

6-1-2005

## Listening to the People--A Strategic Planning Model for Cooperative Extension

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### Recommended Citation

Boleman, C. T., & Cummings, S. R. (2005). Listening to the People--A Strategic Planning Model for Cooperative Extension. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(3), Article 25. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss3/25>

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June 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 3 // Tools of the Trade // 3TOT3



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## Listening to the People--A Strategic Planning Model for Cooperative Extension

### Abstract

The first step in the program development process is planning. In order to properly plan, Extension must listen to the people of their communities to hear their needs. In Texas, this is done through a county forum process that identified needs people are facing in their communities. This article outlines the listening steps Texas Cooperative Extension took to host its Texas Community Futures Forum (TCFF) Process. This includes how TCFF was organized and how each county in Texas held a county TCFF to help identify issues facing Texans.

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## Background

According to McDowell (2001, p. 69), the purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service has always been:

(1.) To seek to know the problems of ordinary people and bring those problems to the attention of the researchers, (2.) To deliver functional education, based on the best scholarship available, to ordinary people, and to help solve their problems, and (3.) To collect political support from the beneficiaries of extension programs in order to fund the continued research and education of ordinary people of the society-not just, or even primarily, farmers.

These purposes are defined more specifically by Rasmussen (1989, p. 1), who stated that, "The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is to help people improve their lives through an educational process which uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs."

The first step in the program development process is planning. Proper planning determines the ultimate success of the educational program (Gupta, 1999). Within the planning step is needs assessment. A needs assessment is a process for pinpointing reasons for gaps in performance. A needs assessment can also be utilized to identify new and future programming needs. This step is essential because it allows clients to provide valuable data and input pertaining to issues that these clients need help, guidance, and/or support in answering.

## Texas Community Futures Forum

Texas Community Futures Forum (TCFF) is Texas Cooperative Extension's *listening to the people of Texas* step. It provides an avenue to hear from all types of clientele and people within a county. It is designed to provide an opportunity for everyone in a county to come together and discuss issues and problems they are facing.

Each county held a County TCFF Meeting. This was a one-night event that brought together other agency representatives and county residents to identify and prioritize issues within the county. Extension faculty served as facilitators for these meetings. Every Extension employee received 6 hours of face-to-face training on the TCFF process and facilitation skills in the fall of 2003 before the county TCFF.

The agenda for the county TCFF was as follows. It started with the facilitator issuing a charge to the participants and a discussion on the importance of them being there. After this discussion, participants were split into smaller groups to discuss and prioritize issues. Once the small groups completed their tasks, all small groups were brought back together in a large group. During the large group discussion, final voting for prioritized issues took place. To wrap up the evening, the facilitators expressed their appreciation to the participants and talked about how these issues will help shape the educational programming plan for the next few years.

### **Small Group Description at Texas Community Futures Forum**

An Extension faculty member facilitated the meeting. At the beginning of the meeting, participants were divided into smaller work groups. Once in the small groups, each individual was asked to list issues the community is facing. Once these were listed, the group facilitator combined similar issues and asked for clarification from the person who wrote the issue if needed.

A modified nominal group technique was then used in the small groups to prioritize the issues. This modified nominal group technique utilized 10 voting sticker dots. Each individual in the small group received these 10 dots and was asked to place his or her dots on the issues of the most importance or greatest priority. The participants were instructed to disseminate these dots however they wanted. In other words, if they wanted to place all 10 of them next to one issue, they were welcome to do so. Once all small groups completed this task, the issues receiving the most votes moved forward to the general assembly for voting for the entire groups.

### **General Assembly Description at Texas Community Futures Forum**

The small group leaders then provided a brief description of the ranked issues from the small groups and opened the floor for participants to discuss any issues they wanted. These were timed, 2-minute "stump speeches." Participants could talk about an issue of significance to them and discuss why they thought it was important for the county to address. After this discussion, the same modified nominal group technique was utilized again to rank issues that surfaced from each of the small groups. After voting, the issues receiving the most votes became the highest priorities for the county to address.

## **Conclusion**

This was the first step in Texas Cooperative Extension's strategic planning process. Our ability to be relevant in the years to come is based on our ability to listen to our "customers"--the people in our communities. If the agency does not listen and respond, then our customers will seek out others to respond to their needs.

In spring 2004, over 6,400 people averaging 25 participants per county identified 2,274 issues during TCFF. These issues yielded an average of nine per county. Texas Cooperative Extension evaluated these issues and prioritized these for the agency to address.

## **References**

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