

**Leading Change in a Federal Agency
at the
Orientation for New Deans, Administrators, and National Program Leaders**

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and
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Introduction

Good afternoon and welcome. Once again it is my special pleasure to address some of the newest members of the agricultural leadership team during your orientation.

I say team because whether you are a new Dean, Director of an experiment station, Director of an extension service, new Administrator, or new NPL in CSREES, you are all part of the same team—the Federal/State Research, Education, and Extension team, or as I prefer – America Agriculture’s Blue Ribbon Support Team.

Sometimes we forget that--but it’s true. Each part of the team is like one leg of a three-legged stool—and a one-legged or two-legged stool can’t stand on its own.

One of the purposes of this orientation is to give you a sense of what the other parts of the team contribute to our common goal on behalf of American agriculture and all Americans.

The theme for this year’s conference is about leading change. “Change” seems to be the operative word of the moment, especially in light of the recent presidential election. One thing I’ve learned in my nearly three years in Washington is that “change” doesn’t come easily anywhere, especially in the Federal bureaucracy.

We have all been sensitized to change because of the recent presidential election. The successful candidate was more effective in convincing the electorate that he was an agent of change. Clearly, the electorate is ready for change – or are they?

Before we get into a discussion about change in a Federal agency, I’d like to define change and my interpretation of change in our environment. The basic definition of change according to Webster’s dictionary is (1) “to make different in some particular.”

This simple definition can take many forms, for example:

- (1) “To make radically different
- (2) To give a different position
- (3) To replace with another
- (4) To exchange for an equivalent sum
- (5) To become different

(6) To shift

(7) To undergo transformation

Change is described a bit more colorfully by Sir Winston Churchill, who is alleged to have said, “take change by the hand – else it will take you by the throat.” Whether he said it or not, it is a good thought. They say the only people who really want change are babies when their diapers are wet.

I was asked to address “Leading Change in a Federal agency.” Obviously, the first question is what is different in a Federal agency than a university, corporate business, the church or a family? In the final analysis, there is not much difference in leading change in any of these situations. Although each area has some unique nuances.

To lead any organization, group, or institution in change, you must have a clear vision of what kind of change you want to make. The change agent should also have some good idea as to how to make the desired change to achieve the desired results.

The bottom line is, to want change is to want something different. It is clearly implied that something different is something better than what you now have. On the other hand, things can be so bad that change – any change – is desirable.

Your main challenge as a leader in some facet of agricultural programs is to lead change. That’s only part of the challenge. You also must ensure that the change you are leading is in the right direction and will lead to something better than what you now have. This is not always an easy task.

I’d like to take a few minutes and discuss the steps in instituting change.

- ❖ Deciding to change
- ❖ Identifying what specific changes to make
- ❖ Developing the change plan
- ❖ Executing the plan
- ❖ Follow up

The question today is, “how do any of these steps differ in the Federal Government as compared to any other institution, organization, or group?”

I’d like to examine each step in some detail.

Deciding to change

The astute leader “reads” his constituents, stakeholders, board of directors, fans, faculty, staff, etc. and makes the decision to change. I might add the really exceptional leader senses the need for change before getting told to make changes. In sports, it’s easy. A 1-10 record is pretty clear evidence that change should be considered or risk being fired. Obviously, the decision to change is a fundamental one that should be carefully thought through. Change for the sake of change is absolute folly. I’m reminded of a quote attributed to Petronius who is alleged to have said in 210 B.C. the following:

("We trained hard ... but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized ... I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization.")

Change should be a deliberate, thought-through process to accomplish specific objectives.

Probably the best training ground for change is in the family situation. Any change in the family is an excellent learning experience. Let's say you have gone to your family for Christmas for the past 5 years. Your wife decides you will go to her family this year. If you can navigate this, you graduate.

Identifying Specific Changes to Make

Once a leader has made a decision to change, the crucial question is what changes to make. Collecting and assimilating information is important. Getting your stakeholders to buy into the need for change is essential and is often the most difficult part.

Developing the Change Plan

The next step in instituting change is to develop a change plan. The successful leader must have a good plan or roadmap to guide the implementation of proposed changes.

It's important not only to identify necessary changes, but also the sequence in which changes are to be implemented.

Executing the Change Plan

Actually making changes is always a challenge. No matter how carefully change is planned for, the real challenge is actually making the change. It's normal not wanting to leave a comfort zone.

Follow up

Assessing the value of change is an important step in the change process. Seriously asking the question, "did the changes make the system better," or "were the changes worth the effort?" For the remainder of my presentation, I'd like to consider change from two perspectives. First, from a Departmental perspective, then from a personnel perspective.

Departmental Perspective

Deciding to Change

Mike Johanns became the Secretary of Agriculture, he sensed the need for change in USDA. He confirmed his idea with forums (listening sessions) held in almost every state. Indeed, the results of these listening sessions provided the basis for the Administration's Farm Bill proposals.

Identifying Changes to make

Secretary Johanns heard from many sections of the country the need for certain changes in the new Farm Bill. Among them were:

- A. Provide a genuine safety net for farmers
- B. Enhance support for specialty crops programs
- C. Coordination of research

D. Recognize changing expectation with regard to international trade relationships

Bringing the matter closer to home, the land grant community and others clamored for change in the REE mission area. Dr. Danforth called for a National Institute of Food and Agriculture and the Land Grant system proposed several changes, including consolidating three of the REE agencies and the Forest Service under a new agency, the National Institutes for Food and Agriculture. All of this input was helpful and considered in drafting the research title of the Administration's Farm Bill proposals.

Developing the Change Plan

Secretary Johanns and his staff developed an elaborate plan for change. This plan was a comprehensive document that included detailed plans for each proposed change. Secretary Johanns exercised positive leadership in working with all Departmental mission areas. Developing the Farm Bill proposals provided a skeleton for the change plan.

Executing the Plan

Unfortunately, Secretary Johanns did not have the last word in any of the proposed changes. Congress spoke and did not accept many of the proposed changes.

In the end the administration didn't get all the changes we desired or expected, however, there were some successes. For example, we received major growth in mandatory funding for four new or greatly expanded initiatives.

These are the (1) Specialty Crops Research Initiative; (2) the Biomass Research and Development Initiative; (3) the Organic Agriculture Research Initiative; and (4) the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers Program.

This is a remarkable achievement that our entire agricultural science community can take credit for. This is a testament to our effectiveness when the entire research, education, and extension system works together as a team.

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (The Institute)

Another important change is the provision for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (National Institute). The National Institute will administer research funds and programs that have been administered by USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES).

Most of you know the history behind the Institute--which is sort of a hybrid between the recommendations of the Research, Education and Economics Task Force created by the 2002 Farm Bill; Create 21—NASULGC's restructuring plan; and the Administration's proposal.

Each of these groups saw the need for change. All these plans took different approaches toward the same end; they all wanted to enhance the stature of agricultural research, education, and extension; get more funds for basic research; and improve coordination between all parts of the system.

Secretary Schafer recently issued a memorandum assigning the authority to approve the final establishment of the National Institute to the Under Secretary, REE. This process is well underway and will be completed by October 1, 2009.

Research, Education, and Extension Office (REEO)

As part of the effort to further enhance coordination of research among various research components of USDA, the Farm Bill also mandated the formation of the Research, Education, and Extension Office (REEO).

The REEO will assist the Chief Scientist, USDA/Under Secretary for REE in identifying emerging research needs and opportunities; promoting broad collaboration; and fostering communication to enhance coordination and appreciation of agricultural science.

I am pleased to report that I have selected six very capable career employees, through a competitive process, to serve as the first Division Chiefs.

The Division Chiefs have now been in place for a couple of weeks and they are hard at work. They are already working on the roadmap for agricultural research, education, and extension as mandated by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill.

The roadmap must be implemented within one year and although it is only subject to review by the Secretary or the Secretary's designee, partners such as you and your institutions have provided significant and meaningful input to the process. You will also have other opportunities to provide input.

Chief Scientist

The designation of the Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics as USDA's Chief Scientist was another small but nevertheless important change under the new Research Title. The legislation designated that the appointee be a distinguished scientist with training or experience in agricultural research, education, and economics.

This change recognizes research as an important facet of USDA's mission and elevates the stature of science in USDA on par with other Federal Departments.

I must say, however, that I was disappointed that one of my proposed changes was not approved. That recommendation was to change the name of the mission area from the Office of Research, Education, and Economics to "Office of Science."

Visiting Senior Science Fellow Program

However, I am very pleased to announce the Department has recently approved our proposal for the REE Senior Science Fellow program. This initiative will provide senior agriculture Administrators from government and the academic community an opportunity to gain experience, understanding, and appreciation of how the REE mission area supports the Nation's agricultural research, education, and extension system.

The selected individual will “shadow” the USDA Chief Scientist/Under Secretary for REE and others in the mission area to learn how the various agencies and offices in REE contribute to the overall mission. These will be short term (three month) fellowships.

I readily admit, the administration’s Farm Bill proposals were defined by change. The changes that were proposed were motivated by input from many stakeholders across the country as well as an internal assessment. However, the final legislation was stripped of many of the proposed changes by the Congress. This so clearly illustrates some of the constraints in leading change in the Federal government. The bottom line – we did get some of our proposed changes!

Personal Perspective

Deciding to change –

During the interim after my retirement from the University of Georgia and joining the Department, I was engaged in energy related activities. My confirmation hearing in the U.S. Senate featured many questions about my views on agriculture’s role in helping the nation achieve a greater degree of sustainable energy security.

After arriving in the Department, I found that “energy” was not a high priority in the Research, Education, and Economics mission area. In fact, I found it was not a priority at all. My prior experience and my immediate assessment, along with very active support by some REE scientist enabled me to quickly come to the conclusion that we needed to make some changes. That change was to make “energy” a more important part of the active portfolio in our mission area.

Clearly, this was an area that was crying out for change with a capital “C”.

Identifying What Changes to Make

- A. My first reaction was to get help. That came by engaging two cooperators.
 - Jim Fischer – Former DOE employee and former state agricultural experiment station director
 - Stan Johnson – Former extension director and university leader
- B. Created mission area energy leadership Team ABBREE (Agricultural Bioenergy and Bioproducts Research Education and Extension) team.
 - 1. Included representation from all REE agencies
 - 2. Change was to assist me in making energy a priority in the REE mission area.
- C. Strengthening BBCC (Bioenergy Bioproducts Coordinating Committee)
 - 1. A Departmental-wide committee
 - 2. Worked to revitalize this group
- D. Develop Bioenergy Strategic Plan
 - 1. Included stakeholder input
 - 2. Included follow-through
- E. Establish Bioenergy Awareness Days
 - 1. Worked to get university buy-in
 - 2. Joined forces with 25 x 25 efforts

3. Planning for BEAD III

- F. Becoming more active in joint efforts with DOE and other Departments of the Federal government.
- G. Developing and participating in special conferences and activities.
 - 1. WIREC
 - 2. Sorghum Crops
 - 3. Int. Cooperation w/Brazil and China
 - 4. ARS International Conference in Bioenergy
- H. Scientist exchanges with DOE
 - 1. This is up and running.

I should add that some of my ideas bombed out before they were born. For example, I proposed the creation of an energy center to be located at a major Midwestern university. It didn't fly!

Developing the Change Plan

Each one of these activities has a specific plan. The overall goal was to raise the visibility of the importance of sustainable energy with the federal government and among all cooperators.

Executing the Change Plan

Execution of the change plan is still underway.

Summary

There are numerous hurdles, road blocks, and challenges in implementing changes in the Federal establishment that are not a part of the university or corporate businesses. I know I had far more flexibility in managing change as Dean than I have as Chief Scientist/Under Secretary.

Another unique challenge of leading change in a Federal agency is some of the constraints that Federal employees must acknowledge and follow. For example, a Dean can solicit input in almost any way he (she) deems appropriate. In contrast, Federal employees must always be aware of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) rules. This legislation provides guidelines that are quite limiting and must be followed in accepting any stakeholder input.

Closing

It's been a very rewarding experience to have served as the USDA Chief Scientist/Under Secretary for Research, Education, and Economics. And it's been a tremendous honor for me to serve in President Bush's Administration.

It's also been a genuine learning experience involving lots of on-the-job training. As you know, I spent all of the previous 50 years of my professional career as a student, professor, experiment station director, and dean in an academic environment.

It's tempting to say that nothing could have prepared me for serving in this role and the work of putting together the Research Title of a new Farm Bill or dealing with the myriad of other issues that need attention on a daily basis. But serving as an Experiment Station Director and as an Administrative head of agricultural programs (Dean) were about as good training as one could get.

One of the first lessons was to learn that there are many, many constraints in taking any action. You Deans and Directors have far fewer restrictions than someone in my position. Everything I do must be in concert with the Administration; follow Department goals, rules, and regulations; must avoid conflict with Congress; must avoid violating ethics standards and the Federal Advisory Committee Act rules; and, of course, must keep all of our stakeholders happy!

Although I had a bit of a learning curve I was able to draw upon my own background and experiences as a university faculty member; on my experiences as an Experiment Station Director; and as a College of Agriculture Dean.

I am also very fortunate to have had the support of two great Secretaries of Agriculture; Mike Johanns, now Senator-elect Johanns, and Ed Schafer.

I also had a lot of help and sage advice from my former Deputy Under Secretary, Merle Pierson; current Deputy Under Secretary Joe Dunn, Legislative Director Rob Hedberg, and Budget Director Sara Mazie, along with Agency Administrators, Ed Knipling in ARS, Colien Hefferan in CSREES, Kitty Smith in ERS, and Cynthia Clark in NASS.

One of the things I have come to appreciate while working inside the Government is the dedication and commitment of the hard working career employees in USDA.

Additionally, I had the very capable help of two former Land Grant University Administrators, Jim Fischer and Stan Johnson as cooperators.

We have a good system. It's not perfect, but it is truly a "blue ribbon" system for support of agriculture. But let me state in the most emphatic way possible, "to keep this system viable, we must be receptive to change."

I can't pass up the opportunity to challenge you to think about changes you want or need to make back home. Also, what about changes at the National level? May I suggest a couple for your consideration? I'll state a fact and you determine if you need to make some changes in your thinking or your support.

- (1) Future growth in support of agricultural research will most likely be provided in a competitive format and not according to the Hatch formula.
- (2) Congressional earmarks are an extremely poor way to fund agricultural programs.
- (3) Can you think of others?

The challenges we face will require the maximum effort of all appropriate segments of the agriculture R & D community. As new Deans, Directors, Administrators, and National Program Leaders, each of you will play an important role in the success of agriculture.

I challenge you to take change by the hand and make change work for you and for the system.

Please accept my congratulations on your assignment and best wishes and good luck in all future endeavors.