

Innovation in Extension

2016
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of leadership

Leaders in Extension must act as change agents to create a culture that encourages and sustains innovation throughout the organization.

Characteristics of innovative leaders

An innovative leader is visionary and can communicate that vision. The ability to form collaborations with a diverse group of individuals and take risks are essential. These leaders understand failure is part of the process and encourage open communication that includes differing opinions.

Support for leaders

Leaders at all levels must understand their own capacity to innovate and why innovation is needed in our organization. Professional development should focus on the following: critical thinking, managing difficult conversations, culture change process, experimentation, learning from failure, utilizing diverse teams, encouraging & embracing dissenting opinion, and avoiding groupthink. A national innovation conference could kick off the new focus on innovation. A Chief Innovation Officer could design a more innovation-friendly organizational environment.

New hiring strategy

Search committees must be diversified to consist of creative & entrepreneurial individuals and may include non-Extension representatives. Job descriptions must express the expectation and responsibility to innovate and an assessment tool such as ISPI could be used to identify a candidate's capacity for innovation. Job candidates from non-traditional sources should be recruited and non-typical applicants should be considered.

Support for staff

Onboarding of new staff and professional development for all staff will be needed to help initiate the change process and support innovative practice. A tool kit with new technologies such as Kickbox, Sprints, IdeaScale, and Hack-a-thons should be developed and provided to staff via in-service sessions utilizing hands-on learning. eXtension and the Horizon Report should be consulted for communication, brainstorming, and idea sharing technologies. Shadowing, mentorships, and webinars are suggested as additional training vehicles. Schedules should include 'free time' for staff to explore new ideas.

Reward system

The reward system must recognize those who exhibit innovative behaviors. The evaluation process must be reworked to encourage experimentation and creativity in employees' work and failures should not be detrimental to the performance assessment. The promotion and tenure process must be adapted to support innovation.

Learner engagement

Extension's clientele are an important part of the innovation process. Focus groups, community forums, leadership and council meetings can engage the public in our innovation process. Extension can model innovative ideas to the public through team projects, experimentation, and stretch assignments with community organizations.

WHAT IS INNOVATION?

Innovation is the process of improving, adapting, developing, or creating a new product, system, service, or process, large or small, to deliver better results, create value for people, or move an organization forward.

WHY SHOULD EXTENSION INNOVATE?

Extension plays a significant role in rural, urban, and suburban life with offices located in most of the nation's 3000+ counties. If we are to continue to provide solutions to problems and improve the quality of life in the 21st Century, we need to continually change and adjust. In other words, Extension must innovate. A call to action to support and invest in innovation has been embraced by more than 500 leading organizations in US industry, education, science, and engineering.

The Innovation Task Force was asked to provide guidelines for implementation of innovation strategies within the Extension organization.

THE FOLLOWING TOPICS WERE ADDRESSED:

