through the leadership of capable supervisors.

This could suggest that Extension supervisors must play an important role in the training of county chairmen. Yet, supervisors generally are selected from the ranks of county personnel. They usually receive additional training for the job through workshops, graduate schools, or regional schools. However, Durfee found no clear understanding among agents of the role of the Extension supervisor.⁶

DEFINING RESPONSIBILITIES

As soon as a person is designated chairman at the county level, questions arise: (1) Is his job strictly administrative or will he be expected to continue performing some of his former functions? (2) What is to be the extent of the county chairman's authority? These are "knotty" questions, and require deep thought and planning be-

³Fritz Roethlisberger, "Training Supervisors in Human Relations," *Harvard Business Review*, XXIX (September, 1951), 48.

⁴Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 19.

⁵Moorehead Wright, "How Do People Grow in a Business Organization," *Federal Extension Service, USDA, ER & T*, February, 1961, p. 6.

⁶Arthur E. Durfee, "Expectation Held Toward the Extension Supervisor's Role" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1956).

fore satisfactory solutions can be determined. As stated previously, county agents usually have been designated as chairmen. The chairman, to be successful in his new role, must immediately broaden his horizons to include home economics, farm and home development, other specialized areas, and 4-H Club work (if it is not an integrated part of the agricultural and home economics programs).

The question then becomes one of how much technical competence he must have in each of these areas. Gulick points out that whatever the function being considered, the chief characteristic of such a staff member is administrative ability. Technical ability is the most important quality at the lower levels of the industrial ladder.⁷ Will the same hold true in educational organizations? Assuming that some of the administrative principles that are applied in business can be applied in Extension, the real test for a successful county director is whether he can give impartial leadership to all phases of the program and whether he has the administrative ability to coordinate and direct all aspects of a county program.

Many companies have failed because the best salesman or engineer did not make a good executive. It may be realistic to expect that Extension achievements at the county level will be measured to some extent by the leadership ability of the county coordinator. To fulfill his responsibilities, varying degrees of authority and responsibility have been suggested for this position:⁸

1. He may have the authority to call the group together for the purpose of exchanging information (sounding board).
2. He may be the fiscal officer. He may also be the sole authority to deal with the county board.
3. He may have the entire administrative authority, including authority to manage budgets and office administration, and to deal with over-all county advisory groups on policy matters.
4. He may have the authority to coordinate and direct the planning and execution of the entire county program.

The amount of authority and responsibility accorded the county director will vary from state to state, depending, among other things, on whether there is a well integrated agricultural, home economics, and 4-H program at the state level. If the Extension program is well integrated at top level the most successful county unit might include

⁷ Luther Gulick and L. Urwick, *Papers on the Science of Administration* (New York: The Institute of Public Administration, Columbia University, 2nd ed., 1947), p. 120.

⁸ *Cooperative Extension Administration: Report of Fifth National Administrative Workshop* (Madison: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, 1956), p. 24.

an administrative officer who has the responsibility and authority to coordinate and direct the county program. But to be effective he must operate within a framework that will not usurp the technical competencies and leadership abilities of other staff members.

Possibilities for Job Descriptions

Directing the county program may be a pleasant experience for the chairman and staff or it can be frustrating and confusing. A job description outlining in clear, concise terms the duties and responsibilities of each position and the lines of authority attached to each can help clarify administrative responsibilities. Terry points out that job descriptions bring about better understanding because qualifications required of an employee are identified. He maintains that job descriptions also help in selecting persons best fitted for a job and in bringing scattered information into a clearer job picture.⁹

However, Durfee found that detailed job descriptions for Extension supervisors were rare. He found that only four or five states had statements describing the supervisors' duties—and those could hardly be described as detailed.¹⁰ Job descriptions may be one area in administration that deserves considerable attention. But it should be remembered that job descriptions may give directions but should never be so detailed as to abort individual initiative. But they should identify with considerable clarity the responsibility for decisions.

The most valuable asset an Extension agent can possess is the ability to make correct decisions, regardless of his position or responsibility. There is considerable literature on the decision-making process. However competence cannot be developed in this area by studying the theory exclusively—opportunities must be provided at every level in the hierarchy for staff members to make decisions and shoulder responsibility. And even though staff members may counsel with their superiors before arriving at decisions, the responsibility for the decision should be clearly theirs. In this respect Extension personnel may differ from the industrial labor forces—each Extension employee is professionally competent and presumed to be qualified to give leadership and imagination to program building. Since the success of the county Extension program is contingent, for the most part, upon unity of efforts, opportunities such as these can be used to create unity and provide growth and leadership for the staff.

⁹George R. Terry, *Office Management and Control* (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1958), p. 405.

¹⁰Durfee, *op. cit.*

SUMMARY

Let's go back to the point of origin. If suddenly you were asked to assume an administrative position do you feel you have the training and experience to do a competent job? Could you plan, in the broad sense, what should be done: to organize a formal structure of authority, to staff properly (include training), to direct the decision-making process, to coordinate the various aspects of the program, to keep your superiors and staff adequately informed, and to prepare and secure the necessary budget? If your answer is in the affirmative, you likely have the competence to provide necessary educational leadership for a staff. If not, additional training should be considered.

How do agents generally feel about their administrative ability? In studying the training needs of county agricultural agents in Texas, Cook found that a majority of agents had not had course work as an undergraduate in Extension education, agricultural education, or psychology. Seventy per cent of the agents included in the study said they would like advanced training in these fields and 88 per cent of the state staff would like for agents to take advanced training in these fields.¹¹

Conclusion

These ideas have been presented largely as they concern Extension personnel and the internal operation of the Extension organization. In administrative decisions, however, local leaders, Extension council, and the public must be considered. They all have an interest in Extension. To consider all these components, and not lose the importance of any, is administration of a high order.

The intention has not been to minimize the importance of experience as preparation for an administrative position at the county or at other levels. However, experience in itself may not be sufficient because much of the training of Extension agents at the undergraduate level has been in technical agriculture or home economics—there is an inherent weakness in their preparation in the social sciences. This deficiency may be corrected in a number of ways. The individual Extension worker as well as the organization may have responsibilities for correcting such deficiencies.

¹¹ Benjamin D. Cook, "Comparative Analysis of Training Needs of County Agricultural Agents in Texas" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957), as summarized in Research Summary No. 48, March, 1958, ER & T-52, Federal Extension Service.