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It is an honor and humbling experience to be selected by my peers to receive the National Distinguished Service Ruby Award from Epsilon Sigma Phi. I am accepting this Award on behalf of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service faculty and staff who dedicate their lives to improve the quality of life for the people of Kentucky. Recognition of this magnitude cannot be achieved by an individual alone, and I want to express my appreciation to all my colleagues who have assisted in our joint efforts during my 38-year career in Extension. I would like to recognize my wife of 40 plus years Jo Ann (Sweetie) who has shared this Extension adventure with me. Joe Williams stated that we need to present her with a "Ruby" award for her partnership in this joint venture, and it has truly been a partnership. Finally to all our supporters in Kentucky and Texas, especially Sandy Duff, who worked long and hard to make us all look good, thank you!

**The Art and Science of Building Bridges**

Ever since my first days on the job as a young Extension professional I've been expected to be a builder of bridges. Not the type that are built of wood, or steel, or stone. But a type of bridge that you can't see or even put your hands on. It is a bridge that connects people. The expectation to build bridges goes back many years. As a young, inexperienced agent in Texas, I remember my first supervisor telling me that I needed to recruit volunteers to serve on advisory committees, work with 4H and youth programs, assist with both method and result demonstrations and help secure program resources. As the years went by, we began organizing interdisciplinary teams to help solve complex problems; and today the buzz words include collaboration, coalition building, and partnerships. I am positive that the individuals responsible for these charges assumed that we as Extension professionals had the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve success in these endeavors, but for the most part these assumptions were false. We had to learn these skills by trial and error. We made mistakes, but generally we were able to learn from our efforts.

We tend to divide our skills in Extension work into two areas: programmatic and process. We allocate a majority of our resources as an organization to the program component without developing process skills in our employees. I contend that we need to expand professional development efforts with our staff in developing an understanding of the process skills required to be successful. How much easier it would have been, if as a young agent, I had been given training on how to recruit, manage and retain volunteers leaders. It would have been easier to chair a committee or task force if I had been trained on the various stages a committee goes through and how to manage a diverse group of people and to bring them to a consensus. And today, we encourage

coalitions, collaboration and bridge building without the slightest thought that we are asking our employees to engage in a complicated process without possessing the basic skills required to achieve success. One of the most important endeavors that I undertook as a new specialist and probably helped me more than anything else was to search the literature for all the information I could find on the "Adoption Process." The earliest papers, if I remember correctly were from England and mapped the various stages an individual goes through before adopting a practice or changing behavior. The first two stages were "Awareness" and "Interest."

I hope that we as a group are now in the "Interest" stage as we discuss the subject of "Building Bridges." If you will allow me, I'd like to use my engineering background and the courses I took in structural design as an analogy to building bridges, i.e., partnerships, coalitions, collaboration, etc. The first question that comes to mind is "why bother?" Building a bridge allows you to cross physical barriers more easily and efficiently. Building relationships allows us to achieve goals that we would be unable to accomplish as individuals. Building these bridges or relationships, even in the simplest form, is a complicated task that requires knowledge of the fundamentals. All (or most of us) have utilized simple bridges. The most basic that comes to mind is a plank across a stream or gully. Simple and easy to build: isn't it? Maybe not, if you consider the basic principles involved. The bridge requires a solid foundation or footing on both sides. It requires a board or plank that is capable of sustaining the load that it will be exposed to. The plank will be subjected to stresses, both internal and external, as well as compression and tension. If a miscalculation is made in computing these stresses, the result could be catastrophic failure of the structure or over building the structure based on its function can result in excess use of resources. Not so simple anymore, is it? But it can be if you focus on the components.

Let's start with the foundation. The principles are the same whether you're considering a physical structure or a personal relationship. In order for the foundation to support the structure, it must be solid and have a sound footing. The foundation for personal relationships must also have solid components. These include trust, integrity, respect, credibility, reliability, loyalty, attitude and honest communication. As an organization, the foundation starts at the local level. If we don't have the ability to build this relationship or foundation with our co-workers, how can we be expected to build this foundation with external audiences. Too many times as an organization, we focus on individual program areas or discipline, rather than recognizing that we have one Extension program to which all of us contribute. If you consider the foundations of a bridge, each side must be equal to support the span. Webster defines a partnership as one "in which each person has equal status and a certain independence but also has the unspoken or formal obligation to the other." If one fails, the whole structure fails. In my experience working as a partnership or with interdisciplinary teams, each individual serves as a vital component of the foundation. The better job we do selecting the team members, the better chance of success. To ensure success, we need the very best people we can find, those that are solid in their discipline and respect those of other disciplines, not intimidated by other team members, and are able to communicate honestly and openly. The first time one of the team members is intimidated or overwhelmed by another team

member they are unable to pull their weight or hold up the load and (what do you know) we have another failure. The same is true for county staff. The better job we do hiring the team members, the more solid the foundation, and the greater chance of success.

Now let's talk about the span or plank. The first question is: what will be the load to which the span will be subjected, or what is the task or goal we hope to achieve? In all relationships, the simplest is "one on one," where two people enter into an agreement to work together to accomplish a mutually agreeable goal, i.e., get from one side to the other. I would require a totally different plank than someone half my size to accomplish the goal to reach the other side. The bridge is still subjected to the same stresses, compression on the top of the plank and tension on the bottom. There are also internal and external forces at work; any of which, if an overload occurs because of design weakness, will result in failure of the bridge or relationship. As the number of variables or participants increase, the greater the chance for failure. It is important to recognize that even in the simple relationships, continuous forces are at work which, if not recognized and taken into consideration, could cause problems. Over the years I have been involved in many partnerships - including result demonstrations with agents and clientele. We were successful in achieving our goals a high percentage of the time. That success can be attributed to the fact that each of the partners understood the goals of the partnership and were committed to achieve these goals. When we examined the failures, we found that some could have been avoided. For example, higher stakes in our field plots which could have been seen from the combine, or better yet, rearranging our schedule to harvest the plots before the producer combined the field. Other failures were beyond our control, i.e., hurricanes, droughts, diseases, etc. The most important lesson is to learn the cause of the failures and correct the problems which we could control. The critical element in a partnership or relationship is open and honest communication. It is often easier to blame the failure of a partnership on the other person than to share responsibility and take steps to eliminate the problems in the future. Too often we focus on the failure to achieve our goal as the lack of success of the partnership, but many partnerships fail because of success. Success in achieving the goals of the partnership, but failure to give full credit to the contributions of the other partners. If there is one thing that I have learned in my 38 years in Extension, it is there is no such thing as giving too much credit or praise. Generally if you give more credit than is deserved, people will overcompensate the next time and give more than their fair share. The key to success in relationships is always allow the other person to be the star.

Often external forces beyond the control of the partnership can cause failures. I remember when I was a young county agent in Angelina County, Texas, our beef advisory committee planned a field day. We had a number of resource people on the program, including a person from the Soil Conservation Service (NRCS). He was demonstrating the use of terraces to prevent soil erosion, and we had good coverage from the local news media. His picture was one of several in the news article covering the event. All was well until I got a call from my supervisor "chewing me out" because I let someone from a "competitive agency" get their picture in the paper. We have external forces that we must deal with in all relationships. Try to organize an

interdisciplinary team of faculty members to produce an educational program, no problem, but when this same team develops a series of publications with joint authors, guess what? We now have to deal with promotion and tenure and who will be listed as senior author. If you think these external forces don't have a tremendous impact on the ability of the partnership to survive, think again! You can do the best job designing your bridge, but unless you build it over the high-water mark, the first flood will wash it away. The trick is to know where the high-water mark is and plan for the event.

To this point our discussion has been a simple structure, i.e., plank. But what about coalitions? We hear that word "bantered about" fairly frequently. If a simple partnership is complicated, what do you think about coalitions? Same principle, instead of one beam (plank) we have to deal with many, each one necessary to support the load the structure is designed to carry. Some beams or girders are compression members, others under tension. All are subject to internal, as well as external pressures. All designed and located to support the structure each dependent on one another. If one fails, the structure fails. One thing to keep in mind, you don't choose someone with little or no experience or training and ask them to design a complicated structure. Someone who has not developed and managed a partnership cannot be expected to handle a coalition. The task requires a thorough understanding of the process, as well as the design, management and leadership skills necessary to handle the job. You should be able to handle the plank before you try to build the "Brooklyn Bridge."

Once we have the bridge built remember the first thing you did - took that first step. Assuming that you used the appropriate formula, were accurate in your calculations, read your slide rule correctly, and, had confidence in yourself, you didn't go barreling across the bridge! Your first step was tentative, you knew that even under the best of conditions, you had to be cautious and feel your way across. There may be an internal fault in the plank that could cause it to break once it supported the full load. If you had your brother-in-law along, you could coax him to cross first. But, once you have made the first few crossings, you gain confidence in your structure. The same thing is true of partnerships. The first stages are tentative, but slowly, but surely you gain confidence in each other. As a specialist I developed many relationships with agents and demonstration cooperators and as time passed, I became more comfortable with them. Conducting a demonstration that second time was easier because we knew each others expectations and contributions to the partnership. I was always more comfortable crossing a bridge that I had used before, rather than crossing another one that someone else had built. As I think about it, the reason was ownership. If you're part of the design and construction team, you have greater confidence in the structure. The same can be said for programs we deliver to our clientele. If they [clientele] are part of the process, they will have commitment, support and ownership at all levels.

Have you ever been driving down the road and noticed how many bridges are undergoing maintenance of some type? How long do you think that even a simple plank bridge will last without some type of maintenance? High water could erode the foundation (bank), fungal organisms could weaken the wood fibers. To think that you could build a bridge or form a partnership without thought of maintenance is a path to

disaster. All relationships need constant nurturing (maintenance). Let one partner think that the other is taking him/her for granted and guess what? Even though I have worked with individuals, both agents and clientele, for years, I never arrived to put in a demonstration or research plot without adequate communications. Never make assumptions about the soundness of the structure or relationship. Regular attention is required. Keep in mind, maintenance is cheaper and more efficient than new construction. Maintaining an ongoing partnership is easier than establishing a new relationship.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your indulgence allowing my use of analogies and metaphors to discuss "building bridges." Hopefully the analogies will cause us to think about the process skills required to successfully manage partnerships, enter into collaborations and establish coalitions. We as an organization need to invest more resources in helping our employees understand group dynamics and the various stages that committees, teams and partnerships go through in their evolutionary stages. Just as we use mathematical formulas to design and build bridges, research has shown that personal relationships and group behavior is predictable. We can apply science to help us become more effective as we deal with new relationships, but keep in mind that there is also the "art." No matter how good a job we do in training our employees, if they do not possess the artist skills in applying the science, they will not be successful. These skills include communication skills, interpersonal skills, integrity, attitude, loyalty and honesty. Each is required to achieve a successful, fulfilling partnership. As we move into the next millennium, we need to recognize that the issues we deal with will become more complicated. The "Lone Ranger" approach will no longer work; we will work in teams, coalitions and partnerships, and our employees will require the necessary skills to allow us to function effectively in this new era.

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