

the extension agent's job: critical behaviors

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The Extension agent's audience has greatly expanded to include increasing numbers of urban and suburban clientele. Ever-changing conditions mean the agent has to evaluate and revise educational programs and methods to meet effectively the needs of varied clients. The course of study for agents must be designed to help them function effectively as professionals. Identifying and analyzing effective and ineffective behaviors contribute to the rationale and foundation of this course of study.

The following study, using the critical incident technique (CIT), was done to determine the consistency between actual on-the-job behaviors of agents and their expected or inferred tasks as portrayed in a 31-task role model of the Extension agent.

Critical Incident Technique

The critical incident technique was developed by John Flanagan and is described as follows:

The critical incident technique, rather than collecting opinions, hunches, and estimates, obtains a record of specific behaviors from those in the best position to make the necessary observations and evaluations. The collection of these observations makes it possible to formulate the critical requirements of an activity. A list of critical behaviors provides a sound basis for making inferences as to requirements in terms of aptitudes, training, and other characteristics.¹

The technique assumes that a job consists of two types of behaviors—critical and noncritical. Critical behaviors are

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defined as activities that make the difference between effectiveness and ineffectiveness in carrying out job responsibilities. Therefore, they represent either successful or unsuccessful on-the-job behaviors. Noncritical behaviors derive from two types of activities: (1) those having little relation to success on the job and (2) those done well by most workers, but aren't a source of judgments on individual effectiveness. The CIT, as one would expect, focuses on the critical behavior and ignores the noncritical.

The findings of the study have been useful in diagnosing training needs of county agents. A definite need exists to explore agent performance and competence in the evaluation of programming. . . .

The core of the technique lies in the collection of a representative sample of critical incidents in a variety of on-the-job situations from the respondent's very recent past, so as not to select only the most dramatic or outstanding events from his/her experiences.

The following definitions serve to provide more concise meaning to the conduct and results of the study:

Critical incident: An event, occurrence, or happening that takes place in the performance of a professional role, the consequences of which are judged by the agent to be effective or ineffective.

Effective incident: An incident in which the objectives set by the agent are successfully attained.

Ineffective incident: An incident in which the agent failed to attain his/her desired objectives.

Methodology

A total of 204 Extension agents representing 34 randomly selected North Carolina counties participated in the study. Each participant was personally interviewed. In each interview, the agent was first asked to recall an effective incident in which he/she had been involved that occurred during the past three years as part of his/her job. He/she was then asked to state his/her objective(s) in the incident chosen.

The objectives were recorded by the interviewer. After a statement by the agent as to what he/she was trying to accomplish and why his/her behavior in realizing the objective(s) was effective, the interviewer and the respondent decided whether the incident was effective.

On reaching this joint decision, the agent proceeded to relate the effective incident via tape recording following this outline: (1) time and place of incident, (2) people involved, (3) circumstances leading up to the situation, (4) description of the behavior that led to the effective outcome, and (5) statement of why the results of the incident were effective. The same procedure was followed for obtaining the ineffective incident from each agent; and, insofar as possible, the procedure described above was replicated.

Classification System

A classification system was required to interpret the critical behaviors collected by the study. A role model of the county agent served this purpose. The model, as described by Boone and Dolan,² was broadly inclusive of all activities and efforts of Extension personnel and leaders in effecting the Extension program. Planning, execution, and evaluation were the major categories in the model that subsumed 7 phases, consisting of 31 tasks or behaviors.

Overview of Distribution

A wide variation existed in the number of critical behaviors classified in each of the 7 phases of the role model, as shown in the summary in Table 1. Of the 402 behaviors classified, 243 (60.5%) were classified under planning, 153 (38.0%) were classified under execution, and only 6 (1.5%) were classified under evaluation.

The 3 tasks receiving the highest number of behaviors under planning were: (1) identifies and organizes learning experiences, receiving a total of 72; (2) helps people invoke the decision-making process, receiving a total of 45; and (3) organizes human resources to plan program, receiving a total of 50. These three tasks collectively received nearly three-fourths of all behaviors relating to planning. Of the 243 behaviors classified under planning, about 60% were effective-related, 40% ineffective-related.

The three tasks receiving the highest number of behaviors under execution were: (1) communicated effectively, (2) obtain cooperation of resource people, and (3) conducts training experiences for resource people. These three tasks collectively received nearly three-fourths of all behaviors classified under execution. Of the 153 behaviors classified under execution, 40% were effective-related and 60% ineffective-related.

Conclusions

The county agent's job can be studied and described by the identification of behaviors critical in his/her job performance. With the exception of 12 behaviors out of a total of 402,

Table 1. Summary distribution of county agents' effective and ineffective behaviors.

| Role model phases | Total no. behaviors | | Effective behaviors | | Ineffective behaviors | | Rank |
|---|---------------------|------|---------------------|------|-----------------------|------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | |
| | <hr/> | | | | | | |
| 1. Planning | | | | | | | |
| a. Adapting program framework to the county level | 12 | 3.0% | 5 | 2.4% | 7 | 3.7% | 5 |
| b. Organizing human resources to plan program | 54 | 13.4 | 36 | 17.1 | 18 | 9.4 | 4 |
| c. Planning the program | 74 | 18.4 | 39 | 18.5 | 35 | 18.3 | 3 |
| d. Preparing the written program | 4 | 1.0 | 4 | 1.9 | 0 | 0.0 | 7 |
| e. The plan of work | 99 | 24.6 | 61 | 28.9 | 38 | 19.9 | 2 |
| 2. Execution | | | | | | | |
| a. Implementing the plan(s) | 153 | 38.1 | 61 | 28.9 | 92 | 48.2 | 1 |
| 3. Evaluation | | | | | | | |
| a. Evaluating the accomplishments | 6 | 1.5 | 5 | 2.4 | 1 | .5 | 6 |
| Total | 402 | 100% | 211 | 100% | 191 | 100% | |

it was possible to classify all behaviors within the role model. The 12 behaviors cited were classified under 2 additional tasks in the execution category of the model: "establishes a common understanding among persons concerned" and "exercises authority of competence." To this extent, the actual behaviors of the agents were consistent with the expected or inferred tasks within the role model.

Agents' accounts of effective and ineffective performance were classifiable more frequently in planning than in execution and evaluation combined. Agents' accounts of effective performance occurred more often than accounts of ineffective performance in planning. In the execution category, agents' accounts of ineffective performance occurred more often than accounts of effective performance.

The classification of only 6 out of a total of 402 critical behaviors in the evaluation category is an indication that agents didn't perceive incidents related to evaluation as important as incidents related to planning or execution with respect to effective and ineffective job performance.

Implications

The findings of the study have been useful in diagnosing *training needs of county agents*. A definite need exists to explore agent performance and competence in the evaluation of programming. The findings may be of further help to Extension administrators in analyzing agents' actual behaviors about effective and ineffective performance in the planning, execution, and evaluation of Extension programs.

An analysis of behaviors critical in the county agent's job is one of the initial steps in the ultimate development of a formal course of study for county agents. The findings may be useful to Extension administrators in designing further ways of collecting information about the general performance of agents and, therefore, may aid in determining areas of strength and weaknesses in the county programs.

The findings indicate: (1) the need for further study to determine causal factors associated with agents experiencing more ineffective than effective performance in the execution of educational programs and (2) the basis for the lack of accounts of incidents in several of the tasks embodied in the model.

Summary

The critical incident technique was used to collect, via personal interviews, 402 incidents of effective and ineffective performance from 204 county agents in North Carolina. From these incidents reported, the critical behaviors that led to the effective or ineffective outcomes of the incidents were determined and classified into three broad categories of the model—planning, execution, and evaluation.

In general, the agents didn't readily perceive incidents in evaluation as being as important as planning or execution in relation to effective and ineffective job performance.

Footnotes

1. J. Flanagan, "The Critical Incident Technique," *Psychological Bulletin*, LI (4), 327-55.
2. E. J. Boone and R. J. Dolan, "A Conceptual Approach for Examining the Programming Process in the Cooperative Extension Service and Identification of Inferred Program Roles of Major Staff Groups" (Unpublished paper, Department of Adult Education, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 1965).