

On Being Professional

**Professionalism involves the mastery of a highly
complex body of knowledge
and the ability to apply this knowledge skillfully and perceptively**

LLOYD H. DAVIS

A MAJOR concern of administrators is to determine what professional competencies are most needed in their staffs and to commit resources in such a way as to acquire, develop, and apply these competencies. While a search for competence in Extension is a necessary, continuing process, our level of achievement in this search has been conspicuously high. Extension is generally recognized by rural people as an almost indispensable institution. It is recognized as having made great contributions to the levels of living of all people. Such recognition has come because we have had the competency to do things considered important by the public—because of a high level of professional competence.

One of the biggest challenges facing Extension is the development and maintenance of the kinds of competencies that will make the greatest contribution. (Many feel that this is a dominant challenge facing us as a Service.) Competition for funds suggests that our competence should be of a unique quality. Indeed, Extension is unique in its educational emphasis, basic philosophy, university affiliation, and the broad range of technical fields.

But the adequacy of our competence must be measured also against the problems and needs of people we serve. For example, the competence required to be of assistance to the small general farmer of a generation ago is quite different from that required for the large-scale, highly trained, and specialized farmer of today. Each of our major program areas requires different sets of competencies, as do some problems that are unique to a region. Recogn-

LLOYD H. DAVIS is Administrator, Federal Extension Service, Washington, D.C. This article is an adaptation of an address on *Competence in Extension* to a Seminar of the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

nizing that there are differences in the competencies needed to perform the varied assignments in an Extension organization, we can still identify common threads through all areas of responsibility. These common competency characteristics will be identified and described and related to the characteristics of a profession.

COMMON THREADS OF COMPETENCIES

Competencies common to all Extension responsibilities relate not just to abilities needed to handle the problems people commonly bring to us. They relate to the desirability of our analyzing problems and needs and subsequently demonstrating ability to apply such competencies to solving problems. It is not enough we have a competence; abilities must be recognized by the people we serve.

Even so, we cannot expect all Extension workers to have all the competencies needed. An organization must be maintained in which individuals have specialized assignments and specialized abilities. We should seek, through organization, to capitalize on the unique combination of competencies that each staff member has. As we seek the flexibility to utilize effectively each individual's unique talents, we avoid pouring our staff into a few rigid, standard molds. It seems only good sense to utilize each person's capabilities and help him further develop these strengths.

Technical Competence

The first thread running through all Extension responsibilities is the need for technical competence. Within the program areas of Extension everyone must be an expert on something—have special insight in some field needed by and important to clientele. Such knowledge should encompass established principles and the latest developments but will vary with assignments: Entomology specialists are expected to have the latest knowledge about insects and their control; a county agent working on the dairy program is expected to have technical knowledge and management knowledge pertinent to decisions a dairy farmer must make; the home management specialist is expected to have the latest research information in home management; the home economics agent is expected to be up to date on a wide range of subjects important to home makers.

It is not only necessary for staff members to have such knowledge, they must be recognized by their clientele as sources of it.

up-to-date, reliable, and useful information. If an agent serves only as a booking agent, a referral office, or chauffeur for the specialist, he commands little respect. Frequently a very important result of demonstration activities and other types of work is the establishment of the worker as an expert in some field.

In connection with this need for technical competency we have a considerable challenge. The rate at which knowledge becomes obsolete and new knowledge is developed is accelerating. In practically all fields, workers must devote additional emphasis to keeping up to date or they will soon find themselves equipped with outdated tools. As a director I found no criticism more devastating than the insinuation that a staff member had lost effectiveness because his technical knowledge was obsolete. I also remember, as an agent immediately after World War II, how inadequate I felt when farmers discussed varieties, equipment, and production practices that had been developed while I was in the service.

Problems of People

There is need for Extension workers in all program areas to identify and analyze the problems of people. As the entomology specialist must be constantly analyzing people's problems in the control of insects, the dairy agent must constantly be identifying and analyzing a range of problems of dairy farmers, the 4-H agent the problems of youth, the home agent the problems of homemakers and families, and so on through a whole roster of assignments.

A first requirement for conducting educational programs concerned with helping people recognize and solve their problems is for the Extension worker himself to identify and understand their problems. Such competence requires workers with powers of observation and insights which make it possible to recognize and analyze problem situations. It requires ability to obtain, select, organize, and interpret information so as to refine understanding of these problems. It requires imagination, ingenuity, and initiative to conceive of potential solutions to such problems and subject these to careful analysis. Such workers need to be able to subject the familiar and conventional, as well as the innovation, to equally scrutinizing analysis.

Management Decisions

But this is not enough. The professional Extension worker must also be able to lead others through the same problem-identification,

problem-solving process and instill in them the same open-minded, scientific approach. I would call this a third thread running through all program areas. This process is essential to working with farmers, homemakers, cooperatives, marketing firms, and others on a wide range of management decisions. The same process is necessary in working on group decisions and public issues—public problems of agriculture, community problems, resource development problems, problems of youth, and so on.

Perhaps most important, ability to lead others through this process is essential to using lay groups effectively in program planning and resource development. Without adequate analysis such groups do not have the opportunity to fully use their judgment in advising Extension. By taking groups through such a process we develop their ability to take leadership roles in individual communities of interest.

A fourth thread common to all Extension responsibilities is knowledge about people and "what makes them tick." By this I mean knowledge about motivation and the process by which people learn and make decisions—how to work with them to get understanding and action. It is not just a matter of having this knowledge, it involves an ability to use it in devising educational strategies. This ability is especially needed by people in administrative positions, particularly in working with staff in the development of Extension programs and in working with various boards and groups supporting Extension work and participating in its administration.

Communications

And through all the program areas goes the need for skill in communications—a fifth thread. We cannot conduct educational work unless we are able to communicate with people. This does not necessarily mean that all of us have to be equally skilled in the use of all the communication media and techniques. But we must have sufficient skill in our particular program areas that we can communicate effectively with those we serve.

Competence in communications, of course, is a particular need of the Extension administrator at any level. He must communicate with many diverse groups, in many directions, on many subjects—including special problems with staff on policies and goals of the organization, with university administration, university faculty, governing bodies, clientele and their organizations, lay leaders, business people, and others. He must communicate the role, goals, needs, and accomplishments of the Service.

Dedication

We can have all these and still have an inadequate professional staff. A sixth and essential thread is a staff of people who can dream and who are dedicated to turning dreams into reality. I am reminded of a county agent who was good in all the previous areas discussed. He had a special assignment in working with one type of agriculture and was convinced that this type of agriculture was destined in his county; he was sure there was no way his producers could compete. Such pessimism was reflected in all he did and was picked up and magnified by the producers.

Fortunately, this agent had an experience that enabled him to see his job from a new perspective. He began to dream. You might say he had a vision of a prosperous and growing industry in his county—of a better world for the people he served. He began looking for ways to make that world become a reality—discussing his ideas, encouraging people to try them, working long hard hours, and enjoying it. He awoke to the fact that you can win a battle only when you believe you can and are willing to proceed with vigor to do what is necessary. He then became a very fine Extension worker.

Such vision, such evangelism, such dedication, such willingness to sacrifice for the people we serve are essential in all program areas. It is especially needed in Rural Areas Development in depressed areas and in work with the disadvantaged because hope—a vision of and a belief in the attainability of a better tomorrow—is frequently lacking among people accustomed to failure. The rebirth of hope is essential to progress and requires the greatest devotion and dedication in the leader who attends that rebirth. An essential companion to this attitude for successful Extension work is a strong and abiding faith—faith in people, their ability to make sound decisions, and their good judgment.

CONCLUSION

What do we mean by a profession or by being professional? We all recognize certain people in our society as professionals—this includes the doctor, the lawyer, the dentist, the minister, the architect. We could list others. Also there are many vocations in which people refer to themselves as professionals. But what do the people we consider professional have in common?

Edward Kieloch, Director of Educational Resources of the U. S.

Civil Service Commission, has said that professionalism involves ". . . mastery of a highly complex body of knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge skillfully and perceptively. This normally means academic preparation or absorption of academic knowledge." This is to me just another way of expressing the need for a high level of technical competency (the first thread identified).

Kieloch also said that ". . . professionalism is the ability for comprehending the relative significance of facts and circumstances and interpreting them to reach intelligent conclusions in areas where fixed routines and standard solutions do not exist. In short, professionalism implies informed judgment and wisdom in making decisions." He went on to say that ". . . the mental characteristics of a professional are marked by tolerance and objectivity: ability to see a problem from many sides—ability to rise above personal prejudices—and an understanding of himself and his environment."

It seems that these points are but a restatement of my second and third "threads"—having to do with problem analysis, testing solutions, and working with people in this process. Kieloch cited as a fourth characteristic of professionalism ". . . the attitude of the man whose pride in the service he renders is psychologically more rewarding to him than the monies he receives for the service. Not that he shuns financial reward, but that this does not become the whole purpose of his work." He then mentioned that ". . . professionalism implies observance of a code of ethical behavior in moral conduct and intellectual integrity."¹ Is he not saying that a professional must be able to dream of a better tomorrow and be dedicated to public service in making his dream a reality?

If these, according to a national authority, are the essentials of professionalism, then these "threads" make up the fabric of professionalism in Extension. To be truly professional, to be truly cut from professional cloth, each of us must have in his being each of the threads. Professional Extension workers, made of this fabric, enjoy the highest status in their communities and in our organization. Theirs is a service not only socially acceptable but much sought. Such status is a result of real professional competence and high level professional performance.

The search for competence, as seen from the point of view of this definition of professionalism, is an essential aspect of Extension as a profession. Without competence in technical knowledge, in analyzing problems, in conducting educational work, we have little claim to being a profession—or to public support.

¹ From an address by Edward Kieloch to the annual conference of the Federal Extension Service, Washington, D.C., January 9, 1963.