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The Role of Experienced Extension Educators in Attracting and Retaining New Educators

Abstract

Experienced Extension educators can, and should, help attract and retain new Extension educators. When experienced educators engage with various groups or individuals, they should discuss careers in Extension and highlight the opportunities that are available to Extension educators. Additionally, as new educators are recruited and hired, experienced educators should mentor and encourage them, develop relationships with them, and convey the positive aspects of being an Extension educator. After all, experienced educators are in the best position to convince potential and new hires of the benefits of a successful and rewarding career in Extension.

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Introduction

While attending an agriculture and natural resources in-service in June 2013, I noted that I had the most tenure of all the educators in attendance. That is when I realized that with 27 years in Extension, I am now one of the organization's "older educators." The change happened fast. In 2008, Ohio State University (OSU) Extension had 235.5 full-time-equivalent educators (FTEs). The organization was faced with a budget shortfall, and a reduction in force of 10% of the educators was required, leading to a reduction of 21 educators. In 2011, OSU Extension continued to downsize, offering an incentive to retire, and another 21 educators accepted that incentive (L. Keesor, personal communication, October 17, 2014). As a result of other separations, by July 2012 the number of educators had been reduced to 131.75 FTEs. In addition, changes in the Ohio public retirement system had encouraged many more educators to retire by mid 2015. As the economy and funding improved, new educators were hired and experienced educators eligible to retire continued to leave. In July 2016, the number of educators had crept back up to 168.63 FTEs (G. Strickland, personal communication, July 15, 2016). In spite of this upward trend, a question remains: How can Extension attract and retain new employees? Educators with many years of service play an important role in accomplishing these two functions.

Attracting New Educators

Experienced Extension educators have a unique opportunity to attract new Extension educators. A study by Arnold and Place (2010) indicated that those pursuing careers in Extension were most influenced by Extension agents, Extension specialists, and college advisors. Those of us in these roles can influence potential newcomers with whom we have contact by presenting a positive attitude, conveying positive aspects of our jobs and the organization, and emphasizing the positive interactions we have with Extension clientele and our coworkers. This is not to say that we should be unrealistic about the demands of the field. When contacted by someone considering a career in Extension, an experienced educator will serve that person best by identifying both the opportunities and potential of such a career and the expectations of the job, including the need to engage in evening and weekend meetings and programs and so forth (Safrit & Owen, 2010). Arnold and Place (2010) found differences in the amount of knowledge people had about Extension work prior to employment, so it is important to explain the expectations of the job to improve the chance of retaining personnel once they are hired.

In addition to providing upbeat, honest feedback to those seeking jobs in Extension, we must be ambassadors for our universities and Extension. For example, when we are in schools, whether participating in a career day for kindergarteners or teaching on a campus, we should always make careers in Extension part of the discussion. Speaking from experience, I can say how gratifying it is to hear from new educators that they were influenced by my discussions with them about careers in Extension.

Retaining Educators

A study by Young, Stone, Aliaga, and Shuck (2013) emphasized the difficulty employers have in retaining employees. When new Extension employees are hired, experienced educators need to work to help the organization keep them and make them productive and inspired employees. OSU Extension has an excellent orientation program for new educators and a mentoring system in which experienced educators work with new educators; however, experienced educators can do even more to help.

As those of us with years of experience encounter educators starting their careers, we should think back to our early days in the organization. I recall who helped me "learn the ropes" to become a successful educator: It was an experienced Extension agent. Extension's current veterans have an obligation to help retain those just entering the field. There are several strategies Extension's experienced educators can use to fulfill this role.

Experienced educators should be positive and realistic when interacting with new hires. When asked to help mentor new educators, we should do so willingly so that we can share the positive attributes of this profession. We should try to provide an appropriate amount of coaching, discuss the opportunities we have experienced during our careers, and advise on how to balance work and life issues (Safrit & Owen, 2010).

When attending trainings and in-services, we should make it a point to introduce ourselves to each new educator in attendance and offer to provide assistance in any way possible. When we have programs that may be of interest to new educators who have little teaching experience, we should offer them opportunities to teach portions of those programs and, conversely, offer to help them teach the programs in their home counties.

We need to help each new educator feel a sense of belonging and become embedded in the organization and his or her community (Young et al., 2013). When talking to new educators, experienced employees should

provide advice on how to succeed. For example, I suggest to new hires that if they take care of their clientele and their coworkers, they will succeed. We can explain that work in Extension does not need to be just a job: It can be a way of life. We need to encourage new educators to get involved with organizations such as the Joint Council of Extension Professionals, which promotes professional development and support of Extension professionals, and other groups. In Ohio, for example, agriculture and natural resources educators are encouraged to become involved in teams that focus on various program areas, such as beef, horticulture, direct marketing, and agronomic crops. It also is important to encourage new educators to join departmental or organizational committees. In addition, we should promote participation with local organizations, such as Rotary, and commodity groups, such as a local dairy committee.

There are various reasons why new hires are not staying in Extension for long. If someone you are speaking with suggests that maintenance factors such as salary and work/life balance are issues (Harder, Gouldthorpe, & Goodwin, 2014; Strong & Harder, 2009), remind that person of the flexibility of the job and the many opportunities to be innovative and creative. Individuals are motivated by having a career that is stimulating and fulfilling (Harder et al., 2014). Emphasize the prospects for being promoted and receiving pay increases and the satisfaction that comes from making a difference in the lives of Extension clientele (Kroth & Peutz, 2010).

Conclusion

For those of us with many years of experience in Extension, attracting and retaining new educators are important parts of our role. We need to develop professional relationships and build trust with new educators. We need to continue to be ambassadors for and promoters of our communities, universities, and organization. We have spent the majority of our working careers in this field. If we cannot convince potential and new educators that they can have successful and rewarding careers in Extension, who can?

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