

Building Political Support for Extension Challenges for Today

North Central Region Leadership Workshop

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Dr. Michael J. Tate
Assistant Director of Extension
Michigan State University

PART I

Basic Principles

Dealing With Realities

Working With Decision Makers

COMMUNICATING WITH DECISION MAKERS

Purpose: To build strong partnerships between Extension and policymakers at all levels, working on issues of concern to citizens.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

- The emphasis is on building partnerships to work on public issues
- Efforts need to be comprehensive, ongoing, focused on education.
- This should be a TOTAL STAFF EFFORT. The county Extension Director needs to play a coordinating role, but all staff members should be involved.
- Focus on issues....connect with the interests of the decision makers.
- Help facilitate communication between constituents and policymakers around issues of concern.
- Use the "make a friend" approach....build a relationship

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DEALING WITH REALITIES...

Here are a few observations about the policymaking process:

- Remember that policymakers are people...with all of the talents and shortcomings found in the population generally.
- Everything is politics...all politics is local...and often the politics is a partisan.
- Representative government and long-range planning are conflicting ideas.

- At the present time, holding public office presents a number of difficult challenges: budget constraints, complex policy problems, well-organized special interests, etc.
- At the state and federal levels, it is crucial to fully recognize the important role played by staff members.
- Term Limits

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WORKING WITH DECISION MAKERS

ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

1. Keep the issue simple and easy to understand
2. Frame the issue in the current political environment.
3. Involve appropriate stakeholders in defining and communicating the issue.
4. Be prepared for arguments from those who don't understand the issue or want to redefine it.
5. Identify and be supportive of those who become "champions" of your issue.
6. Be passionate, persistent, informed and focused.

PART II

A ROLE FOR EVERYONE

TECHNIQUES THAT WORK

PLANNING A STRATEGY AND TAKING ACTION IN YOUR COUNTY

KNOW YOUR POLICYMAKERS

A ROLE FOR EVERYONE

No matter what the job, each MSU Extension staff member has a role in developing and nurturing relationships with local, state and federal decision makers. The emphasis is on COMMUNIATION...between staff members in different positions and policymakers. This information provides a basis for encouraging more active efforts within counties and among staff members to build strong partnerships with policymakers.

Extension Administration (Director, etc.)

- Work directly to assure the federal and state budget support necessary in order to maintain and build a vital, relevant and dynamic organization that extends Michigan State University of every country in the state.
- Orchestrate the communication and contacts needed, from countries, campus etc. to build and maintain such support.
- Strengthen a network of communication with relevant statewide interest groups and with other policymakers (Executive Departments etc.)

- Encourage county efforts to foster ongoing communication with policymakers.
- Communicate regularly with County Extension Directors about the current budget situation (including time lines when appropriate) and also about relevant interests and contacts that involve a particular county.

Regional Directors

- Help the staff in each county plan a strategy and action plan for implementation.
- Facilitate the sharing of information between counties in terms of specific legislators (this is particularly important when several counties share a legislator) and in terms of the various action plans.
- Encourage and support county efforts.
- Facilitate training and mentoring experiences as needed. (Example: facilitate visits to decision makers with CED's and staff.)

County Extension Directors

- Coordinate the efforts for communication with all elected officials in the county. (note: the implementation needs to be a shared responsibility, but the CED should know what is happening.)
- Orchestrate the effort to gain support for the county budget.
- Facilitate discussion among county staff members concerning the development of an appropriate communications strategy for that particular county.
- Help the staff to regularly share, assess and adapt such a strategy plan
- Provide training, support, resources etc. in order to help each new staff member develop a basic level of "political savvy" within the first few months of employment in the county. Introduce new staff members to local policymakers, as appropriate.

District Extension Positions

- Develop information networks with the various relevant interest groups (e.g. ag industry groups etc.) and agencies.
- Share information concerning contacts with others (the appropriate CED, the regional director etc.)
- Work with the county staffs in relevant counties to help foster more contacts with policymakers concerning specific issues.

All County Extension Staff Members

- Personally work to develop basic "political savvy." This involves being politically astute but non-partisan and it primarily means that there is a need to carefully follow the news and to pay attention to local people and issues.
- Communicate with CED and other staff members concerning contacts with various policymakers. What are the possibilities for follow up? What are the connecting points?
- Discover the policymakers (state, local and federal...elected and appointed) who are interested in issue areas where you are programming. Find ways to:
 - share Information about programming efforts and issues of concern
 - involve policymakers in educational efforts
 - facilitate communication on such issues with their constituents
 - encourage constituents to be politically aware and actively involved
 - work with policymakers concerning local problems/concerns

MSU Extension Specialists and Program Leaders

- Discover the legislators and legislative aides, state and federal, who are working in areas of interest to you. Develop an ongoing, informal relationship focused on mutual information sharing.
- Involve such staff members, as appropriate, in programming efforts and share with them information that you gather concerning that specific issue area.
- Share any relevant insights or bits of information concerning the aide and/or the legislator with the local

CED...and with the Extension director as appropriate (e.g. Sen. _____ expressed appreciation for _____ resource/program etc).

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TECHNIQUES THAT WORK

ALL YEAR, EVERY YEARTECHNIQUES THAT WORK

This information is a compilation of suggestions that have been shared with the Communicating with Decision Makers Committee by Extension staff members. The listing does not cover all of the possibilities, but rather it serves as a starting point for discussion and strategy planning by the Extension staff in each county. Individual situations...the county politics, the makeup of the Extension staff, and the backgrounds and interests of the policymakers...will all vary a great deal. A communication strategy needs to carefully consider all those factors.

County Extension Directors

- Coordinate the efforts for communication with all elected officials in the county. (note: The implementation needs to be a shared responsibility but the CED should know what is happening.)
- Orchestrate the effort to gain support for the county budget.
- Facilitate discussion among county staff members concerning the development of an appropriate communications strategy for that particular county.
- Help the staff to regularly share, assess and adapt such a strategy plan.
- Provide training, support, resources etc. in order to help each new staff member develop a basic level of "political savvy" within the first few months of employment in that county.
- Introduce new staff members to local policymakers, as appropriate.

The following suggestions from Extension staff members illustrate the type of activities where the CED generally provides the leadership – others will likely be involved.

- After elections, write a congratulatory note to newly elected officials. Make plans for personal contact. Also, after elections, write to outgoing officials, thanking them for their service.
- Right after an election, collect information on the newly elected policymakers from that district.
- Develop a strategy plan among Extension staff members for ensuring ongoing contacts.
- During pre-election periods, share general information (possibly distributed by volunteers) about Extension with all candidates.
- Host an annual "get-together" dinner, picnic, lunch, etc.) with state and federal legislators and commissioners, along with the advisory committee, in order to help them understand Extension and its goals.
- Send brief periodic updated to state (and possibly federal) legislators which highlight major educational programming efforts.
- Encourage newly elected county commissioners to attend "New Commissioner Training." Be sure that an Extension staff member attends with the commissioners.
- Match county staff with commissioner (according to interests etc.) and encourage them to invite the policymakers to programs etc.

Examples of reporting strategies to the county board of commissioners include:

- provide annual written report; have Extension clientele provide bi-annual report
- Extension staff members report monthly or quarterly at commissioners meeting
- send commissioners a monthly report or newsletter highlighting programs
- develop special reports on annual accomplishments and initiatives
- clientele, including youth, can describe their involvement in program to commissioners at a regular meeting or at a special event

- Work with commissioners through county administration (this really depends on the political structure and “climate” in a particular county).
- Include public officials in the extension advisory committee.
- Make sure that the advisory committee is a diverse group that represents each county commissioner district. Encourage committee members to regularly contact their elected officials.
- Regularly inform commissioners, and legislators, about special events, awards etc. that involve their constituents.

ALL County Extension Staff Members

This listing of suggestions is relevant for all county staff members. It is always important to remember, though, that good communication among Extension staff members is imperative to strengthening partnerships with policymakers.

- Personally work to develop basic “political savvy.” This involves being politically astute but non-partisan and it primarily means that there is a need to carefully follow the news and to pay attention to local people and issues.
- Becoming knowledgeable about the county government process and structure, including budget timing etc.
- Communicate with CED and other staff members concerning contacts with various policymakers. What are the possibilities for follow-up? What are the “connecting points?”
- Become knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of commissioners. Know them as individuals – interests, biases etc. Don’t wait for them to come to you. Go find out what you can do to help them in their jobs.
- Take advantage of informal opportunities (coffee etc.) to talk with commissioners and other policymakers.
- Provide copies of bulletins and other resource materials when appropriate.
- Discover the policymakers (state, local and federal...elected and appointed) who are interested in issue areas where you are programming.

Find ways to:

- share information about programming efforts and issues of concern
- involve policymakers in educational efforts
- facilitate communication on issues with their constituents
- encourage constituents to be politically aware and actively involved
- work with policymakers concerning local problem/concerns
- Get to know the aides of legislators (state and federal), particularly those who are concerned with your subject matter.
- Use the expertise of policymakers and/or their staff members concerning specific issues. They also might serve as resource people in leadership programs (e.g. about the policymaking process, or about citizen involvement strategies).
- Get to know the special interest groups and the politically active clientele in the county in your programming area (e.g. economic development, youth issues etc.).
- Be physically present and involved so that policymakers will know Extension staff members. Be informed about, and show interest in the issues of concern to them.
- Share information about demographics and about the issue identification process.
- Attend legislative receptions or other such social events in order to network with the particular legislator and with other individuals and groups.
- Involve policymakers in special programs (e.g. EFNEP graduation, awards program).
- Be sure to follow up specific contacts (a conversation on an issue, obtaining resource materials, etc) with a brief note.

- With federal legislators: maintain contact; also share information with the individuals and groups that may have impact on the legislator.
- Get to know the local staffer of federal and possibly state legislators and utilize that person as a resource. Also, become acquainted with the key members of the Washington staff of a federal legislator. Help those staff members with resources available through Extension.
- Visit your congressional Representative's office when you're in Washington and your state legislators' offices when you are in Lansing.

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PLANNING A STRATEGY AND TAKING ACTION IN YOUR COUNTY

These pages are designed to help Extension staff members – with leadership from the CED – develop a strategy for building stronger partnerships with policymakers. This page answers some questions about process; the next page provides the basic outlines for a strategy plan; and the third page provides a chart for developing an action plan related to specific policymakers. The form "Know Your Policymakers" should be an integral part of the planning process.

What's the major goal for all this work?

To forge stronger partnerships with local, state and federal public officials focused on issues of concern to the citizens in your county.

Why is this important now?

Building such partnerships has always been important, but it takes on special significance now because Extension's issue identification process provides an ideal opportunity to work with policymakers on local issues of concern in communities. The changing environment in governmental bodies increases the need for forging new relationships and enhancing those already in place.

Some factors related to that changing environment include:

- Redistricting and more newly elected officials in federal, state and local levels of government
- Dual-party leadership for the Michigan House of Representatives for the 1993-94 session. This changes the nature of decision-making, committee deliberation and staffing.
- Continue decline in fiscal health for nearly all units of government.
- Term limitations for state officials (possible outcomes include: increasing the rate of turnover for all units of government; diffusing the power of leadership roles, etc.)

Haven't we been working with policymakers all along? Why do we need a PLAN?

Yes, most counties have worked in some way with their policymakers. However, given some of the factors listed above, it is now critically important that we work systematically to consider the best ways to strengthen those partnerships.

Whose responsibility is this?

The CED should coordinate and oversee such efforts but the involvement needs to be a TOTAL effort.

How do we use this information to develop a plan?

Use attached information only as a guide in developing the plan that best meets the needs in YOUR county. Work together with other staff members to develop an overall strategy plan and the action plans related to different levels of government. Use the plans as working guides ... adapt and change to meet current needs.

COUNTY STRATEGIC PLAN BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH DECISION MAKERS

Preliminary Actions

- I. CED or designee writes a "congratulations and looking forward to working with you" letter to each elected official.
- II. CED and/or designee provide district maps (state and county) for the use of staff and volunteers, identifying the elected officials within the district.
- III. CED and/or designee completes the KNOW YOUR POLICYMAKERS QUESTIONNAIRE.
- IV. CED and/or designee uses the KNOW YOUR POLICYMAKERS QUESTIONNAIRE, as well as the knowledge and interest of staff, to match each Extension staff person with one or more elected officials.

Developing A Plan

V. Extension staff members determine an ACTION PLAN FOR BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS WITH DECISION MAKERS. These plans will include arranging/attending one-to-one meetings with elected officials. The CED and/or designee will assist each Extension staff member with developing, organizing and implementing this plan:

A. Potential Extension initiated and organized opportunities for individuals to meet decision makers include:

1. In the Extension office
 - a) invite to agent/total staff/special interest meetings
 - b) invite to tour Extension office
 - c) other activities
2. In the community
 - a) invite to Extension education or program event/home visit
 - b) hold informational coffee/breakfast luncheon meetings
 - c) stop by the elected official's office
 - d) hold an information session for legislative/congressional staff
 - e) provide a tour of Extension programs
 - f) ask elected officials to serve on a committee
 - g) provide officials copies of bulletins, resource materials and newsletters
 - h) encourage extension consumer/advisory board to tell elected officials their "story" about Extension
 - i) send personal letters/invitations to Extension programs
 - j) interview the policymaker about needs and concerns of constituents, Extension's role in the community and how best to keep them informed.
 - k) hold "ask the public official programs" to discuss a specific issue
 - l) ask the policymaker to discuss a specific issue
 - m) other activities

B. Events, not organized by Extension that provide opportunities to meet public officials include:

1. Attend meetings/events where elected officials will be present. Introduce yourself, and if appropriate, invite decision maker to your office, and/or tell him/her positive program happenings related to areas of interest.
2. Request information and/or offer assistance related to shared concerns/interests or agenda items.
3. Other activities.

- C. Staff will keep appropriate person informed of contacts with decision makers.
- D. Staff periodically will submit summary of their and their volunteer's involvement with elected officials.
- E. After initial meeting with policymaker, CED and/or designee works with staff to develop more in-depth strategies for building relationships with the elected official and/or official's staff.
- F. At every staff meeting, report communications with elected official.

Additional Actions

- VI. CED and/or designee will coordinate written and/or oral reports/highlights quarterly or annually for policymakers.
- VII. When Extension staff members work with another county department, agency, organization, etc., a letter or call will be made to the director of the organization/agency/department to explain Extension's mission and to identify potential for future cooperation.
- VIII. Staff will identify and develop a plan to keep other special interest groups and politically active volunteers informed.
- IX. CED and/or appropriate staff will write a thank you note to outgoing elected official/decision maker.

(Developed by Jan Voorheis, CED Macomb County, in conjunction with the "Communicating with Decision Makers" Committee)

KNOW YOUR POLICYMAKERS

Note: this questionnaire can be used as a tool by MSU Extension staff members to gather more information about their policymakers. The same information should be gathered for federal, state and county officials.

Name _____ Position _____
 District # _____ Term in office _____ Political Party _____ Is it the majority party? _____
 Address(H) _____ Phone(H) _____
 Address(O) _____ Phone(O) _____
 Marital Status _____ Children? _____
 Educational Background _____
 Occupational Background _____
 Committee Assignments _____
 Leadership Position (in the House, Senate, County Commission, etc.) _____
 Prior Political Involvement _____
 What are the most important issues to this person? _____

Special Interests/Situations

Organizational Affiliations _____

Major support groups/forces? _____

Does this person have a special relationship with: Extension Staff Member? _____

Extension Volunteer? _____

Who are aides and support staff or this policymaker?

Name Position Interests

Do any of these staff members have special relationships with Extension staff or
volunteers? _____

(Communicating with decision makers Michigan State University Extension, April, 1993