

***Foundations of Political Effectiveness  
in Cooperative Extension—2009***

**Case study: WALWORTH COUNTY**

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***Situation***

The Walworth County Extension office was in crisis. Both the CNRED and 4-H youth development educator positions were eliminated at about the same time. The county would not support refilling the CNRED position. The county board wanted nothing to do with replacing any future tenure-track extension positions in the county. They wanted nothing to do with a tenured faculty position. Shortly after this, the Family Living educator quit, leaving the agriculture educator as the only tenure-track position within the office. The partnership between the county and state was broken due to lack of trust.

The county and state agreed to hire a 4-H educator who would also serve as department head. This was an academic staff position. The Family Living educator position was also refilled as academic staff. The County would not refill the CNRED position, either as faculty or academic staff. The new office department head was outspoken and had an abrasive leadership style with staff. This resulted in a difficult office working environment that made it impossible to create a strong team. This leadership style really led to a challenging workplace.

***Response***

The Cooperative Extension district director and associate dean analyzed the situation and made a decision, in partnership with the Agriculture and Extension Education Committee and county administrator, that the department head's leadership style was not going to move the office forward. To make any progress the district director and associate dean recognized that they had to "get the right people on the bus." They eventually asked the department head to leave the office and Extension.

The Family Living educator served as department head for the first six months after the department head left. At this point, the district director met with staff and they contemplated how best to move forward. After the meeting, the Agriculture educator and Family Living educator agreed to share department head responsibilities. They decided to work very hard at building trust with the county board and administrator.

The district director and department head followed up with a meeting with the county administrator and communicated a message that was direct and to the point—that they would work to gain back the trust and support of both the board and the administrator. They mutually agreed that it was a new day in Extension-county relations. The administrator agreed to work with the Extension office to make progress.

After the meeting, the district director and co-department heads continued to build a better relationship with the county administrator by regularly meeting and communicating with him. Together they partnered to build a new and strong working relationship, which facilitated building common ground and trust. The county administrator, district director, and co-department heads trusted each other.

The next step was to work with the Extension Committee. The Extension office was able to gain the attention and support of one of the committee members who really went to bat for the office. This was a risk that the committee member was willing to take. She believed in the office and its potential for growth. Based on an in depth, trust-based discussion she had with the district director, she talked with county board members and advocated for bringing back tenure-track faculty positions. As a result, the Agriculture and Extension Education Committee and county administrator, in partnership with Cooperative Extension agreed to convert the Family Living and 4-H youth development agent positions to faculty.

The office was working well together. The county administrator and Agriculture and Extension Education Committee supported the staff. Most importantly, the Extension office was again seen as a valuable resource. The county administrator met with the Local Government Center director and district director in Madison. He saw for himself the specialists that county educators have behind them and made personal connections with them. This visit helped reinforce the fact that Extension resources went beyond the county office and the importance of the county educator /state specialist relationship.

Through ongoing discussions with the co-department heads and district director, the county administrator was able to see UW-Extension through a “big picture” lens. He suggested more ways to use Extension resources that would benefit the county. This resulted in the county increasing its funding for the Horticulture position from 50 to 100 percent, which allowed for the expansion of the Master Gardener program. The county also asked Extension for support for a CNRED position. The state did not have the funds for the position, but this has not stopped the county from continuing to explore the establishment of the position and possibly funding the majority of it.

## **Outcomes**

The right people need to be involved for an Extension office to be successful. The environment needs to be collegial—with everyone working with, not against, each other.

To be successful you must be able to build trust with partners. Without trust, you have nothing. Trust-based relationship-building with key local officials is imperative to gaining long-term support for Cooperative Extension.

Extension must understand county needs and be able to provide resources that are seen as valuable.

As learned in responsibility-based culture, it is important to “walk the talk.” Promise only what you know you can deliver. For example, Extension made it clear that they did not have the state match dollars to partner with the County and create the position. No promises were made.