

A Case Study of Ohio State University Extension's 2009 Organizational Restructuring: Perceptions from Area Leaders and Regional Directors

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Introduction

Throughout the decade of 2000-2010, at least 10 state Extension systems were known to have announced a restructuring process, which also coincided with funding and economic pressures. Changing economic and social trends are likely to continue to affect the Cooperative Extension System resulting in broad-scale organizational change.

Ohio State University Extension's administration implemented a restructuring plan in 2009 (OSU Extension, 2009). OSU Extension reorganized, maintaining a county presence in 88 counties, into nine multi-county areas organized with three areas in each of three regions. The areas were formally named Extension Education and Research Areas (EERAs). Within the new organizational model, nine Area Leaders and three Regional Directors were primarily responsible as change agents for ensuring Extension educational program services were provided to all counties despite a reduction in force and diminished public funding. Anecdotal information indicated that there were differing actions and characteristics in how the area structure was being implemented by regional directors, area leaders, and county program educators (Kelbaugh, Smith, Martin, Earnst, & Marrison, 2010). Information had not been systematically collected with regard to how restructuring was implemented in the field, including how leaders approached working together, delivering programs, and planning future outcomes.

Insight gathered from this study could be used by Extension professionals and leaders in Ohio or other state Extension systems to consider factors, resources, or methods to assist staff in future reorganization efforts, adaptation, and creative response to change, and integration of strategic planning. Extension employees can get a better understanding of the change process and their part within it. George Morse (2009) answered many questions about the processes used in Minnesota's Extension system change processes used in 2004. Many other answers and alternatives to questions about organizational change and development in Extension systems are yet to be discovered.

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to describe implementation of an area structure in the OSU Extension organization, examining the processes used during restructuring and subsequent outcomes of that process over a period of approximately 20 months. Objectives were to describe, from the viewpoint of Area Leaders and Regional Directors with the organization, (a) how the Extension Education and Research Area (EERA) structure had been implemented within the nine areas outlined in Ohio State University Extension's 2009 restructuring model, (b) what worked or did not work well during the restructuring process, and (c) what was working or not working as a result of the restructuring process.

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology was used to develop a case study to answer research questions. Merriam (2009) describes a case study as valuable for providing "rich and holistic" accounts, insightful to read experiences, and playing "an important role in advancing a field's knowledge base" (p. 51). Interviews are an appropriate data collection method for understanding "how people interpret the world around them" (p.88).

All nine Area Leaders and three Regional Directors in the Ohio State University Extension system were invited and agreed to participate. A semi-structured interview guide was used to focus on answering the research questions. Data were analyzed using a coding system and organized by categories related to each research question.

Findings

This study showed how Area Leaders and Regional Directors in the position of being organizational change agents initiated and implemented the EERA structure in Ohio State University Extension. The Area Leaders and Regional Directors also described their insights about what worked or did not work in relation to their experiences. The significant findings from this study include: redefining staff roles in the new structure; creating structures for communication, program planning, and delivery; strategies, goals, and philosophies used in early stages; internal challenges and barriers to implementation, as well as external issues; working in the new structure; benefits to employees and programs; perceived challenges and barriers after 20 months; and what appeared to be working.

Research Question #1: How Has the EERA Structure Been Implemented Within the Nine Areas In OSU Extension's 2009 Restructuring Plan?

Defining Staff Roles and Levels of Staffing. One of the primary needs defined in the *OSU Extension Restructuring Model: A Plan for Continued Excellence* (OSU Extension, 2009) was "to change the staffing pattern of OSU Extension to allow a focus" (p. 2) on "needed resources" including "research-based curriculum, the ability for educators to focus on their highest skills,

and reduced time spent on administrative matters” (p. 1). Area Leaders and Regional Directors had to define their respective roles for the area structure to create a working relationship between themselves and the county staff, including educators, program support staff, and office support staff. Extension educators were asked to develop specializations and be more accountable for area programming. Program and office support staff were not responsible or required to participate in area programming functions, although in a few situations participation on the area level was evident by their attendance in area-wide meetings and their help with business activities. The number of staff within each EERA varied and many counties no longer had a fully staffed Extension office with an educator in each program area and support staff to assist with conducting educational programming.

Creating Structures for Communication. Establishing and maintaining communication is vital to a change process. The Extension leaders in this study described communication created for internal and external audiences. Internal communication was accomplished primarily through planned meetings to develop area-wide educational programs and to provide opportunities for Extension staff to build relationships. Internal communication also included creating reference lists and resources that were used across the counties within each area. External communication was developed from the meetings with Extension staff and included marketing materials to share programs available to clientele within each EERA. There was also communication to stakeholders that leaders considered necessary in order to discuss what changes were happening in Extension during the restructuring process. Technology was utilized for creating and sharing information. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the communication methods and purposes used by Area Leaders and Regional Directors during the 20 months of implementing the new structure.

Table 1. Communication used by Area Leaders and Regional Directors

Type, Participants, Frequency	Purposes, Agenda Items, Subject Matter
<p>County Office Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Area Leaders to County office staff - Initial non-reoccurring meetings in early stages of implementation 	<p>Introductions, questions, concerns, thoughts about area structure Learning about skills and abilities of staff</p>
<p>Program Area Meetings (4-H, FCS, ANR, CD)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organized by Area Leaders within each EERA, some with assistance by a voluntary lead educator in each program area - Educators, program staff participate - Face-to-face, virtual - Multiple times throughout the year, varied per program and EERA 	<p>Identify resources Programming needs Team building Media opportunities Specialization identification and sharing Ongoing issues</p>
<p>EERA All-Staff Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organized by Regional Directors and Area Leaders with County Extension Directors - All county staff members: office and program support staff, educators - Assistant Directors of programs often participated or invited - Face-to-face - Once a year 	<p>Bring people together Program sharing Learning opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support staff dialogue Training opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technology, diversity, program organization Interdisciplinary programming Program meetings</p>
<p>Regional Director and Area Leader Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Phone calls, virtual - At least weekly, as needed 	<p>Share strategies, successes, ideas Learn new role</p>
<p>Regional Director, Area Leader, and Administrative Staff Meetings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mentioned by some leaders, but not clear from interviews about frequency of meetings 	<p>Not able to be determined from study</p>

Table 2. Internal and external communication methods used by Area Leaders and Regional Directors

Internal Communication	External Communication
Face-to-Face Meetings	County Commissioner Meetings
- Social interaction, planning, training	Extension Advisory Committee meetings
Virtual Meetings	- Organized by Regional Directors, Area Leaders, and County Extension Directors
- Planning, training	- Expectations, implementation of the restructuring plan, benefits of new structure, introductions of Area Leaders
Basecamp	Email, Blogs & Social Media
(online project collaboration service)	- Sharing information with clientele
- Useful for storing documents, not for public use	County Websites
Blogs & Social Media	- Links to news and information for clientele
(Facebook, Twitter, Skype)	- Calendar of events
- Useful for communication with groups of educators and staff as	Print Materials
EERA Websites	- Newsletters, fliers, brochures, information to share
- Posting calendars, specialization lists, newsletters	
- Posted through regional office websites	
County Websites	
- Links to published and marketing materials for educational programs	
Print Materials	
- Upcoming program announcements	

Creating Structures for Program Planning and Delivery. The EERA structure concept is essentially about working together in groups of counties to plan and deliver educational programs. Leaders talked about a variety of planning and decision-making processes for creating area-wide programs. Meetings scheduled for the purpose of program planning also provided opportunities for collaboration on obtaining grant funding and developing agreements for cost recovery. Leaders gave examples of programs that were being offered on an area-wide basis and shared the importance of strategically locating program events for clientele to access. Evaluation of area programs was limited to using individual evaluation for teaching and some programs that had pre-existing evaluation materials.

Research Question #2: Within Areas, What Worked Well, or Not So Well, During the Restructuring Process?

Strategies, Goals, and Philosophies Used by Leaders. Leaders reflected on their initial ideas and concepts, which were expressed in a rather positive attitude towards working together as a team and ensuring that Extension program efficiency and offerings were a priority. Several leaders shared experiences about how important it was to develop relationships with people, which they did by taking time to meet Extension staff members in county offices or the local stakeholders. Learning about people’s skills and abilities also seemed to be a key element in developing relationships. Avoiding duplication and “getting everybody to work towards a common goal” are examples of leaders’ initial ideas.

What Worked in the New Structure. Leaders set the stage at the beginning of the restructuring process by acting on ideas and making decisions to accomplish the development of the area structure. Leaders created agreements for communication with various groups of people including staff members and stakeholders. They used a variety of ways to identify and share strengths, creating useful resources such as educator specialization lists and media contact lists. Leaders talked about the decisions they made such as identifying lead educators to assist with coordinating program areas within EERAs, instituting cost recovery fees and reciprocation agreements, sharing information via websites, and having discussions with County Extension Directors. These actions and decisions were not consistent across all areas. All EERAs received grant funds from the Administrative Cabinet, which created a series of decisions within each EERA on how to spend those funds that leaders also supervised. Leaders also seemed to take some time with staff members in their respective EERAs to refine the meaning of what area programming was pertaining to the restructuring plan and how to put it into effect in the counties.

Internal Challenges and Barriers. Challenges that leaders faced in early months of the new structure included different sources of funding, different levels of staffing, resistance from staff, challenges related to program areas, and facilitating program planning across county lines. Leaders expressed frustration with the fluctuation and variation of funding sources that seemed to have an effect on educator participation in area-wide activities. A similar frustration was expressed by leaders about the variation of staffing levels in each EERA, especially for counties with only one educator to cover all program areas. This staffing situation made participation on an area level more demanding for those individuals. Leaders talked about resistant staff members who did not seem to be willing to participate in the restructuring process and plan. Difficulty to adapt to the new structure was also apparent in Extension program areas. Agriculture and natural resources educators in some counties had previous working relationships to conduct multi-county work and seemed to resist evolving this established group work into the new structure. Within the 4-H program, many educators seemed to find difficulty in conforming to the new structure because the program design is strongly localized. Questions related to how to facilitate programming across county lines surfaced, and leaders had to consider demographics of areas in organizing programs or hotlines for clientele to access.

Challenges related to implementing the area structure also included the initial reaction and timing of the introduction of the restructuring plan. Leaders talked about how staff members seemed apprehensive and concerned about change that appeared rather ambiguous to some staff. Restructuring began in spring 2009, which challenged staff members because they had to reorganize the schedule they already had planned for the year, adding work to their schedule in order to get through a transition period.

External Challenges. Leaders were challenged with selling the change to clientele and dealing with geographic boundaries. Leaders used meetings to share the restructuring plan with commissioners and county advisory committees. The experience of “selling the change” was necessary to eliminate assumed barriers, familiarize clientele with anticipated changes, and show how a county’s clientele and stakeholders would still be receiving their money’s worth from Extension services. Although all leaders attempted to communicate similar messages to stakeholder groups, they described areas in very different ways. Leaders also talked about how geography and previous relationships affected the implementation of the area structure, which could offer an explanation why EERAs seemed to be operating differently.

Research Question #3: Within Areas, What Worked Well or Not So Well, As a Result of the Restructuring Process?

Continuing Work in the Area System. What seemed to have developed in Ohio State University Extension, after 20 months, were outcomes including achieving a level of commitment and realizing the attribute of being able to connect people as well as continued concerns for uncertainty about “area” work and the outlook for future opportunities and potential. Leaders sensed a commitment by many educators and staff members to the area system and perseverance to continue working in the multi-county structure. Feedback from educators about the restructuring plan that seemed negative had appeared to decrease, while expressed interest in meeting and planning programs was continuing to be apparent. Leaders shared experiences about how the area structure supported an increase in social connection between staff members in their EERAs. For the area structure to be successful, communication needed to increase between educators in areas. The resulting outcome of increased communication was the opportunity to build relationships and identify strengths among staff members.

Even though the EERAs had been geographically assigned and staff members had been working in multi-county groups to conduct educational programs, several leaders questioned the concept of what area programming really is and how it works. In the area system, many educators seemed to be able to become “less of everything to everybody,” although leaders talked about the consciousness of local accountability that educators continued to be tied to. Some leaders spoke about an improvement in the quality of programs and that the necessity of working with multiple educators to plan programs increased educator accountability as well. Despite some continuing challenges, leaders were fairly positive about the opportunity and potential that educators had by working in the area structure. The advantages included increased creativity and innovation, elimination of duplicated efforts, and reaching out to a new or bigger audience. One leader reflected on the disbelief about working in a multi-county structure such as this that would have existed if the conversation had come up in years prior to changes being made.

Benefits to Employees and Extension Programs. Twenty months after the restructuring process began, leaders observed benefits to employees such as specialization and expertise development and the involvement of support staff. By being able to develop themselves in one or a few specific subjects, educators could focus more on developing that knowledge and feel less pressure to teach a multitude of subjects that someone else could be more capable of doing. Some leaders talked about the benefits to support staff members which included having more opportunities, if they were offered, to share with each other as well as sharing information with clientele if a county did not have an educator staffed in a program area.

Leaders felt that area programs positively impacted clientele in several ways including the following: being able to receive services when an educator was not staffed in a county, improved knowledge of subject matter for programs, and expansion of partnerships. The use of technology to develop programs also increased as a result of the grants that were dispersed from Administrative Cabinet into EERAs. Many of the dollars were used to train educators and staff on using educational technology tools or provide the necessary equipment. Leaders felt that learning how to use technology was important because clientele are becoming more technologically savvy and are relying on the Internet to seek out information.

Observed Challenges and Barriers. Funding for educator and staff positions in counties was still a concern after 20 months of working as an area system. Leaders shared frustrations about some educators who still exhibited resistance by not being able to let go of more county-only activities and through their perceptions of how their job is affected, pressured by reactions from the local stakeholders and clientele. In more specific situations, leaders shared experiences with educators who were being difficult to work with, including a few who seemed to escape from participation in area activities because the tenure system lacked a way to enforce engagement.

Leaders talked about the work load and workflow of educators who were more participatory and the perceived difficulty in balancing activities in regular agendas even though the area system seemed to support opportunities for improved efficiency. Leaders appeared to be challenged in balancing the offering of area activities and staff involvements while staffing fluctuated due to continued funding pressures in the counties. Decreased support staff meant educators had to maintain a presence in the county more often and this situation made less time available to participate in area activities.

Challenges with area programming also stemmed from leader frustrations with consistent marketing, Extension branding, and sharing of announcements across counties. Even though many leaders considered increasing technology use for developing and sharing educational programs a priority, physical infrastructure seemed to limit publishing information online, particularly in southern Ohio areas. The definition and description of “area programming” continued to have varied meanings and ambiguity for leaders. A few leaders were also concerned with developing interdisciplinary programs within areas.

What Was Working. For all of the challenges and barriers leaders described, they spoke rather positively about what was happening with programs and educators in the area structure and system. The area structure provided for a more open system of communication that allowed staff to share ideas and information more than before. Leaders seemed happy about the relationships that had been built between educators, the commitment of educators to the area system, the improved knowledge of using technology to produce educational programming and communication of clientele issues, and the sense that the resulting structure had produced a more cohesive nature between counties that had been independent before. Several leaders talked about their organization methods and experiences that they used that they felt helped them to be successful in carrying out their duties as change agents in the restructuring plan.

Discussion and Implications

This study described the implementation process of an area structure in Ohio State University Extension, examining the processes used during restructuring and subsequent outcomes of that process.

What Changed?

Conclusions drawn from the findings indicated that Ohio State University Extension evolved from singular to more collaborative county entities and specialized and connected educators. This evolution is exhibited in Figure 1.

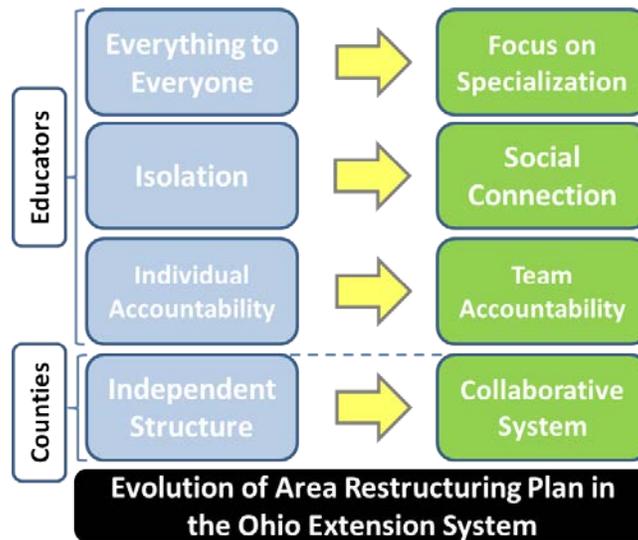


Figure 1. Evolution of Ohio State University Extension restructuring model

Educators and counties adapted during the change process:

- They were required to choose a specialization or area of expertise to develop. By being able to embrace a specialization, educators seemed to have less pressure to be an expert in a broad range of subject matter and were able to rely on each other for informational knowledge. Likewise, Ahmed and Morse (2010) noted that focus is one of the advantages of specialization.
- Educators moved from a sense of isolation to a sense of being connected with peers. Meetings and communication with other educators and clientele developed awareness of program development and community needs in other areas.
- Educators had to rely on each other to accomplish area program objectives, increasing their accountability with peers. Working with each other to share programs and teach exposed skills, habits, and experiences that could be focused on developing quality educational programs. High quality programs are essential to demonstrating Extension's public value (Kalambokidis, 2004) and gaining audience respect (Ahmed & Morse, 2010).
- Counties were more likely to be independent of each other before restructuring. Restructuring seemed to increase the collaboration between counties and programs across an EERA in order to accomplish area programming or conduct regular services. Some counties had previous relationships with each other that had to adjust to new relationships based on the lines drawn on the map for each area.
- Counties were previously an independent structural unit that evolved into a multi-county cooperating unit to provide educational programming. Infrastructure was developed to communicate among counties.

Underlying Dynamics of the Change Process

Challenges with funding, staffing, and programming continued to be present throughout the change process. Consistent with literature on Extension reorganization trends across the United States, funding, staffing, and programming are driving forces of change processes in Extension systems (APLU, 2010; Iowa State University, 2009; Michigan State University Extension, 2010; Morse, 2006, 2009; OSU Extension, 2009; Schmiesing and Safrit, 2006; Tondl, 1991; University of Georgia Extension, 2010; University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service, 2002). Area Leaders and Regional Directors had to deal with various aspects of these elements creating negative issues but struggled with the authority and resources needed to keep these elements from affecting the processes being developed. This is consistent with literature from Jick (1991) about challenges that change implementers have in their role.

Funding. The variety of funding resources at the local level compounded with the instability of local economics seemed to add to the challenge of providing educational programming in every county, which is what the Area Leaders were primarily accountable for ensuring.

Conflicting policies and philosophies may be restraining progress on conducting educational programming throughout multi-county areas. Leaders in this study discussed two ideas about policies and philosophies that affect the area structure in reference to funding including the sense of priority an educator has to local constituents especially when funding is voted upon through a levy or raised through local action and staff resistance to providing the full array of Extension program services in a county that severely cut its budget to afford only the minimal staff.

Staffing. Because of the variety of county funding, there was a variety of staffing levels in the field. In counties where the staff was at the minimum, leaders seemed to stress the existence of work overload for the educator who found difficulty in leaving county operations to work with developing area programming.

Programming. Leaders developed the concept of area programming within each of their EERAs and regions. Leaders in one region seemed to make a more concerted effort to be consistent across its three areas. Questions about what is considered participation by educators or a product of area programming were evident after 20 months of restructuring processes. The definition of area programming could be a combination of the concepts developed by the leaders, but it is apparent that the definition needs some refinement. In comparing Ohio State University Extension changes to those that occurred in Minnesota in 2004 (Morse, 2009), the next step in the evolution of Extension programming is to address concerns for creating a sustainable Extension organization.

Solutions Created by Leaders

To combat the dynamics of funding, staffing, and programming, many leaders encouraged decision-making for reciprocation of services and made time to speak with local stakeholders about what services could be provided. Reciprocation agreements varied and could be an agreement on time, travel, and supplies. Counties that had minimal staffing were allowed exceptions to minimize the stress put on a county staffed by one educator to conduct programming outside of the county as well as manage the in-county services. Planning locations for programs near county borders was a strategic idea to encourage out-of county participation and assist with the challenges of minimal funding and staffing.

Guiding Change for a Successful Future

Leaders in this study expressed various tones of frustration with uncertainty about expectations with the changes that happened in restructuring. They seemed to develop ideas and strategies on their own to guide the transitions within their areas and regions. The most important tool they used was communication.

Communication is Vital

Leaders seemed to spend an extensive amount of time developing internal and external communications, and several of them stated how critical it was to communicate with people. Communication was described across a broad spectrum of meetings, e-mails, phone calls, face-to-face discussions, flyers to publicize educational programs, websites, and much more. Using multiple forms and means of communication is consistent with what Kotter (1996) says about communicating the change vision in the process of creating major change. The design of communication to the public took into account media outlets and identity as an EERA rather than only the county represented. Leaders were communicating and orchestrating more than just the change vision. An example is meetings were planned with varying purposes including creating an identity with the area concept, developing a team atmosphere, and helping people get to know each other better.

The leaders in this study grasped the importance of communication to the change process, as they spent a considerable amount of their time engaged in a variety of communication forms with both internal and external audiences.

Mobilizing people seems to have been the greatest force that Area Leaders had in the change process of restructuring the OSU Extension system. At this middle management level leaders primarily engaged county staff members and some stakeholders in the change process.

Even after 20 months of many challenges and some positive outcomes, Area Leaders and Regional Directors continued to show a positive attitude and outlook for the area structure. There are a few lessons to be learned from the experiences and knowledge shared:

- Extension change agents must be able to communicate across multiple organizational levels while allowing each level to engage themselves in the process to generate additional communication about action and vision.
- Change agents must understand what and where the most effective means of communication are in order to be efficient especially when resources are limited or diminished.
- A change agent must act in a way that is effective and productive but must also prepare for phasing themselves out of being the change communicator.

Leaders also shared the importance and necessity for communication in the change process and many explicitly stated the need for communication as a recommendation for others preparing to make organizational changes. This recommendation was defined as giving more clear directions or expectations or providing a “road map” for anticipated events and action. Leaders encouraged getting more input and feedback from a variety of people, including those who might not typically be asked for input because they might have a motivating idea. Guiding change for the future may mean having a solid communication plan and preparing organizational members through more intentional and focused strategies.

Implications

Theoretical implications include clarifying why organizational culture and change coincide. For Extension systems, this would be helpful to create better balance between them.

Implications for research in Extension systems include the following:

- Understanding staffing patterns and the conduct of multi-county educator work across programs areas
- Understanding the relationships between specialization and organizational change, including long term effects on careers and economic value of Extension educational programs
- Understanding the challenges and benefits of pre-existing working relationships that need to be meshed into new structures and how to best work with those relationships to accomplish goals

Implications for practice include:

- Creating a communication plan that spans internal and external audiences
- Clarify and adjust expectations of change agents by incorporating additional feedback mechanisms
- Review policies on implementing new technology and develop opportunities to use the most effective options to meet the Extension mission

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