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Maximizing Agents' Effectiveness: Virginia Cooperative Extension's Answer to Training New Extension Agents

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Maximizing Agents' Effectiveness: Virginia Cooperative Extension's Answer to Training New Extension Agents

Abstract

The New Agent Training Program is required for all new Extension agents employed by Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE). The New Agent Training Program is based on the programming skills inventory and the background they bring to VCE. This article is to shares with other Extension or related professionals the efforts that VCE is taking to train new Extension agents in necessary skills outside their subject matter training.

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Why a Training Program?

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) employs Extension agents who hold faculty rank and academic degrees from a wide variety of disciplines. The agents' academic preparation enables them to acquire Extension positions in youth development, agriculture and natural resources, and family and consumer sciences. Although degree programs provide excellent subject matter training, they often lack opportunities for agents to obtain skills or strengths in some of the subjects that are needed to be effective Extension professionals (Bennett, 1979).

Because technical degree programs seldom provide adequate programming skill development courses, VCE involves all new Extension agents in a program through which fieldwork expertise and educational programming competence may be developed. The purpose of the New Agent Training Program is to provide opportunities for newly employed agent faculty to receive unit-based, hands-on orientation and training in preparation for assuming assigned roles in their field units. All new field faculty are expected to participate in the Virginia Cooperative Extension New Agent Training Program.

The key to a successful training program is to state up front the roles and expectations of the training agent and new agent so that they know what is expected of them to achieve a successful outcome (Boyle, 1981). The development and implementation of a training plan that allows Extension agents to address their weaknesses and build upon their strengths best accomplishes this. Although the new Extension agent is ultimately responsible for the development of the plan, a collaborative effort among Extension Training Agents, Staff Development Specialists, and Administrative Specialists is necessary.

VCE implemented the program for all new Extension agents in January, 2000. The New Agent Training Program is an innovative way to respect the characteristics of the new employee, determine the situation in the assigned county, and develop a training program that will enhance their ability to maximize performance once they are in their permanent assignment.

What Are the Steps in the VCE Training Program?

The Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) department with VCE conducts the New Agent Training program. The steps involved in the training of a new agent include the following.

Placement of New Agent: This is determined by the District Director with input from the appropriate Associate Director(s) from Agriculture and Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Sciences, and 4-H.

Completion of Programming Skills Inventory by New Agents: The District Director and AEE department liaison specialist review results of the inventory (Gardner 1983). This inventory is available upon request.

Trainer Agent Orientation: The District Director, AEE liaison, and training agent meet to discuss the programming skills inventory. Ideas for the New Agent Training Program are based on the programming skills inventory and Information and Action Items Checklist and Suggested Tasks are discussed (Gregorc, 1985).

New Agent Orientation: The District Director, AEE liaison, training agent, and new agent meet to discuss the New Agent Training Program, noting information from the programming skills inventory.

Development of New Agent Educational Plan: The training agent and new agent meet to discuss and finalize a plan for new agent training using the Information and Action Items Checklist and Suggested Tasks (Caffarella, 1994).

Agricultural and Extension Educational Unit Site Visit: The training agent and new agent work to accomplish the items identified in the training plan.

Submission of Summary of Training to District Director: Upon conclusion of the program, the training agent submits the results of the completed plan and Information and Action Items Checklist with appropriate comments to the District Director and EEP liaison.

Exit Interview: The interview is conducted with the training agent and new agent by the AEE liaison

Final Evaluation: The District Director, training agent, and EEP liaison meet to discuss the new agent's final evaluation to determine whether to advance the agent to his/her home unit or discontinue employment.

What Are the Benefits of the VCE Training Program?

Since January 1, 2000, over 40 Extension agents have completed the New Agent Training Program. Each agent developed and implemented a training plan that was tailor-made to fit their situation (Gagne, 1988). Each plan is diverse and unique to the agent. Training agents are providing valuable educational leadership and support, not only to the agents but also to the training process. The District Director and the Extension specialist for staff development are providing daily support and monitoring of the training. "Train the Trainer" programs (Ittner & Douds, 1997) are being constructed for new training agents as well as administrators that are new to the organization.

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