Pak. J. Agri. Sci. 32 (4), 1995

COMPETENCE OF EXTENSION FIELD STAFF IN USING VARIOUS COMMUNICATION CHANNELS FOR EFFECTIVE EXTENSION WORK

Sher Muhammad, Chris Garforth' & Niaz Hussain Malik
Departments of Agri. Extension and Agri. Education,
University of Agriculture, Faisalabad
'Department of Agri. Extension and Rural Development, University of Reading, (UK)

Extension is primarily a communication intervention in which extension field staff (EFS) is expected to use a wide variety of communication channels to communicate extension messages effectively to farmers. Mere use of various communication channels may not be sufficient for desired 'results, it is the quality with which a particular channel is adopted by the EFS which makes communication more or less effective. The effectiveness of communication depends upon how wisely a communicator uses different channels. This ultimately demands a thorough understanding of basic essentials to be kept in view while using these channels. The more they are aware of these basic essentials, the more effective they are likely to be in attaining the purpose(s) of communication. Empirical evidence suggests that the EFS did not give due consideration to most of the basic essentials while conducting farm visits and demonstrations. The main reason for this situation appeared to be lack of knowledge and interest on their part. The basic essentials indicated by many EFS were very ordinary ones.

Key words: communication channels, extension work, extension field staff

INTRODUCTION

The extension field staff (EFS) occupies a key position in agricultural communication system for being a major intermediary link between research institutions and farming community. Success of the whole system largely depends upon the effective role played by them as communicators of extension messages. Diffusion research argues that exposure to a variety of information channels is usually needed before an innovation is adopted (Rogers, 1983). Thus EFS is expected to use a wide variety of communication channels to communicate extension messages effectively to farmers. Since individuals differ in their abilities and readiness to respond, access to production resources and needs and interests, thus all channels of communication are not equally suitable to all members of the audience in all situations and for all purposes. In this context, Bettinghaus (1980) argued that "to be successful in effecting a change in the frames of reference of various individuals, the communicator must use different appeals with different strength and with various repetitions". The effectiveness of these channels is largely determined by the wise choice of communication channels and their skillful use by the EFS. It is not only the selection of appropriate communication channelis) for a particular task, but also the competence of EFS in using these channel(s) which greatly matters in effective communication. According to a common Chinese saying "If the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong direction" (Van den Ban and Hawkins, 1988). For example an unskilled operator running a perfectly sound thresher tOO fast, will break many of the grains. The competence of EFS in using various communication channels is largely determined by their thorough understanding of the basic essentials to be kept in view while using these channels. The main areas of discussion of this paper are to determine how far the EFS is aware of these basic essentials and how far they have been competent in using various communication channels in the field.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

An empirical study was conducted in the Punjab province of Pakistan to assess the knowledge and skill of EFS regarding the use of some selective communication channels like farm and home visits, result demonstrations, method demonstrations and group meetings. The data were collected from one of the tehsils of Faisalabad district. Four Agriculture Officers

(AOs) and 4 Field Assistants (FAs) working under each AO were selected at random thereby making a sample of 20 EFS. In addition 64 contact farmers (CFs) and L28 non-contact farmers (NCFs) were randomly selected from 16 villages selected through stratified random sampling technique out of two relatively homogeneous strata of villages. The data were collected through observation technique and personal interviews. The respondents were asked about the basic essentials of the selected communication channels. Their awareness level was computed on the basis of number of basic essentials for each channel.. The respondents knowing more than two-thirds of the essentials were placed under the awareness category "to much extent", those who knew only up to one-thirds were put under awareness category "to some extent", those who fell in between these two were labelled under the category "to an average extent" and those who could not tell any of the essentials were placed in "not at all" category. In order to see how precisely EFS used different channels, they were observed in the real field situation while the)' were using these channels. Their competence was evaluated against 12 basic essentials for both farm and home visits and result demonstrations by using a scale from 0-3. Thus the weighted score obtained in this way by each respondent may range from 0-36. On the basis of their competence score the respondents were classified into three categories i.e. low (0-12), medium (13-24) and high (25-36).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The EFS is supposed to know the basic essentials of communication channels if they are to be competent and skillful in using these channels. The data in this regard presented in Table 1 revealed that the respondents had very little knowledge about the basic essentials in almost all the selected communication channels. The situation in case of method demonstration was even worse as all but one had no idea about it. However, the awareness 'level regarding farm and home visits was relatively high.

In order to see how precisely EFS undertook various communication channels, observation technique was considered as the most appropriate one because observed data are usualIy assumed to have greater val idity. The data regarding the competence of EFS in usingvarious channels are given in Table 2.

It is evident from Table 2 that more than 80% respondents fell into low and medium categories. Only a fraction of the respondents got high competence score which suggests that poor impact of communication channels in the field may be' due to their inability in using these communication channels properly. This in turn can be attributed to their low knowledge about the basic essentials.

By and large the respondents have not come up to the expected standard of performance. They were found lacking in adequate convincing power which could exert sufficient pressure on the farmers to think for change. Simply telling farmers about recommendations, which was the most common strategy adopted by the EFS, is not a sufficient condition.in itself for their acceptance. Most of the extension workers were found simply reading out the fortnightly printed message to the farmers and not even taking into consideration whether that message applied to their specific situations in some cases. For example some workers were telling the recommendations about those crops which were not grown by the communicatees.

Method demonstrations are' also considered as an effective extension tool which take into account, "how to do" a certain skill properly. In order to see the competence level of EFS regarding this channel, one activity undertaken by them in the area during the time of observations i.e. dusting of rice nurseries was selected. It appeared that alI the EFS observed did not have any intention to teach farmers how to apply insecticide to their nurseries rather they were found undertaking this job themselves, in most cases even in the absence of the farmers. This seems to be against the basic philosophy of extension education. A similar observation was recorded by Van den Ban and Hawkins (1988) who found that extension agents themselves were solving farmer's problems instead of teaching them how to solve such problems. It would have been much better if they could train farmers in that particular skill and develop sufficient motivation to do that.. According to a Chinese proverb If you give a hungary man a fish, you will need tu give him another one tomorrow (Roling, 1988).

Another important activity selected for observation was group meetings arranged by the EFS because group action can have considerable influence on adoption behaviour of farmers as group provides social support for change (Garforth, 1982). Sen (1992) also established the profound effectiveness of group approach in agricultural extension. Despite being so important, group meetings were seldom arranged by the

Table I. Awareness level of EFS about the basic essentials of selective communication channels

Communication channels	Awareness level							
	To much extent		To an average extent		To some extent		Not at all	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Farm and home visits	-	-	2	10.0	14	70.0	4	20.0
Result demonstrations	-	-	1	5.0	17	85.0	2	10.0
Method demonstrations	-	-	-	-	5	5.0	19.0	95.0
Lectu rei discuss ion -rneetings	-	-	-	-	20	100;0	-	-

Table 2. Distribution of EFS according to their competence in using various communication channels

Competence score	Farm and home visits		Result. demonstrations	
	No.	%	No.	%
Low (0-12)	5	31.3	6	42.8
Medium (13-24)	8	50.0	6	42.8
High (25-36) .	3	18.7	2	14,4
Total:	16	100.0	14	100.0

Table 3. Relative value of quality in using various communication channels by EFS based on the farmer's perceptions

Communication channels	Quality of use								
	Excellent x3		Good x2		Satisfactory x I		Poor xO		Total score
	%	Score	%	Score	%	Score	%	Score	
Farm and home Visits	-	-	15,4	30.8	43.6	43.6	41.0	0.0	74.4
Result demonstrations	-	-	-	-	35.0	35.0	65.0	0.0	35.0

EFS. Therefore, no opportunity could be availed to observe any group meeting during the period of data collection. However, on the basis of the data presented in Table I it can be argued that the EFS was less likely to conduct effective group meetings as they had low level of awareness regarding the basic essentials for such meetings.

Farmers appear to be the best judge of the skillful use of communication channels by EFS. They were, therefore, asked about the competence of EFS in using various channels. The perfection score of the selected communication channels was calculated to know the relative value of each channel as indicated in Table 3. It is evident from Table 3 that. the EFS failed to live up to the expected standard of performance in conducting both farm and home visits and result demonstrations skill fully . However, the quality of using farm and home visits as perceived by the farmer respondents was relatively better than that of result. demonstrations. Such a poor standard of performance may be due to the

reason that the EFS paid attention only to the number of visits paid to the farmers and the number of demonstration plots set out by them. The quality of these channels and the subsequent change occurred in farmers and their farms might have been ignored.

Conclusions: The competence of EFS in using various communication channels was found to be very poor. Only a fraction of the *EFS* gained a relatively high competence score which suggests that poor impact of communication channels in the field may be mainly due to their inability in using these channels skillfully. This was mainly because of lack of knowledge about the basic essentials needed for skillful use of the channels. The basic essentials indicated by several EFS were very ordinary ones. The situation in case of method demonstrations was the worst among all other channels. The observed data suggest that the EFS did not follow the prescribed schedule of visits at all. They were more concerned about the selection of appropriate sites for demonstrations than other essentials. Their decision in this regard was more boss oriented rather than farmer oriented.

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