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IMPORTANCE OF USING RURAL PEOPLE AS LEADERS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Joseph Di Franco

Most professional extension personnel have accepted the principle that local leaders are important in rural development. There seems to be two schools of thought in relation to the use of local leaders:

1) Extensionists who believe local leaders should be used primarily as demonstrators;

2) Those who idealistically believe local people should be primarily teachers to instruct others.

However, the majority of individuals in either school of thought have the same general criticism that members of rural families generally are not capable or not sufficiently educated to be able to be demonstrators or teachers. That the job of demonstrating and teaching should be left to professionals.

Individuals who think this way miss the point completely. Farm or rural individuals acting as local leaders, or those individuals who for one reason or another are selected to assist the extension agents, can be effective demonstrators and teachers because they come out of the very group which extension is trying to influence. It is the fact that they are not "professional" that makes them effective and an important media for extensionists to use in the transfer of knowledge and skills to their fellow men.

When a community is primarily illiterate, an illiterate can be an effective catalist to change. A literate person should be able to be more effective but this is not always true even when he is a respected individual in the group. Certainly he can only be effective if he understands the problem and limitations of the illiterate. The professional person therefore must be able to work with the material at hand. The non-professional also does this but mainly because he acts in the only way he knows. In acting in this way, however he

is much more convincing and effective with his neighbors and relatives.

Too often it is when an individual aquires additional education or skills that he becomes different. He then becomes a little apart from the group he wishes to serve. It requires greater effort and skill to maintain an effective position in the group. A farm boy who goes to the city or goes to college sets himself apart from his friends and neighbors. The more experience the more professional.

We have all heard remarks of the professional athlete or musician, i.e. "Of course he's good, he practices 8 or more hours a day." "If I had the time to practice I would be good too."

What we are saying is if we wanted to, we could set ourselves apart. We didn't apply ourselves mainly because we don't have the drive, interest or in some instances, are limited physically. But when the average person can get results without too much extra effort he still must be given the extra push or incentive. This usually can best be done by utilizing individuals in the group which are still much like the group we want to work with. These individuals must not be given the opportunity to use the excuse that they are different (implying that those who are demonstrating or teaching are different).

In the normal pattern of life, children teach each other. Housewives exchange ideas, skills and practices. Farmers pass on to each other those practices that develop agriculture. However, the normal procedure does not move rapidly and tends over long periods, to perpetuate the same ideas, skills, concepts and practices. (Thus "cultures" are developed.) The group tends to be self contained and the group begins to impose limitations through customs. We therefore need to break the group pattern to allow new ideas and concepts to penetrate. (This is called progress.)

A member from outside the group may have impact and can bring about change. However, relatively speaking, to change groups would require as many "trained" or professional individuals (change agents) as there are groups.

Most countries do not have this human man power source to do the job. So we resort to laws, edicts and even grandiose schemes such as land reform, colonization, rural plans, often forgetting the individuals that are to be affected in the development of the plans.

Until the people themselves are involved in providing the local leadership, most "schemes" are doomed to failure. Thus where local leaders are used as an integral part of the scheme of bringing about change successes are forthcoming. It is only when we begin to question their abilities do we run into trouble. The professional person sometimes gets too far ahead of the leaders and thus looses them and we begin to say that leaders have limitations.

Naturally they have limitations but that is also why they can be effective. They belong to the group. Because they are members of the group they will be effective if we take into account the pressures placed upon them. They are caught between two forces:

1) Trying to stay acceptable within their own group;

   and

2) Trying to effect changes to the normal pattern of the group.

Yes, local leaders can be effective demonstrators and teachers. In doing one, they contribute to the other. We should worry less about their knowledge of psychology, sociology, group dynamics. This the professional man must know.

What we need to do is utilize the group and its natural make-up. In using the group as it is we can make effective and lasting changes. We must keep the local leader comfortable and related to his group. If we change him too quickly and drastically we separate him from the group and this results in less effective change.

If we as extensionists can only learn how to accept this concept we can utilize the internal forces that can bring about change. Through proper use of local leaders there is no limit to the extent for rural development.

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