Making use of Nominal Group Techniques with New Extension Faculty to determine how to effectively include Advisory Committee Members in Extension Programming

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Abstract

Advisory committee members are a key component of a true grassroots extension program that is focused upon meeting the educational needs of clientele. These community members typically have much to offer through their expertise, resources, community contacts and networking capabilities. Many agents have become very adept at utilizing advisory committee members to multiply their efforts while further enhancing skills among these volunteers. Through active participation with the nominal group technique, new agents were able to understand how they could utilize this methodology with their clientele. Furthermore, through sharing ideas about involving advisory committee members, there are many practices that agents were able to learn from one another. The ideas that were generated fit within the major categories of Advisory Committee Management, Meeting Management and Involving Members in Extension Programming.
Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to extension agents is the effective utilization of advisory committees in the program development process. This requires an in-depth understanding of the committee’s personality, the clear conveyance of what they are being asked to do, the ability to gain and hold their interest and involvement in the process, and providing them with the information and resources they need to accomplish what is being asked of them.

A number of extension agents have become masters in involving and working with advisory committees. Through insights gained in reading and in training, and particularly through day-to-day experience, agents learn the “ins and outs” of effective involvement of local people in volunteer support for extension. Advisory committees have their own special personalities, expectations and idiosyncrasies, as we all do. Effective agents are able to flush these out and make adaptations and adjustments as needed to create a “good fit” and working relationship between the agent and the advisory group. The agent’s consideration of the advisory group members, their needs and expectations, and the potential intrinsic rewards to them from their involvement with extension is paramount to the committee’s contribution.

According to McCaslin and Tibezinda (1998), the nominal group technique is an effective means generate possible items and set priorities. The technique enables data to be generated in a group setting while minimizing verbal communication. This serves to increase the involvement of all people in a group without fear or concern of being overridden by persons who may be more vocal or outspoken. There are six general steps for properly conducting the nominal group process: A) Clearly stating of the question or problem for the group to address; B) Silent time for individuals to generate and write ideas relating to the issue; C) Presenting the ideas in a round-robin fashion, so that each person takes a turn in expressing one of their ideas at a time until all ideas have been shared. At this stage, there is no evaluation of ideas – the sole purpose is to get all the ideas out and written on a flip chart by the facilitator; D) Clarifying ideas – this is an opportunity for participants to seek clarification or express reasoning about each item in a constructive manner; E) Rating of priorities among the various ideas that have been shared and discussed; and, F) Discussion and voting on the ideas to establish a group consensus on the most pertinent areas.

Newly hired University of Florida extension agents attend three sessions of orientation and training that are designed to increase their skills and efficiency related to extension programming and effective interpersonal skills. The training is focused on learning-by-doing, so that new agents have tools that they can readily implement into their educational tool box. One hands-on educational method used during new faculty training is a group method for gathering ideas known as the nominal group technique. This method for gathering information from a group is beneficial over other methods because it provides an opportunity for active involvement
of everyone within groups to express ideas and opinions. It is also well-suited for establishing prioritization of group ideas.

**Purpose/Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to expose and train new extension agents on the nominal group technique and to simultaneously learn about ways to more effectively utilize extension advisory committees – particularly in extension educational programming.

**Methods/Procedures**

The population for the study (N=100) was comprised of all new county extension faculty who participated in orientation and training between the years 2000-2002. For this study, new agents were instructed on how to use the nominal group technique. Each group was asked, using the nominal group technique, to develop a list of ways advisory committee members could be utilized more effectively. Since it can be a struggle to find ways to involve advisory committee members in extension programming, this provided an opportunity for agents to share and discuss innovative ideas that they had used, observed or were aware of. Agents represented diverse program areas including Horticulture, Sea Grant, 4-H, FCS, and Agriculture and Natural Resources. The resulting qualitative data were entered into a word document and categorized for subsequent content analysis. Through content analysis, major and minor themes emerged for reporting the findings.

**Results/Findings**

After working with four different cohort groups through the orientation and training program at the University of Florida, many innovative ideas were submitted by the new agents for involving advisory committee members. The comprehensive results from the four groups were summarized and were later categorized into three major categories being Volunteer/Advisory Committee Management, Meeting Management and Involving Members in Programming. Each of these categories was then divided into appropriate minor clusters.

**A. Volunteer / Advisory Committee Management**

1. **Recruiting** – Recruiting advisory committee members is a crucial first step to the effectiveness of the advisory committee. How we go about recruiting members says a great deal about our organization, our program and us as individuals. Is it being done in a professional, organized and consistent fashion? Would you volunteer for you? How we recruit establishes an initial image for the potential recruit, and it conveys the level of importance, time and effort required. It is difficult to recruit if you can not articulate why volunteers are needed and what their purpose will be. We need to know specifically why we want and need volunteers and communicate this by focusing on the unique skills and/or expertise that they will bring to our extension program.

   - Ensure that volunteers are interested/professional members.
     - Select committee members that will work together and have the right interpersonal characteristics, i.e. good communicator, open-minded, analytical
ability, respectful, good listener and interested in the needs and issues of the county.

- Take opportunities to recruit when speaking at functions. Talk about the importance and impact of volunteers for extension.
- Ask volunteers to help recruit volunteers among family, friends and contacts.
  - This can help ensure diversity of membership geographically, racially and programmatically as well as across social economic status.

2. Training and Orientation — Training and orientation play an important first step once members have been identified and recruitment has taken place. Members need to know what role they play, and what tasks are ahead of them. Many agents have nontraditional people on their advisory committees, and in many cases these people do not understand extension let alone their role as an advisory committee member. For them to be contributing members they need to understand the organization and how they fit into it.

- Provide a timely orientation.
  - Educate about extension, including its mission and history of how and why it got started and specifics related to your state and county. An experienced volunteer and/or outside speaker can be very effective.
  - Utilize university and/or extension videos or specialists to help tell the story.
  - Share a summary of a state and/or county four year plan of work to show areas where extension focuses its programs.
  - Overview county statistical data related to demographics, race, poverty, education, etc. to paint a picture of your potential clientele.
  - Discuss the ideal situation for targeted clientele and how extension can take steps toward achieving it.
  - Ensure that volunteers understand their purpose and specifically how they will be involved.
- Utilize the organizational mission statement
  - Discuss long term vision as well as goals and objectives of extension education. Talk about how work needs to fit the organizational mission just as any good business follows a mission statement.
- Provide agent job descriptions to increase understanding of position responsibilities
  - Solicit personal views among volunteers of agent roles, such as sharing among experienced and new volunteers.
- Develop support materials
  - Provide an orientation handbook that can be used as a reference and to hold pertinent information.
  - Provide a packet of informational resources. Be careful not to overload on materials as it will be set aside and neglected, so choose materials that are clear and concise.
  - Make sure they receive recent newsletters and program announcements.
3. **Building Rapport** – Establishing good relationships with committee members pays great dividends for agents and extension programs. Unfortunately, it is neglected in many cases because we do not take the time to do it. These highly influential community leaders can help to make or break the reputation for those in extension and throughout the public.

- Go out to homes or places of business to establish rapport on the volunteer’s home turf. This serves for getting to know the person, his/her situation and issues. Relationship building is stronger when we put ourselves out there.
- Commit to holding informal social events for people to get to know each other, and for you to get to know them.
  - Friend building – go for lunch (or other informal opportunities) with volunteers and/or stakeholders invited by members
  - Evening social hour one or more times per year with brief update meetings to follow.
- Invite them to special events such as major county and state meetings, such as agricultural shows, state extension meetings or conferences related to their program interests.
- Keep them included in what is going on in the extension organization and major decisions that would relate to their involvement.
- Communicate between actual meetings to keep them in the loop.
  - Provide feedback of items and issues covered in meetings.
  - Make use of an email list-serve for dialogue among members.
  - Electronic communication can be very effective for informing as well as obtaining input on items. For example, to inform and/or poll members prior to a meeting on an issue that will be discussed.
  - Be approachable and keep an open line of communication for feedback.

4. **Recognition and Rewards** – Recognition and rewards are necessary to identify dedication, and hard work in the advisory committee. Many times the hard work is somewhat expected, and the recognition is forgotten in the every day shuffle of work. We also need to recognize that everyone is different in regards to what they would most prefer, i.e. some people like the limelight while others do not. We need to know our people well and make use of diverse means to recognize our volunteers. This list identifies practical ways to recognize and reward committee members.

- Provide opportunities to share information.
  - Give them feedback from leadership in extension.
  - Show how their ideas have been implemented and give credit for volunteer creativity and involvement.
  - Tell about success stories in extension and volunteer involvement, i.e. volunteer leadership on programs, volunteer work with community leaders, etc.
  - Show success from other counties, districts or states.
• Offer recognition for volunteer efforts.
  o Praise them and let them know that their opinion and involvement matters.
  o Some people would just like a pat on the back and to hear “thank you!”
  o Help them feel wanted for who they are and what they do.
  o Get word out via newsletters, newspapers or another appropriate medium.
  o Make use of a “Volunteer of the Month” in your newsletters.
• Meals are a great reward for many people. These can range from formal recognition dinners to informal one-on-one lunches.
• Involve volunteers in volunteer appreciation and reward activities such as making nominations and presentations for awards.
• Nominate your volunteers for awards and recognitions available locally, regionally or nationally.

B. Meeting Management
  1. Setting – The setting of the meeting area plays a large role in both the attitude of the members, as well as their attendance to meetings. This can be easily overlooked when we are busy doing other things. Providing a setting that is comfortable, safe and easily accessible is extremely beneficial to the effectiveness of the group, and it conveys the importance that is placed upon the advisory committee.

• Meeting location
  o Depending upon factors such as geographic representation and access it may be best to meet at a central location. Otherwise, it can be advantageous to meet in alternate locations to provide variety. Using different sites helps people learn about the county, diverse clientele and different extension programs.
  o Make the room comfortable in regards to seating, temperature and lighting.
• Food and socializing go hand-in-hand.
  o Food helps to satisfy basic physiological needs, and these must be met before people give adequate attention to other matters.
  o People tend to open up and get to know one another while eating, and this leads to greater group cohesiveness.
  o Depending upon the meeting time and length, consider providing refreshments and/or meal.
• Meet and greet people as they arrive to increase comfort level. This is especially critical for new members.
  o Make use of name tags so people get to know one another.
  o Use an ice-breaker to encourage involvement.
  o Do team building activities that get people working together.
• The time of day is important to attendance. Know your volunteers to determine the best time for people to attend.
2. Meeting Organization — Having organized meetings is important. Those attending are busy people, and most of them have limited time because of other obligations. Many of them are successful community leaders, and most likely, efficient in their daily activities. To them, unorganized, rambling, rubber-stamp meetings are a waste of time, and therefore, attendance and participation may drop because of it.

- Have a plan and goals for the meeting. Know what outcomes are expected
  - Rank/prioritize what needs to be addressed, and focus on what can be realistically accomplished in the designated time.
  - Make sure there is a clear description of priorities and objectives.
  - Start on time and end on time!
  - Leave time for informal socializing prior to and/or after the actual business meeting.
- Send out an agenda in advance
  - Provide detailed agendas prior to meetings so people are prepared. You may even include some background reading that will be necessary for them to read ahead of time.
  - Organize meetings around an agenda and follow it.
- Elect and make use of officers, i.e. chair & secretary.
  - Work with the chair ahead of time so s/he is fully aware of issues and can effectively facilitate the meeting.
  - Rotate meeting leadership to ensure new ideas and vitality.
- Ensure an educational moment (hook) at each meeting, so that people come away with something concrete that they can apply. This may be sharing of extension programs or pertinent information such as current insect or disease problems.
- Make use of subcommittees for specific tasks, i.e. budget, marketing, nominating and special events or programs to encourage deeper involvement and for streamlining meetings.
- Meet four to eight times per year – depending upon the extent of business that needs to be dealt with. Find the right balance between having enough meetings to ensure communication and involvement without having too many unnecessary meetings that lack substance.

C. Involving Advisory Committees in Extension Programming

1. Obtaining input — Overall input from the advisory committee is crucial for a truly grassroots extension program. Members play a crucial role in the task of identifying what the needs of the community are, and the best approaches for addressing solutions. The group needs to feel as though they can be straightforward when identifying problems, or suggestions for improvement. Input should be sought out at each step of extension programming.
• Engage advisory members on local research projects, including use of ideas, resources, farms and businesses.
• Involve with assessing county needs.
  o Ask for help to identify minority and underserved groups.
  o Suggest and prioritize needs of communities.
  o Identify needs and support network to meet needs.
  o Help with community needs assessments formally and/or informally.
• Brainstorming is effective for generating input for things such as:
  o Marketing programs.
  o Funding and support.
  o Problem priorities and focus of educational programs.
• Capitalize on their networking ability and contacts.
  o Involve them in recruiting sponsors as well as potential target audiences.
  o Let them share contacts for marketing programs.
  o Help with making minority contacts with key representation and/or program participants.
  o Connecting and communicating with key leaders in communities.
  o Call on individuals for their knowledge for providing answers or as local experts.
• Market extension with your volunteers and get them involved in marketing.
  o Try some give-a-ways such as T-shirts or other extension paraphernalia.
• Utilize their feedback on programs, events and activities.
  o Ask for their ideas/visions for enhancing program.
  o Let them suggest ways to reach underserved populations.
  o Encourage the use of email for submitting suggestions/input.
  o Allow them to provide technical support in appropriate areas.
  o Work with members on conducting a survey of commodity or target groups for future programs.
• Involve their help with program evaluations –
  o For example, this could include interviewing or observing past program participants for practice and behavior change.
  o Calling extension users (or nonusers) to ascertain their satisfaction with extension.

2. Involvement in Programming – Getting advisory committee input in program delivery is one of the most important functions a committee can make. This group can be a great way to find out what will work and what will not when it comes to program effectiveness. Involving them in the programming process may also open doors to more resources for the program and multiplying extension efforts.

• Giving presentations and facilitating programs.
  o Co-programming with organizations and agents.
  o Encourage active participation in programs as much as possible.
  o Volunteers to monitor and facilitate booths at fairs, shows, schools, etc.
  o Invite members to participate in grant writing.
Bring in committee members to teach/play active role in programs.
- Have members assist in setting up experimental plots
- Communicate with them about specific areas where help is desired, and people will step forward.
  - Link them with a youth protégé to build leadership in youth and the volunteer.
  - Let them design activities or events.
    - Help obtaining exhibits and demonstrations.
    - They can organize fieldtrips including tradeshows, gardens, etc.
    - Involve volunteers in setting guidelines of program areas as well as potential job descriptions and recruitment where appropriate.
    - Delegate suitable parts of programs to volunteers.
  - Attending presentations/programs.
    - Invite them to programs.
    - Give them a tour of extension and research facilities.
    - Invite members to existing programs to observe, analyze and critique.
    - Take a field trip to see programs in action.
  - Jointly produce facts sheets and distribute to clientele.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study revealed that the nominal group technique was effective for new agents to work cooperatively to develop ways to better utilize advisory committees. Effective learning occurred through actual hands-on practice with a technique on a relevant issue. In summarizing the activity, agents discussed ways that they could utilize the nominal group technique in their work with advisory committee, volunteers and many of the clientele that they work with. It is a very effective means that encourages involvement among all people for greater diversity of ideas and suggestions.

The agents also learned many ways that advisory committee members and volunteers can be involved in extension programs. The ideas posed in this study are not exhaustive, but they can serve as a very good foundation. Experience plays an important role in both recognizing areas and ways for involvement, as well as for members to understand their role, and to operate efficiently.

The use of advisory committees will continue to play an important role in the proper development of extension programs that target actual clientele needs. Advisory committees, in their role as grassroots input, is one of the hallmarks of Cooperative Extension that separates it from so many other agencies and organizations today. In a time that includes issues such as downsizing, efficiency, program impact, building leadership, developing individuals and communities and multiplying extension efforts, volunteers will play a key role. In order to keep extension on the cutting edge, agents must find ways to utilize their committee members to the fullest.
References


