

attitude change: your challenge

Gene C. Whaples

Einar R. Ryden

Extension professionals have long prided themselves on their ability to change the knowledge and skills of their clients. Many questions have been asked about the possibility of changing attitudes. Few argue about the importance of attitude change in increasing the speed and amount of knowledge and skills changes in the learner.

This article reviews the literature on attitude change, pulls together some basic principles, and offers some techniques that have been used successfully to promote attitude change in Extension education.

Overview

An attitude is a pattern of behavior that has been learned. It causes a person to react in a particular way toward ideas, objects, or other people. "That attitudes are forged out of previous experience is perhaps the least controversial issue in America" ¹

An attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs about an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner." ² "Attitude change would then be a change in predisposition." ³ An attitude can be focused toward an object or situation.

One way a person acquires an attitude is by direct contact with the object of the attitude and interaction with others holding the attitude. Attitudes tend to develop gradually, unconsciously, and incidentally. They spread from one situation to similar situations. Many of our attitudes are acquired through imitation of those we admire. They're also formulated through deliberate cultivation by teachers and parents.

Although an attitude can't physically be given, arranging for someone to experience a satisfying, worthwhile activity can help develop desirable attitudes. Attitude development is

Gene C. Whaples: Assistant Professor and Program Leader, 4-H and Youth, University of Maryland, College Park. *Einar R. Ryden:* Professor, Extension and Continuing Education, University of Maryland, College Park.

important because “among the various tendencies and predispositions which are acquired and modified by learning, none is more important to individual and social welfare than attitudes and ideals.”⁴

Attitude Change Procedures

The basic procedures for changing attitudes include three elements: (1) the subject—the person whose attitude is to be changed, (2) the message—information being presented or delivered that’s designed to effect an attitude change, and (3) the communicator—the person or instrument used to present the message to the subject.

The Subject

Involvement. One effective way to change attitudes is direct contact. This concept has been supported by many studies. One study about a summer camp program in Israel revealed that Jews from the United States and Canada who had a high level of contact with Jews from Israel developed more favorable attitudes toward Israel than did those who had a low level of contact.⁵ Another study showed that positive attitudes of foreign students living in the United States were fostered when the students had contact with American families.⁶ These studies support several methods Extension uses, such as demonstration plots and camps. Giving clientele the opportunity to be a part of program planning also supports this concept. It isn’t always necessary to be involved. There are ways other than involvement that can reinforce attitudes.

Preparation. The time just before a planned experience can be used effectively to prepare a person for attitude change.⁷ Understanding potential audiences and their needs will help Extension make better use of this time.

Coercion. Studies show that when a person has to do something counterattitudinal, the less coercion used the greater the attitude change if the act is carried out.⁸ Extension professionals who can accomplish this change through suggestions and encouragement will probably have more success than those who resort to demands and pressure.

The Message

Stating the Conclusion. This approach proved more effective in changing the opinions of the less educated members of an audience.⁹ More than twice as many listeners changed their opinions in the direction advocated when the conclusion was drawn than when it was left to the audience to decide for themselves.¹⁰ The need for the communicator to know his subjects is underlined when this principle for attitude change is considered.

Presenting Both Sides. When the audience was going to be hearing the opposition’s arguments, a communicator who

advocated a definite position on a controversial issue was more effective if he presented and discussed both sides of the issue.¹¹ Regardless of the original position, a program that presented both sides was more effective with the better educated. Presenting only one side was more effective with the less educated.¹² The need to know your subjects and design your approach is again supported.

Reinforcement. Studies show that information or opinions that are supported almost immediately with favorable arguments are more valuable than information reinforced after a long delay.¹³ Reinforcement can be used to encourage attitude and behavior change.

Indirect. An interesting approach to attitude change is the indirect message. For instance, if the influence attempt is made indirectly, it's more likely to succeed than if it's done directly.¹⁴ In this same vein, an accidentally overheard message is more likely to influence a subject than if he knows the message was intended for him.¹⁵ Designing situations using these concepts should be a challenge to Extension. This concept could be used to deliver effective messages to legislators or others who control Extension funds. Think about the planned, indirect ways messages can be presented to change attitudes.

The Communicator

Credibility. Communicator credibility, which can be defined as the effect of the speaker's image in the minds of the subjects before the message is delivered, affects change in specific attitudes.¹⁶ A high credibility speaker produces more attitude change than a neutral credibility speaker. He'll also produce a greater immediate reaction. This places the Extension professional in a powerful and influential position. The recognition and prestige of the Extension position provides a platform from which to influence others.

Liked. "An influence attempt from a liked person will be more effective than one from a disliked person."¹⁷ Careful selection of the communicator is a key to changing attitudes. An example might be using "acceptable people" when giving reports to county commissioners and legislative bodies.

Divergent Position. If a highly credible situation exists, there'll be greater change if the positions on an issue are further apart to begin with.¹⁸ One of Extension's problems in using this divergent position principle is that we don't have enough information about individual attitude positions. If we did have this information, Extension could take a more divergent position to get clientele attitude change.

Effecting Attitude Change

Many methods of attitude change have been used successfully and might offer some promise of effective ways for Extension to change attitudes. Not all methods will work in all situations. We in Extension must select the method and apply the principles of attitude change that best suit the subject, the communicator, and the message.

One-to-One Contact

Successful attitude change has been demonstrated in camping situations.¹⁹ Here, there's an opportunity to develop one-to-one encounters as well as group interactions. Extension has used this method for years. It has proved a viable method with disadvantaged as well as affluent audiences.

The Group

In a study of group counseling on attitudes, one group in which students and their parents participated in discussions of college planning showed greater parent-child empathy.²⁰ It also had less anxiety about self before and after entering college than the control group.

The group as a method for changing attitudes must be carefully studied and used. Keep in mind the many unknowns of each member of the group. Rap sessions for parents and youth at 4-H type retreats is one way to use this idea.

Role Playing

When this method was used, a person who actively played a role as a sincere advocate of a point tended to shift in the direction of the role that he played.²¹ In role playing, the leader of the group is most important. His ability to help interpret what has happened is the key to successful role playing.

Debating

Scott says that one way to change attitudes is to ask the client to debate a position opposite one he believes in and then declare the client the winner.²²

True, this is clearly stacking the deck. But . . . it does change attitudes!

Videotape

Certain attitudes may be more effectively influenced by helping a person gain insight into himself rather than insight into the problem. Videotape has proven to be an effective device for subjects to see their own activity. It has been used successfully in marriage counseling.²³ With skillful handling, this tool can be used in working with small groups of both teens and adults in interpreting behavior.

Art Education

The effect of art education on improving attitudes and cultural awareness of disadvantaged youth has been studied. Children from economically and socially deprived environments benefited from art education with an attitudinal change in a positive direction.²⁴ This may be important to

Extension's effort to improve the self-concept of low-income groups. This same principle may apply to attitudes toward food and diet.

Extension's challenge is more than understanding attitudes and the methods and techniques used to change them. It must look at its goals and objectives and take steps to change attitudes of both its personnel and clientele.

Conclusion

Extension can't escape the responsibility of developing attitudes. It must understand the nature of attitudes and the process of developing and changing them.

This review of principles and methods of attitudinal change isn't all-inclusive. When using any method, the communicator must remember the basic principles of attitude change. Attitude change isn't based on information alone, but, more significantly, on the degree and nature of ego involvement.

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"Attitudes cannot be legislated. Attitudes, in fact, do affect behavior to some degree. Extension must face the challenge that, as change agents, they not only change technological behavior but can and do change the attitudes of others."²⁵

Footnotes

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