

## Administrative Communication

If administration is to be effective, the administrator must be a successful communicator

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*Many county Extension chairmen are administrators not by choice or training. Consequently, minimal time is likely to be devoted to administrative responsibilities. Many such responsibilities involve creating, maintaining, and servicing effective channels of communication—within and without the staff. At least five areas of communication can be and are defined. Such communications can take place in a number of situations. However, roadblocks to communications exist and should be recognized.*

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION is a necessary part of county Extension administration. We might even go so far as to say that if administration is to be successful, the administrator must be an efficient communicator. All administrators have important communicator roles—and each staff member can make an important contribution to effective communications among members of the county team.

In support of this thesis, Mees says, "Regardless of the type of leadership involved, effective administration will hinge in many respects on the adequacy of communications. Much attention has been devoted to this subject in Extension in recent years—but mostly in terms of communicating with clientele. In order to upgrade organizational effectiveness of Extension, communication must be considered significant as a component of the administrative process."<sup>1</sup>

What is to be communicated? There seems to be general agree-

<sup>1</sup> Carl F. Mees, "County Chairman Position," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, Summer, 1963), 87.

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ment about three areas important to successful communications in any organization: (1) a classification of the organizational structure; (2) the nature of the activity in which the individual concerned is participating; and (3) day-to-day guidance of the worker by criticizing unacceptable work or by rewarding work well done (by oral or written commendation).

At least five areas of communication involving the chairman and members of a county staff can be defined:

1. *Information that comes down from the top* must be conveyed to appropriate members of the staff. The administrative line in Extension is from the top administration and district supervisors to county chairmen. Much administrative material is handled by mail, and much correspondence from specialists aimed at other agents or all county workers is sent to the chairman. A North Carolina study found that during the month of September, 1962, each of four chairmen received an average of 81 pieces of mail from other members of the Extension organization.<sup>2</sup>
2. *Information that comes in from commercial concerns, other government agencies, etc.*, where there is only one mailing per county, must be communicated by the chairman to other members of the staff. The study mentioned above revealed that for the month investigated, each chairman received an average of 213 pieces of mail from these sources.
3. *Ideas originating with the chairman* and his thoughts on various activities must be conveyed to appropriate members of the staff.
4. There must be a *reverse flow or "feedback"* from all staff members to the chairman. In this capacity the chairman also serves as the channel whereby an agent can communicate his ideas to the administration. (However, this does not imply that an agent has no access to any member of the Extension administration except the county chairman.)
5. The chairman has the administrative function of seeing that there is good *communication between members* of his staff. On a number of projects, two or more agents team up to carry them out. The chairman has the responsibility to see that they work together as an effective team.

#### FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNICATING

Communication between chairman and staff can take place wherever the chairman and any member of his staff happen to get

<sup>2</sup> William L. Carpenter *et al.*, "Mail Survey Committee Report," North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service (October, 1963), p. 5.

together. In all situations, the communication can be initiated by the chairman or any member of his staff. However, most communication situations can be grouped under the following four headings:

First, *regularly scheduled staff conferences*, appear to be superior to all other formally-structured communications situations in county Extension work. Many chairmen report a regularly scheduled, high priority, Monday morning staff conference.

Mees says that perhaps the best way to assure good communications is through staff conferences. The smaller the staff, the more informal the conference can be. He recommends regularly scheduled conferences if the staff numbers five or more, and that such conferences be devoted to program problems and their solutions, promotion of ongoing program, changes in program effort, exploration of new program areas, or activities of the staff.<sup>3</sup>

Knaus says the Monday morning staff conference has become routine in many county Extension offices and, if properly conducted, is the best means known to bring about full understanding of the total county Extension program by all personnel. "Such a conference provides opportunity for correlating and harmonizing the respective activities of the several agents. It provides a desirable opportunity for clearing and explaining duties and responsibilities, of planning future work, of getting a better understanding and distribution of the work load of each member of the staff."<sup>4</sup>

Dobbs<sup>5</sup> also believes that the best way to reach decisions and gain understanding in a county unit is through weekly office conferences. He says that to bring full understanding of the over-all county program by all personnel, regular staff sessions are essential and that such meetings eliminate the need for some of the "little" conferences during the week.

Second, *specially called meetings or conferences* must occasionally be used, but discussions with North Carolina chairmen indicate there is seldom a need for called meetings of the full staff if regular weekly conferences are held. Most often, such meetings are called when a supervisor, specialist, or commercial representative is in the county and several members of the staff are concerned.

Third, *written memoranda or letters* are used considerably less in counties than they are at the state level. Chairmen do say, however, that they often circulate written materials they have received,

<sup>3</sup>Mees, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup>Karl Knaus, *System in the County Extension Office*, Agricultural Information Bulletin No. 28 (Washington: USDA, March, 1951), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Marvin C. Dobbs, "What Makes An Efficient Office?" *Extension Service Review*, XXXI (April, 1960), 61.

sometimes with a notation appended. This procedure seems to be in line with one recommendation for good administration: Ferguson has recommended a flexible system by which the executive follows an open door policy and makes appropriate use of conferences—on preference to the rigid system in which the administrator depends on memos, directives, and formal statements.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, *personal conferences* take place at such a variety of times and places that it is impossible to establish a frequency or amount of time spent in this activity. In counties where internal communications are good, chairmen feel they can approach staff members at any time and agents do not indicate a reluctance to approach the chairman, even for discussing personal problems.

In the opinion of some chairmen, communication often is most successful in the office of the supervised, away from the desk of the supervisor.

Third parties also enter into the county communications system. For example, a good secretary can be particularly helpful as a messenger, distributing materials addressed to the chairman but of primary interest to some other member of the staff, keeping notes on pertinent activities, adding items to the weekly conference agenda, and, perhaps in some cases, speaking for the chairman.

#### SOME PROBLEMS

Assuming that a county Extension chairman possesses all the abilities of a good administrator, including the communication skills, there are still several roadblocks to good communications. Here are some of them:

1. Office location: In many counties, agents are housed at different locations or on different floors of the same building. This lessens day-to-day contact and increases communications problems among members of the same staff.
2. Time for communications: All chairmen have subject-matter responsibilities and, in some counties, responsibilities for several areas. Thus, administration (including internal communications) must compete with these responsibilities for the chairman's time. The communications phase of administration may lose priority requests for attention from clientele groups and individuals may be considered more important.
3. Efficient use of time: Few good methods, if any, have been developed to measure the effectiveness of time spent in internal

<sup>6</sup> C. M. Ferguson, "The Human Side of Administration," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Spring, 1964), 25.

communications in Extension groups. It is possible to become victimized by rigid schedules for staff conferences; too much time, as well as not enough, can be devoted to them. They should be held when the time can be profitably spent but only for the time required to adequately cover the important topics. There is no reason to hold a conference just because it is on the schedule.

4. Physical facilities: Good staff conferences require a location away from the telephone and other interruptions. Such facilities are not available in many counties. Also, where more than one person occupies a single office, frank communication is hindered.
5. Secretarial situation: County secretaries have sometimes been labeled as the forgotten group in the Extension Service. In some states, as county employees, their wages are pegged to local situations and the salary scale is not sufficient to hire the administrative assistant type that can contribute to administrative communications.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Many county Extension chairmen are administrators not by choice. They find the administrative details of their position a chore rather than something to look to with delight. They would rather be out on the farm talking with their clients. In such a situation only the minimum amount of time is likely to be assigned to the administrative part of the job. There is danger that not enough time is built into the daily schedule for effective communication—a necessary part of county Extension administration.

The county chairman is responsible for insuring good internal communications among the members of his staff. But all members of the team have a responsibility in this area—to the chairman and to each other. As the pace quickens, as new areas of responsibility are accepted, and as the physical tools for communicating become more sophisticated, the importance of communications in carrying out an effective Extension program will increase.

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TO BE A GOOD WRITER a person must spend much of his time at a table in the toilsome act of writing. You cannot develop a word sense haphazardly any more than you can pick up by casual or chance acquaintance the facts in physics and chemistry and mathematics needed in today's manufacturing.

—*The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter* (July, 1964).