Extension’s Role in Conflict Resolution and Consumer Education

M. M. Schutz* and J. S. Ayres†

*Department of Animal Sciences, 105 Poultry Building, and †Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907

Primary Audience: Extension Educators and Agricultural Leaders

SUMMARY

The role of Extension dairy, poultry, and livestock educators is evolving rapidly, and to be relevant, we must continue to provide science-based information to an ever-broadening clientele. Campus-based specialists have remained insulated from this shifting paradigm longer than field-based staff who often facilitate disputes involving agriculture. Examples of conflicts involving animal agriculture include disagreements over manure or odor regulations, animal welfare, animal cloning, and food safety (for example, sales of raw milk or food irradiation). Several models of conflict escalation and public issues management help those of us in the Cooperative Extension Service understand how to be relevant in addressing public issues. As livestock, dairy, or poultry Extension specialists, our best opportunity is to be involved and to provide science-based solutions or alternatives before the conflict begins to spiral out of control. Once communication stops, even science-based information may be misinterpreted as advocacy. We must also develop an appreciation of the skills needed for dispute resolution and conflict management, though we need not all become skilled facilitators.

Key words: (Extension, conflict resolution, consumer education, public issues, public issues management)


DESCRIPTION OF PROBLEM

The role of Extension dairy, poultry, and livestock educators is changing at an ever-quickening pace. Many of the roles played by Extension educators are moving from providing technical expertise about relatively straightforward problems with readily identifiable solutions toward more ambiguously defined problems with multifaceted solutions. Often the solutions deal as much with societal pressures as with the technical solutions we were trained to solve as animal, dairy, and poultry scientists.

The fact that public issues and consumer education would become increasingly important for Extension educators has been apparent for some time [1], but public issues education began to pick up momentum in the Extension system in 1992 with the release of Public Issues Education: The Cooperative Extension System’s Role in Addressing Public Issues [2]. Educational efforts to help Extension educators to become better managers of public issues received more attention, and efforts were redoubled about the same time [3]. Campus-based specialists have remained insulated from this shifting paradigm longer than field-based staff that often facilitate disputes involving agriculture, particularly land use issues that arise at the local level. Examples

*To whom correspondence should be addressed: mschutz@purdue.edu.
of conflicts involving animal agriculture include disagreements over manure or odor regulations, animal welfare, animal cloning, and food safety (for example, sales of raw milk and irradiation of hamburger). To be relevant as Extension specialists, we must continue to provide science-based information to an ever-broadening clientele. A smaller percentage of the population is involved in production agriculture, our traditional clientele; and we must recognize that consumers and the public at large will continue to seek sources of unbiased information. Although we will often be perceived as biased because we continue to work with livestock producers, involvement in public issues education may be seen as the type of Extension programming that will keep Extension educators relevant in the future [4].

The purpose of this presentation is not to provide a comprehensive, in-depth, or expert review of public issues education. The first author of this paper is a campus-based Dairy Extension Specialist trained as a geneticist, who has little formal training in public issues education, consumer education, or conflict resolution. The second author has served on the National Public Policy Education Committee and is an expert on public issues education. However, the goal of this contribution is to share some insight into public issues education and consumer education from the perspective of Extension specialists trained in dairy, animal, or poultry sciences.

Public Issues

Definitions of what exactly is meant by the term public issues are fleeting. Often the term, public issues, is defined by examples and takes its meaning from the contemporary issue of the day. Many of us in animal, dairy, and poultry production Extension programs likely conger up a vision engulfing a range of issues dealing with environmental stewardship, land usage, and siting of concentrated animal feeding operations when we hear the term. Perhaps others think of issues like food safety or even bioterrorism at its mention. While involved in a mapping effort of public issues at Purdue University several years ago, our committee struggled to find a standard definition. We defined public issues in the traditional sense as matters of concern that may involve differing interests, beliefs, values, and interpretation of information. At that time, we concluded that Extension public issues education included delivery of information, such as when Extension applies knowledge and research to issues of public concern. The focus is to deliver educational programs and resources designed to enhance citizens’ understanding of issues and their capacity to make informed choices and impact public decisions and policies. Since this committee’s report, Extension’s role in the work of public issues has continued to advance from being simply the providers of information to also including Extension staff as the facilitators of a collaborative learning process among key stakeholders to create sustainable and mutually agreeable solutions.

Societal issues or public issues go hand in hand with conflict, and the level of divisiveness depends upon how well the issue is managed in the public arena. Often public servants, such as county commissioners, are called upon to assist in managing conflict. Although they are usually untrained in this area, Extension educators at the county level often have experience in facilitating open discussions and perhaps have some formal training in issues management, which can be of immense value to their communities. The consequences of a dispute spinning out of control are enormous. In their 1988 book, Carpenter and Kennedy [5] laid out a diagram of what they considered a “spiral of unmanaged conflict.” A version of this spiral appears in Figure 1. Initially, the problem arises, sides form, and positions harden. But as the conflict spirals out of

![Figure 1. Spiral of unmanaged conflict. Adapted from Figure 1 in Carpenter and Kennedy [5].](https://academic.oup.com/japr/article-abstract/14/2/406/696655/Downloaded-from-https://academic.oup.com/japr/article-abstract/14/2/406/696655)
control, communication stops, resources are committed, conflict spills outside the community, perceptions become distorted, and a sense of crisis emerges. Reactions in terms of citizen group activities, government activities, evolution of issues, and the psychological effect on the parties are predictable as debate over the issue intensifies.

**Spiral of Unmanaged Conflict Model**

In a 2000 publication, Singletary et al. [6] described how Western natural resources disputes fit the model of the spiral of unmanaged conflict. That model could easily be applied to the recent instance of a dispute over siting of a moderate-sized dairy farm (700 milking cows at first with a plan to eventually expand to 1,500) in a rural county in eastern Indiana.

**Problem Emerges.** A dairy development organization made known that a dairy farm was being planned in the largely rural county by an immigrant farm family from the Netherlands. The proposed facility would be the county’s first large concentrated animal feeding operation.

**Sides Form.** Quickly, a delineation of where people stood with regard to the siting of the dairy became apparent. To a large extent, the sides pitted the agricultural community against other citizens, although the lines were not that clear. Some local farmers supported the siting, if they saw opportunity in contracts, such as feed production, heifer raising, or manure use; while others feared reducing property values, water quality issues, and reduced milk prices. Largely, the nonagricultural community vigorously questioned the water and air quality issues. Letters were written to the editor of local newspapers opposing and defending all sides in this dispute.

**Positions Harden.** As the county council approached a decision about whether to permit the dairy farm operation, hundreds of people turned out for council meetings and hearings. Sides sought legal representation, and leaders in the environmental movement began to arrive from outside the county to attend these meetings. The farm community sought input from Purdue University, Indiana Farm Bureau, veterinarians, and others.

**Communication Stops.** While this dispute did not get bogged down in courts, as many public issues conflicts do, many signs of disengaged communication existed. Both sides were stereotyped, and statements were quoted in the press regarding the national heritage of the immigrant dairy family. In another case, manure was thrown at the car belonging to a concerned citizen. At one meeting, an environmentalist put a medicine dropper’s dose of manure slurry into a glass of water, and the dairy producer drank the glass of water to demonstrate that the water was harmless.

**Resources Are Committed.** County commissioners began to rely on legal advice to arrive at a decision. Existing ordinances did not prohibit the siting of the dairy farm, so the county commissioners saw no way to prevent the farm from locating in the county.

**Conflict Goes Outside of the Community.** Experts, including the first author, were invited by the dairy development company to provide scientific-based information to alleviate the fears of the concerned citizens about the project. By that time, all invited speakers were perceived to be biased toward one side or the other. One commissioner was asked to recuse himself from voting, because he was a crop farmer and, therefore, was seen as a biased party by some concerned citizens and environmentalists. On a state level the Indiana Livestock Alliance, representing many interested parties in animal agriculture, was developed largely as a result of this public issues dispute and seeks to provide unbiased information to help communities make informed decisions about dairy, poultry, beef, swine, and even elk and deer farms.

**Perceptions Become Distorted.** The county was asked to adopt an ordinance largely drawn up by environmental activists from outside the county. That proposed ordinance contained, for example, setback distances from dwellings for land application of manure that were so great they would have essentially eliminated most agricultural land in the entire county for concentrated feeding operations.

**Sense of Crisis Emerges.** Fortunately, county commissioners, with a great deal of assistance from the county’s Extension educator, handled this public issue well enough to prevent it from reaching this crisis state, at least to this point. It is entirely possible that the crisis could reemerge at some time after construction begins.
TABLE 1. Types of public issues, adapted from Hiefitz and Sinder [7]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Underlying problem</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Clear</td>
<td>Several alternatives</td>
<td>To be discovered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Calcium deficiency in laying hens</td>
<td>Farm in financial difficulty</td>
<td>Siting of large dairy farm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outcome to Date. The farm has been allowed to proceed with its plan to construct a dairy farm. The family was able to purchase a tract of land more removed from rural residential housing than the originally proposed site. At present, the farm plan has been accepted, pending a public hearing and 3-d response process by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. While this one farm begins construction, the underlying issues have not gone away.

Observation. An educator well-trained in public issues education and conflict resolution would have been an invaluable resource to help avert part of the spiral by providing the county commissioners assistance in managing the conflict. The local educator, in our estimation, had the necessary skills or resources but was not asked to be involved early in the process. Simultaneously, hearings by county commissioners were allowed to proceed with little sense of decorum or order and resulted in a conflict that began to spiral out of control. However, it must be pointed out that all parties must be willing to accept other viewpoints, or conflict management has little opportunity to succeed.

Heifetz and Sinder Model

Another model for understanding the types of issues we face as animal, dairy, and poultry specialists (Table 1) was proposed by Heifetz and Sinder [7]. The evolution from Type I to Type II and III problems was discussed by Ayres [3]. In the first situation, both a problem and a solution are clear, which characterizes the traditional role of Extension specialists as experts in a particular field. With this type of problem an expert (e.g., beef nutritionist) is called in to fix the problem. The second situation, in which a problem is clear, but a solution is not, is familiar ground for those of us trained as animal scientists. Examples of dealing with farms in financial difficulty fit this area, since the problem is clear (farm is not profitable), but many solutions may be possible, ranging from increasing income to decreasing costs of production to exiting the industry. But the third situation, in which both the problem and solution are unclear, will become more common as we tackle the larger societal issues facing animal agriculture. The previous example is clearly that of a Type III situation. Often, science is ill-prepared to answer the specific questions that arise, since the problem is not very well defined. It is here that the Extension system has great opportunity to lead public issues education.

Cooley [8] indicated that facilitation skills are needed more and more by Extension educators, and these fit best in the conflict-laden issues we address more and more frequently. “An Extension agent can teach about those value differences to groups having an interest in this issue, but that teaching is not likely to change their values or result in behavior changes and agreement. On the other hand, if an agent facilitates a process that identifies the larger contex-

TABLE 2. Roles for public issues educators, adapted from Patton and Blaine [1]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content experts</td>
<td>Provide information</td>
<td>Analyze proposed solutions</td>
<td>Conduct issues research and analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process experts</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Facilitate public deliberation</td>
<td>Frame the issue in public terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Facilitate public deliberation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tual issue ... then real problem-solving and appreciation can begin.”

It is clear that as specialists we will all need to develop more facilitation skills. But must we all become experts in facilitation, dispute resolution, and public issues education? Not necessarily. Patton and Blaine [1] point out a paradigm under which 2 types of experts, content experts and process experts (Table 2), collaborate to address the 3 types of public issues previously mentioned. Under the Type III issues in which both problems and solutions are unclear, content experts conduct issue research and analysis, whereas process experts use the results of that research to frame the issue in public terms and facilitate public deliberation. Nevertheless, even the content experts must be increasingly aware of facilitation techniques to ensure a synergistic relationship. Patton and Blaine [1] go on to mention the roles of content specialists to be an issue monitor, issue researcher, information provider, technical advisor, and policy analyst; and the roles of the process expert to be a stakeholder analyst, meeting facilitator, issue framer, public forum convener, forum moderator, and facilitator in dispute resolutions.

PUBLIC ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Further encouragement for Extension specialists to be involved in public issues education was from the National Public Policy Education Committee [9], who saw the role of Extension specialists to include networker, convener, program designer, diplomat, forecaster, facilitator, trainer, information provider, researcher, and technical expert. That report further outlined core competencies thought to be important for successful public issues management. Though lengthy, the list provides insight as to the needs for process experts in public issues management. As content specialists we may not need all of these competencies but will be faced with situations in which some or all are beneficial. We at least need to know process experts who possess these abilities to successfully resolve public issues as they arise.

Competencies

Creating partnerships involves the ability to

1. Identify individuals and organizations involved in public issues and their potential roles in a public issues education program.
2. Bring individuals and organizations together to create a collaborative climate for problem solving.
3. Foster and maintain a fair and respectful group discussion to share information effectively.
4. Frame public issues to facilitate civil communication and collaborative, creative decision making.

Collecting and interpreting data about issues, audiences, and educational settings involves the ability to

1. Assess readiness for and suitability of public issues education and approaches.
2. Attain knowledge of formal and informal decision-making processes and their relationship to public issues education.
3. Understand sufficient technical information about the issues to help participants identify sources of information and support.
4. Understand the role of scientific analysis and information in the resolution of issues.
5. Recognize, understand, and value diverse perspectives held by program participants.
6. Identify conditions that affect participation in a public issues education program.
7. Discern whether the degree of polarization among participants may detract from a successful public issues education program.
8. Recognize and interpret relationships among participants, including sources of power, power imbalances, and political dynamics.

Designing public issues education programs involves the ability to

1. Choose and apply educational methods that are appropriate for program goals, issues, and audiences.
2. Adapt public issues education programs to existing situations and circumstances.
3. Identify and define appropriate roles for educators and participants.
4. Define and communicate a sequence of steps leading participants to their desired outcome.
5. Establish realistic and attainable meeting objectives.
6. Prepare meeting information, including agendas, background materials, and speakers.
7. Work with participants to create and follow behavioral and procedural guidelines.

Communicating effectively involves the ability to
1. Listen actively and ask questions effectively.
2. Provide constructive feedback.
3. Monitor one’s own communication behaviors and those of others.
4. Encourage and maintain constructive dialogue among participants.

Facilitating group discussion and decision making involves the ability to
1. Attain knowledge of group decision-making dynamics.
2. Acquire skills in negotiation processes, strategies, and tactics.
3. Keep participants on task and engaged.
4. Help participants move from advocacy toward inquiry within a group setting.
5. Explain and facilitate the process of collaborative learning, planning, and problem solving.
6. Help participants to clearly define their roles in all phases of the process.
7. Promote civil discourse through open and balanced discussions.
8. Protect people and their ideas from attack.
9. Manage multiple lines of thought and discussion.
10. Organize information for efficient and effective use.

Managing and transforming conflict involves the ability to
1. Recognize sources of conflict.
2. Intervene into the conflict in a constructive and instructive manner.
3. Help participants establish ground rules of effective communication.
4. Facilitate communication and information exchange in an emotionally charged climate.
5. Build and maintain trust among the participants by establishing a positive climate.
6. Minimize or neutralize the effects of negative emotions and behaviors.

Working with scientific and technical information involves the ability to
1. Work with multiple participants to identify data needs and sources.
2. Recognize both the importance and limitations of scientific data and analysis in the resolution of public issues.
3. Organize complex information in ways that make it useful to all participants.
4. Manage different types of information in various educational settings.
5. Organize and facilitate the presentation, interpretation, and application of information by outside experts.
6. Organize the search for and analysis of data.
7. Prepare technical reports.

Creating an environment of professionalism involves the ability to
1. Demonstrate a commitment to honesty, integrity, and respect for all participants.
2. Separate one’s personal values from issues under consideration.
3. Demonstrate sensitivity to participants’ values and diversity, including gender, ethnic, and cultural differences.

As content experts, we must bear in mind that though we try to provide science-based information, in some public issues debates we will be seen as biased parties. This is because we frequently provide advice and support to particular clientele, such as dairy, swine, beef, or poultry farms or industries. In those cases, it is often best to excuse ourselves from also being the process expert. That role may be played best by a member of a core team of experts within the state’s Cooperative Extension Service [1]. Working closely with process experts is necessary to face public issues head on, rather than waiting for them to go away.

The lack of incentives or recognition of efforts in public issues education by departments and schools or colleges of agriculture has been
an impediment to the involvement in public issues education by campus-based extension specialists. Recognition systems are finally appearing that allow recognition for public issues education on equal footing with applied research or traditional extension efforts.

All extension specialists may benefit from media relations training that is sometimes offered within the Extension system and by various organizations, including many of the commodity groups with which we work. It is difficult to get agricultural information to consumers; but media relations training can help educators to get the message across concisely and keep focused on the 2 or 3 main points the consumer needs to know.

CONSUMER EDUCATION

Many of the issues surrounding consumer education are similar, if not identical, to public issues. For example, recently the first author was involved in public debate about legalizing sales of raw milk. Increasing interest in purchasing raw milk is clearly an issue of food safety and consumer education, since many are not aware of the risks of pathogens that may be carried in unpasteurized dairy products. Yet, it is clearly a public issue, pitting those who want to be able to purchase unpasteurized milk for its purported health benefits vs. regulators who want no part in the risk associated with raw milk. Clearly, this is a case that fits the Type III public issue scenario (Table 2). Much of the science about raw milk is very old and often misleading, and this is likely because public institutions have shied away from participating in that research because the potential public issue ramifications of finding either benefits or dangers of raw milk outweigh the merits of conducting the research [10]. In Indiana, proper management of the raw milk debate prevented it from spiraling out of control. Although the dairy bottling industry and dairy sanitation regulators initially reacted with suspicion to Purdue University’s facilitation of the public issues debate, a properly facilitated meeting among all interested parties got issues in the open and resulted in a mutually satisfactory solution. The debate led to the allowance of raw milk to be available in a cow share program, in which the public may co-own cows. The requirement that all owners be involved in decisions about care and management of the cows helps to ensure they are at least aware of the herd management conditions and more responsible in the event that a mishap occurs.

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

1. Extension specialists will be pressed more and more to have a role in public issues conflicts. Most often this will be in the role of a content expert, but some will also face situations in which they will need to be a process expert too.
2. Extension specialists will need increased training in public issues education. At minimum, content experts must have an awareness and appreciation for the role of the process experts and develop relationships with those that will be needed to collaboratively solve public issues conflicts.
3. This training process can be enhanced by developing programs to recognize successful efforts and to foster and nurture an academic culture that values research and Extension efforts in public issues resolution.
4. Those choosing to largely maintain the role of content expert must avoid the temptation to stray from providing science-based and science-backed information.

REFERENCES AND NOTES


