

Ohio Cooperative Extension Service Agents Perceptions of the Agent Rating Method of the Performance Appraisal System

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For many individuals, work is the center of life. As much as half an individual's waking hours may be spent at work or commuting to or from work. However, recent evidence indicates that many people are dissatisfied with their jobs or alienated from work in general--with unfortunate consequences for individuals, organizations, and society. Causes of this dissatisfaction can range from unhealthy supervisory relationships to non-contingent reward systems to dislike of the actual work. Perceptions of performance appraisal systems are also important to the formulation of employees attitudes toward their jobs (Cascio, 1982).

Another very important factor related to job satisfaction is co-worker relationships (Dunham & Smith, 1979). The importance of good co-worker relationships is enhanced when the work involves teams of individuals working together closely to accomplish organizational goals, as in the case with Ohio Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) county faculty. Working together successfully to plan and conduct informal educational programs for citizens in their communities requires that county Extension teams be satisfied with all areas of co-worker relationships. Components of trust, support, communication, and power are equally important to good working relationships. (Blumberg, Hare, Kent, & Davis, 1983; McCall & Simmons, 1966). A change in situation affecting any of the components could have a tremendous impact on satisfaction with team relationships. A clear example of a change of this type was the switch in the county chair's responsibilities with regard to performance appraisal.

January 1, 1987, the chair's personnel management and staff development responsibilities were expanded to include conducting the actual performance appraisal of agents. The performance appraisal score initiated the administrative decisions on tenure, promotion, merit pay, and state and district assignments. This task was performed by the district supervisor prior to January 1, 1987. Previous to this change, the chair had only been responsible for non-faculty performance appraisal and general office administration.

By having a person whose previous role had been a co-worker in the county office now doing peer performance appraisal of fellow workers, some change in satisfaction with the rating method may have occurred for agents and chairs. In turn, the change in satisfaction with the rating method might also have led to a change in satisfaction with the relationship between the chair and other members of the county team.

Background for the Study

Researchers have found peer ratings as a performance appraisal method, a form which has been described above and currently is in use by the OCES,

to have many positive aspects. Such aspects included their similarity to supervisor ratings, their reliability, and their usefulness for feedback purposes (Cedarblom & Lounsberg, 1980; Holzback, 1978; and Kane & Lawler, 1978; Siegal, 1982).

Conversely, others have concluded that using a peer rating method would have negative effects on satisfaction of office relationships, including impaired office relationship, poor employee acceptance, less agreement between raters, leniency in ratings, and the effect of jealousies and rivalries on the evaluation (Batista, 1976; DeNisi, Randolph, & Blancoe, 1983; and, Zedeck, Imparto, Krause, & Oleno, 1974).

Satisfaction with a system of peer rating within the OCES could be affected by many variables associated with the individual county office situation. Based on research findings (Banziger & Drevenstedt, 1982; Cleveland & Landy, 1981; Ferris, Yates, Gilmore, & Rowland, 1985; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; and, Van Tilburg, 1987), the variables determined to be most important for this study were the age, gender, and program area combinations of the agents and the chairs.

For the purpose of investigating the change in the office relationship, four components of a relationship were identified: communication, trust, power, and support. These components were chosen based on a review of the work of Blumberg, Hare, Kent, and Davis (1983) and McCall and Simmons (1966).

Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the level of satisfaction of the field faculty of the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service with the new performance rating method used to evaluate agents in the performance appraisal system. An additional purpose was to determine if there had been a change in satisfaction with faculty member's office relationships related to the change in county chair responsibilities.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To describe the levels of (a) position of the county faculty member, agent or chair, (b) gender combination of the agent and the chair, (c) age combination of the agent and the chair, (d) program area combination of the agent and the chair, (e) years of stable faculty membership, (f) satisfaction with the office relationship, and (g) change in satisfaction with the office relationship,
2. To investigate the possible relationships between selected variables in the population. The following research questions helped to address this objective:
 - (a) Is the number of years of stable faculty membership in the county office related to agent level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
 - (b) Is the number of years of stable faculty membership in the county office related to chair level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
 - (c) Is the gender combination of the chair/agent related to agent level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
 - (d) Is the gender combination of the chair/agent related to chair level of satisfaction with the new rating method?

- (e) Is the age combination of the chair/agent related to agent level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (f) Is the age combination of the chair/agent related to chair level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (g) Is the program area combination of the chair/agent related to agent level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (h) Is the program area combination of the chair/agent related to chair level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (i) Is position of the county faculty related to the level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (j) Is position of the county faculty related to the level of change in satisfaction with the office relationship?
- (k) Is change in level of satisfaction of the agent with the office relationship related to agent level of satisfaction with the new rating method?
- (l) Is change in level of satisfaction of the chair with the office relationship related to chair level of satisfaction with the new rating method?

Procedures

This study was a descriptive, correlational study that used a mail questionnaire to survey the respondents. The population consisted of all OCES county extension agents who were employed as of January 1, 1985 and were still employed as of October 1, 1987. Another criterion for the population was that the agent must belong to a team of agents (have more than one agent in the county office). Out of the accessible population of 180 agents, 125 were randomly sampled. Of this sample, 54 were chairs and 71 were agents.

The data were collected by a mail questionnaire. Using the procedures outlined by Dillman (1978), all members of the sample were mailed a packet October 8, 1987. A response rate of 96.8% (**N** = 121) was obtained after two mailings, with a usable data sample of 93.6% (**N** = 117). To address non-response error, responses of early and late respondents were compared using χ^2 -tests to determine if there were differences. No differences were found; thus, based on the logic of Miller and Smith (1983) that late respondents are most like non-respondents, results were generalized to the population.

The instrument was developed by the researcher. Part One, the "Level of Satisfaction with the Current Rating Method," consisted of six statements to which subjects responded on a 5-point scale with 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied. Part Two, "Changes in the Level of Satisfaction with the Office Relationship," used the same response scale and contained 16 items (each of the subscales of power, communication, trust, and support were measured by four items). Modeling the design and theory of the Borich model of needs assessment (1980), these 16 items appeared in the center of the page with a scale on either side of the items; the left-hand scale measuring satisfaction with the office relationship during the use of the old method and the right-hand scale measuring satisfaction with the relationship during the use of the new method. The satisfaction score of the previous rating method was subtracted from the new rating method satisfaction score to obtain a discrepancy score. A positive discrepancy

score indicated an increase in satisfaction, a zero indicated no change in satisfaction, and a negative score indicated a decrease in satisfaction.

Reliability was tested for the instrument through a pilot test on a random sample of 15 extension agents selected for the study. Cronbach's alphas for summated scales ranged from .70 to .96. Content validity was determined by a panel of experts.

Frequencies, means, and sum values were used to organize and summarize the data. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to determine the nature and strength of relationships (using interpretations suggested by Davis, 1971), while analysis of variance and t-tests were used to compare groups on selected variables. The alpha level was set a priori at .05.

Results

Description of Levels of the Variables in the Population

One hundred seventeen county faculty members returned usable responses, of which 66 were agents and 51 were chairs. The most often reported gender combination was a female agent/male chair ($n = 49$). The most frequent age combination was the agent under 40/chair 40 and over ($n = 43$). The most frequent program area combination was the agent 4-H/chair agriculture ($n = 31$) combination. In the majority of the combinations, the chairs were male (69.8%), 40 years old or older (63.8%), and had agriculture as their program area (50.0%). Fifty-four county faculty members had three or more years of stable faculty membership (the same work team).

The mean level of satisfaction with the new rating method for all respondents was 3.1 ($n = 117$). For the change in the level of satisfaction with the office relationship ($n = 103$), the mean discrepancy score was 0.16 for communication, -0.41 for trust, -0.43 for power, and 0.21 for support.

Relationships Between Selected Variables and Satisfaction with the New Rating Method

Relationships between selected categorical variables and the level of satisfaction with the new rating system were determined for the group of agents and the group of chairs using analysis of variance. The selected variables were: age combination, gender combination, and program area responsibility combination.

Results showed that there were no significant differences among the above mentioned combination groups. Therefore, no relationships were discovered between age, gender, and program responsibility combination variables and satisfaction with the new rating system (chair conducting performance appraisal).

The relationship between years of stable faculty membership and agent and chair satisfaction with the new method was determined using a Pearson product moment correlation. The correlation coefficient for the group of

agents, -.11, was described as a low negative relationship suggesting that the longer the county team had been together, the less satisfied the agents were with the new rating system. The correlation for the group of chairs was .20, a moderate positive relationship suggesting that the longer the team had been together, the more satisfied the chairs were with the new rating system.

To determine the relationship that county position (agent/chair) had with satisfaction with the rating system, a **t-test** was performed. The chair mean of 3.37 (**sd** = 0.80) was determined to be significantly higher than the agent mean of 2.96 (**sd** = 0.73).

Pearson correlation coefficients for relationships between the satisfaction with office relationships discrepancies (of the four components of a relationship) and the satisfaction with the new rating system for each group (agents and chairs) appear in Table 1. All represent moderate, positive relationships. These findings suggest that the greater the satisfaction with relationship discrepancy score, the higher the satisfaction with the rating system.

Table 1
Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between the Change in the Level of Satisfaction of the Agent and Chair with the Office of Relationship and Selected Variables

	<u>Agent</u>		<u>Chair</u>	
	E-satisfaction	<u>N</u>	E-satisfaction	<u>N</u>
Comm Discrepancy	.36	56	.29	47
Power Discrepancy	.41	57	.29	46
Trust Discrepancy	.31	57	.32	46
Support Discrepancy	.39	57	.21	46
Years of Stable Faculty Membership	-.11	66	.20	51

Relationship Between the Change in Satisfaction with the Office Relationship and Position (Agent/Chair)

T-tests were conducted on the discrepancy scores of the four relationship components for the agent and chair groups. Results displayed in Table 2 indicate that agents' satisfaction with the office relationship had decreased for all four components. Discrepancy scores for agents were lower than the chairs' discrepancy scores for all four components and statistically significantly lower than the chairs for the communication and power components.

Table 2
Change in the Level of Satisfaction with the Office Relationship as Related to the Position of the County Faculty

	Mean	SD	SE	t-value	df	2-tail P
COMMUNICATION						
Agent (N = 56)	-.43	3.8	.51			
Chair (N = 47)	.85	2.6	.38	2.99	97	.05*

POWER						
Agent	-1.28	3.0	.40			
Chair	.63	3.8	.56	2.83**	101	.01*

TRUST						
Agent	-.74	3.8	.50			
Chair	.00	2.72	.40	1.14	100	.26

SUPPORT						
Agent	-.21	3.7	.49			
Chair	.74	2.62	.39	1.52	94	.13

Note. *p < .05 **pooled variance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Satisfaction with the new rating method was independent of age, gender, or program area combinations; thus, extension services need not be as concerned with these demographic variables, but should concentrate on selecting those who are the best qualified for the position.

Based on the literature review and as suggested by the open-ended comments of respondents, organizations need to be aware that having a peer or immediate supervisor as a performance rater provides a rater with more opportunities for interaction and observation of the subordinates, but it may also provide opportunities for personality conflicts and other concerns as well.

An organization that uses a peer rating method should be aware that while employee satisfaction with communication and support in the office relationship may increase, satisfaction with power and trust may decrease. Measures should be taken to keep the employees' satisfaction with the power and trust components of a relationship from declining.

Organizations should investigate employees' satisfaction levels with the organizations' methods of performance appraisal to gather information about benefits and shortcomings of those performance appraisal methods.

Need for Further Study

Other studies need to be conducted to determine why certain components of the office relationship were related to the agents' and chairs' satisfaction with the new rating method.

States with similar rating methods should investigate the faculty's level of satisfaction with the rating method, while states with different rating methods could examine satisfaction with the method currently being used, and determine which method might be more favorable.

A follow-up study should be conducted in Ohio in a year to determine if time has had an impact on the satisfaction of the faculty with the performance rating method.

Other studies could investigate the differences between agents and chairs in the variables of years of stable faculty membership, the level of satisfaction with the new rating method, and the different components of the office relationship.

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