

Extension Advisory Committees: Recruiting and Orienting Members

Without a strong foundation, even the best-built house will eventually fall. Likewise, an Extension advisory committee is only as strong as its members, their skills, and the subsequent orientation and training they get from you, the agent.

The changing nature of Extension and the needs of clients require that you think strategically about recruiting advisory committee members who have skills and abilities to address identified issues and problems, while enhancing your ability as an Extension agent to do your job. As those issues and problems change, so should your committee membership.

Preferred Advisory Committee Member Traits

When thinking about potential advisory committee members, start by making a list of people, along with their corresponding demographics and relevant knowledge and skills. You want members who have a broad range of knowledge of issues facing your community. Additionally, they should know or belong to the audiences you will be trying to reach and be committed to and vested in the committee and its purpose. Finally, seek out members who have differing views from your own, are known to be creative or imaginative (big-picture types), and may challenge you to think critically.

The skills you look for as you build your committee depend on its purpose. If you need to raise funds in support of your programs, seek out members with grant-writing, event-management, business, or marketing skills. If you need public advocates for Extension, recruit members with skills in public speaking or journalism. If you need help with program policy and procedures, skills in management and attention to detail will be important.

Remember that teamwork is crucial to a functioning advisory committee. So, in addition to knowledge, commitment, and mission-specific skills, members should demonstrate—or be willing to learn—certain other attributes necessary for highly functioning teams, including:

- ▶ leadership skills (including shared leadership)
- ▶ respect for and willingness to work with others
- ▶ flexibility and adaptability
- ▶ communication skills (including listening and networking skills)
- ▶ long-term visioning, coupled with short-term action

Examples of potential members might include:

- ▶ current or former Extension agents
- ▶ current or former volunteers
- ▶ representatives of partner organizations
- ▶ representatives from key community-based organizations that serve your target audience(s), including parents of young adults in 4-H programs
- ▶ representatives from your community's cultural, racial, and ethnic minorities

Other criteria for membership may include a diversity of opinions and experience and a balance of cultural, racial, age, and gender representation.

The Recruitment Process

Now that you have a list of potential candidates, you'll need to approach each one with a request to become an active member of your advisory committee. In some cases, an email or phone call will suffice, especially if you know the person well and he/she already has a strong knowledge about Extension and your programming efforts.

However, it may take several attempts at making contact and networking with other individuals to “sell” them on the idea of joining your committee. In these situations, it's best to understand what these people value and what motivates them.

For example, someone interested in children's issues may want to hear how the advisory committee will make decisions regarding educational programming for disadvantaged young people in the community. Another person might be a well-known community leader and would relish the idea of enhancing that role by being an “ambassador” for Extension with his or her constituents.

Recognize that, as you speak to potential advisory committee members, you may have to first raise their awareness and understanding of Extension and your role before they will even consider your request. If possible, have an elevator pitch ready when you first deliver your request. An elevator pitch is a short, persuasive, 1-minute summary of who you are, what Extension does, and why this person would be a good fit.

Also, be prepared to knowledgeably answer any of the following questions a potential member may ask:

- ▶ What is a land-grant university?
- ▶ How is your county Extension office tied to the MSU Extension Service?
- ▶ What is an Extension program?
- ▶ What Extension programs are currently offered in your county?
- ▶ What audiences are currently reached in your county?
- ▶ What impact does Extension have in your county?
- ▶ What issues or concerns do you expect the advisory committee to address?
- ▶ What would be the time commitment for advisory committee members?
- ▶ What would be my role on the advisory committee?
- ▶ What's in it for me to be a member of the advisory committee?

Following is a sample script for an introductory elevator pitch you can use when speaking to potential advisory committee members. Modify it to suit your program area and the person to whom you are speaking.

As you recruit members, ask for suggestions from other agents, your regional Extension coordinator, partner agencies, and others. Once you've selected your committee, ask members to complete a profile form that gathers basic information about their current knowledge and skills so that you can ensure that you are putting together a dynamic, strong, and well-rounded committee. See the end of this publication for an *Extension Advisory Committee Member Profile* template.

Orienting Advisory Committee Members

Orientation and training for new and existing committee members is a must. If you have existing committee members, recruit them to assist with the orientation of new members. As the Extension agent and facilitator of the committee, it is your responsibility to ensure your committee members understand:

- ▶ MSU Extension and its mission;
- ▶ the role of Extension locally, regionally, and beyond;
- ▶ your role as the agent;
- ▶ members' roles and responsibilities; and
- ▶ how everything fits together—the BIG PICTURE.

Meeting frequency often depends on the type and purpose of the committee, since situations relevant to Extension may change rapidly or not for a long time. As a good rule of practice, your advisory committee should meet quarterly, but, at a minimum, twice a year—once for a needs assessment and once to report programmatic results. Of course, do **not** call a meeting if one is unnecessary—no new issues to discuss, vote on, etc. That will only serve to frustrate and demotivate your committee members.

At the first meeting of your Extension advisory committee, members should each receive a welcome packet that includes:

- ▶ basic information about the organization and your programs (including your current Plan of Work);
- ▶ list of other local Extension personnel and their program assignments;
- ▶ current bylaws (including member rotations);
- ▶ job descriptions explaining member responsibilities (including specific roles of officers); and
- ▶ any other relevant information you need them to know.

In an effort to respect your members' time, keep the meeting to fewer than 2 hours. Meet at a place and time that is appropriate and convenient for your members. Start and end on time. Be well prepared so you are not rushed, and always maintain an image of professionalism and credibility.

Following is a sample agenda for a formal orientation session with an advisory committee.

As the agent, you should have well-defined expectations of your advisory committee. Keep in mind that your advisory committee members will also have their own expectations as part of their participation. If you are not aware of these expectations and do not ensure that these needs are met, your members may not stick around long or may not be fully engaged in the process. Members expect to:

- ▶ feel welcomed at committee meetings
- ▶ receive a clear explanation of roles (of members and of the Extension agent)
- ▶ receive continuous support from the agent until they feel competent in their roles
- ▶ have an active role in solving specific problems
- ▶ feel that their contributions are valuable
- ▶ actively communicate with the agent and other committee members outside of meeting times

The importance of orienting your advisory committee should not be overlooked. You cannot expect advisory members to be effective contributors if they are not aware of their roles, and the best way to raise their awareness is through successful recruiting and orientation.

Extension Advisory Committee Member Profile

CONTACT INFORMATION *(This information will be shared only with other committee members.)*

First Name: _____ Last Name: _____

Nickname/Preferred Name: _____

Address _____ Suite/Apt: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Email: _____

Phone 1: _____ Phone 2: _____

Communication Preference (check all that apply): Mail Email Phone

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Gender: Male Female Other/Unidentified _____

Race (choose all that apply): American Indian/Alaska Native Asian Black or African American
 Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander White Other/Unidentified _____

Hispanic or Latino? Yes No

EDUCATION INFORMATION

College/Institution	Subject/Field	Degree

JOB INFORMATION

Position Title	Organization/Company	Industry/Client Base	Years of Experience

Please see other side.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Please describe your top talents and strengths.

What are you passionate about?

What are your hobbies?

Are you involved in any extracurricular activities (e.g., volunteering)?

Have you ever served on any boards or advisory committees? If yes, what roles do/did you hold?

How do you stay informed about local events/activities (check all that apply)?

Facebook Twitter Instagram Other _____

How familiar are you with the MSU Extension Service and its mission?

Not at all familiar Somewhat familiar Very familiar I know all about them!

How familiar are you with your local county Extension office and its programs/services?

Not at all familiar Somewhat familiar Very familiar I know all about them!

Any other information you wish to share?

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