Going Forward In Agricultural Extension: Helping Cooperative Extension Service Employees Adjust To Organizational Changes

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Abstract

The slowing economy, the changing public needs, and new communication technology have forced the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) to change its organizational structure and staffing pattern. The purpose of this literature research was to synthesize research and philosophical views related to possible changes in the CES and the potential impact of these changes on employees, and to develop a communication model to facilitate the change within the CES. A variety of literature sources was used to gather data and information for the study. Downsizing has become the trend of many recent restructuring initiatives adopted by organizations. During restructuring, the extension staff faces different changes such as job termination, subject area specialization, and relocation of the service centers. These changes inevitably create uncertainty that demands personal and organizational coping strategies. Uncertainty and anxiety are the commonly cited psychological states of employees in an organization undergoing change. These psychological states can negatively impact work performance. Therefore, it is necessary to address these issues and concerns prior to and during organizational change. Employees may have general, job-specific, and personal issues and concerns regarding the change that need to be addressed in order to meet the challenges ahead of the CES in the 21st century. Figure 1 illustrates a communication model for helping human resources to manage the change process in an extension organization. The model identifies the issues and concerns that should be addressed during an organizational change, suggests communication strategies to deal with issues and concerns, and provides guidelines for professional development.
Introduction

External as well as internal environments of extension services are changing, mainly because of the changes in society, technology, and the global economy. The slowing US economy forced budget cuts in many Cooperative Extension Services (CES). Changes in society made demands for new program areas such as nutrition and health, food safety, consumer economics, etc. The CES should be responsive to these changes in order to go forward with new challenges as a vital organization. Downsizing and restructuring were the most common changes implemented in CES. The CES leaders need to understand the organizational changing process and human behavior in the changing environment in order to direct the organization in the 21st century.

Boyed (1992) mentioned that "change is inevitable in organizations and because people naturally resist change, managers must be prepared to cope with the problems that this dilemma produces." This statement indicates that managing the human resource during an organizational change is a very challenging task. How can human resource managers help extension service employees to learn the changes of their organization when they resist change? This is the focused problem of this literature research.

Objectives

The primary objective of this study was to synthesize research and philosophical views related to possible changes in the CES and the potential impact of organizational changes on human resources. The secondary objective was to develop a communication model to facilitate a change within the CES. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the potential forces that can cause changes in the Cooperative Extension service?
2. How do people react to change in organizations?
3. What are the communication approaches that help employees adjust to change?

Procedure

This study was based on library research. Journals, magazines, theses, books and conference proceedings related to management science, psychology, behavioral science, sociology, natural science and agricultural education were used to gather data and information for the study. Related studies in these reference sources were mainly located by searching computer based library systems. Located studies related to the topic were reviewed and the necessary information was obtained to achieve the purpose of this study.

Forces for Changes in the Cooperative Extension Service

Change in client groups and the shifting public interest can become a considerable force for change in a public organization such as the Cooperative Extension Service. The Cooperative Extension Service was established in the United States of America in 1914 under the Smith-Lever Act (Rasmussen, 1989). The initial focus of the extension service was on agricultural production and improvement of rural life (Hoffert, 1978). This was especially
important because farmers played an important role in the American economy at that time. In
1910, one-third of the nation's total population lived on farms averaging about 140 acres
each. Agricultural products made up just over 50% of the U. S. export earnings (Rasmussen,
1989). The nature and the number of the original client group of the Cooperative Extension
Service have changed over the last 75 years. At present, only about 1 to 2% of the population
is involved in agricultural production. The average farm size has increased from 140 acres to
470 acres. The agriculture industry is more capital intensive than it was in the past. Parallel
to farm consolidation, there is a growing public concern about conservation and preservation
of natural resources (Bultena, 1991). “The homogeneity of rural America has diminished
greatly” (Scobell, 1992). The growing public interest and the diversified client structure
have become a force for change in CES programming.

The slowing economic situation is affecting many extension organizations
(Cunningham, 1987). CES is a federal, state and local government jointly funded public
educational organization. This cooperative funding arrangement has drastically changed
over the last few decades. The shrinking economy forced many states to cut their CES
budget. The CES has to meet increasing clients’ needs with a reduced budget. This
challenging situation forced CES to adopt organizational changes such as downsizing and
restructuring.

Fast growing communication technology has also had a significant impact on
extension service delivery methods. With the help of the Internet, extension agents and
specialists can exchange information and ideas over a large geographic region (Lippert &
Plank, 1999). Thereby, electronic and satellite communications have made it possible for
CES to serve the needs of people in a larger area with a smaller extension staff. Rapidly
developing communication technology is another changing force impacting extension
delivery methods and staffing pattern.

The slowing economy, the changing client group and public needs, and the new
communication technology have forced the CES to change its organizational structure and
staffing pattern. Downsizing has become the trend of many recent restructuring initiatives
adopted by organizations (Miller, 1992). Some states, Illinois for example, restructured its
organizational setup of Cooperative Extension Service by redistributing its human resources
to meet the challenges (CES 2000: Blue print for the twenty-first century, 1990). During
restructuring, the staff went through different changes such as job termination, subject area
specialization and relocation of the service centers. These unstable conditions inevitably
create uncertainty that demand personal and organizational coping strategies.

**Reaction to Changes in Organizations**

Organization development literature indicates that employees resist change (Gardner,
Dunham, Cummings, & Pierce, 1987). Employees differ in their receptiveness to changes in
their work settings (White, 1977). Gardner et al. (1987) suggested that this difference in
perception can be attributed to the employees' understanding of what is being changed. Some
researchers (Mezoff, 1982; Wacker, 1981) suggested the ways people allocate their attention
may affect how they perceive stimuli and react to those perceptions.
When the organizational change introduces new jobs, the employees’ reaction depends on their professional needs. If the changes enrich the motivational properties of jobs, employees with higher professional needs show higher performance while employees with lower professional needs show a declining performance (Hackman, Pearce, and Wolfe, 1978). Schlenker and Gutek (1987) studied employees' behavior when there was a loss of professional work roles without loss of job or level of pay. Their findings showed that work role loss is associated with lower job satisfaction, lower work related self-esteem, and a higher propensity to leave the job.

Ashford (1988) mentioned that employees' perceived uncertainty and fear about the impact of a transition is related to their stress. Uncertainty is the most commonly cited psychological state of employees undergoing organizational change (Nadler, 1982; Ackerman, 1982). Employees' reactions to uncertainty are dependent upon how a change will affect their careers and daily activities (Nadler, 1982; Schweiger & Ivancevitch, 1985). Structural changes create uncertainty among employees due to potential job terminations, transfers and the need to survive in a new working environment (Marks, 1982). With the organizational change the established reward system can be changed and employees' uncertainty about this change may cause worries among them (Nadler, 1982). The reward pattern includes formal rewards such as salary increments and promotions and informal rewards such as clients' appreciation of one's work.

When there is an uncertainty, one's anxiety level can be affected. Employees' heightened anxiety during an organizational change has been confirmed by research studies (Fox, 1979; Jayaratne & Gamon, 1998). A study done with extension educators of the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service during its 1991 restructuring revealed that their level of anxiety rose to a peak after they heard about the change (Jayaratne, 1993). The heightened anxiety declined after the extension educators resumed their new jobs. This anxiety originated as a result of uncertainty and difficulties associated with organizational change and its unwanted impact on the quality of people's overall work life (Fox, 1979). Research shows a negative relationship between one's anxiety and work performance (Anderson, 1976; Meglino, 1977). Research findings further indicate a high degree of job anxiety with regard to human relations at work is most acute in diminishing employees’ work performance (Sirivastava and Krishna, 1980; Jayaratne & Gamon, 1998).

Organizational change is likely to be unequally supported by the employees. Major reorganization is a political process where some employees' expertise will have greater value to the organization than other employees' expertise (Gaertner, 1989). This way organizational change is likely to impact the power structure of the organization (Pfeffer, 1980). Those whose benefits are diminished by the change are less likely to support it than others (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). An organizational change that involves a shift in priorities is likely to be resisted by employees because it implies a change in the implicit work contract (Nadler, 1983).

Literature reveals that organizational changes create an uncertainty and anxiety among the employees. Heightened anxiety has negative effects on work performance.
Sometimes, the best employees might be out migrated (Cunningham, 1987). Therefore, it is important to address this human resource issue during an organizational change.

**Helping Employees Adjust to Changes**

Change in an organization can be turbulent. Unless change is properly managed, the quality and the quantity of extension service can be affected. Therefore, it is important to identify ways to help people learn about the proposed changes of the extension organization in order to resolve employee concerns and issues.

There might be general issues and concerns that everyone has about an organization’s proposed change. Additionally, there might be some job-specific concerns and issues related to each and every category of employees. Further, there might be some individual issues and concerns that some employees have over the proposed change of the organization. Unless general, specific and individual concerns and issues of the employees are addressed, it may not be possible to achieve outcomes desired by changing an organization.

**Addressing General Issues and Concerns**

An interactive seminar is a good way to educate staff about the proposed change and to address their general issues and concerns during an organizational change. This seminar should be open to everybody in the organization. Human resource managers should focus their attention on broad issues that might affect a wide range of employees. Question and answer forums will be useful to clarify changes and related issues and get feedback from the participants. Feedback information is useful to facilitate the changing process.

**Addressing Specific Issues and Concerns**

The literature indicates that different categories of employees are affected differently during an organizational change (White, 1977). Therefore, each category of staff may have some common issues and concerns specific to that group. Interactive group discussions can be used to address these job-specific issues and concerns that each and every staff category has. During these group discussions human resource managers can resolve job-specific concerns and issues. During the workshops it is important to get feedback from participants to plan future training programs for helping them to get acquainted with the new system.

**Addressing Individual Issues and Concerns**

Individual issues and concerns over proposed change in an organization can be different from person to person. Therefore, it is necessary to have individual counseling sessions to resolve individual concerns and issues. Individual counseling is very important to address very personalized issues and concerns.

**Providing Professional Development**

Feedback from groups and individuals can be used in developing an in-service program that will help employees deal with new responsibilities resulting from change.
Conclusions and Recommendations

The Cooperative Extension Service has to change in order to serve the needs of the
changing client groups with shrinking funds and modern communication technology. Some
Cooperative Extension Services have adopted organizational restructuring in order to meet
these challenges.

With organizational restructuring, employee behavior is a concern. Normally people
resist change. When changes bring transfer of power, strong opposition can be expected from
the power losers. When changes introduce job enrichment, the employees with high growth
potentials show a higher level of motivation. Work role loss can lead to lower job satisfaction
and increase the propensity to leave the job.

Uncertainty and anxiety are the commonly cited psychological states of employees in
an organization undergoing change. These psychological states can negatively impact work
performance. Therefore, it is necessary to address these issues and concerns prior to and
during organizational change. Employees may have general, job-specific and personal issues
and concerns regarding the change that need to be addressed. Awareness seminars can be
used to resolve general issues. Interactive group workshops can be used to address job-
specific issues. Individual counseling sessions can be used to address personal issues. Figure
1 illustrates a communication model for helping human resources to manage the change
process in an extension organization. The model identifies the issues and concerns that
should be addressed during organizational change, suggests communication strategies to deal
with issues and concerns, and provides ideas for professional development.
Figure 1. A communication model to help Cooperative Extension Service staff adjust to change.

**CES Organizational Change**

**Impact on Human Resource**

**Potential Issues and Concerns**
- Uncertainty
- Anxiety
- Change of responsibilities
- Change of location
- Relocation
- Change of personal environment
- Change of reward structure
- Change of power structure

**Addressing Issues & Concerns**

**Step 1 - General Awareness Workshops**
During this stage, very general issues related to all the levels of employees could be discussed in order to educate employees over the changes and address broader issues. Feedback information received from participants could be used to plan next steps.

**Step 2 – Job-Specific Group Workshops**
During this stage, specific issues related to different staff categories could be discussed in order to address their issues and identify special training needs. For example, the issues and training needs of County Extension Agents.

**Step 3 - Individual Counseling Program**
At this stage, individual concerns and issues could be addressed in order to help employees manage their own changes during the organizational changing process. Individual training needs are identified.

**Step 4 - Professional Development Program**
Identified training needs could be used to develop in-service programs for employees. These in-service programs focus on building knowledge and skills necessary to carry out their new responsibilities in the changed organization.

**Professional Development Needs**
List of References


