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What I Learned from 35 Years of Mistakes

Kim B. Anderson

There is no success without errors. Three keys to success are to learn from your errors, to learn from successful people, and to have mentors or role models whose advice and counsel you may follow to minimize errors. It takes more than knowledge and skill to develop a successful Cooperative Extension program. Programs need to be research-based, part of a team effort, and may involve using research and extension programs conducted and developed by others.

The best advice given to me on my first real job was, “The only way you’re not going to make mistakes is if you’re not doing your job” (Laubhan, 1972). Another quote from Henry Ford, “The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing,” added to my philosophical base (Ford and Crowther, 1922). Without the wisdom conveyed by Laubhan and Ford, plus Oklahoma State University colleague Phil Kenkel’s (1990) famous quote, “How hard can it be?,” mine could have been just another mediocre career.

As a dairy and farm boy from Muskogee County, Oklahoma, with a new Ph.D. in agricultural economics, I set out to educate producers in the area of marketing and risk management. I noticed that attendance at meetings and workshops was good. Participants were interested and listened. They even tried some of my ideas. Nearly all of them, if not all, reverted back to decisions and techniques they had used before my meetings or workshops.

Observant and inquisitive soul that I was, I conducted research to determine who was right. The results indicated that the producers were mostly right! If research-based information and education were to be transferred, and management

practices were to be changed, either the subject matter and/or the method of delivery had to change.

Learn from Your Audience

Audiences tend to be more receptive to change if they believe that you recognize that they have useful knowledge and skills. Time must be taken to learn about the audience individually, to learn from them, and to learn what management practices and decisions have worked for them and which ones have not. Then, let the audience know that you have learned from them.

When the audience recognizes that you believe that they are making relatively good decisions and are using good management practices, they are more likely to accept some of your suggested changes. You want to impress your audience with their knowledge, not yours. Then your audience will accept your knowledge as their own. Educational material needs to be structured so that the participants believe the needed change in management or the decision process is their idea.

Know Your Audience

The Oklahoma Grain and Feed Association (OG&FA) was and continues to be a major reason for my success. The association’s directors are leaders in Oklahoma’s grain industry and are

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a source of knowledge, ideas, data, and connections. Early in my career, I was asked to be the speaker at OG&FA's three district meetings. The program's format was open bar, steak dinner cooked on-site, open bar, my presentation about "On-farm Storage Costs," and open bar.

I assumed that the audience would be more interested in entertainment (jokes) than a boring lecture on "storage costs." Halfway through the "entertaining" presentation, Neal Hampton, manager of the Pillsbury Mill in Enid, Oklahoma, looked at me and said, "Son, you'll never make it in this business." This audience wanted as much "meat" in the educational portion of the program as they did in their steaks. At the second meeting, my presentation had been revised to include research results showing the costs of on-farm storage.

Do Not Do It Alone

Few people are intelligent or talented enough to accomplish tasks without direction from successful people. Financial guru Dave Ramsey (2013) said, "If you want to be successful, read books about successful people." It is even better if the successful people are present in person.

Between my M.S. degree and my Ph.D., I worked on a special project with Dr. John Holt (1977) from the University of Florida. His advice was, "Kim, you have the habit of getting between 85 and 90 percent prepared. When you think you've completed a task or are ready to make a presentation, that's when you have to 'bear-down' and finish that last 10 percent." He taught me that you have to have the discipline to finish the task right.

In my first few years as the crop marketing specialist at Oklahoma State University, I was fortunate to work with John Ikerd, the livestock marketing specialist. At meetings, John would present livestock marketing situations and outlook, and I would follow with crop marketing and outlook. After John would finish to a great round of applause, I would walk to the front with someone from the audience saying, "Let's see you follow that." John provided an example of how to "bond" with an audience. He forced me to sharpen my presentation skills and to use John Holt's advice about being prepared.

Several years later, at a Southern Agricultural Economics Association meeting, John Ikerd's presentation followed mine. After the applause and as John was coming forward, someone in the audience said, "John, let's see you follow that." Get a mentor that forces you to set the bar high and who will help you reach higher than the bar.

During my first year at the University of Kentucky, Wilmer Browning (1980) came into my office and said, "At the end of each year, you will fill out an annual report. Keep daily records and schedule two days on your calendar to complete the report." Everyone has to complete an annual report, and few people can remember everything that was accomplished during the year. Keep good records and take time to report what you accomplish.

Gus Page, Oklahoma State University Extension specialist in agribusiness, taught me to play golf and socialize with the clientele. He taught me the importance of building and maintaining relationships. Concurrent with this lesson, he also stressed "knowing your place." He said, "No matter how close the relationship, you're still 'not one of the boys.' Your stakeholders want to know you, but they also want to hold you on a pedestal. You are Dr. Anderson from Oklahoma State University, even though they call you Kim."

Present Others' Work

We have no reason to reinvent the wheel. If someone else has published or shared information and educational material that will enhance your program, use it but give them credit. At an Extension session of an American Agricultural Economics Association (AAEA, now Agricultural and Applied Economics Association) annual meeting (I do not remember the year), Carl Zulauf at The Ohio State University gave an excellent presentation on efficient markets and predicting prices. I have used parts of that presentation for nearly 30 years.

Kansas State professors Terry Kasten's and Kevin Dhuyvetter's research based on the Farm Business Record database provided research results that were instrumental in changing how Oklahoma crop producers market their crops.

Scott Irwin's and Darrel Good's AgMass research results supported Kasten's and Dhuyvetter's findings, which was also supported by the research of Wade Brorsen at Oklahoma State University. These three research programs from three different universities provided definitive evidence that what I was teaching had a sound research base, which is better than implying "trust me; I know what I'm talking about."

Do Not Tell Stakeholders What to Do

A producer will ask, "When should I sell my wheat?" or "How should I sell my wheat?" What they really want to know is, "Is the way I'm selling my wheat or plan to sell my wheat okay?" or "Am I making sound decisions?" The educator must have the communication skills, know the questions to ask, and how to ask the questions to determine what the producer plans to do. If the plan and/or decision is sound, the educator supports it. If not, then information needs to be provided that leads the producers to the "right" decision. Producers want to make their own decisions. What they really want from educators is supporting evidence that what they are doing has a relatively high probability of turning out right.

Wade Brorsen quizzed me about what I taught producers. After asking the same question three different ways and receiving the same answer three different ways, he said, "All you're doing is making them feel good." My response was, "Yes, and after they develop confidence in what they are doing, they are ready to make the changes that improve the decisions they are making." A major responsibility is often to teach the audience that what they are doing is the right thing to do. Often decision-makers make the right decisions but do not know why they are the right decisions.

Provide Something the Audience Can Use Immediately

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service conducts meetings, workshops, and conferences that provide education and information. Often the education provides knowledge and

skills that may be used over months, years, or even a lifetime. However, in each presentation, something must be provided that may be put to use immediately, something that provides instant gratification. This "something" makes stakeholders feel like their time was not wasted and that they leave with something they know will improve their profit situation or make their lives better.

Know the Value of Entertainment

I was conducting meetings with an agronomist, a plant pathologist, and a soil scientist. They presented material that was research based, educational and could be implemented immediately. This information, if implemented, would increase production and profit. Audience members were very attentive and asked questions.

My "situation and outlook" presentations were always typically last in the group and, often, the audience members asked few questions. I lamented to the agronomist, Roger Gribble, that the other material was based on research and was rich in value. However, because prices cannot be predicted, I believed that my information was not as valuable as their information. Gribble's response was, "People will come because you're on the program. People like to listen to your presentations because you are entertaining. Never discount the value of entertainment" (Gribble, 2013).

Approximately three weeks later, Roger and I were visiting with producers when a medical doctor, who owns a large farm and ranch, owns 10 John Deere dealerships, and is a big supporter of Oklahoma State University, said, "Kim, I want you to know that I always like to listen to you. Your presentations are always informative and entertaining" (Pollard, 2013).

Entertaining does not mean telling jokes. It means bonding with the audience. It means convincing the audience that you believe what you are saying. It means delivering the message with energy and passion. It means delivering at least one thing they can use immediately. If the audience is asleep or distracted, no matter how important the message, the message has no value.

Ask for Questions

When a presentation is delivered, the facilitator will usually invite the audience to ask questions. If no questions are asked, the presentation ends on a negative note. Even if questions are asked and the presentation ends with the phrase “if there are no more questions. . .,” the presentation ends on a negative note.

Always save one good point to share after the questions. By doing this, the presentation will always end on a positive note.

Conclusions

I cannot provide you with the perfect, the best, or the one single style or method to deliver Cooperative Extension educational programs. All educators must develop a style and method to fit their knowledge, skill base, and personality. Educators should remember that “there is not effort without error and shortcomings” (Roosevelt, 1910). The important part of mistakes is to learn from them.

Knowledge and delivery method will depend on the audience and the individual educator. To be successful, each educator should find mentors who are successful, are role models, and who will assist in minimizing mistakes.

Do not worry about being the best. Strive to be above average in everything and in the end, you will be counted among the best.

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