Iowa State University Extension and Outreach puts the land-grant mission to work, applying university research and evidence-based practices across the state. We’re focused on feeding people, keeping them healthy, helping their communities prosper and thrive, and turning the world over to the next generation in better shape than we found it. How well we do this work is influenced by the culture of our organization. During our 2014 annual conference, we examined our organizational culture, as well as project and budget management, and putting new technology to work for programming.

After a month of online activities, nearly 400 of us came together March 11-12 at the Iowa State campus to determine what is important to ISU Extension and Outreach, because we are committed to excellence and responsive to change. The evaluations showed 89 percent of us believed the conference helped us determine the kind of organizational culture we want. This report focuses on our organizational culture, because our culture can hold us back — or move us forward. It’s up to us.

Working above the line
Debra Davis, professor with the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center and director of Extension Organization Development and Evaluation, did not have all the answers for us. However, she helped us think more about the questions we have about our culture and what will work for ISU Extension and Outreach. Each of us has perceptions about the culture within ISU Extension and Outreach. Our perceptions are influenced by our individual experience. The culture we create within our organization is based on the experiences we have. Our experiences lead to beliefs. Beliefs cause us to act in a certain way. When we act a certain way as an organization, we get results — which can be positive or negative.

Dr. Davis talked about accountability, above and below the line. Will we operate below the line, playing the blame game, or will we work above the line? Above the line, when we see a challenge, we own it, solve it, and do it. We take the steps to accountability. Success is much more likely when we operate above the line. Creating an accountable culture is a shared responsibility. It belongs to everyone.

WHAT CAN EACH PERSON IN OUR ORGANIZATION DO TO CHANGE THE CULTURE?
Own it, solve it, do it.

In a healthy culture, an organization has a shared vision, accountability, and strong leaders. There is trust, respect, communication, and engagement. People take pride and enthusiasm in their work and are adaptable. Opportunities and learning abound. Are these things lining up within ISU Extension and Outreach to create the culture we want? The answer is above the line: own it, solve it, do it.
Examining our organizational culture
Most Iowa youth will be living in eight to 10 metro counties of our state by 2040, while outlying and rural areas will see increases in their populations of Iowans over age 60. On the first day of our conference, we gathered in small groups to discuss Iowa’s workforce and demographics and the competing values of our organizational culture. We considered how we might shape our culture to meet the challenges of educational leadership, as well as economic and community development.

We shared our perspectives on the seven dimensions of organizational culture:
1. Innovation and risk taking – depends on your position in the organization
2. Attention to detail – differing expectations and interpretations
3. Outcome orientation – little focus on process, quality, or relationships; and lack of time, money, or training to do evaluation
4. People orientation – need more communication up, down, and across the organization
5. Team orientation – depends on the situation and team leaders
6. Aggressiveness – the term is viewed negatively
7. Stability – “Our stability is our inability to change.”

Several themes emerged from these discussions. Overall, we issued a call for more fully uniting campus and county. We voiced our hope of becoming a “family” again — a feeling that some say has been missing since the 2009 reorganization — as well as the fear of reorganizing again. However, in their annual conference evaluations, many participants shared their view that it is time to accept the reorganization and move on. We also requested more professional development and support for county staff and councils.

Our conversations continued on the second day of our conference. We began to articulate potential “next steps” for building a better organizational culture within ISU Extension and Outreach.

Shaping our culture for our future
During the conference we heard from Vice President for ISU Extension and Outreach Cathann Kress. She reminded us of the fundamental principles we agreed upon at our 2011 leadership summit, which guide our decision-making and provide the overall compass for our work. Providing access to education is our responsibility; it’s in our DNA. Our DNA includes an equally important belief that we do our work through our diverse and meaningful partnerships. Whenever we need to make decisions about allocating resources or strategic planning, or when we’re trying to figure out the best direction for Extension and Outreach going forward, these two components of our DNA always must be driving our decisions.

Likewise, our programs should address real needs in the here-and-now by providing education, while also generating knowledge and making the most of our resources. As our program portfolio model shows, we must make choices about our programs, given our available funds.

• At the heart of our portfolio are programs that are fundamental to our agriculture-based cooperative extension system and long-term partnerships.
• Next are programs that are responsive to needs assessments and changing demographics.
• Strategic programs integrate resources across the university and land-grant system, are multi-disciplinary and diversified, and address signature issues.
• We address emerging program opportunities that need an educational response.
• Finally, we must transition programs that can be spun off to a partner, sustained locally, or for which an educational need no longer exists.

The partnerships we build and the learning opportunities we provide have one over-arching goal – to improve the quality of life in Iowa. We must operate as a learning organization, with providing access to education and working in partnership at our core. Our organizational culture can hold us back – or move us forward. It’s up to us.

Moving forward
During our 2014 annual conference we began examining our organizational culture and how to better align our behaviors with our values and vision. So what happens next? The data gathered from our facilitated discussions and post-conference evaluations have been summarized as three action steps.

ACTION STEPS

1 Address Iowa’s changing demographics.
   • Widen our circle of service with urban audiences.
   • Increase diversity of our workforce, partners, and participants.

2 Adapt to our new reality.
   • Deal with complex problems.
   • Develop inter-relationships within and beyond agriculture.
   • Broaden Extension and Outreach’s role to support and encourage informal educational efforts from all colleges.

3 Continue to invest in professional development.
   • Use technology more effectively.
   • Adapt to new audiences.
   • Build stronger teams and increase team orientation.
Each of us has a role in carrying out these action steps to build a better organizational culture for ISU Extension and Outreach. None of us should be content to “delegate up” and cede our responsibility to someone higher up the administrative ladder. We said we want to become a “family” again. If that’s true, then we all must do our part to unite campus and county more fully.

We closed our annual conference by reciting our Extension Professional’s Creed. Our creed helps us frame the beliefs of our profession and the unique work of Extension and Outreach. How do we implement these beliefs in our daily work? How do we challenge ourselves to keep changing to best represent our ideals? Because yes, to live up to our creed, ongoing change is required. What will we ensure for our colleagues, our institution, and our citizens on our watch? See you there.

The Extension Professional’s Creed

I believe in people and their hopes, their aspirations, and their faith; in their right to make their own plans and arrive at their own decisions; in their ability and power to enlarge their lives and plan for the happiness of those they love.

I believe that education, of which Extension is an essential part, is basic in stimulating individual initiative, self-determination, and leadership; that these are the keys to democracy and that people when given facts they understand, will act not only in their self-interest, but also in the interest of society.

I believe that education is a lifelong process and the greatest university is the home; that my success as a teacher is proportional to those qualities of mind and spirit that give me welcome entrance to the homes of the families I serve.

I believe in intellectual freedom to search for and present the truth without bias and with courteous tolerance toward the views of others.

I believe that Extension is a link between the people and the ever-changing discoveries in the laboratories.

I believe in the public institutions of which I am a part.

I believe in my own work and in the opportunity I have to make my life useful to humanity.

Because I believe these things, I am an Extension professional.

http://epaf.ifas.ufl.edu/esp/creed.shtml