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DISCUSSION: A BLUEPRINT FOR DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL EXTENSION PROGRAM: ADVICE FROM SOME MASTER BUILDERS

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I not only was impressed with Anderson's paper, but also with his cooperation in providing me with a copy sufficiently in advance of our annual meeting for me to review it for this session.

The "Blueprint" gives a thoughtful and practical treatment of the assignment on how a novice extension specialist (economist) in agricultural economics should design, and, to some extent, implement a successful extension program. Experienced extension economists have offered numerous dos and don'ts, and these admonitions, if heeded, will surely benefit beginning specialists.

A career as an extension specialist can be challenging and rewarding, but since fewer individuals come up through the ranks than formerly, more "on the job learning" is required to master the art of extending the findings of research to the users of such knowledge. Anderson has enumerated many excellent points, which need no elaboration. However, I would like to add a few comments to emphasize some of the points that he discussed.

More emphasis should be placed on the need for the extension economist to firmly establish his credibility as a communicator in the subject matter area during the first six months. Establishing his credibility means that he knows what he is talking about; but he also needs to put his information together and deliver it in an understandable presentation. Knowing what not to say before groups that might embarrass a county staff or other groups supporting his extension efforts is also important. Also, a new specialist should avoid creating the impression on county staffs, especially, that they are being used for his personal gratification. A third factor is that six months may be too short a time period in which the new specialist learns how extension works. This is a significant point and needs to be understood early—it is a continuing process so far as knowledge is concerned. No matter how good the specialist's program, if he (she) cannot get past the door of the district agent or the county chairman, his (her) success will be less than the potential.

An area that might have been slighted is the

matter of the attributes essential to becoming a successful extension economist. A person should get satisfaction from the work and find the work both challenging and rewarding. Some frustrations are unavoidable in any type of work; this can be especially true for an extension specialist. The job description is not nearly as straightforward as that of an assignment to teach or to conduct research. Extension is said to be "a link between research and the users of knowledge." A more direct description is offered by Tom Brown, long-time Missouri extension economist: "Extension specialists will continue to have the responsibility for orienting the new county agent and keeping all agents competent in subject matter." Such assignments involve a much more varied approach than simply "meeting a class" or "designing a computer program to meet a research need." The professional extension economist must maintain a professional attitude in relations with colleagues and clientele group. If others sense that one is "competent and not vain and pretentious," they are inclined from the start to give a fair hearing to ideas or proposals. In the first six months, the specialist should exploit the opportunities afforded to make a favorable first impression. To be interested in what you present and to be interested in what others think can go far to establish you in the minds of others as a worthwhile addition to the team.

To fulfill the expected requirements of a discussant, I shall try to point out some possible limitations. Because the paper deals with a blueprint for a successful program, one might expect some rather clearcut statements of what successful means, or at least about the criteria for success. How does an extension specialist evaluate the success of his (her) program? I have to assume that Anderson knows what it takes to be successful, because he identified "three Master extension specialists from three institutions," who in turn named 75 persons. There may be an element of self-identification in the process. Despite the absence of criteria for choosing the "Masters," however, there are comments found in the paper that may give some clues about how success is measured or identified. A close examination reveals some suggestions. Probably

the most meaningful criterion is, "help clientele make better decisions." Another is that the extension specialist should "prioritize a plan of work with emphasis on high pay-off programs." But when the specialist examines what criterion is used to determine high payoff, the specialist is first admonished to find out "Who sets priorities?" and so determine "On what is the professional and monetary system based?" The Masters also point out "it is important to develop and hold administrative support." However, this may conflict slightly with the assertion that the specialist "give your family first priority." In considering possible conflicts, though, the following suggestions may represent the greatest conflict, "if you are a good speaker put yourself on the road," vs. "don't be a suitcase specialist." Apparently another criterion is to be known by editors and newscasters—"cultivate a relationship with television, radio, newspaper, and magazine professionals." Perhaps the size of the honorarium one receives is also an identification of success, because one is admonished to establish one's own identity.

Immediately following the suggestion that the specialist should travel if he (she) is an effective speaker is the palliative that "if you are not a good speaker, don't worry about it," be a good organizer. The payoff there, I assume, is that if the specialist is a good organizer, he (she) will have material for the required extension reports.

It is quite possible that this following criticism is not as valid as I may be implying, because the comments are taken out of context, and it is not a criticism of Dr. Anderson's observations but those of the "Masters." Whether taken out of context or not, I believe that my impression is valid, because the emphasis is intensified by the use of quotes and capital letters. I refer to the emphasis placed upon "your own" long-range program objective and an ongoing program based on YOUR assessment of real clientele needs and opportunities. My reaction to this attitude would be equally applicable to a research program as to an extension program. In the absence of a Master agricultural program based upon consensus of scientists and agricultural leaders in the state, YOUR program, based on your preliminary ideas may be best. A much more defensible alternative in my view would be a program, utilizing the discipline of the extension specialists, that would make the maximum contribution to the overall objective of the Master agriculture program. After reading the paper the first time, I was left with the sense that the "blueprint" really laid out a procedure that would assure the popularity and self-centeredness of the person, rather than a program and procedure that would contribute to the well-being of the clientele being served. I am probably wrong, because this is one discussant's reaction to the opinion of 40 Masters.