

## Tools for Addressing the Skills of a Communication-Challenged Extension Agent

### Abstract

In Extension, communication challenges often become more palpable during periods of workload shift when initiatives are started. As an Extension agent and a supervisor who found ourselves in this situation, we took steps to improve communication among members of the program team by adopting four strategies: fostering a supportive environment, defining and communicating expectations, using effective communication planning tools, and maintaining program momentum and work output through supervisor and supervisee best practices. Implementing these strategies positively affected team satisfaction and work output. Other Extension professionals in the midst of "breakdowns in communication" also may find the strategies we describe useful.

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## Introduction

Extension professionals strive to achieve excellence and organization while keeping everyone in the know, yet at some point we all hear "there has been a breakdown in communication." In a world of global accessibility and digital infiltration, we struggle to communicate with diverse audiences in manners considered most effective. As we navigate competing interests vying for our time and attention, we are stretched to balance community/client needs and professional skills amid workload shift created as new programs are launched. This situation is exacerbated when Extension professionals struggle to maintain effective communication with program teams and supervisors.

After receiving a grant to implement a multiyear program, we soon realized that there was a communication breakdown between the Extension professional and the program implementation team. The Extension professional, in this case, is the "communication-challenged Extension agent." So as the Extension professional and supervisor, we took steps to address communication challenges by adopting four strategies:

- Foster a supportive environment.
- Define and communicate expectations.

- Use effective communication planning tools.
- Maintain program momentum and work output through supervisor and supervisee best practices.

## Four-Pronged Approach

### Foster a Supportive Environment

We found a starting point in the research conducted by Golnaz and Hoa (2002), who advocated for establishing a supportive environment in the workplace as a means of meeting the needs of a diverse workplace. Moreover, they recommend two strategies for accomplishing better supervisor-subordinate communication: managing personal growth and mentoring. Still, supervisor-prompted change can be hard for employees who work as autonomously as Extension agents unless they feel supported and not criticized. This is affirmed by the 1997 study by Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg, which showed a direct connection between performance in high-quality jobs and fostering of supportive workplaces. They went on to conclude that creating a highly supportive workplace is a challenge that is worth the effort (Bond et al., 1997).

Questioning someone's ability to do his or her job while simultaneously acknowledging the person's value as an employee requires a delicate balance. We adopted three practices in an attempt to foster a supportive environment:

- *Remove criticism when mentoring.* Intentionally use positive, value-added language in lieu of criticism that could lead subordinates to comply through risk avoidance.
- *Use a mentor approach.* Give positive feedback consistently, not just when using the "sandwich approach" (Lynch & McCurley, 1996). With our project, the supervisor engaged in the group to assess the best methods of addressing communication, focusing on observations and avoiding inferences.
- *Do not dump and ditch.* Follow-through on constructive criticism is a part of the supportive solution. Avoid feedback overload, and filter commentary.

### Define and Communicate Expectations

Our team was being affected by unknown, unrealized, and incongruent individual expectations, which led to frustration and confusion as we attempted to plan. In his 1994 work "Communication Needs in Extension," Weigel stated, "Knowing the organizational communication needs of Extension staff can be useful in enhancing an effective and dynamic organization" ("Implications," para. 1). So we defined our organizational communication needs with reference to timing, roles, and individual differences:

- *Timing expectations.* Team members should be cognizant of meeting logistics. How often and how long are meetings, updates, and question-answering sessions? What is the agenda for a particular meeting, and what should team members bring? Putting firm numbers to such questions provides predictability.
- *Role expectations.* Team members should know their communication responsibilities. Who takes minutes, posts reminders, and communicates with participants? A communication plan helps define individual expectations.

- *Individual expectations.* Team members should recognize one another's communication expectations. Then they can identify where communication friction may naturally occur. Understanding individual expectations allows team members to meet one another's needs.

## Use Effective Communication Planning Tools

Improving communication involves more than establishing and operating within a supportive environment and setting expectations. Researching and using readily available tools saves time and still serves communication needs. We found value in using the following tools:

- *Communication plan.* We used a communication plan from the Project Management Docs website (<http://www.projectmanagementdocs.com/#axzz4uq0ayK4E>) that fit our needs. It helped define communication details such as roles, method, frequency, duration, deliverables, and audience.
- *Uniform meeting format.* We used the same format for all meetings so that they were predictable relative to sequence and topics. This approach ensured that no one giving an update was caught off guard.
- *Recurring meetings.* Prearranged, recurring meeting schedules ensured team member attendance and reduced schedule conflicts.
- *Expectation checks.* We conducted frequent reassessments to determine whether expectations were being met. This established a culture of open sharing.
- *Better, not more, communication.* No one wants duplicate communication. We set our communication priorities as a group, and occasionally a "no update" status report was all that was needed.

## Maintain Program Momentum and Work Output Through Supervisor and Supervisee Best Practices

Maintaining program momentum while adopting communication skills was imperative for success. The supervisor was able to observe the communication strengths and weaknesses of the Extension agent firsthand and provide feedback on an ongoing basis by attending meetings. As a result of our experience, we were able to identify practices that both the supervisor and the supervisee could implement to ensure forward motion of the program.

### ***Recommendations for the Supervisor***

- Be a bystander, not a hijacker. Allow your staff to lead meetings without your input. Provide coaching before and after meetings.
- Some things should go without saying, so let them go . . . without saying something. Differentiate between personal style and actual problems.

### ***Recommendations for the Supervisee***

- Be open to hearing feedback; your supervisor is supporting your work.
- Keep pushing forward. Professional development is a process, and implementation of new ideas is a matter of practice. Improve, but expect to have setbacks as you go.

## Conclusion

To effectively address the communication gaps we experienced between Extension agent and department chair, we adopted research-based strategies to effect change. These strategies included

- fostering a supportive environment,
- defining and communicating expectations,
- using effective communication planning tools, and
- maintaining program momentum and work output through supervisor and supervisee best practices.

Implementing these strategies positively affected team satisfaction and work output. If you find yourself in the midst of a "breakdown in communication," consider using these strategies to benefit your team.

## References

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