FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY  
MSUE Field Crops Industry Advisory Committee  

January 29, 1996

INTRODUCTION

Like every organization, MSU Extension faces the challenge of how to remain relevant and effective in a world of rising expectations and limited, if not shrinking, resources. Consequently, an evaluation effort designed to assess stakeholder satisfaction with the AoE Team approach is now underway. The AoE Team concept is grounded in theory suggesting that fully empowered, self-directed work teams can be both more efficient and effective than hierarchical organizational systems in delivering program products.

Dee Hock (1995), founder and CEO Emeritus of VISA USA and VISA International, offers six principles to guide self-directed work teams as they attempt to function in a world of constant and rapid change, uncertainty and complexity. As Bolman and Deal (1991) suggest, leaders must guide their organizations in such a way that hierarchy and control do not extinguish the flames of innovation, creativity and individual initiative. The AoE Team concept reflects this approach to mission-based, vision-driven self-directed work teams.

The overall goal of this evaluation effort is to assess the effectiveness of the AoE Team concept. On January 29, 1996, the Field Crops Industry Advisory Committee participated in a focus group session designed to generate information for use in designing a survey that will be part of a larger effort to evaluate MSU Extension programming efforts. The following paragraphs summarize the general themes that surfaced in that session. Questions focused on the MSU Extension Area of Expertise (AoE) teams as well as general feedback concerning MSU Extension and its program efforts.

AREAS OF CONCERN OR CONFUSION

The Role of Extension

The role of the extension agent has changed in Michigan reflecting what some view as a lowering of the place of production agriculture on MSU's priority list. Agents are viewed to have fewer farming-based technical skills and more social skills. The roles and competencies of some agents reflect an increasing emphasis on technology (particularly communication technology) and government regulation. Many farmers are still in need of the Extension agent of old that was accessible, knew farming and farm problems and was able to personally answer farmers' questions without a need to access additional expertise from campus.
**Field Agents**
Some concern exists with respect to the performance of some agents. These concerns generally involve responsiveness, technical competency and accountability. Many of these concerns are 'agent-specific' meaning that, while some agents perform poorly, other agents perform at a high level and are highly valued and respected resources in their counties. Some viewed agribusiness representatives/private consultants as a more responsive and competent source of information than Extension field agents.

* Responsiveness
This concern relates to the time taken for an agent to respond to a producer's question or problem. It also involves the manner in which a response might occur. For example, an expressed need was for a personal response at the time of inquiry. Instead, some agents will refer the caller to someone else, or will provide materials that are old and outdated. The result is that the producer judges the response to be generally inadequate.

* Technical Competency
One concern is that an agent may not be able to respond to specific farming-based technical questions competently, suggesting inadequate technical skills. In this regard, farming-based technical competency is valued far more than social competencies such as community and/or economic development competency. Farmers want agents who have a working knowledge of their operations, and who can respond competently and confidently when farming questions arise. They are far less concerned with how skilled the agent is in non-farm competency areas.

* Accountability
There was a general perception that agents are not held sufficiently accountable for the quality of their work. Quality was thought to involve the level of concern an agent had for producers' concerns and the responsiveness of the agent to the farmers questions and problems. More specifically, there was a perception that incompetent agents were difficult to dislodge from their positions and that promotion of these agents (rather than dismissal) was the normal way of handling such problems. There was some frustration about what some felt was their lack of leverage with Extension in dealing with poorly performing agents.

**AoE Teams**
Some participants were concerned about what they viewed as a lack of team-specific expertise exhibited by some members of some AoE teams. There was the perception that some team members didn't have the skills they needed, but often did have skills they didn't need. There was also some concern regarding AoE Team members working outside their home counties. Specifically, agents working outside their county are not working in their home county at the financial expense of their home county. There was also some concern about the frequency with which Team members change, thereby leaving farmers unaware of who to contact for what, and where to contact them. This reflected a larger desire for farmers to need only to call one office to get their questions answered.
AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

Sources of Regulatory Information
Extension agents are viewed as credible and knowledgeable sources of information concerning regulatory requirements connected to agricultural production. This would include their knowledge of legislation and other government activity affecting the farm operation.

Farm Chemical Information
Agents were viewed as objective sources of information about chemical application. It was felt that specific chemical company representatives might be more concerned with increasing sales than appropriate use of their products.

Technology Transfer
There was considerable agreement that Extension, as an organization, and agents specifically, were beginning to find efficient and useful ways of delivering information to farms. Two examples given were the DTN data and the CAT Alerts. Several participants suggested that Extension should increase its efforts to use innovative technologies to deliver timely, useful information to producers. Technologies mentioned included fax, the Internet and video cassettes.

AoE Teams
Those participants familiar with the "AoE Teams" concept thought it was a move in the right direction. However, it was clear that some of the participants did not know or understand what "Area of Expertise Teams" are. Further educational and promotional efforts might be in order. In addition, the field crops AoE was viewed as having an understanding as to what problems, solutions and issues are being experienced throughout the state and elsewhere. There was also the feeling that AoE Teams, as well as agents, in general, should listen more carefully to individual farmers to better understand farming-based problems and search for solutions.

SUMMARY

Participants seemed confused as to Extension's priorities in connection to the mission and function of field agents. There was general concern as to the amount of expertise that is and should be possessed by both county agents and AoE Team members, and about the accountability of agents in the context of on-the-job performance issues. Overall, there was a perception that the role of the ag agent has changed considerably from Extension's traditional mission. Some agents are caught between an organizational mandate to wear many hats and the producers' need to have someone they can reach in a hurry, and who has the correct answers to their farming-based technical questions. AoE Teams seemed to participants to be a reasonable concept for which there may not been enough planning and preparation, particularly in regards to the training and expertise possessed by some Team members.

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Enclosed is a copy of the summary of the focus group session with MSUE Field Crops Industry Advisory Committee. We hope these findings will be helpful to the field crop AoE team in planning and implementing educational programs for farmers. You may wish to share these findings with members of field crop AoE team or other audience, as you deem appropriate. We believe that the Field Crop Industry Advisory Committee members will appreciate receiving this summary from you.

Thank you for the opportunity to work with your team. Please feel free to call us at 355-6580 if you have questions or need further information.