

Inter-Staff Communication in Illinois County Extension Offices

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ANALYSES OF AN EFFORT to help county extension advisers in Illinois improve their communication abilities points to one conclusion: In many county extension offices in that state, communication among staff members—and particularly between “senior” and “junior” members of the staffs—could do with substantial improvement.

In the latter part of 1969, a University of Idaho publication called “A Self-Instructional Manual for Newsletter Writing and Production”¹ was called to the attention of all extension advisers in Illinois, of whatever rank and sex. They were advised that copies of the manual were available on request from the University of Illinois Office of Agricultural Communications. The notice of availability stipulated that distribution would be limited to one for each county office from which a request was received, and that the person requesting the manual should share it with other county staff members.

One brief follow-up reminder of the manual’s availability was sent out via *It Says Here*, a weekly communications training letter distributed to all county advisers in Illinois.

Fifty-eight advisers, representing 56 of the 102 counties in Illinois, requested copies of the manual. Four of those requests were from senior advisers, 41 were from advisers (three specialized or area advisers were included in this category), four were from associate advisers and nine were from assistant advisers.

Six months after copies of the manual were distributed to those who had requested it, an informal questionnaire entitled “Survey

¹ Authored by James L. Johnson, then agricultural editor and head of the University of Idaho’s Department of Agricultural Information, now holding a comparable position at Washington State University.

of County Staff Reaction to a Self-Instructional Manual for Newsletter Writing and Production" was sent out. Recipients of this questionnaire included 194 staff members in the 56 counties where requests for the manual had originated.

Responses to the questionnaire totaled 113, or 58.2 per cent of the 194 advisers to whom it was sent.

The first question in that questionnaire was: "Did you initiate your county's request for the Idaho manual?" "Yes" responses (35 in all), came from four senior advisers, 20 advisers, four associate advisers, and seven assistant advisers. "No" responses numbered 78 and are not broken down by rank in this report.

The second question was: "Have you seen the manual?" It was at this point that the apparent lack of communication among staff members was revealed. Potentially, 194 staff members might have been interested in seeing and reading the manual. Yet only 43 of the 194 (22 per cent) indicated they had seen the manual, despite the earlier stipulation that copies, when distributed, were to be shared. Perhaps the six-month interval between distribution of the manual and the conducting of the survey was responsible for some lack of recall. But even allowing for some lack of recall because of that interval, it seems reasonably clear that for the most part county staff members to whom the manual was sent did not call it to the attention of their colleagues.

Closer examination of responses to the second question revealed that the 43 who said they had seen the manual included four senior advisers, 21 advisers, four associate advisers, and 14 assistant advisers.

With one exception, those figures closely matched the number of advisers who said "Yes" to the first question. Only at the assistant adviser level did the figures vary substantially from the number reporting they had initiated the request for the manual.

Seven assistant advisers said they requested the manual, compared with 14 who said they had seen it. At both the senior adviser and associate adviser levels, responses to the first two questions were identical—in each case four requested the manual and four reported having seen it. At the adviser level, 20 reported requesting the manual and 21 said they had seen it.

The above comparison appears to indicate that communication among assistant advisers was more intense, at least about the Idaho manual, than was communication among advisers of

TABLE 1. EXTENT TO WHICH ILLINOIS EXTENSION ADVISERS REPORTED SEEING AND READING "A SELF-INSTRUCTIONAL MANUAL FOR NEWSLETTER WRITING AND PRODUCTION"

Category	Senior advisers	Advisers	Associate advisers	Assistant advisers	Total
Seen and read (at least in part).....	4	19	3	13	39
Seen but not read.....	--	2	1	1	4
Not seen and not read.....	5	33	10	22	70
TOTAL.....	9	54	14	36	113

higher rank, or communication between assistant advisers and those with higher rank.

Table 1 shows that the great majority of the respondents, regardless of rank, did not see the manual in question. Of the few who did see and read the manual (at least in part), the majority spent at most two hours reading it, Table 2.

TABLE 2. TIME SPENT ON FIRST READING AS REPORTED BY 39 ILLINOIS EXTENSION ADVISERS

Time spent on first reading	Senior advisers	Advisers	Associate advisers	Assistant advisers	Total
Less than 1 hour.....	3	8	--	7	18
1 to 2 hours.....	--	10	2	6	18
More than 2 hours.....	1	1	--	1	3
TOTAL.....	4	19	2	14	39

Finally, those advisers who had both seen and read the manual were asked to use a scale of 1 to 10 in evaluating how helpful they found it to be, with 1 meaning "not helpful" and 10 meaning "very helpful." In general, most advisers (30 out of 39) who saw and read the manual rated it as "helpful" in the communication aspects of their jobs, Table 3.

TABLE 3. EVALUATION OF MANUAL AS REPORTED BY 39 ILLINOIS EXTENSION ADVISERS

Evaluation	Senior advisers	Advisers	Associate advisers	Assistant advisers	Total
Not helpful ¹	2	4	--	3	9
Helpful ²	2	15	2	11	30
TOTAL.....	4	19	2	14	39

¹ Ratings in the 1-5 range have been arbitrarily classified as "not helpful."

² Ratings in the 6-10 range have been arbitrarily classified as "helpful."