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LOCAL LEADERS IN EXTENSION

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LOCAL LEADERS IN EXTENSION

by

Joseph Di Franco

There seems to be a universal acceptance, on the part of extensionists of the principle that the use of leaders is part of the process of extension education. In a recent survey of a Latin American country with a decade of extension, it was found that almost every agent said leaders were a great help in carrying on extension work. However, many extension agents in newly developing extension services seem to have difficulty in using leaders. In response to the question: "who are your leaders?" the answers indicated that most agents considered appointed official as the principal leaders. We cannot say that all appointed officials -- political, religious, educational -- could not be extension leaders, but it is improbable that they are the only ones who can give the leadership necessary for an effective extension service.

The leader concept may be one of the major factors why some young extension organizations have not moved ahead as rapidly as they should.

To avoid future problems we must make sure we do not have the wrong concepts. We may all accept the principle that use of leaders is a good thing but it may be a good idea to clear up some of our misconceptions if they exist.

First let's go over some reasons why use of leaders is so important in Extension work:

1. Using leaders helps the agent to expand (extend) his educational service.

2. Rural people will more readily accept new practices when their leaders adopt them.

3. By "working through leaders", agents should have great contact with the people and better know their needs.

4. There is usually less disruption of the program when agents change if the leader approach is used effectively.

5. Using leaders helps to fulfill the Extension principle of involving people in the process of helping themselves.

These five reasons express the value or importance of using leaders. They may be also sufficient to help us clarify what an Extension leader is. Perhaps we can obtain an insight into the roles of leaders by analyzing these statements.

Once we know what is expected of leaders, assistance (training) can be given to the agents to help them more adequately select leaders, and to use them properly.

The first reason (mentioned above) for using leaders assumes that the Extension process is clearly understood by agents. Here again we may have misunderstood a fundamental concept and it logically follows that if the Extension process is misunderstood the agent may in good faith be mislead in his thinking on the kinds of leaders he needs to help him.

Administrators and supervisors especially need to make sure that all Extension agents understand the process of Extension. It is also the supervisors' responsibility to assist the agents to learn the educational process we call Extension. In fact the only way to know if an agent can do Extension, in spite of what he says, is to see him at work. Agents learn the process by doing it. This means a very close observation of new agents is necessary in order to help them develop and practice what we preach. It is in the first years of experience that Extension agents are made. It is also in the first year that an agent can take the time to start right with developing people. Too many start action programs instead of developing a process through or by which a program can be developed.

There are many reasons why new agents may start wrong. There are great pressure to "get on with the job". Many needs are visible and many are easily satisfied through direct contact and services. So the agent does get on with the job and is extremely busy rendering direct services and has less and less time to exploit leadership to help him do Extension. He also formulates his own idea of what Extension is and these bad habits are hard to break later.

When we look at the second reason given, that people more readily follow their own leaders, agents too often assume that political officials, clergy, teachers, officials of various organizations are the leaders of the people. These individuals are more often representatives of groups rather than leaders. In a society where public officials are usually appointed by politicians rather than elected, where teachers come from outside the community, where clergy may represent a religion rather than people, we must realize that many of them may not necessarily be leaders but instead may be representatives or symbols. They must become a part of a community and in time may become leaders. They have the same relationship to the community as the Extension agent. They may have some legal or traditional responsibility in which they may <u>control</u> groups rather than lead them. This "control power", however, is one that Extension can use to advantage in becoming established. In fact, Extension agents cannot start working without becoming accepted by these

formal community representatives. What we are saying is, that Extension must have acceptance by these legalized representatives because Extension, too, is another "power" within the community. The agents have to sell their programs and assure others that they will not usurp power from existing groups. Satisfied that Extension will not by-pass or displace them, many formal officials can do much to help Extension become established. Without this acceptance no Extension program can be initiated, however; with this acceptance agents still have to develop Extension programs. Thus, we see that formal community officials are helpful for Extension agents in order to become a part of the community and that Extension agents must work with them.

We now begin to infer that there are different kinds of leaders. These are: 1) formal community officials. 2) Un-official lay Extension leaders. There is also a place in the Extension process for using these different kinds of leaders. We have already discussed the relationship of Extension with the first group, "formal community officials", which is one primarily of public relations. The agent himself becomes one of these formal community "leaders" after he establishes himself. These formal leaders may become Extension leaders but usually this does not happen because formal leaders have full time jobs and responsibilities representing their own organization. The position of informal leader is one that is not easily acquired by appointment.

Let us turn to reason Nº 3, "through leaders agents have direct contact with people". We know that both, formal and informal leaders have direct contact with people. What we want is not contact alone but acceptance by people. All community officials have direct contact by right of their position. Not all officials, however, reach people. The old adage that you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink, perhaps, expresses this best. Officials (Extension agents included) can contact people but cannot always get them to change, even when the change is beneficial for them. (Although they may use force or the power of their appointed position). Extension as we know is an educative and democratic process which does not order people to perform. How then can we reach people? We have to get them to accept or desire the change we propose. Usually, change accepted and practiced by the progressive people of a community who are doing a little bit better than their neighbors, i.e. the farmer who seems to stand out and get better results. These who lead in production and management, often are the progressive farmers and usually by example lead others to follow. This type of leadership may not be an active type role. He may not desire the leadership role or seek it intentionally, but he is the one people watch and of whom they ask questions. He is the one they wait for to make decisions. Usually he informally can pull individuals together and in effect he sways decisions of the group he is in. Thus if we can turn this leadership role to an active role in the Extension process we have a very effective resource to strengthen our position as agents of change.

Another important factor is the problem of program interruption with Extension staff changes. To help strengthen newly developing programs it has been proven that use of local leaders helps lessen the shock or disruption brought about by staff changes. In fact one major problem expressed by Extension administrators is how to continue effective program development when there is a shortage of trained staff and high rate of turnover. When the people become an active part of program planning and development and as leaders support the Extension staff, Extension can then have a method whereby people (leaders) can take over during a period when an agent is absent or new on the job. This also insures that the program is one of the people and not of the agents. A program is apt to change when there is a turnover of agents unless local leaders help plan the program.

Thus, we see the use of leaders supports another Extension principle which is "we should involve people to help themselves". This includes planning and execution of programs. This includes more active roles on the part of the recipients, the people. Leaders are also part of the community. There are many ways in which people can be involved but a proven and successful way is to use leaders to help their neighbors and friends. In this way, leaders become actively involved in promoting change. They can also be considered "agents" of change for they actually represent the Extension agent in demostrating and teaching and become a part of the Extension process.

Briefly we have presented some reasons why the use of local leaders are very helpful and beneficial in the Extension process. We have not, however, still clarified who are the leaders that we refer to or we should incorporate into the educational process.

Some clues are available if we think about why they are helpful. They are progressive individuals in the community. They are good farmers and good housewives. They are vitally involved in the activity in which change is to take place. They are full-time farmers, dairy men, coffee growers, housewives, etc. The potential leaders are not only active in farming but they look outward for resources to improve their productivity or level of living. They are also respected citizens who are willing to share their know-how. Usually they are not involved directly in an official capacity of the community. Holding an official or appointed position often limits their freedom of action, i.e., religious leaders or political officials. These kinds of leaders have their own full-time programs to take care of. Extension agents need to turn to farmers and housewives for his leadership assistance. Leaders must emerge from the same groups or class of people that the agents are trying to help.

The successful Extension agent is the person who can discover leadership within the community and successfully involve them in the process of education aimed at bringing about change. These voluntary informal leaders of the community give of their services to help their neighbors but without being paid for their services. They are known in Extension as voluntary lay leaders.

The successful Extension Service is one that includes in the training of agents and in their supervision the philosophy that use of local leaders is a part of Extension Education. It must also include training on where leaders are to be found and how to select and use them. And that in the program of training, there needs to be included training for local leaders; they too need to understand their roles and responsibilities. Part of this training should help newly developing agents to see the difference between using community officials to establish the right to work in a community (Public Relations) and using local people as leaders in the development and execution of an Extension program. Both are aspects Extension agents need to understand, learn and use.

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