



**EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEES
Starting With the Farmer**

By
Dr. Allan E. Lines
Extension Advisor
USDA MAP

Presented at
Second Annual Extension Conference
Armenian Agricultural Academy
Yerevan, Armenia
December 11, 2001

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today. Before I do that, however, I want to add my words of congratulations. With the assistance of Drs. Haykazyan and Avagian and many of you Specialist and Agents, I have, during my short time in Armenia, been privileged to visit with agents and farmers in each Marz except Syunik Marz. I am impressed with your ability and dedication to deliver needed Extension education under very difficult conditions. Your performance is a proud testament to your professionalism. Again, I want to congratulate you on a job well done and I want to encourage you to continue to seek and plan for ways to improve your effectiveness.

My remarks will address a topic that is now and will become more important as your Armenian Extension Service grows into a vital force for facilitating positive change in

the agricultural communities that you serve. My comments will be straightforward and you will need to adjust them to the realities of your organization, communities and farm families. I will focus on your need to serve the people of rural Armenia and how you decide to meet that need.

Through your Extension Service you are charged with assisting farmers, farm families, rural communities and agribusinesses with the difficult ask of “improving the quality of life” in rural Armenia. Remember, and don’t ever forget, it is your students in rural Armenia, not you, who will “improve their quality of life.” They will make the decisions, take the actions and accept the risks that will result in improvement. They will do it within the confines of the restrictions in their lives, families and communities. Your job is to provide them with the tools, information and techniques to enable them to make better decisions that will positively impact their lives. However, provision is not your only task. You must also help your students discover their needs and to self-identify their problems before they can fully implement the tools you have to offer.

Self-identification of needs and problems, not your determination or that of some academic or bureaucrat, is a necessary prerequisite if the education you provide is to take root, flourish and enable your students to improve their lives. Yes, we all know we went to school and successfully completed many different courses. However, if you are anything like me, much of what I learned promptly disappeared from my memory bank after the final exam. The information that was most useful and that which I have retained for these many years was associated with real problems in the context of my world.

I teach both students in the classroom at the university and farmers in their villages and on their farms. Farmers are my most challenging and responsive audience. They are not obliged to listen to my academic lectures and answer questions on a test. They are attentive and permit me to engage them only if I am able to relate my thoughts to their perceived needs and problems. In my career as an Extension educator, I find I spend more time listening than I do talking.

Most of my academic colleagues spend their weekends and vacations on the golf course. I, on the other hand, spend my free time going to farm sales, visiting farmers in their barns and fields, having lunch or breakfast with them at the local snack bar and talking with agribusiness managers. This is my learning laboratory. It is here that I learned to listen to and learn from the farmers I had chosen to serve.

In my opinion, a major part of your time should be spent “listening to”, “learning to understand” and “learning from” those whom you are serving. To provide service and advice that is needed and accepted you must be sensitive to the needs, desires and problems of the people in the families and villages you serve. It is a tempting yet fatal trap for educated persons like you and me to easily develop conclusions and then carry out “our education program” based upon the misguided notion that “We know what these farmers, families and businesses need.”

All too often we define the farmer’s problems within the context of our “interpretation” of the world rather than the “reality” of the farmers’ world. Planning Extension education

in this manner inevitably results in our “providing what we have to offer” rather than “what is needed” or what will be accepted, implemented and used by farmers to improve their quality of life. I am an economist by training. In the language of my profession, a language you are learning, we as educators are too often engaged in “supply-side” rather than “demand-side” education.

Trust me, if farmers are not “following your advice” they have a good reason for not doing so. You may have mis-specified their problem. You may have failed to help them self-identify their problem. You may have encouraged them to adopt what turns out to an unusable solution to the problem, given the reality of their situation. Regardless of the reason, if farmers are not “listening to you”, you will find the reason relates to your failure to “listen to them.”

To minimize this difficulty in the U.S., each Extension Agent is required to have a group to advise and assist with problem identification and needed educational programs. Known as the Extension Advisory Committee, it represents the interests of the larger clientele group. The committee elects its own officers, follows a prescribed set of Bylaws and meets regularly to advise the Agent and to speak with confidence and conviction to local political and economic leaders about the value of Extension. These committees are crucial to the success of the Extension Service in the U.S. Leaders of local Advisory Committees are asked to serve on regional, state and national Extension Advisory Committees. Rectors of our agricultural universities, our state and national legislators, and our Minister of Agriculture meet regularly with Extension Advisory

Committee members to learn about the successes of and need for an effective Extension Service that serves the needs of people.

I want to challenge you today, as you go to your next conference session, to consider organizing and utilizing Advisory Committees as you examine ways to improve the effectiveness of your Extension Service. Each Village Agent, each ASC and the Department of Extension should have an Advisory Committee consisting of clientele that are being served. Farmers need a voice in determining what education they want and need. Give them the opportunity to help you better understand the reality of their world.

Most importantly, these committees will facilitate the development of a demand-driven Extension education program, enabling rural communities to help themselves. They will prevent your Extension Service from becoming an institution focused on itself rather than the problems of “real people” in a world that is often “more real” than we are willing to admit. Advisory Committees will express the demand for your problem-solving education programs to local, regional and national political and financial leadership. I may be wrong, but I believe politicians are more likely to listen to people that vote than they are to public organizations looking for financial sustenance. Farmers can and will do a better job than Extension itself of convincing politicians of the need for a well-funded Extension Service. Farmers will show them results - the “improved quality of life” they created with your assistance. Remember, you empowered them to make positive changes in their lives and communities. Thank You.