

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TASK FORCE REPORT

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Charge and Objectives

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach is a large, varied, and complex organization, requiring substantial and clear internal communication across all sectors. Within this organizational context, internal communication is defined as any communications channel with a primary target audience of faculty, staff, and/or extension council members. Challenges related to internal communication may affect staff morale, as well as the organization's effectiveness and reputation with stakeholders.

In April 2018, Vice President for Extension and Outreach John Lawrence appointed and charged a task force with determining how communication might be improved within the organization to enhance the delivery of the mission. The task force received four objectives:

1. Gather information from across the system on barriers and ways to improve internal communication.
2. Ensure all voices are heard.
3. Assess, evaluate, and determine the most important issues for the system to address in the short- and long-term.
4. Provide a final report with recommendations to the vice president and leadership team.

The overriding goal was to move the organization forward and increase the effectiveness of ISU Extension and Outreach.

### Members

The task force devoted more than 1,000 hours of staff time over ten months to design and implement this analysis and is grateful for the colleagues who took the time to engage in this important endeavor:

- *Debra M. Sellers* (co-chair), director, Human Sciences Extension and Outreach, and associate dean, College of Human Sciences
- *Ross Wilburn* (co-chair), diversity officer
- *Mary Giese*, member, Marshall County Extension Council
- *Alex Merk*, director, Boone County
- *Andrea Nelson*, interim program leader, 4-H Youth Development
- *Ben Pullen*, field supervisor, 4-H Youth Development
- *Ann Torbert*, program specialist, 4-H Youth Development
- *Terry Torneten*, director, Region 12

The task force presented an extensive, 215-page report to Vice President Lawrence and the leadership team at the 2019 ISU Extension and Outreach Annual Conference. This executive summary now is being shared with employees and councils. The task force thanks Dr. Lawrence for his trust in the task force as individuals and as a team.

# Process

The task force used the following strategies:

- asked members of the leadership team to share their insights related to the charge;
- engaged with regional representatives of the Iowa Extension Council Association to gather their input and possible questions to ask of council members; and
- developed a comprehensive plan to gather feedback.

Four methods of feedback collection resulted in the following:

- 11 submissions (representing seven individuals) to the task force’s generic email address
- 15 individual interviews with four task force members
- 26 participants in four community conversations (focus groups)
- 306 completed and partially completed forms via an electronic survey

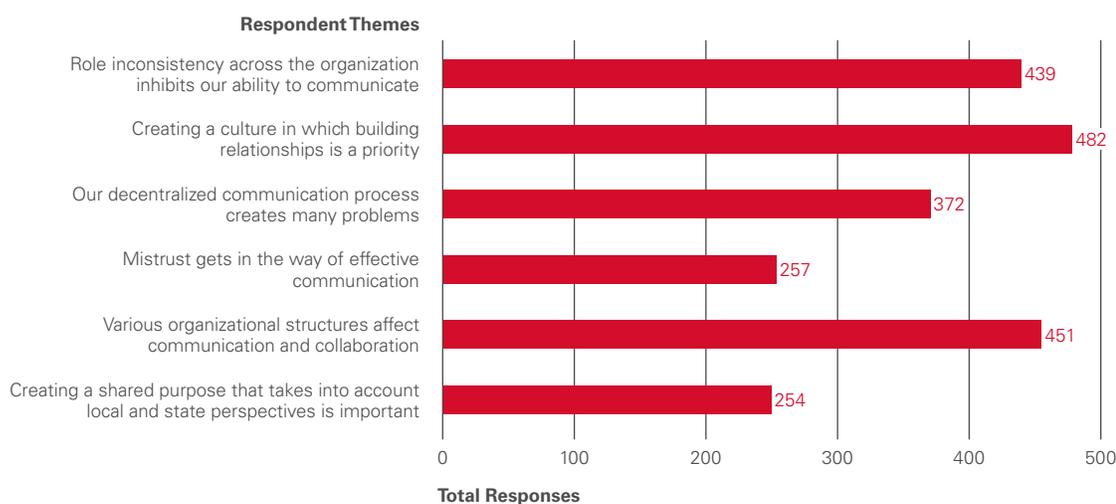
# Findings

The task force was encouraged by the positive response in both numbers of participants and thoughtfulness of the comments. The following data points are from the electronic survey:

- 48 percent of respondents indicated they were employees of the county agricultural district; 40 percent were Iowa State University employees; and 12 percent were county extension council members.
- 78 percent of respondents indicated they receive needed internal communications that support them in being effective in their positions.
- 81 percent of respondents believe that role confusion exists within the organization.
- 71 percent of respondents often or always trust the organization.
- 33 percent of respondents stated they believe local and state priorities are aligned always or most of the time; 30 percent said half the time; and 37 percent said sometimes or never.
- 65 percent of respondents indicated they had joined ISU Extension and Outreach after the 2009 reorganization.
- 80 percent of respondents said they felt a sense of belonging within ISU Extension and Outreach.

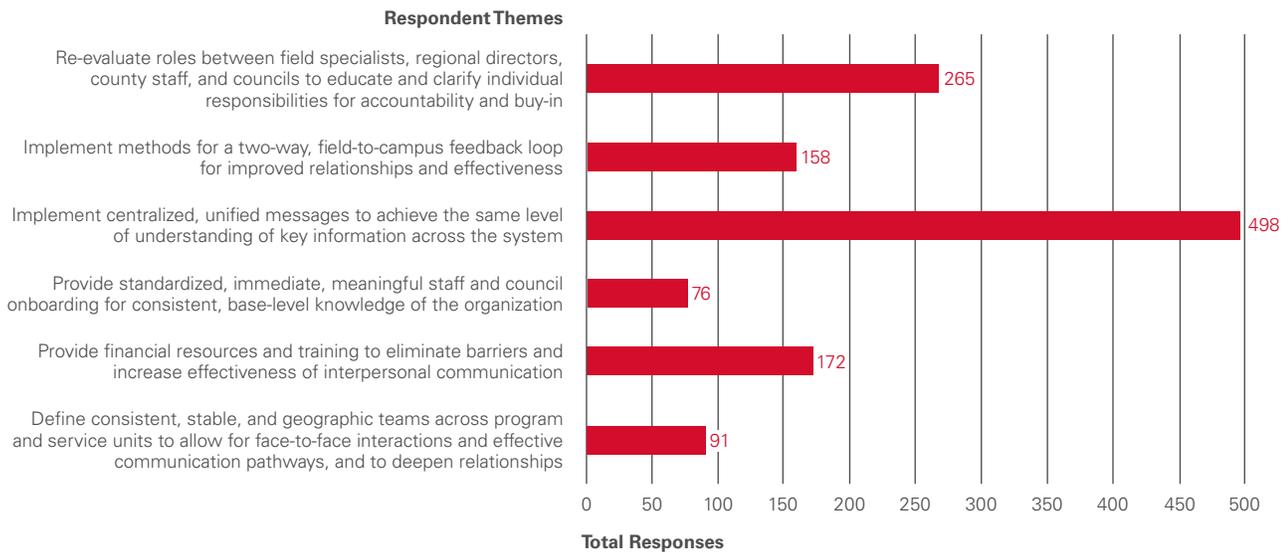
Specific highlights from the qualitative data, collected across all four feedback mechanisms, provided themes across two broad questions. The first question was related to good and poor communication people have experienced and the affect it had on their ability to be successful in their role. The task force quantified the number of times each theme was mentioned across all four feedback mechanisms (email address, community conversations, electronic survey, and individual interviews).

**Table 1. Communication experiences that affected people’s ability to be successful**



The second question and corresponding themes were related to effective internal communication strategies we can use to help each other be successful in our roles.

**Table 2. Effective internal communication strategies for ISU Extension and Outreach**



## Recommendations

The task force’s recommendations were guided by the data and based upon a holistic view of the process and the results. The recommendations are arranged to align with the themes generated from the qualitative data analysis. For brevity, each recommendation is listed under the most pertinent theme. However, many of the recommendations could be placed under multiple themes, and would positively impact internal communication in many ways.

ISU Extension and Outreach likely will need financial resources to address most, if not all, of these recommendations. The task force did not consider financial implications when deciding upon recommendations.

**Theme: Re-evaluate roles between field specialists, regional directors, county staff, and councils to educate and clarify individual responsibilities for accountability and buy-in.**

**Define clear lines of accountability.** Perhaps one of the most basic recommendations is related to clarifying lines of accountability for all staff. The Structured for Success process may provide a vehicle for beginning to address this issue within the system.

**Create standardized templates for position descriptions.** ISU Extension and Outreach is making progress in clarifying position titles within the system. To aid communication, ISU Extension and Outreach could create templates for position descriptions that could be shared and implemented across the system.

**Theme: Implement methods for a two-way, field-to-campus, feedback loop for improved relationships and effectiveness.**

**Create an internal virtual suggestion box.** A virtual suggestion box, potentially anonymous and accessed only by Vice President Lawrence and/or his appointed designee, would encourage ongoing suggestions for improvements and act as a potential warning of challenges that employees are experiencing.

**Implement listening sessions or virtual “office hours” with the leadership team.** Employees appreciated the listening sessions conducted by Vice President Lawrence. The task force recommends continuing to conduct listening sessions periodically and possibly expanding them to include the rest of the leadership team.

**Create a public website to gather information about needs across the state.** As an expansion of the virtual suggestion box, create a centralized mechanism, open both to employees and to the public, to collect information relative to needs across the state. This would contribute to positive communication.

**Ensure county staff have a seat on all planning committees.** All ISU Extension and Outreach program units, and service units when appropriate, should include county staff when creating committees.

**Expand the ISU Extension and Outreach leadership team.** The leadership team should engage all interested parties in ideas and challenges discussed during their meetings. The Iowa Extension Council Association potentially could be allocated a representative at leadership team meetings.

**Theme: Implement centralized, unified messages to achieve the same understanding of key information across the system.**

**Share the ISU Extension and Outreach vision regularly and often.** Leadership is encouraged to relate ISU Extension and Outreach's work back to the mission and vision at every possible opportunity. Although the "how" of their work will differ, all employees should understand the "why" behind their work, which will strengthen purpose, trust, and communication.

**Develop a place and process to coordinate messaging across the system.** A frequent concern was the piecemeal approach to messaging across the system. The data indicated strongly that there was no "one place" for staff to go to become informed about major changes. Therefore, the task force recommends the following:

- **Develop a centralized (internal) website or other "front page" for leadership communications.** Utilize technology to ensure that a pre-determined ISU Extension and Outreach internal "front page" automatically populates the opening window when a system computer comes online each day. This front page would carry real time announcements from across the system.
- **Develop a centralized process for the content of messaging across the system.** Leadership is encouraged to come together on key points, if not details, of how important changes are developed, implemented, and disseminated across the system.
- **Develop a method for crisis communications.** The organization needs a system for communicating about crises. Staff need to feel informed and able to address questions and comments that may arise in their local contexts.
- **Develop a method for systematically communicating university visits across the state.** County staff are not being notified when individuals from campus are visiting locations across the state. ISU Extension and Outreach should develop a communication method for these visits to provide adequate advance notice for employees.
- **Develop a method for systematically communicating regional or county staff visits across the state.** Another area of concern relates to individuals within counties visiting locations in their region or another county without notifying the staff in the locations they are visiting. ISU Extension and Outreach should develop a central system for visit notification.

**Theme: Provide standardized, immediate, meaningful staff and council onboarding for consistent, base-level knowledge of the organization.**

Electronic onboarding and training, although efficient and necessary, does not support the development of relationships, which is fundamental to extension work. Creating a culture in which building relationships is a priority was a main theme; therefore, the task force offers the following recommendations.

**Prioritize onboarding of extension council members.** Onboarding for extension council members is of great concern, as is determining what would motivate them to participate in professional development. Therefore, the task force recommends an alternative survey to investigate this issue.

**Develop, and demand, actions that include face-to-face interactions.** Employees need to interact with individuals central to their role. Face-to-face opportunities need to be supported with time and funding.

**Hire a professional trainer to conduct core onboarding across the state with supervisors.** A professional trainer dedicated to systemizing the onboarding process would be able to develop personal relationships with supervisors and ensure that they and their new employees receive standardized communication about all aspects of the system and their roles.

**Provide U-Bill user-friendly training.** The U-bill process was mentioned frequently during the task force's data gathering. A comprehensive and targeted U-bill onboarding process should assist in alleviating miscommunication around this issue.

**Theme: Provide financial resources and training to eliminate barriers and increase effectiveness of interpersonal communication.**

**Enhance diversity of employees and clarify career planning and pathway.** Increased diversity of employees will enhance ISU Extension and Outreach; the organization must address existing barriers that hinder the ability to recruit and retain diverse staff. For all employees, the career pathway is not clear; a plan for advancement should be developed, implemented, and disseminated.

**Provide professional development related to email etiquette.** ISU Extension and Outreach should provide training in email etiquette and guidelines for best practices.

**Provide a risk management hotline.** The task force recommends that ISU Extension and Outreach create and maintain a risk management hotline, a “one stop shop” employees could consult for answers to their questions.

**Theme: Define consistent, stable, and geographic teams across program and service units to allow for face-to-face interactions and effective communication pathways, and to deepen relationships.**

**Develop consistent teams across units for implementation across the state.** ISU Extension and Outreach program and service units currently operate with a variety of structures, which creates confusion and miscommunication across the state. The Structured for Success Committee should seriously consider this recommendation as they progress in their work and develop their models of implementation.

**Implement transparency in the use of listservs.** The task force recommends that the Extension Information Technology unit bring its expertise to bear on the use of mailing lists and listservs, and determine one best method for moving forward. The task force also recommends that a master list of all listservs be made available, along with an “open list” policy in which any member of the system may request access to any listserv.

## **Recommendations beyond the themes**

**Data mine the electronic survey for additional information.** Additional analysis of data from the electronic survey may be useful to Vice President Lawrence and the leadership team.

**Investigate organizational culture/design application within the system.** ISU Extension and Outreach has an opportunity to further explore the dichotomy of trust/mistrust within the organization. Engaging in this work could help the organization develop a shared purpose and assist with many of the recommendations.

**Communicate systematically and repeatedly (via the recommendations) the status of the Internal Communications Task Force report and recommendations to the system.** Mistrust will take hold if employees perceive that the work of the Internal Communications Task Force is not being diligently used within discussions and decision-making.

By reviewing and evaluating these collective recommendations, Vice President Lawrence and the leadership team will help staff feel that they are valued and that leadership is listening to them. This review and evaluation also will contribute to transparency, increase staff satisfaction, and increase effectiveness of ISU Extension and Outreach’s services to the public – providing increased value to all Iowans.

### **Acknowledgement**

The Internal Communications Task Force thanks Patti Lewis, secretary, Human Sciences Extension and Outreach, for her ongoing administrative support of the task force’s work.