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Climate for Change in Extension

Different perspectives make a difference.

Rose Marie Tondl

The 1990s are ushering in major changes for Cooperative Extension as National Initiatives become the foundation for program planning, replacing some of the traditional discipline-based programs. As new ideas for program operations are introduced, a natural consequence is human resistance to change.

Throughout the system, we're being forced to cope with fundamental changes in the way we do business. The possibility of upsetting the balance of power exists. Individuals will take action based on their perception of how changes will affect their relative power position in the organization.¹ New knowledge, varying economic conditions, pressures of competition, evolution of new cultural values and perspectives, and a paradigm shift from disciplinary programming to issues programming have had a great impact on Extension. Internal changes—structural reorganization and/or personnel relations—have created pressures on Extension staff. Understanding how agents, administrators, and county board members respond in a time of change is vital to the organization and its continued functioning in the future.

Climate for Change Study

Over the past few years, the Nebraska Cooperative Extension has coped with two major changes. First was a move from single county programming to multicounty program units. This meant Extension educators (and in

some cases, county board members) were expected to work across county lines rather than confine themselves to one county. Secondly, the nationwide move from disciplinary to issues-based educational programming necessitated a change in the basic program planning process with an increase in the need for teamwork or interdisciplinary programming by both agents and county board members.

As this shift in the organization occurred, a "Climate for Change" survey tested the perceptions of 163 agents, 12 administrators, and 300 randomly selected county board members on four change dimensions: need for, openness to, potential for, and participation in change. County board members, elected members from their local community, are responsible for directing the educational programs in agriculture and home economics in the county. Of the 475 selected individuals, 84% recorded their agreement/disagreement on 63 statements. A five-point Likert scale recorded both positive and negative reactions to test the four dimensions of change (Table 1).

Findings

Administrators were more positive on all four dimensions of change (need, openness, potential, and participation) than were the agents or the board members. Agents were more positive than were the board members (Table 2). Non-chair agents were more positive

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Table 1. Sample questions from the "Climate for Change" instrument.

Dimension change	Sample questions
Need	1. Changes in Extension must be made if it is going to be an effective organization. 2. Changes in Extension's organization will make little difference in improving program effectiveness.
Openness	1. I am comfortable in defending the need for issues-based programming. 2. I find it difficult to support issues-based programming in Extension.
Potential	1. The changes taking place in Extension will provide better opportunities for me to learn and grow. 2. It is difficult to commit oneself to the organizational changes occurring in Extension.
Participation	1. My involvement in teamwork is necessary to move toward issues-based programming. 2. I am actively participating in the changes occurring in Extension.

about the need for change, openness to change, and potential for change than were the agent chairs (Table 2). Male agents perceived the need for change and openness to change negatively, while female agents perceived these dimensions positively. Although both were positive about participating in change, the female agents were more positive than were the male agents (Table 2).

No differences were found on the following variables: (1) full-time vs part-time agents, (2) number of years agents had been on staff, (3) years volunteers had been on the Extension board, (4) size of the community in which board members lived, and (5) locale (farm, rural nonfarm, city/town) in which board members lived.

Findings Applied to Extension

A positive attitude toward the four dimensions of change among Extension employees correlated with less resistance to organizational change. A positive response toward the four dimensions allows change to occur more easily. Watson emphasized that resistance will be less if individuals feel the change is their own, their autonomy

and security aren't threatened, current workloads aren't increased, and there's active participation in the change process.²

Administrators were the most positive about changes occurring in Extension as it moves into issues-based programs and multicounty program units (Table 2). Yet, administrators may be less affected by these changes since they represent the leadership initiating change. Although agents accepted and felt positive about change, they didn't perceive these changes as positively as the administrators.

The board members were more negative toward the changes being made in the organization. The fear of losing county control and moving to multicounty program units may have lessened their sense of power and authority. As agents work in more than one county, board members may view this change as being directed top down from administrators. Therefore, it's imperative agents communicate openly with county board members to help them understand and accept the changes. At this "letting-go" period in the change process, administrators need to: (1) provide support to ensure the security of

Table 2. Differences among groups on the four change dimensions.

Groups	Change dimensions			
	Need	Openness	Potential	Participation
Staff position:				
Administrators	++	++	++	++
Agents	+	+	+	+
Board members	-	-	-	-
Agent's role:				
Chair	+	-	+	
Non-chair	++	+	++	
Sex:				
Female	+	+		++
Male	-	-		+
p.<.05				
+ = positive				
- = negative				

agents' positions, (2) help agents and county board members adjust to the new reality, and (3) assume responsibility for the future.

Female agents were more positive toward the need for change, more open to change, and more committed to participating in change than male agents. The fact that female agents were more receptive to change may be attributed to the fact that home economics agents have worked across county lines since the early '60s. Thus, the change to multicounty program units may not represent the threat it does for male agents who have worked in only one county. Administrators need to reward female agents who have a positive attitude toward the change process by encouraging their leadership during the change process in the organization.

Non-chair agents were more open to change and more willing to deal with change than were the agent chairs. Agent chairs may have perceived a loss of autonomy, changes in the security of their position, and a threat to their power in the county. However, this finding might also be gender related because agent chairs were predominately male.

Summary

Whenever an organization undergoes change, administrators must be aware of how change might affect the staff's job satisfaction.

It's important that county board members be involved with this change process. Since they were the most resistant to change, administrators and agents must communicate more openly with them about the change process.

Extension sends a message when it resists or accepts change, either actively or passively. The organization reveals itself: its internal norms, values, its attitude toward change, the workload of its personnel, and limitations such as financial resources. As Extension moves into the 21st century, all groups involved need a sense of stability so they're able to cope and move in a positive, productive direction.

Footnotes

1. David A. Nadler, "Managing Organizational Change: An Integrative Perspective," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, XVII (April/May/June 1981), 191-211.
2. Goodwin Watson, "Resistance to Change," *American Behavioral Scientist*, XIV (May/June 1971), 745-65.