

## **Talk the Talk and Walk the Walk**

In March 2002, I began a new position as the District Administrator in the Northwest section of Mississippi. My previous position was Evaluation Specialist at Mississippi State University Extension Service (MSU-ES). Two different positions; however evaluation is an integral part of both. Evaluation is essential to administration because of the demand from public and nonprofit funding sources for a strict accounting of how funds are spent and what is accomplished with funds. As a specialist, the training, conducting and designing evaluations was the most essential part of that job.

Therefore, one of the first things I decided to do is conduct district training on "Impact Evaluation". The goal of the training was for participants to come away with some idea of how to evaluate a program. My personal goal was for participants to understand that an "activity/event" is different from a program. Now in 2002, I realize that I was a naïve administrator. The training went very well and the participants indicated that their understanding level increased. But after a year of encouraging and reinforcing impact evaluation, I have not seen a significant increase in planning and implementing the evaluation process. Where do we go from here? How do we empower field staff to conduct and follow through on the evaluations?

Literature related to extension staff and their perception of program evaluation indicated many issues why extension staff will not conduct evaluations. According to Grantham (1999), extension staff stated that they perceived program evaluation to be an important part of their job, however there was a general concern that organizational commitment, especially in terms of funding, clarity of the purpose, use of evaluation results, was lacking. Other results included the following (my comments follow each finding):

- 1. Lack of evaluation knowledge and skills, especially for simple, easy to use, evaluation techniques.**  
Extension agents feel they lack adequate skills to design and conduct evaluations. Although in-service training has been provided several times, agents still feel intimidated. Agents also feel a lack of assistance in designing evaluation instruments. Most agents think they can use the same instrument with different programs. Therefore, we as evaluators and administrators must help agents acquire the skills and experiences to conduct systematic evaluation of program outcomes and impact.
- 2. Lack of time to do evaluation.**

Education programs delivered by Extension agents today are more varied than ever and will continue to change to meet the needs of the clientele they serve. I agree that to design and implement an evaluation takes time and effort. However, if done correctly and efficiently, the process is very rewarding. We as administrators must consider the time and effort put forth in each project. Therefore, agents should be rewarded through performance evaluation scores.

**3. Fear about the consequences of identifying lack of success in a program.**

There is a perception among Extension agents that program evaluation means their own performance evaluation. We must convey to agents that evaluation is more than just reporting. Evaluation assists agents in making decisions, in reallocating resources, and determining if a program is cost effective.

**4. Skepticism about whether evaluation really matters – is the information used and useful for anyone other than the staff involved in the program?**

Outcome and impact evaluation is now more important than ever, as accountability has become critical and financial support becomes limited. Extension agents must understand that program outcomes are needed to show stakeholders—funders, administrators, legislators, governmental officials, and clientele --the types of impact that have been made.

**5. Lack of commitment on part of Extension administration in supporting program evaluation.**

Extension agents feel that Extension administrators are not “walking the talk”. Agents think that administration does not provide enough support to conduct program evaluation (i.e., specialist, assistance in designing and implementation, time, resources, etc).

These are issues and concerns that we are definitely trying to manage. Strong administrative support and leadership are critical at all levels for effective program evaluation to occur. Administrators need to establish with agents that planned evaluations are expected, supported and rewarded. I refer back to Roger Rennekamp's article in the March edition (2002) **Hear it From the Board** where he discusses the need for field staff in the Extension System to take a course on program evaluation (core competencies). I agree with his assessment. We provide in-service training on outcome evaluation each year for Extension staff. Usually these in-service training sessions are 1-2 hours, which is not enough time and too much information for agents to learn how to conduct an evaluation. Therefore, core competencies for agents will enhance the knowledge base for designing and implementing effective evaluations and will address the discomfort that extension agents may feel regarding their abilities to conduct

evaluations. Again, where do we go from here and how do we “talk the talk and walk the walk? “

**References:**

Grantham, Marilyn (1999). University of Minnesota Extension Faculty and Staff Members' Attitudes Toward and Perceptions About Program Evaluation: An Organizational Concern in Relation to Accountability Demands. Retrieved 3/13/2002; Available at <http://danr.ucop.edu/eee-aea/Evaluation%20Attitudes,%20AEAPaper.htm>

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