Leading Extension in the 21st Century

A Vision for Extension in the State of Washington

Roger Tormoehlen, Ph.D.

My philosophical views are based upon my beliefs and values instilled in me by my parents and other significant individuals in my life (4-H club leader, high school agricultural science teacher, masters and doctoral programs major professor) and that have been strengthened and enhance through my professional experiences as an university researcher, university extension faculty, and university academic leader. Following is a brief insight into my philosophical views and beliefs on leadership for Extension in the 21st century. The document is separated into two sections: 1) Leading in the 21st Century, and 2) Creating and Maintaining a Preeminent Cooperative Extension System.

Leadership in the 21st Century

Doctoral programs rarely encompass coursework or other training programs on how to effectively lead and manage a unit. Consequently, most academic leaders learn from being “thrown into the fire.” I have been able to develop my leadership toolbox through: 1) observations as an extension faculty member in three different departments at two different academic institutions; 2) hands-on learning from serving as inaugural head of a newly created academic department at a tier 1 research institution; and, 3) through professional development opportunities (i.e., Academic Chairpersons conferences, CIC’s Department Executive Officers seminar, Academic Impressions leadership workshops) focused on leadership and management.

The following statements reflect my philosophical values regarding leadership and management. Each value is further clarified to provide a framework for my leadership and philosophical views.

*If the right people are hired and provided with a barrier-free or barrier-reduced environment in which to work, my belief is they will do great things.*

As a faculty member the one value that I appreciated the most was the freedom afforded faculty to design, develop and implement their academic program whether it was research-based, learning-based or engagement-based. I believe this freedom is the core foundation that makes the U.S. university system the greatest research, education and engagement system in the world. During my time as an academic leader, I saw it as my duty to create an environment that provided faculty AND staff the opportunity to do their job in an environment that contained minimum to no barriers. As a leader, I strive to utilize the “servant leadership” model, as I believe my role is to provide an environment that allows faculty and staff to thrive professionally and personally. If you hire academically talented individuals who have a passion for: 1) expanding the knowledge and skills of our clientele throughout the state; 2) seeking new discoveries through cutting-edge applied research that will benefit humankind; and 3) working with students in the classroom and laboratory, then great things will happen.

*Today’s challenging issues will demand a team approach.*

Today’s science is more complex than at any time in our history. Understanding the science and applying it to solve the world’s grand challenges (environmental change, food security, energy independence, and water security) we are and will be facing over the next 20 to 50 years will demand a team-based approach. We will only be able to address these grand challenges if we develop a team-based approach utilizing our best minds from a variety of educational disciplines, and from a variety of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. For the U.S. Extension system, this means exploring how we utilize our strengths in different and more collaborative ways. On campus, partnerships will need to be developed within colleges, across colleges and university wide. Off campus, we must take a lead role in serving as the catalyst for the development of new collaborations that will bring unique and synergistic partners to address today and tomorrow’s challenges. These partnerships will have to include unlikely and unique partnerships if we are to create teams with the skills to address our challenges over the next several decades.

*The work climate must be welcoming and collegial.*

It is essential that as a leader I fashion a work environment that is welcoming to all, and one that enables all individuals (campus faculty, campus and county staff, clerical staff, student workers, volunteers and our clientele) to function at their highest level of productivity. For a collegial workplace to exist, we must create an environment built on trust, honesty, transparency, ethics, and respect. I believe a collegial environment built on the values mentioned leads to a setting where people from a variety of cultural and socio-economic background can and will be highly productive because it is a fun-filled environment in which to work.
Change is inevitable; we must be in the driver’s seat.
I am a firm believer that change is essential for success. Change is inevitable, but if not implemented in a thoughtful and deliberate manner, change can lead to negative consequences. In a graduate course focused on the philosophy and mission for land grant universities, which I co-teach with two other colleagues, I spend five-weeks on change theory. The first thing I write on the whiteboard the first day is, “No change = change.” Students are asked to explain the phrase. My point with the statement is that change will occur. We can choose to do nothing and remain in status quo, which could result in “death” to the organization. This is change, just not positive change. As an organization, we must create; using deliberate procedures and processes, the change we believe will positively move forward our organization.

Communications and transparency do matter.
Technologies such as email, Facebook, Twitter and other social media tools have moved us to a society where instantaneous access to information is common and expected. With this expectation comes the challenge of how communications are shared, when they are shared and to whom they are shared. My view is that to be an effective unit, transparency is essential. Appropriate resources must be allocated to ensure effective internal and external communication strategies are developed and implemented. Failure to communicate creates an environment where little to no trust exists.

A climate of “Trust” must be created.
Historically, leaders have used three tools to motivate employees. A tool frequently used in the past --- not so much today --- is the “fear factor.” The “fear factor” is a strategy that can encourage employees to perform, but it can also create a mentality amongst employees of looking out for themselves. They give lip service to loyalty, but it only goes as far as their paycheck. The second motivational factor is the “benefit factor.” While the “benefit factor” can motivate employees to accomplish the task and goals of the organization, benefits can never buy the loyalty a leader/organization needs to take the organization to the heights of success. The third and final motivational factor and the one that I strive for and believe in is the “trust factor.” With this motivational factor, followers buy into the goals and vision because they trust and believe in the leader. People will follow a person they trust to the extent of pouring their heart, soul, and spirit into his/her dream with little to no reservations. For an organization to reach its greatest potential, the “trust factor” must be applied unilaterally across all aspects of the organization and with all individuals. Teams will not function to their greatest potential if the members do not trust one another. There are many factors that comprise a congenial and productive environment and we could spend considerable time on each and everyone but, in my view, time would be wasted if a working environment has not been created that is built on “trust.”

Creating and Maintaining a Preeminent Cooperative Extension System
Historically the Cooperative Extension System has placed a huge value on “People, Partnerships and Places.” As we move into the future with the tremendous growth in education pedagogy, it is critical that we continue to stress our connection with people, our involvement in partnerships and our presence in places where our traditional and non-traditional clientele live and work.

NOTE: Doug Steele, former Director of the Texas Extension Service established the “People, Partnerships and Places” phrase. I have borrowed the phrase as the foundation for my philosophical statement on the core components of a world-class Cooperative Extension System.

People
We must establish and maintain a people-focused culture
We are at a time when the rate of innovation and technological change appears to be occurring at a rate never before seen in the history of humankind. These innovations and changes have the potential to significantly advance the world in which we live. Yet, this rapid rate of scientific discovery will present unique challenges for our formal and non-formal educational systems. The Cooperative Extension System, to remain relevant, will have to explore new, innovative ways to share these advancements while maintaining the personal connections to people that have been a hallmark of the Cooperative Extension System. We will have to further develop our educational models to incorporate new educational methodologies while maintaining a personal connection. This will be one of our greatest challenges but one with huge potential benefit.
We must engage a diverse audience with a range of views and opinions.

Extension will have to understand and recognize the views of a very diverse population, for it to be a preeminent change institution in the 21st century. In some cases, the different views may be geographically-based, in other situations, the differences may be racially-based, and in other instances, additional factors may inform a person’s view. Extension will have to engage all people if it wishes to effectively address the 21st century’s grand challenges (i.e., food and water security, climate change, energy, environmental sustainability). All views and opinions must be shared if the Land-Grant system and the Cooperative Extension System expect to continue to be a dynamic change agent in the 21st century.

We must meet the needs of a changing workforce

Over the next 5 to 10 years, the U.S and Extension’s employee base will change dramatically as the Baby Boomers retire and the Millennials become the largest percentage of the U.S. workforce. For Extension, this means that a better understanding of this group will be necessary if we are to find, manage, inspire, and retain this much-needed part of our workforce. This understanding will be essential if Extension wishes to keep the Millennials employee happy, satisfied and productive in the workplace. From an educational perspective working with Millennials as clientele will present Extension with new educational challenges and opportunities. We will have to adapt our educational delivery model to meet the needs of this new clientele group!

We must meet the needs of a changing clientele base – we must remain relevant!

Geographically over the last 100 years, our clientele base has shifted from one that was primarily rural/farm located to one that today is heavily located in rural/non-farm, suburban and city settings. This has created a situation that has necessitated a change in the types of programs delivered. Over the next 20 years Extension’s clientele will move from one dominated by baby-boomers to one dominated by Millennials, iGeners and Alphas. This population has never known what it is like to not be connected electronically. Extension will have to constantly re-evaluate the programs it delivers and the manner in which these educational programs are delivered as it seeks to serve this new generation of clientele.

We must develop and support a world-class group of employees

When Herb Kelleher, Founder of Southwest Airlines was asked about his clientele and his secret to meeting their needs, he promptly responded that his clientele was the employees of Southwest Airlines. He proceeded to explain that if his employees were happy and well trained then Southwest Airlines’ passengers would be well cared for and consequently happy. Michael Lee Stallard in his book, the Connection Culture emphasizes that to achieve superior performance an organization must create a connection culture. According to Stallard, organizations with a connection culture have employees who feel connected. These employees:

1. Perform at the top of their game
2. Give their best effort
3. Align their behavior with organizational goals
4. Help improve the quality of decisions
5. Actively contribute to innovation

For the Director of Extension this translated to making sure that his/her employees at the county, regional and university level have appropriate resources, our well-trained, and feel valued as a member of the team.

Partnerships

We must Partner in ways never before seen in Extension

The challenges facing society have become significantly more complex. Solving these complex issues/challenges will require collaborations at a level not yet seen. These collaborations/partnerships will have to occur at all levels (locally, statewide, nationally and internationally). Scientists from different disciplines, public universities and private corporations will have to work collaboratively. Educators, both formal and non-formal will need to join forces to devise effective and efficient educational methodologies that will transfer our most complex scientific concepts to youth and adults. For the Cooperative Extension System, this means that we will have to create partnerships with educators and scientists in others settings (i.e., private corporations, non-profit organizations, commodity groups, formal educational networks) if we wish to create the most powerful and effective Cooperative Extension possible.
Issues of the 21st century will require national and international Partnerships
Historically, issues faced by our clientele tended to be localized to a community or possibly a region of the state. Today's issues may be local but often are multi-state, national or international in scope. Additionally, many of today's issues and the issues that society will face in the future will be multifaceted and complex. The collaborative expertise of professionals from a diverse range of scientific disciplines will be needed to address these issues. Washington State Extension will have to continue to be a major player on the national and international scene if it wishes to address the needs facing its clientele and the world. Washington State Extension must play in the world arena!

We must expand our Partnerships beyond our state boundary
Funding models have historically limited the range of a county or state's extension efforts to either the county or the state level. Some progress has been made in recent years to create partnerships that have more effectively utilized local, state, national and international resources on a larger scale. The grand challenges facing the world will not be solved if we are not able to focus our collective human and financial resources to collaboratively address issues that affect our clientele and people of the world. We must continue to identify new and innovative financial and expertise-focused partnerships!

We must foster Partnerships with local, state and national public officials
Historically, the land-grant system and in particular the Cooperative Extension System has had very strong partnerships with local, state and national public officials. Changing county and state demographics have created a situation where the value of Extension is not intrinsically known. Consequently, conscious efforts must be made to strengthen already established partnerships and when partnerships are not present, they must be established. We must clearly share the value of Extension with our partners at the local level.

Places

We must connect with our clientele in their Place
One of the greatest strengths of the Cooperative Extension has been our physical connection to each and every community. Historically, the Cooperative Extension Office has had a physical presence in each county through a county extension office. Budget challenges have created situations in which some state Cooperative Extension systems have had to implement new and creative partnerships to meet the needs of the people. Technological communication advances (i.e., cell phones, Facebook, Twitter, and World Wide Web) have led some to believe that we can educate totally from a distance. While it may be technically possible to reach our clientele using digital-based technologies, it is critical that we maintain a local presence with our clientele and the communities in which they live. The challenge facing Extension is how we best utilize modern digital-based technologies to educate our clientele while maintaining a personal connection. I believe this is and will be an area of tremendous research and exploration.

We must connect in new Places reaching a broader clientele
For many the image of Extension has been one of an organization that has historically connected with individuals on farms and in rural areas. As the demographic of the American population has shifted to one more heavily suburban and urban, Extension must continue to refocus to meet the needs of those who reside in areas that have traditionally not been a major service area for the Extension system.