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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Communication Techniques for Initiating Discussion About Complex Value-Laden Issues

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Abstract: As Extension professionals, we often engage clients who need help with complex, laden issues. This article lays out five simple communication techniques that can be used by Extension professionals when engaging clients. By deploying these techniques, Extension professionals can direct discussions, reduce fears and tensions, address underlying values, and help clients discover unanticipated opportunities. If these communication techniques are successfully deployed, Extension professionals can make their clients comfortable and confident when participating in Extension programs.

Introduction

Invasive species, economic downturns, rural/urban tensions, peak oil, limited clean water, population growth, and climate change are huge, complex, value-laden issues affecting our clients. As Extension professionals, we can use "quick" techniques in our programs and workshops to engage clients and help them:

- Reduce tensions,
- Define the real issues,
- Address underlying values,
- Break out of the usual brain patterns,
- Involve different learning modalities, and
- Discover unanticipated opportunities.

Communication Techniques

Open Sentences

At the beginning of a session, ask participants to complete the following sentences:

I've heard a lot about _____ [issue], and the questions I still have are...

What I'm hearing about _____ [issue] makes me feel . . .

But _____ [issue] presents some new possibilities, and facing it together could enable us to . . .

Use their responses to direct the ensuing discussion.

Extension Shuffle

This activity, as well as being an icebreaker, can help participants generate ideas around the topic of a meeting. Participants pair up and answer a series of questions related to the meeting topic(s).

To begin, ask participants to pair with someone they don't know well, to introduce themselves, and then to pose a first question. Give them a few minutes to share. Ring a bell and tell them to find another person they don't know well. Pose a second question. Allow them to discuss it for another few minutes. Then repeat the cycle for a third question.

Posting the three questions on a flip chart in advance and uncovering the questions one at a time helps keep the group focused. The first question should be simple, such as "What outdoor activity do you enjoy the most?" The second and third should be related to the content of the meeting, but not be too hard to answer in a few minutes.

After the questions have been discussed in pairs, reconvene the group, and debrief on what they heard. These can be recorded on a flip chart and referred to as the group moves to corresponding topics during the meeting. This exercise can be done with any size group of four people or more and takes about 15-20 minutes to complete.

On Common Ground

Have participants stand in a circle with you on the outside. Read a series of statements, one at a time, and ask everyone who answers "yes" to each statement to step into the center of the circle. After each question, they return to the full circle. For example, read: "I have been to the Grand Canyon," and all participants who have been there step into the center.

This activity is particularly useful if the group has strong areas of disagreement or opposing values, because it enables them to clearly visualize their common ground. It works best with 10 to 20 participants, but it can be modified for larger or smaller groups. It is best to start with straightforward questions like "I have a dog" or "I have grandchildren" and then move to silly questions like "I sing in the shower" or "I watch NASCAR" or "I love Brussels sprouts" to generate laughter and camaraderie.

You should ask at least 10 questions in total. By the end your participants will be laughing and joking with each other, and you can get down to the serious business.

Why?

Help your participants uncover their personal values by asking them "Why?" a few times. This process, based on Means-end Chain Theory, assumes that people make conscious choices to behave one way or another to achieve desired outcomes (Costa, Dekker, & Jongen, 2004). Typically used in marketing studies to understand consumer purchase decisions, asking "why" a person behaves or believes a certain way helps her/him think about and describe the connections between behavior and outcome. Asking "why" over and over again helps her or him follow the chain that links outcomes to the deep personal values that make their actions and choices desirable.

In workshops, this technique may be effective in facilitating whole-group discussion, especially if the group is fairly homogenous. However, it may be useful to have participants interview each other in small groups using the technique and then report to the whole group.

What If?

Use this technique as a pick-me-up when a group begins to bog down. We seem to perceive many big-picture issues to be negative. But "What If" lightheartedly inspires creativity by approaching these issues in an overtly positive manner. Imagine, for instance, asking: "What if the climate is changing on our planet Earth? Wow! Isn't that great? Now we can . . ." Encourage participants to adopt this alternate worldview in their responses.

Summary

Simple, quick communication techniques can be useful in engaging clients in programs that focus on huge, complex, value-laden issues. Extension professionals can deploy these techniques to direct the ensuing discussion, reduce tensions among opposing view points, address underlying values, break out of the usual brain patterns, and find unanticipated opportunities. By using these communication techniques, Extension professionals can make their clients comfortable and confident when participating in Extension programs.

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