

# **Success in Extension: It's All About People Caring About People**

## **A Veteran's Reflections on the Heart of Extension**

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While we are together this morning, I plan to do two things. First, share some philosophy that has evolved over my career and then end by sharing some specific reflections.

There is an ancient curse that goes "May you live in interesting times!"

Extension is indeed interesting because it is ever changing. Extension has always been a whirl of constant change. There always has been and always will exist the challenges of new issues, new audiences, and new technologies. In the constant chase to adapt to change, Extension has placed great focus and invested many resources in new technologies and in the development of such things as needs assessments, strategic plans, plans of work, impact reporting, and accountability processes in an effort to proactively prepare for changes and to then indicate that the system successfully responded. Sound familiar? We have all invested in these processes.

While Extension has correctly focused needed attention on technologies, planning and accountability, the system must not overlook a key element in the recipe for success "people caring about people." The annals of CES history abound with stories of dedicated people who devoted their lives to improving the lives of others (whether it was in agriculture, community development, family living, or 4-H youth development).

Let me be perfectly clear, the future success of our system is dependent on people who care. As leaders, we need to demonstrate the people side of our system in every action and every decision that we make. The future of Extension will depend heavily on strategic planning, adoption of technology, plans of work, accountability, and utilizing the latest research-based results in addressing the ever-changing issues facing the world. But, true success, the kind that makes a real difference in people's lives and makes your heart feel good at the end of the day, will depend on people passionately caring for people in a personal manner.

In my view, Extension, as a system, has often overlooked two very significant groups of people as the system prepared for the future. The first is the collective group of local people who we serve: customers, community leaders, stakeholders, elected officials, and partners. We complete

the needs assessments, but do we really take time to listen and think about the implications of the results? We have local Boards and Councils, but do they really have significant input into the planning process? What worthwhile role will Extension Councils and Boards have if there are no locally identified and provided programs?

Dr. Hank Wadsworth, in his Ruby acceptance speech in 1996, quoted Tip O'Neill's famous line that, "all politics are local!" (O'Neill and Hymel) The point being that people have local issues which may or may not be part of national issues, but local people want to be heard at the local level and want their issues addressed with a personalized resolution in a community setting.

The second group of people that we tend to overlook is our colleagues and our volunteers; we often take them for granted. We work every day with colleagues and volunteers but do not always take the time to care. Technologies such as email, blogs, wikis, etc., have made communications and expressions of ideas efficient but have also reduced it to the coldness of key strokes followed by hitting the send key. When was the last time we called a colleague and asked, "How is your son's baseball team doing? I remember you told me that he was trying out for Little League last May." Or, "how is your husband's shoulder doing? I remember you mentioned it might need surgery."

In the Centennial booklet entitled, "Celebrating the Past, Growing the Future," which recounted the first 100 years of Purdue Extension, I wrote the following. "One hundred years of people caring for people. That says it all. Extension is all about people who care. This brief history related numerous stories about Purdue Extension staff and their impacts. These stories articulated the changes brought about within Indiana by these staff as they brought new ideas and new technology to people and their communities and businesses. Not as visible, but more important to the underlying success of Purdue Extension and the Extension systems in other states, is the fact that these staff sincerely and passionately cared making a difference and about improving peoples' lives. It is not what they said but how they said it that made the difference and created an enduring respect for Purdue Extension by the people of Indiana. During these 100 years of history, generations of staff have passed onto the next generation an I-can-make-a-difference attitude. The next 100 years will be built on this same foundation. Our legacy will be that we have helped new staff learn why the land-grant mission is as important today as it was 140 plus years ago, and why Extension will be as important tomorrow as it was 100 years ago. The future of the Extension system can be fairly simply stated, "First you have to believe." You have to believe that knowledge can make a difference and then passionately go about sharing that knowledge with others."

The future of the Land Grant system and Extension's role will be dependent on people who believe in caring about people, who use research-based knowledge to help solve problems, and who bring people together to address community issues. Our staff must appreciate that they have to be passionate about their roles and about their careers. We need to teach them, encourage them, coach them, and help them understand that their work can make a difference in the lives of people. Finally, and more importantly, we have to demonstrate that we care that they care. We must be great mentors.

Our customers must appreciate that our staff care about their problems and providing them the needed information in a timely manner. "It's not what they said but how they said it..." Small things mean a lot. As it states so simply in the book FISH, you have to "be present" in order to help people solve their problems. (Lundin, Paul, and Christensen)

In our state, we have devoted many resources to not only technical updates and adaptation of technologies but also to the human side of education and to simply understanding each other as human beings. We have instituted and participated in several programs that focus on people, their development and their abilities to more effectively work together. These include Real Matrix colors, MBTI, FISH, mentoring, successful teamwork, change management, multiculturalism and inclusivity, participation in NELD, and board and council development. While staff can better understand each other, it still comes down to one simple mindset of, "I care!" We in leadership positions must constantly demonstrate and reinforce this attitude.

Some aspects of relationships among people are based on things that are timeless. These do not change because they are cornerstones of who we are and how we live our lives personally and professionally. In recent weeks since I retired, a few people have quietly asked something like, "So, what have you learned over 35 years in Purdue Extension?" This seems to be an opportune time to share these reflections with you.

1. Develop leadership at every opportunity. Mix assignments and people, give them credit and freedom, and watch them thrive and learn new skills. I believe very strongly in the concept of shared leadership. Great leadership is not just professional, it is personal. As leaders in Extension, we have a responsibility to provide examples of leadership to our younger staff. We need leaders who not only can lead effectively, but who can communicate leadership to the next generations. Ralph Nader said, "The role of leaders is to create more leaders, not more followers."

An observation from a recent book entitled, *The Way of the Shepherd*, provides a concise statement on how I view successful leadership. "The Way of the Shepherd will teach you how to lead the people around you so they will view their work as a calling rather than merely a job, a place to belong rather than a place to work. It shows you how to infuse work with meaning and how to engage and energize your workforce." (Leman, Pentak)

Look around this room! Many of you have developed as leaders because the leadership of Extension encouraged you to try your wings and instilled an attitude of "What would you do if you knew you could not fail!"

2. Build trust and respect with your staff and all who depend on you by modeling integrity and compassion and keeping confidences, regardless of the subject of the discussion. So many times in recent weeks I have heard staff express how much my trust in them, my respect for them, and my willingness to listen meant to them. This was especially true among those staff hired in recent years. This is, by the way, a 24/7 role!

3. Work with gratitude for your job, your influence, your abilities and your experiences. An Old French proverb says "gratitude is the heart's memory." It seems that when we work with gratitude we get more for which to be grateful. So many times I have reminded myself after a long day that in spite of the day's challenges, I am so fortunate to be part of a wonderful organization such as Purdue Extension and to have an outstanding staff who are passionate about their jobs.

4. Loyalty is essential at any level of an organization but especially so in key leadership positions. Among us old timers at Purdue, there is a mindset referred to as "the Purdue Extension way!" It is a mental thing and so is difficult to describe. Doing whatever it is the right way and with the tradition of Purdue Extension in mind is as good as I can define it. It is asking, "Does this honor the traditions/foundation of Extension? Does this stay true to the mission of Extension?"

5. Civility is so essential in today's world of mass communications, yet it is so lacking! Much of our communication now is faceless: e-mail, voice mail, text messaging. We cannot let these technologies erode the use of manners and politeness. Words are very powerful, especially thank you and please. When tempted to write a scathing e-mail or letter: go ahead and do it: on paper, then think it over and tear it up. We have all learned as recipients of such messages that hitting the "delete" button does not mean the message has been erased from our memories.

6. Take time to celebrate when anything good happens such as when you get a grant, your budget is approved, there is a breakthrough on a tough issue, and your staff gets an award. Life is short; memories are long...build good ones when you can. Waking up with a million dollars and 10,000 regrets is not success! Taking time to say thank you to a hard working planning committee for a great professional development conference takes little time but means so much because you took the time to acknowledge that you noticed their hard work. This also includes your family for all their help and understanding, often behind the scenes.

7. Credibility and honesty mean much in relationships with everyone who connects to Extension. Your staff, your volunteers, and your stakeholders read non-verbal very well. In your heart, do you believe what you are saying? Moreover, people have memories and do recall what you said last year. "Promises are easy to make; keeping them is the hard part."

We all have to accept that the world changes and what we know today may change tomorrow. Things go from bad to good and good to bad, from right to wrong, in and out of favor. It may be wise to lay the groundwork for change by telling your audiences of any age something like "This is what we know now: it may well change as we learn more." The most important thing as a leader is to be willing to indicate that things changed and to explain why we are changing direction!

8. We encourage our students and our adult audiences to continue to learn and grow. We must do the same for our staff and volunteers and then create the opportunities and provide the resources for them to participate and grow. "Growing" must include increasing their knowledge about new research findings and technologies as well as allowing staff to learn more about themselves through multiple leadership and personal development opportunities.

Extension has made tremendous differences in the lives of generations of people around the world. Extension will face enormous opportunities and challenges as it will be expected to make even greater impact in the future. But: will the next generation of staff in Extension rise to meet these opportunities? Will the next generation of staff in Extension appreciate why their doing so will be important?

Change in Extension is inevitable, and the task of managing the challenge certainly includes a whole tool kit of techniques such as needs assessments, strategic plans, plans of work, impact reporting, and accountability processes. But these cannot overshadow or minimize the foundation of Extension's success over the past 100 plus years "people who care about other people". As Sarah Ball, an Extension Homemaker in Oklahoma stated, "To step out to lead and to teach and to see the need. This is the part of Extension work that is really great, to look beyond ourselves and see the need of the community." (Voices 247)

In an era of high tech, we must not forget the high touch of personal interaction among our citizens, colleagues, and volunteers.

It will be critical for all of us, regardless of our place in the organization, to take a sincere interest the development of future leaders who not only have the knowledge but the sensitivity and personal caring required to be lead into the future. ESP has an important role to play in the continual strengthening and leading of our professionals.

Lastly, I leave you with a wish--May you continue to grow and learn and thrive in these Interesting Times!

Thank you.

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