

Strengthening Our Extension Family through Realism, Optimism, and a Shared Vision

Good afternoon. Before we begin, I would like to take a moment to talk about marketing. Last year at our annual conference, I spoke about relevance and the need to for awareness of Extension and its mission. I said that if Extension is to remain relevant in today's world, we must do a much better job of marketing. We must stop singing to the choir and mine for new audiences. Since then a strategic marketing plan has been developed and approved and plans are under way to begin a campaign in the spring.

To that end, I hope that by now you all have had an opportunity to view and study the Extension Communications Gallery. If you haven't, then I would ask that you make it a point before you leave. Many of you have asked why I requested these materials. Some of you grumbled about it being busy-work.

The reasons are simple: I wanted us to see what our publics see. In other words, what is our printed image? Are we recognizable as one organization or family? Or do we appear to be an assortment of homeless orphans? The materials speak for themselves, but not necessarily for Extension.

Let me be clear, I'm not blaming you or anyone for our lack of consistency or marketing identity. There haven't been resources or processes in place to help or fix this problem. But that is going to change. We are going to provide you with the tools, training, and templates to create a consistent and strong image for ISU Extension.

In the coming months you will be hearing a lot from our Communications group. I am asking that you all treat marketing as a priority. Thank you.

As your capstone speaker, I am told that it's my job to keep people awake, to try not to say the same things that have already been said at the conference, and to send people off in a good mood. I hope I can achieve at least two out of three.

Each year the Annual Conference committee bestows the title for the director's talk. This year it's "Strengthening Our Extension Family through Realism, Optimism, and a Shared Vision."

But before we tackle the family ties topic, I'd like to show you a help wanted ad. Note that it doesn't list the title of the job. Please take a moment and read over the qualifications and we'll come back to it later.

Wanted: Seeking a person who will work to make our organization stronger and who can work and thrive in a group whose members are related by occupation only. We need someone who has a practical understanding and acceptance of the actual nature of the world, rather than an idealized or

romantic view of it, but, at the same time, who has a tendency to believe, expect, or hope that things will turn out well. Moreover, the successful candidate will be able to take equal responsibility for something along with other people and have the ability to anticipate possible future events and developments.

OK, getting back to my assigned topic, I would like to pose it as a question. How can we, with the emphasis on you and I together, strengthen our Extension family through Realism, Optimism, and a Shared Vision? Let's break it down into sections, starting with the concept of strengthening our Extension family. I know that we often refer to Extension as a family, but what does that mean to you? Most of us aren't related by blood—or at least that's what Bruce Stoll tells me. But we are related in that we share a profession and we work for ISU Extension. But does our relationship end there, or are there other characteristics that bond us together and cause us to refer to ourselves as family?

When researching characteristics of strong families it is a sure bet that one of the most infamous families of all will turn up: the Cosa Nostra. You may laugh, but the Cosa Nostra is an interesting example of a strong family with some surprising similarities to Extension. The dictionary definition of the Cosa Nostra is "a loose confederation of families, each of which claims influence over a region or county." Maybe they even have an office in every county. The Cosa Nostra is regarded by many people as a role model and advisor. The Cosa Nostra lends a helping hand to those in need. And at one time, the Cosa Nostra actually stood for respect of the law, defense of all rights, and greatness of character.

But further research lead me to Gayle Peterson's work on families. She has a doctorate in social work from UC Berkeley, is the author of "Making Healthy Families," and works in family development. I would like to share some of her observations on families with you. This is a quote:

"Each family is its own unique culture. But all families, no matter where they are...exist to nurture the growth and development of their members."

Peterson goes on to lists several characteristics that cultivate and strengthen families. Consider these attributes with reference to your Extension relationships.

Orientation

Family atmosphere is influenced by a belief in helping each other, acknowledging human needs for reassurance and support, and viewing mistakes as human. When family members make mistakes the other members believe there may be numerous factors involved, and refrain from jumping to blaming or criticizing statements precipitously. Members believe in the inherent "goodness" of one another, and do not assume "bad" intent of other members.

Boundaries

Clear boundaries between family members means that their responsibilities are clear. Members talk freely for themselves, expressing differences of feelings and opinions without fear of punishment or retaliation.

Honesty and freedom of expression

Members of a family are free to express themselves autonomously, including different opinions or viewpoints. Discussions can be lively and even heated and it is basically acceptable for family members to have differences. Love and caring is not withdrawn if people think differently about something. If ambivalence and uncertainty are accepted, as well as differences, families tend to enjoy an open atmosphere of honesty in relationships.

Warmth, joy, and humor

When there are joy and humor in relationships, people seek out the comfort of these interactions. Family members' enjoyment and trust in one another is an important energizing resource! There is the feeling that there is always someone to talk to who cares, and with whom you can laugh and have fun at various times as well.

Organization and negotiating skill

A necessary aspect of family life is coordinating tasks, negotiating differences, and being able to reach closure effectively. Negotiating skills include the ability to listen and make choices in what family members feel is a fair process. In healthy families, this process does not get overly bogged down and taking charge does not mean being overly controlling. There tends to be a spirit of camaraderie and trust built up over the years so organization is relatively easy.

Value system

Part of the health and vibrancy of any family is also dealing with weaknesses, fears, and stresses in the system itself. Nobody is perfect and no system is perfect. But in healthy families, truth is accepted as not absolute. Different perspectives on reality are acceptable and people are basically good.

I think that we can all agree that these seem like a good set of fundamental building blocks for strengthening our Extension family, or any family for that matter. Now let's look at adding some additional ingredients to strengthen our Extension family: Optimism, Realism, and Shared Vision.

One thing is clear to me: I don't think that an Extension professional exists who isn't an optimist. It's in your nature to want to make things better. At the same time, even with the odds sometimes stacked against you, you rarely lose hope. Sure you get down in the dumps from time to time. But that's natural, especially with what you already have on your plates. Then, there's a guy standing behind the buffet with a big spoon, (that's a metaphor for me) who keeps heaping on more. And it's natural to get a little cranky when you realize that you haven't put a dent in it even after a long day of trying. In the end, I would bet money that all of you still think that things will get better. No, I don't think that there is any shortage of optimism in our Extension family.

But realism might be a different story, especially with all of that rampant optimism going around. I often have said that Extension is an organization with infinite ambitions and finite resources. I also have said that the lack of resources

has not prevented Extension from accomplishing great things. It is our family relationship and our optimism that have made it possible to have the large and small successes that are achieved every single day in a world of increasing challenges and shrinking resources.

There's another element to our successes as well. It is the trim tab factor that Buckminster Fuller often used as an example of how groups of individuals could accomplish great things. The trim tab is a nautical device with a series of small fins that is used to turn enormous ships. It is this same principle that fires the engines of Extension: many people focused and working toward the same goal, or in a phrase, a shared vision.

With so many programs and a myriad of priorities that sometimes appear to be working at cross-purposes, finding a shared vision might seem difficult, if not impossible. And it's true that we have labored long in the creation of vision statements and dare I say, "strategic plans"? But when I think about our shared vision, I'm not referring to our mission and vision, but something deeper—something that defies the collective hashing out of a proclamation with carefully chosen words.

Ralph L. Reeder, professor emeritus of agricultural communications at Purdue University, eloquently offers this insight into Extension and its folk:

"Extension's future lies with helping those who have the greatest need. Extension's program continues to be in the hands of those people for whom Extension carries the name Service. Hope for the future remains in a basic concept of democracy, of all civilized society, that the majority of their citizens will hold firm to their 'mission of concern' for those in need."

For me, a "mission for concern for those in need" is the essence of our shared vision. Ultimately, it is also the glue that strengthens our Extension family. Remember that if your Extension family atmosphere is not where you want it to be, you can change it! You are not stuck in the past. Once you are able to objectively identify elements that need to change, your observations will lead you to different outcomes. But change takes time. Each incident or event you turn around builds on itself to create the future, and patience and compassion are your best allies.

Before we put this topic to bed, let's take one last look at the dictionary definitions of Strengthening, Family, Realism, Optimism, Shared, and Vision.

- Strengthening—to make something stronger or more powerful, or increase in strength or power
- Family—a group with something in common and whose members are related in origin, characteristics, or occupation
- Realism—a practical understanding and acceptance of the actual nature of the world, rather than an idealized or romantic view of it
- Optimism—the tendency to believe, expect, or hope that things will turn out well
- Shared—to take equal responsibility for something along with other people

- Vision—the ability to anticipate possible future events and developments

And what about that want ad I showed you earlier? Well, the job title could be any one of your titles.

Thank you.