Maximizing Agents’ Effectiveness:
Virginia Cooperative Extension’s Answer to Training New Extension Agents

Jerry D. Gibson and Almeshia S. Brown, Virginia Tech University

Introduction
Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) employs Extension agents who hold faculty rank and academic degrees from a wide variety of disciplines. The agents’ academic preparation enables them to acquire Extension positions in youth development, agriculture and natural resources, and family and consumer sciences. Although degree programs provide excellent subject matter training, they often lack opportunities for agents to obtain skills or strengths in such necessary subjects as group facilitation, planning and organizing educational programs, evaluation, volunteer management, local government relations and many other related subjects that are needed to be effective Extension professionals (Bennett 1979). Because technical degree programs seldom provide adequate programming skill development courses, VCE involves all new Extension agents in a program through which fieldwork expertise and educational programming competence may be developed. All new field faculty are expected to participate in the Virginia Cooperative Extension New Agent Training Program.

Purpose
The key to a successful New Agent Training Program is to state up front the roles and expectations of the training agent and new agent so that they know what is expected of them to achieve a successful outcome (Boyle 1981). The purpose of the New Agent Training Program is to provide opportunities for newly employed agent faculty to receive unit based, hands-on orientation and training in preparation for assuming assigned roles in their field units. The development and implementation of a training plan that allows Extension Agents to address their weaknesses and build upon their strengths would best accomplish this. Although the new Extension Agent is ultimately responsible for the development of the plan, a collaborative effort among Extension Training Agents, Staff Development Specialists, Administrative Specialists is necessary. As of January 2000, Virginia Cooperative Extension implemented a program for all new Extension agents. Gregorc (1985) maintains that individual learning styles must be respected. The New Agent Training Program is an innovative way to respect the characteristics of the new employee, determine the situation in the assigned county, and develop a training program that will enhance their ability to maximize performance once they are in their permanent assignment.

Major Points
The Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) unit with Virginia Cooperative Extension conducts the New Agent Training program. The steps involved in the training of a new agent include a nine-step process outlined as follows: 1) Placement of New Agent; 2) New Agents Complete a Programming Skills Inventory; 3) Trainer Agent Orientation; 4) New Agent Orientation; 5) Development of New Agent Educational Plan; 6) Agricultural and Extension Educational Unit Site Visit; 7) Submit Summary of Training to District Director; 8) Exit Interview; 9) Final Evaluation.

Conclusion And Educational Importance
Since January 1, 2000 over forty Extension agents have completed the New Agent Training Program. Each agent developed and implemented a training plan that was tailor made to fit their situation (Gagne, Briggs & Wagner 1988). Each plan is diverse and unique to the agent. Training agents are providing valuable educational leadership and support not only to the agents but also to the training process. The District Director and the Extension specialist for staff development are providing daily support and monitoring of the training. “Train the Trainer” programs are being planned for new training agents as well as administrators that are new to the organization (Ittner & Douds 1997).