

**Tools and Techniques for Revising a State Extension Performance Appraisal System for
Extension Agents, County Directors, and Area Extension Specialists**

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Introduction/Need

Appraisal, as a social phenomenon, is a basic human behavior of evaluating the work performance of oneself and others (Dulewicz, 1989). Performance appraisal is a process of interpreting and measuring the degree of effectiveness, standards achieved, or performance goals met (Bernardin & Beatty, 1984). In Cooperative Extension, performance appraisal has received limited attention among researchers. Davis and Verma (1993) linked extension agents' views of their numeric performance appraisal to the agents' perception of the ideal performance appraisal system in a seven-state study of 602 agents. They found that agents' identify ideal performance appraisal as one in which their appraisers had adequate instruction, and the agents' plan of work was incorporated into the appraisal.

A survey of 218 Tennessee Extension Agents found that the vast majority (78.9%) agreed that their performance appraisal system needed to be improved. Recommendations included a performance appraisal rubric more accurately reflecting the job and increased professional development for County Directors who rate Extension Agents' performance (Donaldson & French, 2013). In response to this research, a two-year initiative was established to revise the performance appraisal system used by the University of Tennessee (UT) Extension and Tennessee State University (TSU) Cooperative Extension Program. The performance appraisal form produced by this initiative became the first such document jointly approved by Extension administration, general counsels and human resource departments of the University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University.

Process

A team of 16 UT and TSU Extension personnel representing county, regional, and departmental offices conducted numerous studies to select performance factors, criteria, and descriptions. A document review was completed. A faculty member used random number generator for random selection of 73 Extension Agents, 26 County Directors, and 6 Extension Area Specialists. The job descriptions and position description questionnaires of the selected individuals were copied from official University personnel files for study. This document review ensured that performance factors and criteria reflected the actual Extension professionals' jobs. The team also reviewed the performance appraisal forms used by five peer institutions. In addition, a focus group of nine high-performing Extension Agents and County Directors (selected by Regional Directors) reviewed the criteria and provided feedback.

Results to date/Implications

This initiative created a number of tools and techniques to inform similar efforts in other states. Broadly, the tools and techniques may be grouped as instrumentation and instructional. Regarding instrumentation, a performance appraisal form and a performance appraisal rubric were created. The rubric delineates performance factors and performance levels for five categories: 1=Unsatisfactory, 2=Needs Improvement; 3=Meets Expectations, 4=Exceeds Expectations, and 5=Exemplary (Donaldson, et al., 2016). The instructional tools are:

- Executive Summary – The initiative's Executive Summary provides an overview of performance appraisal in society and in Cooperative Extension. This publication also

describes the Performance Appraisal Revision Committee's major objectives and recommendations for assessing performance (Donaldson, et al., 2017).

- **Appraisal Guide** – The *Appraisal Guide for the Tennessee Extension Performance Appraisal System* is a 57-page guide that provides information for employees and supervisors. Sections include roles and responsibilities for conducting the appraisal; establishing goals for the coming year; reviewing goals and progress toward those goals from the past year; assessing performance; and understanding low performance. This guide provides practical tools such as a checklist for County Director to use in coordinating the appraisal process at the county level (Donaldson, 2017a).
- **Case Studies** – The *Case Studies for Assessing Performance Facilitation Guide* is a 26-page guide that details employee case studies and how the appraisal system reflected the employees' performance. This is an important tool for creating consistency among different Regional Directors and County Directors (who each have roles as raters) because a rater can compare his or her answers to the standard rating for a given scenario (Donaldson, 2017b).
- **Regional Workshop Materials** – One-day, regional workshops introduced the revised Tennessee Extension Performance Appraisal System. These workshops were taught by Regional Directors using standard lessons plans, visuals, and handouts (Donaldson, 2017c).

In Tennessee, all of these tools supported successful implementation of the new performance appraisal system. This project provides a number of implications and ideas for effective performance appraisal of Extension professionals. The project underscores the importance of a written guide (available online) coupled with face-to-face learning opportunities with peers and supervisors. The instrumentation is critically important and the instructional materials that help employees consistently and accurately use the instruments are just as important.

Future plans

Research is needed to identify best practices, including instruments and processes, in performance appraisal for Extension Agents. This is particularly important given the small research base in extension agent appraisal. Using the preliminary documents from this Tennessee initiative, the University of Arkansas adapted, with permission, the performance factors and criteria (2016). Research to understand how the appraisal systems are performing in both Tennessee and Arkansas is needed. Due to the importance of performance appraisal and its effect on the workforce, researchers are working to identify extramural funding to conduct intensive performance appraisal studies, including how performance appraisal may influence, if at all, effective education and community engagement.

Costs/resources needed

One Agricultural and Extension Education faculty member with expertise in program evaluation, organizational change, and performance appraisal coordinated the project. The two-year effort had a \$107,000 budget of state-designated Extension funds that supported: (a) the tuition, health insurance, and salary of one graduate research assistant working 20 hours per week for two years; and (b) mileage, meals, and lodging for 16 committee members to participate in five face-to-face meetings (two days each).

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