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Practical Application of Aspiration as an Outcome Indicator in Extension Evaluation

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Abstract: Extension educators need simple and accurate evaluation tools for program evaluation. This article explains how to use aspiration as an outcome indicator in Extension evaluation and introduces a practical evaluation tool. Aspiration can be described as the readiness for change. By recording participants' levels of aspiration, we will be able to determine whether the program is effective in achieving desired results. This aspiration-recording tool is easy to use in terms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Evaluation data collected from this tool can be used to document accountability and make decisions for program modifications.

Introduction

With the increased demand for limited resources, Extension stakeholders are asking for more accountability. Parallel to this demand for accountability, there is a significant attention on Extension program evaluation. Increased attention on evaluation has been well documented in Extension literature (O'Neill & Richardson, 1999; Stup, 2003). Extension educators need practical, easy-to-use, and reliable tools for program evaluation. This article explains how to use aspiration as a practical indicator for Extension program evaluation.

Extension outcome can be defined as the extent to which participants changed or benefited as a result of their participation in the program. Outcome evaluation aims to document these changes. When people participate in an Extension program, if the program is effective, then participants will gain new knowledge, change their attitudes, build new skills, and aspire to take charge of the learned practices. Bennett (1975) termed this stage as KASA (Knowledge, Attitude, Skills and Aspiration) change in his hierarchical model.

Aspiration can be described as the heightened level of internal motivation of an individual for taking charge of a behavior or practice with full comprehension of its content, value, and application for achieving desired benefits. Level of aspiration reflects one's intention to change. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) described intentions as predictors of behaviors. Aspiring of an individual can be considered as the beginning of the change process leading to subsequent behaviors or practices of an individual.

If any program is effective, participants will leave the Extension session as aspired individuals for taking charge of learned practices or behaviors. If any participant leaves as an aspired individual, he or she can be considered as a potential candidate for behavior or practice change. That doesn't mean every aspired

individual will certainly change his or her behavior or practice, because actual changes depend on various social economic and environmental factors.

However, if any participant is not aspired by the end of an Extension program, then he or she is less likely to change as a result of that training because that individual has not been fully convinced to change. If any participant is aspired and the social economic and environmental conditions are favorable for the planned change, then there will be a great chance for actual change. Therefore, aspiration can be considered as a significant indicator in determining the direction of Extension participants' potential behavior or practice change.

How to Determine the Levels of Aspiration?

One's level of aspiration is related to the extent that individual intends to apply what he or she learned. "The strength of an intention is indicated by the person's subjective probability that he will perform the behavior in question" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, p.12). If the participants are asked whether they intend to practice what they learned and record their potential answers then, we will be able to determine their levels of aspirations. The potential answers to this question are no, maybe, yes, and I'm already doing.

For example, if we are evaluating a nutrition education program and teaching participants how to eat healthy by reducing their fat intake, eating recommended servings, and eating whole grain foods, we will be able to record participants' levels of aspiration toward the planned behavior changes using the question and answer format displayed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Aspiration Recording Scale Example for Nutrition Education
Please circle the number that best describes your answer.

As a Result of This Program, Do You Intend to:	No	Maybe	Yes	Already Doing This
1. Eat recommended servings from five food groups?	1	2	3	4
2. Consume reduced or non-fat milk and dairy products	1	2	3	4
3. Eat baked or grilled food rather than fried food?	1	2	3	4
4. Eat whole grain bread and cereals?	1	2	3	4

These aspiration questions should be selected from the core behavior changes targeted by the Extension program. For instance, if the program is planning to promote integrate pest management (IPM) among producers, then it is important to include key practice changes such as application of biological control measures and minimizing chemical control measures needed to promote IPM. By selecting appropriate questions for the program, this scale can be used to evaluate participants' levels of aspiration for any Extension program.

Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

This scale can be included at the end of a post evaluation instrument for assessing the levels of participants' aspirations. Participants will be asked to circle their choice for each of the behavior or practice change.

If the participant is not convinced at all, his or her answer choice will be "no" to the potential behavior or practice. If the participant is partially convinced about the behavior, he or she will select the answer choice "maybe." If the participant is fully convinced about the potential behavior, he or she will answer "yes" to the question. If the participant is already practicing the behavior, then he or she will answer "already doing this."

Aspiration data collected on this scale can be analyzed by using descriptive statistics such as percentages. For example, data can be summarized as percentage of the participants who said no, maybe, yes or already doing this. If you have 50 participants in your program and 45 of them (90%) said "yes" to the planned change, that means your program can be considered successful in terms of convincing the target participants. This information is useful for accountability purpose of evaluation.

If the majority of the participants, for example 80%, said "no" to the potential behaviors, then it indicates that your audience has not been convinced and the training was not effective for this audience in the current form of instruction. If you want to achieve desired results, you have to change your program. If the majority of the participants said "maybe" to the potential behaviors, then it can be concluded that the program was partially effective. For achieving desired results, the program should be modified.

If the majority of the participants said that they are "already doing this," it means that you have targeted the wrong audience and wasted your time as well as their time. You have to retarget the program for the correct audience. If you want to reach the same audience, you have to revise program objectives and contents. This way aspiration data can be used for improving program effectiveness.

Practical Significance the Tool

This tool can be used for recording aspiration levels of any Extension participants. Since this aspiration-recording tool is so simple, it is user-friendly and can be used with low-literate audiences as well. User-friendly evaluation tools contribute to increases response rate (Swackhamer & Kiernan, 2005). Analysis of data is simple and does not demand sophisticated statistical procedures. Findings can be used to document outcomes and making decisions for program modifications.

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