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## **Change, Who... Me?**

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**Abstract:** As we approach our 100th birthday in 2014 as a National Cooperative Extension Service, we would like to spark discourse around our collective identity as agents of change. We present an argument in the spirit of promoting a self-reflective debate to move our organization—and ourselves—forward. As all agents of change know, awareness is one of the first steps in the change process (Rogers, 1963).

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In this Commentary, the authors use "we" to refer to the corpus of the Cooperative Extension Service. It, as an organic organization, is a manifestation of the people who make up its ranks. We are Extension.

### **Introduction**

It can be argued that our primary mission as a Cooperative Extension Service is to provide educational programming that will empower clients to change aspects of their practices, attitudes, behaviors, and lives (CSREES, 2009). Dictionary.com offers the following primary definition for change: "to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of something different from what it is or from what it would be if left alone; to change one's name; to change one's opinion; to change the course of history" (change, n.d.).

Our business is that of the change agent; indeed the very foundations of our work are predicated on the assumption that change is what we are all about (Rogers, 1963). We are an organization focused on the external contexts and environments in which we carry out our change agent work. Much change does occur because of our efforts. We do not deny this reality or take issue with it. Indeed it is the primary reason that we continue to exist to fulfill our change agent functions nearly a century after our official beginnings.

### **Contradictory Change**

What we do want to call attention to, however, is the seeming contradiction that exists between our external focus and change successes and our internal struggles with the very thing we help millions do every year.

Change is simultaneously something that *is* (as in a noun—a person, place, or thing), something *to do* (as in a verb—an action we can perform), or something that has already *been done*.

We wonder if "*been there; done that*" gets in the way of really *doing it*. As Epictetus, the Greek philosopher speculated: "It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows." We know change; therefore we find it immensely difficult to learn how to do it ourselves. To continue the Greek metaphor, perhaps organizational change is Extension's Achilles Heel.

Going back to Dictionary.com, we also find the following definition for change: "to substitute another or others for; exchange for something else, *usually of the same kind*" [emphasis added] (change, n.d.). This latter definition is thought provoking. Over the course of our organizational history, how often have we changed, but only insofar as exchanging one thing for what might essentially be viewed as non-changing substitutions?

## Looking Back

We base our case on the academic discourses presented in this very journal since its inception nearly 50 years ago. We reached back through the *JOE* archives to search for articles that addressed some aspect of change. As you can imagine, there are literally hundreds and hundreds of articles that focus on change; we are, after all, an organization dedicated to it.

However, rather than finding a progression of discourse that informs and drives the profession forward, we find themes of a recurring refrain that seem to follow the issue-attention cycle (Downs, 1972). In the issue-attention cycle, certain kinds of issues, termed "latent issues," will come and go in salience and importance, dependent upon some triggering event to bring them back into consciousness, but other competing interests and/or events push them aside before they are adequately resolved (Downs, 1972).

## Unresolved Issues?

The example list of issues and representative articles below seems to document the presence of latent issues that revolve around change for the Cooperative Extension Service. They capture our attention but are never fully resolved before they are substituted with something else; otherwise we would not continue to present them as "issues to be solved," but could move to "how do we advance in these areas?"

- The benefits and tribulations of local vs. area staffing models (e.g., Brain, Irani, Hodges, & Fuhrman, 2009; Harriman & Daugherty, 1992; Warner, Young, & Cunningham 1975; Woeste, 1969)
- Our integration into the larger university community (e.g., Blewett, Keim, Leser, & Jones, 2008; Meier, 1989; Vines, Watts, & Parks, 1963)
- Program evaluation rigor (e.g., Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009; Thomson, 1983; Alexander, 1965)
- "Urbanizing" Extension (e.g., Webster & Ingram, 2007; Panshin, 1992; Yep, 1981; Brown, 1965)
- "Urbanizing" 4-H (e.g., Skuza, 2004; Boyle & Brown, 1964)

## Moving Forward

Perhaps it is time that we stop the issue-attention cycle and focus on implementing the changes needed to adequately deal with these issues and bring resolution to them. Furthermore, it may be time for us to truly examine and question ourselves on Kotter's (1995) most common errors of leaders who aspire to create change within organizations. The eight common errors identified by Kotter are:

1. Allowing too much complacency;
2. Failing to create a power coalition;
3. Misunderstanding the power of vision;
4. Under communicating the vision;
5. Permitting obstacles to block the new vision;
6. Failing to create short-term wins;
7. Declaring victory too soon; and
8. Neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the organizational culture.

Again, we are change agents in communities across the United States and teach the concepts of change, but are our own individual and organizational change accomplishments effective enough to create our own future? What foundation are we creating for the next 100 years? As Barack Obama frequently says, "We are the change that we seek."

## Change, Who . . . Me?

Throughout this Commentary, the authors have assumed a collective focus—a "we" perspective. But, what if "we" is really "me"? Am *I* the change I seek? Does my knowing "it" get in the way of my "doing it"? A first person view changes the perspective. "*I am*" does not afford the same degree of emotional distance and shared responsibility as "*we are*." We can hide in the safety of the group. *I* stands out, is self-reflective, is responsible for. Such an individual level perspective shifts the focus—when *I* change, the organization changes, rather than the other way around. We are the organization. If we need to change, then it has to start with *me*. Am I the change I seek?

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