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Levels of Client Change

As discussed in previous newsletters, we as Extension professionals develop programs that are designed to result in some type of client change. What level of client change should be the goal of a program? How do programs achieve the desired level of client change? How do we know if the program was successful in achieving the stated objective? These and other questions are all a part of the program development process that is undertaken for each and every program that Extension offers to clientele. When determining the level of client change that a program should target, there are several factors that should be considered.

What would be the most beneficial level to ultimately achieve? Is the need for clients to have new knowledge to make better decisions? Is the attitude of clients the major attribute that needs to be affected and changed by the program? Or, has it been determined that the ultimate goal would be to have clients change a behavior or adopt a practice of technology? The answer to these questions is an integral part of the program development process, and should be answered when issues are being analyzed. An example might be that a planning group identifies an issue of Childhood Overweight. In analyzing the issue, the Agent and planning group must determine what the ultimate goal of the program is. Is it enough to raise awareness of the issue? Should the goal be to educate parents and youth about the potential health problems associated with obesity? Or is the ultimate goal beyond that, possibly to change the dietary and exercise habits of young people to decrease the incidence of childhood overweight? The design of the educational program, and subsequent evaluation strategies would be substantially different depending on the answer to these questions.

It is evident that knowing the appropriate level of client change to expect is paramount to an effective design of the program, and will lead to the evaluation strategy best suited to measure the impact that the program has achieved. In the Extension publication "Keys to Education That Works", Boleman, Cummings and Pope (2005) outline these primary levels of intended clientele change for Extension programs to target:

Learning

Knowledge – learned information or accepted advice, including varying levels of comprehension

Skills – individuals' mental and physical abilities to use new and/or alternative processes

Attitudes/Beliefs – individuals' beliefs, opinions, feelings and perspectives

Application

Behavior Change – changes or benefits for participants (Behavior change typically happens after learning change, i.e., after participants have developed a skill, they may change behaviors if they deem it necessary to do so.)

Best Practice – participant decides to adopt a new practice in place of a current one

New Technology – participant adopts an innovation

Deciding which of these outcome levels to select is one of the most challenging choices Extension educators face. Before choosing, it is important to analyze the six levels of change. Ask yourself, where do you want audience members to be by the end of their educational program? Key to answering this question is knowing the target audience's level when the program starts. Since the first step toward change is knowledge, for audiences with no background in an issue, Extension educators should start by providing knowledge, and then move to skill development or behavior change. However, if an audience already has a knowledge base in the issue being addressed, it may make more sense to target audience change to a level higher than knowledge, selecting instead behavior change or best practice adoption (Boleman, et. al., 2005).

At the time that the intended client change is determined, the appropriate strategy to evaluate the program should become evident. If the intended client change is knowledge based, then an evaluation instrument should be developed to measure an increase in knowledge, or possibly a change in attitude. However, if the intended change is in the behavior of clientele, a knowledge based evaluation instrument would fall far short of capturing the true impact that the program had.

Understanding the differences between the levels of intended change, and they appropriate educational methods to initiate the intended level is an important skill for the County Extension Agent to understand and acquire. Working closely with Regional Program Directors and the Organizational Development Unit to make certain the planned program could achieve the stated goals and objectives is an excellent way for newer Agents to gain understanding of the process. There are other resources available for review and further study, including:

Boleman, C., Cummings, S. & Pope. P. (2005). *Keys to education that works: Texas Cooperative Extension's program development model*, Texas Cooperative Extension, College Station, Texas. Publication #345.

Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of Innovations* (Fourth Edition), New York, Free Press.