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The Art of Entrepreneurship in an Extension Unit

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Abstract

This article will examine the key concepts and traits of entrepreneurial action that the author believes are necessary to sustain and grow an Extension unit. The article will examine The Ohio State University South Centers' efforts utilizing these concepts. From this examination, future directions for programming, staffing, and structure will be shared.

Introduction

As the land grant system enters its second century of work, it faces many challenges and opportunities and finds society in a different setting than one hundred years ago. These changes suggest a different structure, different mindset, and a different approach. The opportunities need to become the focus of the organization, each unit within the system and each individual within that unit rather than looking at the challenges. The concepts of entrepreneurship to be utilized within the land-grant environment need to be better understood and applied. Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial action is not new to many environments but the land-grant system needs to learn how to apply the many proven but different thinking perspectives.

Background

“Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish, or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry”, Bill Drayton states. This statement sounds like the land-grant system with researchers and Extension agents of 100 years ago and it's evolutionary process taken over the years. Do we still have that spirit

or has the vision changed. Entrepreneurship is a way of thinking with individuals involved having a vision of what they want to accomplish, being highly focused, saving their resources of money, time, and expertise to focus on the real needs and tasks, and avoiding activities that don't move the organization forward or meet the opportunities presented.

Over the past twenty years we have focused our attention on the transfer of information or the learning of new facts to help people improve themselves. We have not had a vision of bringing about a change directly but through an indirect process of people acquiring new information. We have not focused our attention on the people's use of the information. The author suggests that we need to move to a concept of a change agent and focus our attention on helping people to make changes in their families, business, farms, or communities. Our outcome needs to be changes in people's lives and not just the acquiring of new information.

Hirsh and Peters defined entrepreneurship as a "Process of creating something new and assuming the risks and reward". Timmons says that "Entrepreneurship is a way of thinking, reasoning, and acting that is opportunity obsessed, holistic, in approach, and leadership balanced" Timmons further says that "Entrepreneurship is a human, creative act that builds something of value from practically nothing. It is the pursuit of opportunity regardless of the resources, or lack of resources, at hand. It requires a vision and the passion and commitment to lead others in the pursuit of that vision. It also requires a willingness to take calculated risks." Timmons further says that entrepreneurial

action is a “.... recognition of opportunities, followed by the will and initiative to seize these opportunities”

Entrepreneurial action is normally expressed as a function or activity in a business venture. It is true that many of these concepts are an important ingredient of a successful business but the author believes these elements can be incorporated as an important belief structure of a successful social organization such as an Extension unit or program. The extent of the entrepreneur spirit of an individual or individuals within a unit dictates the success of the individual or the unit as a whole. Accenture describes the five elements of entrepreneurship as being creative, the ability to apply that creativity, drive, focus on creating value, and the ability and willingness to take risks. To further explain, Accenture says that creativity enables new ways of thinking and working where opportunities are noticed and resources are marshaled to address these opportunities. The entrepreneur demonstrates a belief in their ability to change the way things are done and with passion success will be achieved. Individuals are willing to break rules, cut across accepted boundaries and go against the status quo.

Bornstein speaks to social change as a place where there is a commitment to systems and information flow and a coalition between government and business. He further says that desire alone will not create the change but true entrepreneurial action requires pursuit in a relentless manner in the pursuit of one's visions. A belief must be in place where one will not give up until one's ideas are spread as wide as one can achieve.

In order for success to occur in an entrepreneurial setting and for an organization to succeed, there needs to be a strong desire to achieve, the individuals in the organization must be leaders to attract resources, a market must be free where people have the right to choose or not to choose a market, and where the market for ideas or programs are not in the control of the larger organization. In combination with the above elements, the competence of the people involved and the orientation to opportunity without regard to resources must exist for true entrepreneurship to occur.

Leebaret speaks to entrepreneurial action as problems and opportunities being clearly identified. The author would argue that one should not look at problems in isolation but consider problems as an opportunity. The glass is half full rather than half empty.

Leebaret further suggests that entrepreneurship is the courage to bring about change combined with common sense to challenge the organization's habit of operation.

The Ohio State University South Centers

These concepts will sustain or even strengthen the Extension unit or program. The Ohio State University's South Centers, a regional research and Extension center, has been striving to integrate the spirit of entrepreneurship into their environment, programming, staff selection, orientation, funding, and program delivery. Staff selection and orientation, program priority selection, program development process, creating an appropriate mind set, locating and managing fiscal resources, and creating an environment for entrepreneurship action have been explored and build on as a part of the development of the unit.

The Ohio State University's South Centers, slightly over ten years old, consists of eight different centers created by legislative acts, base organization's decisions, or funding (collaborations) actions. Each of these actions require a different administrative process, a different view of management, and expectations of operating differently than the base organization may have. The OSU South Centers mission is "We enhance southern Ohio by assisting people with informed decision making through responsive research, education, entrepreneurship application and collaborative partnerships. We are a leading, respected contributor to the land grant mission of the Ohio State University." In turn, the vision of the unit is that "We create an environment where our research based educational resources unite to inspire confident decision making by:

- Fostering objectivity in research and programming
- Interacting with the public and responding respectfully to their needs and opportunities
- Utilizing a holistic approach to problem solving and program delivery to strengthen youth, individuals, families, and communities
- Facilitating technology advancement
- Demonstrating and developing leadership
- Educating volunteers for community service
- Helping people achieve excellence.

This mission and vision has been in place for the past four years. The mindset of entrepreneurial action by the staff and the unit is a necessity to achieve this vision. The

characteristics as described for entrepreneurship is an important ingredient for success.

This mission and vision statements provide a foundation for successful entrepreneurship to occur and develop. The leadership and staff work at this vision each and every day.

With entrepreneurship and leadership, the South Centers have in the past eight years created six new centers to be managed with the original two. Eighteen new positions have been created as a result of building relationships and receiving additional external funding. \$1.2 million of base annual funding has leveraged over two million dollars of additional annual operating funds and 4.5 million dollars of one-time funds for a business incubator facility.

Recently the Ohio State University Extension, with the OSU South Centers as a unit, has focused on restructuring using the following principles:

- Locally focused and relevant
- Holistic
- Proactive programming
- Structure based on entrepreneurial action
- Interdisciplinary planning and implementation
- Flexibility in staffing and operations
- Diversified funding

Implications

To achieve these principles, the characteristic of entrepreneurship has to be a formal and integrated part of the thinking and action of each individual and the organization as a

whole. The culture of the staff and the organization will need to change to accomplish these principles. An outward focus will need to be the signature of the organization to achieve a proactive approach in programming. An internal focus will not allow the organization to focus on the needs and opportunities of the people that the organization has been created to serve and to build the necessary relationships with collaborating partnerships. Collaborations and partnerships with other organizations (private and public) and agencies of similar interest need to be established to address programming in a holistic manner and to best utilize the expertise and abilities of all involved. This fact does not suggest that internal partnerships should not exist but supports the very fact that teams of personnel can best serve the interests of the organization if the teams act in an entrepreneurial fashion.

Staff selection and orientation, program priority selection, program development process, creating a appropriate mind set, locating and managing fiscal resources, and creating an environment for entrepreneurship action need to be explored and implemented. Each unit will look somewhat different depending on the characteristics and needs of the people being served, the collaborators, and the expertise and abilities of the staff.

Extension and applied research efforts are struggling for financial resources to maintain their programming and focus. Cost recovery, revenue generation, private support, loss of formula funding at the federal and state level, and educational and research competition from other organizations and agencies are all a part of the current outreach horizons for academic institutions. The needs and opportunities, which traditionally had been met by

academic organizations, are changing or are being served by other organizations. Is the land-grant system able to shift program priorities quickly into those arenas and generate the internal support needed so the academic institution can meet the opportunity or will it continue with the unique interests of the staff member or the home unit?

Extension being not the only player in town is just one of the examples of changes in an environment, which may require a culture change in the organization. As well as being a good teacher and researcher, partnerships, teams, networking, and being at the table when decisions are being made are important ingredients of today's successful staff member. These changes require a different kind of teacher, leader, communicator, facilitator, partner, and team player all working in an entrepreneurial environment.

Science based and trained personnel have always been the essence of the hiring process. These characteristics are what one has looked for in the candidates that are interviewed. Good communication and teaching experience has been an added dimension of what is needed in new staff. The author will argue there now needs to be the characteristic for new hires of having a spirit of entrepreneurship in their mind and sole. These new staff members need to see the problems in the world, state, or location as opportunities, have a creative attitude, be willing to take risks, and have demonstrated strong leadership skills. These characteristics need to become a part of the many choices that the audiences have for information and education. The strong competition that the land grant system has with the non-profit organizations and private sector, and educational programs, at least in agriculture are no longer just focused on production but need to have a focus on the

environment, social acceptability, and economic efficiency. Without a strong entrepreneurial spirit of the staff, they will have greater difficulty in succeeding and the unit will not achieve the success it needs and consequently will have a greater difficulty in obtaining the necessary resources.

If we are to focus on the outcome of our work, one should have a view of the big picture and not just a single strand. If personnel end up focusing on a single topic in their career, they need to learn to recognize the place that has and how it fits into the global perspective. Orientation and continuing educational opportunities need to be focused on helping individuals see how they may achieve the spirit of entrepreneurship action.

To increase the entrepreneur action of staff, an entrepreneurial structure and organizational dynamics must exist. Market assessment is an ongoing process from which to identify opportunities that need to be in place but the individuals or units must have the ability to move as new ideas and opportunities become available. The staff must be robust and flexible in its day-to-day management and operation to succeed in this entrepreneurial approach. One cannot wait for three to six months to approach new ideas or address new opportunities. One must move quickly to change as new opportunities arise. Approval process for fiscal affairs and program must be streamlined; the University must be willing to accept a higher level of risk to allow individuals to make decisions that affect their programs. Getting contract approval from a business officer to use a church hall is not a wise use of time nor does it encourage individuals to move quickly. Approvals at multiple levels need to be reduced. Hierarchy within the organization needs

to be reduced so a person does not need to look to their program leader, unit head, or director for approval before moving ahead on the opportunity. The focus for program decisions, appraisal, and evaluation process needs to be on the outcome and not on the level of inputs, activities, or output.

With the reducing base funding for research and Extension programs, a greater willingness to collaborate and partner with competitors, organizations with mutually orientated visions, and with the private sector needs to be found. Funding sources are also found in very different locations today requiring different collaborations, team efforts, and willingness to reach out across traditional boundaries. The individuals involved will need to commit time to seeking and finding additional resources to fund program effort with the focus being on changing the situation. The author argues that entrepreneurial action is needed to be successful to obtain the necessary resources through grants, fee based programming, or contracts. The land grant system will need to be willing to become a junior partner at times, accept other parties in the process, and recognizing that other organizations have skills and abilities as well. With collaborations, fiscal affairs will need to occur that are not always clear and neat and may require different administrative arrangements than what the University may desire. If the units are to be successful, the administrative processes must be addressed to allow for differences, the individuals involved need to be risk takers, and the system must recognize that failure may occur at times. The land grant-system as a system will need to focus on the successes and not the failure, remembering the glass is half full rather than half empty. Funding will in deed come in the future from multiple sources of organizations, thus

requiring the building of relationships and an entrepreneurial approach to obtaining those external funds.

The concept that every unit must be the same or everyone must think alike needs to be reexamined. The author believes each unit must operate somewhat differently to fully and efficiently access the collaboration in the regions, to manage the available diversified funding streams, and to remain locally and holistic focused. This mindset will require a change in culture of individuals in the organization and a change in administrative processes.

Personnel, belief structure, and environment are needed for a successful Extension and research program and organization of the future. An organization that can sustain itself, grow in stature, serve the interests and needs of the audience, and compete with other similar organizations will need entrepreneurial action by its staff and each of its units.

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