

Coordinated Tactical Program Planning among Specialists and Agents: The Oregon Extension Forestry Experience

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ABSTRACT

Planning and coordinating educational programs are difficult among geographically scattered faculty who deal with a range of subjects and audiences. The Oregon State University Extension Forestry program has developed and tested an annual group planning and decision process that successfully focuses and allocates human resources. Key elements of the process include a central planning session where faculty review recent progress of major projects, present and discuss new programming ideas, and use an oversized project-faculty matrix to clearly show individual and total commitments. The process can be used by nearly any group of 10 to 30 people. Over several years the process has markedly helped our small group to produce programs of high quality, quantity, and impact through a system of efficient and effective priority setting, time allocation, and accountability.

SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM PLANNING at a statewide or regional level is a major challenge in extension and other group educational efforts. Key faculty are often widely scattered among county offices and separate university departments. For example, the Oregon State University Extension Forestry (OEF) program consists of 12 off-campus forestry agents who work in 24 counties and eight forestry specialists based among five campus departments. Specialists and agents are involved with a large number and diversity of both individual and group programs. Competing time demands make program scheduling and coordination difficult. Yet, increasingly, extension personnel are being asked to carefully plan and focus their efforts for maximum impact and efficiency. Recent interest in the concept of issues programming (Dalgard et al., 1988) reflects this trend, although the importance of program planning and focus have been long recognized (Bruce, 1964; Oliver, 1977).

Because of the unique nature of extension work and staffing, traditional approaches for program planning and administration may not be effective, particularly as issues and programs become broader and involve team efforts (Bruce, 1964; Cosgriffe and Dailey, 1969; Ferry and Kiernan, 1989). This could also explain why planning may not be very satisfying or productive for many extension professionals (Durfee, 1976). The Oregon Extension Forestry (OEF) program struggled with unsatisfying planning for many years until we developed an annual group planning and decision process to successfully focus and allocate human resources. This article describes the process and the benefits provided to our pro-

gram. We believe our approach could produce similar benefits in other group planning situations.

THE PLANNING PROCESS AND CYCLE

Planning Focus

The OEF group planning process is used primarily for short-term, tactical planning. It is a key part of a broader statewide extension planning process that begins with the development of 4-yr, strategic plans that incorporate analyses of broad trends, issues identification, and overall priority setting. These initial steps are essential in establishing the general goals and objectives that give direction to our annual planning. The OEF planning process allows strategic plans to be translated into specific team actions. Although not addressed here, periodic program evaluation also provides important information for both strategic and tactical planning.

Another key feature of the OEF group planning process is its focus on high-priority, group projects. Individual programs still represent the majority of effort by our agents and specialists (Fig. 1), but we found that the group project focus optimally uses group resources and meeting time. Cosgriffe and Dailey (1969) emphasize that teamwork should be used rationally and judiciously—and only when problems cannot be solved

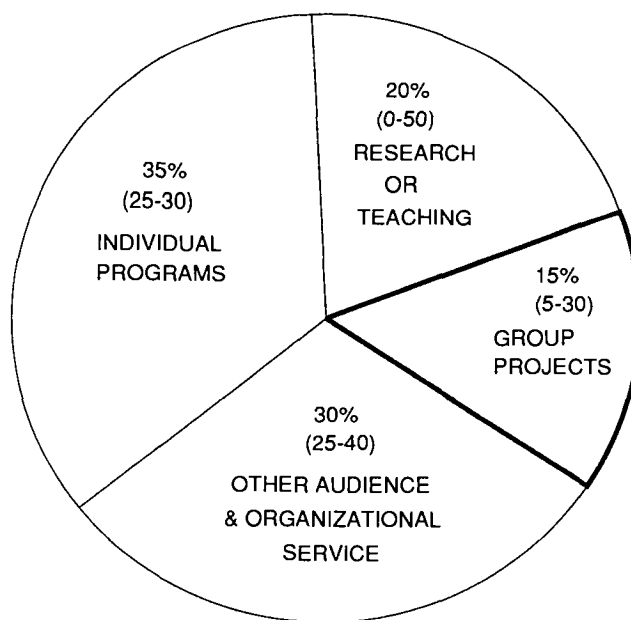


Fig. 1. Typical allocation of annual work effort by an Oregon State University Extension Forestry specialist or agent (bracketed values represent range among individual faculty). The planning process described in the text is focused on the portion highlighted as *Group Projects*.

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in other ways (i.e., through individual efforts). Teamwork is particularly appropriate for complex problems requiring a variety of perspectives or solutions.

To reduce confusion, we developed specific criteria for defining group projects that enter our tactical planning process. A "group project" will have one or more of the following characteristics:

1. The project will involve staff in three or more counties
2. The project will consume substantial staff or administrative resources, either time or money
3. The project will have statewide significance or future application beyond the trial stage
4. The project will substantially improve organizational effectiveness

Group projects vary widely in form and scope. Some focus on the development of specific educational materials, such as a series of extension bulletins or audio-video programs that address an important woodland management issue like taxation. Others are multidimensional, such as the "Master Woodland Manager" program, which involves development of a large array of teaching materials, diverse classroom and field training sessions, and follow-up support for volunteers.

Planning Meeting Preparation

The heart of the OEF tactical planning process is an annual group meeting, but many activities occur in our annual planning cycle (Fig. 2). Some important work takes place a month or two prior to the planning meeting when the program leader and two or three specialists and agents organize the annual planning effort. This early work includes developing a calendar with planning schedules and commitments. The calendar is set so group activities coordinate with individual planning and reporting requirements.

Several weeks before the annual planning meeting, OEF faculty and administrators receive a packet contain-

ing the planning calendar, a description of the group planning effort and meeting agenda, and the criteria for group projects. "No hazard, no fault" forms (Fig. 3) are included for submitting new ideas for group planning. The form requests a brief outline of the situation, proposed goals and objectives, resources needed, activity schedule, and potential team leader and members. Although all are reminded to apply the group project criteria, the form title ("No hazard, no fault") encourages free expression of new or unusual ideas and approaches. Completed forms are assembled and sent to staff shortly before the planning meeting.

***** "NO HAZARD, NO FAULT" GROUP PROJECT PROPOSAL FORM *****

Submitted by: _____ Date: _____

Project Title: _____

1. What is proposed (general description of activity)?
2. What has prompted your proposal (situation)?
3. What need or problem would be addressed (goals)?
4. What specifically would be accomplished (objectives)?
5. Expected activity schedule for key steps in project (calendar)?
6. Estimated annual and total resources needed (FTE, \$, etc.)?
7. What would be the minimum FTE commitment for participants?
8. Who is likely to be interested in participating in this project?
9. Are you willing and able to lead this project? If not, who might be an appropriate leader?
10. Other notes or comments about this project (available funding opportunity, cooperator involvement, unique innovation, etc.)?

Fig. 3. "No Hazard, No Fault Form" used to solicit new ideas for group projects (simplified form).

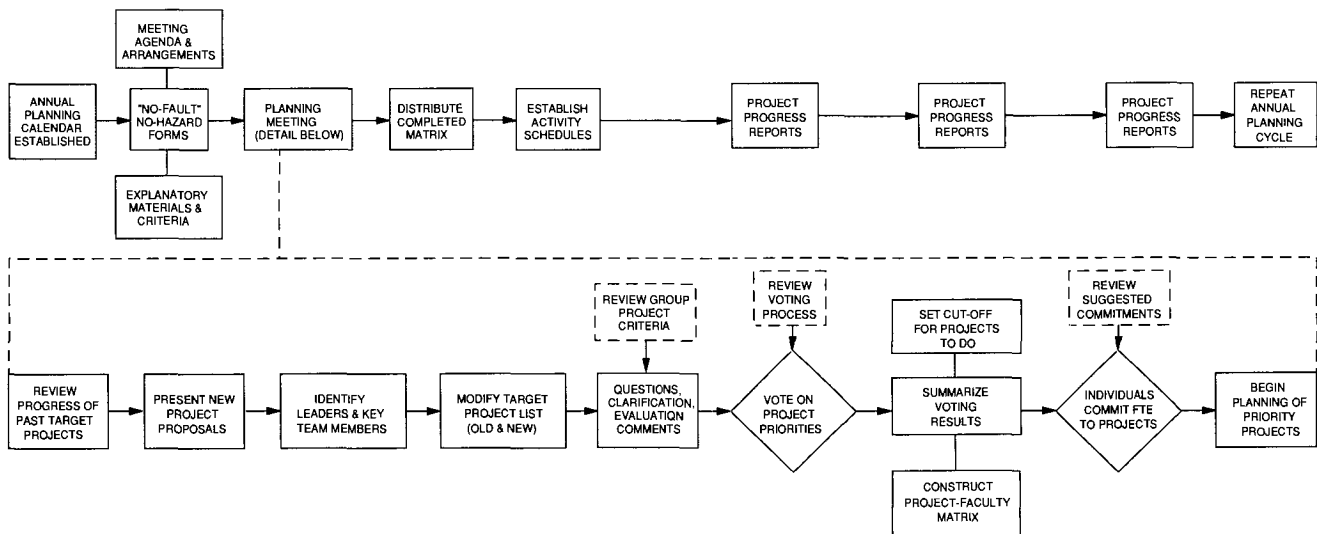


Fig. 2. The Oregon State University Extension Forestry annual planning cycle, including details 2- to 3-d planning meeting.

All OEF faculty (full and part-time) and administrators are asked to participate in the annual group planning meeting. This group includes county agents, campus-based specialists, the OEF program leader, county chairpersons, and academic department heads. Others who are interested or involved in specific aspects of our programs (e.g., support staff, volunteers, cooperators) may also be invited. Diverse participation contributes to creative input and maximum use of extension resources (Smith, 1974), and helps ensure individual commitment through active involvement in planning (Hardaker and Ward, 1987; Oliver, 1977). Although OEF clientele normally do not directly participate in the annual planning meeting, faculty incorporate current clientele and other outside input, such as that used to formulate the most recent 4-yr strategic plans. Each of our forestry agents has a local advisory committee, and lay people in each county are heavily involved in identifying issues and priorities for the 4-yr plans. The benefits of involving lay persons in program planning may vary (Bruce, 1964), but contemporary trends and experience suggest that directed grassroots involvement can help identify critical issues and innovative solutions for a wide range of potential clientele (Ferry and Kiernan, 1989; Richardson and Ladewig, 1989).

The group planning meeting is scheduled as a 2- to 3-day retreat away from county and university offices. The off-site location reduces routine distractions and promotes social interaction and esprit de corps. Each OEF county faculty member is the sole forester in his or her office, and campus-based specialists are scattered among several academic departments. The group enjoys opportunities to informally "talk shop" and compare notes about job-related successes and problems. Thus, we now routinely begin our planning meeting with a social gathering, and include other opportunities for informal communication during the meeting. The social interaction also has a business purpose for people who have submitted "No hazard, no fault" forms to talk to colleagues and generate support for proposed projects.

For the formal group planning meeting, we employ a meeting management system using a facilitator, recorder, and group memory via flipcharts (Doyle and Straus, 1976; Straus and Doyle, 1978). This approach effectively addresses many key requirements for successful team efforts and commitments, including problem clarification, open yet focused discussion, and consensus building (Cosgriffe and Dailey, 1969). Most of our faculty have training in meeting management, which helps the whole group strive toward common goals by efficiently using limited meeting time.

Meeting Procedure

The formal planning meeting begins with a review of accomplishments from the previous year's planning activity. Although the review provides a means of accountability, the emphasis is on positive accomplishments (i.e., we celebrate success, not dwell on failure). Although some project leaders provide assessments of why something was not accomplished, there is little group evaluation of limit-

ed progress at this time. Follow-up assessments are sometimes scheduled after the planning meeting where this is expected to provide useful insights about obstacles or opportunities for progress. The review session primarily brings to the group a sense of accomplishment for successfully completed projects, and identifies incomplete projects for reconsideration during current planning.

At the next stage, new group projects are presented using the format of the "No hazard, no fault" forms. The focus is on the situation statement, the objectives of the proposed project, suggested participant time commitments to complete the project, and identification of key individuals. There is no evaluation of proposals until all new projects and potential continuing projects have been described. A key step is to identify people who are willing to serve as project leaders and team members. A project may not move forward if an appropriate leader and team cannot be assembled. Also, a project proposal can come from someone other than the potential project leader, and new projects can be proposed even if a "No hazard, no fault" form was not submitted before the meeting. Our experience has been that leaders and teams usually emerge when highly important program needs are identified. If not, the urgency of a need often turns out to be less than initially perceived.

A target list is then compiled, with new projects surviving the leadership test, as well as the old projects to be reconsidered. A brief period of discussion or "soak" time is provided before the final list is assembled. Some projects might be withdrawn by participants themselves if they discern low group support for a project. The group also reviews the criteria for group projects and verifies that proposals are consistent with guidelines. This activity reinforces the focus of the planning meeting.

With the target list in place, detailed group discussion and evaluation of proposed projects begin. Questions help clarify specific project activities and resource needs. Consistency with key issues and strategic plans is tested. Evaluative comments reveal concerns or support for projects. For example, some projects may severely compete for staff or other resources, or they may reduce overall organizational effectiveness. In other cases, the discussion may reveal widespread client interest in new management techniques or important current events such as good markets, insect outbreaks, wildfires, and so on. Overall, faculty are receptive to new ideas and directions for programs, because the planning process provides a formal means for reducing or eliminating competing activities through the priority setting and time allocation procedures described later in this section.

Good meeting management is especially important at this stage. A facilitator and recorder maintain control of a vigorous discussion and help the group keep to the schedule. The flow of comments is moderated by the facilitator so certain individuals do not monopolize time and key individuals have opportunities to make statements. Negative comments about projects are directed away from individuals and their personal ideas. Record-ers and flipcharts permit summary of evaluative comments in a clear and consistent group memory of deliberations.

When the group project proposal list is completed, there are usually more proposals than resources for action. There is also little indication of priorities the group has among the competing projects. We use a voting process to identify priority group projects and rationally allocate limited resources. Because there are several important features of the voting, we explain and clarify the process before voting begins.

Each planning participant may cast votes for any group project, but we limit the total votes that each person may use so that a clearer picture of group priorities emerges. The number of votes allowed each participant is the number of proposed projects divided by three, plus one additional vote, if needed, to make an even number (i.e., votes = $n/3 + 1$). Thus, if there are 15 proposed projects, each participant could cast six votes ($15/3 + 1$). The divisor of three was determined after observing the number of projects under consideration usually ranged from 10 to 25. Roughly one-third of this range represented a reasonable number for both voting purposes and for a realistic level of priority group projects.

To allow some expression of emphasis on certain projects, each participant can cast up to two votes for any project. The limit of two votes per project per person was determined by trial and error. We tried allowing individuals to cast all their votes for any single project, and also tried a limit of only one vote per project. These extremes resulted in unreasonable bias produced by one or few individuals, or in relatively unclear priorities and focus.

Having reviewed the voting process and clarified confusion, participants are given a few minutes to consider individual preferences and vote allocations so actual voting proceeds smoothly. With a list of proposed project titles posted, voting is conducted with a straightforward show of hands for each project. We have used stick-on dots to conduct the voting as well. If there is concern about visibility of personal voting or that peer pressure might produce an inaccurate expression of individual preferences, a more private voting system can be used.

After voting, the results are summarized and used to establish priority groupings. In most cases, this tabulation clearly shows a few very high and very low priority projects. The decision about how far down the list the group wants to go in its focused efforts for the coming year is more difficult. Sometimes there are obvious break points in voting patterns, but discussion and consensus building are often needed to identify a cutoff point. Occasionally, some lower priority projects are carried forward "for information purposes only." Often, these projects have small, dedicated support groups likely to proceed despite the voting, and it is useful to list them for later resource allocation and progress reporting activities. Recall that we focus our planning on major *group* efforts, not the entire OEF program.

With the voting preferences and priority projects identified, the next key step is for planning participants to make individual time commitments to specific projects. A large matrix is constructed on poster paper for this purpose, with priority and "for information" projects listed in rows on the left side and individuals listed by name

in columns across the top. It is then useful to review with the group the suggested time commitments, expressed as FTE (full time equivalent) fractions, for individual participation at the various levels of involvement for each project. For a major project, these suggested commitments could range, for example, from 0.20 FTE for a project leader, to 0.10 FTE for a planning team member, to 0.01 FTE for someone involved in a single training activity.

A scheduled break allows each participant to reflect on the voting results, the suggested project commitments, and their expected job commitments overall, prior to actually allocating their FTE on the matrix poster. Because the voting clearly shows group preferences, participants give serious consideration to redirecting their efforts toward high-priority projects now evident. Some individuals also may have to deal with a brief letdown after old or new projects they have championed were identified as low priority. It is important to remind the group that, with limited resources, hard choices must always be made, including "letting go" of otherwise worthwhile activities.

Participants next actually commit time and energy to specific projects of choice by writing their individual FTE levels on the matrix poster. Because of the number of projects and commitment levels, faculty must consider their overall work obligations to determine how much total FTE they can realistically allocate to group projects. To provide some general guidance, particularly for those who are new to the process, it is noted that total individual commitment to group projects typically ranges from about 0.05 to 0.30 FTE. Our experience shows substantial FTE must be reserved for individual programs and service activities necessary in demanding extension positions (Fig. 1).

The FTE totals by project and by person are summarized on the matrix so everyone can see how each group project is likely to move forward in the coming year. Occasionally, a project may have a high priority, but will proceed slowly because faculty do not have sufficient available FTE to commit to the project. In most cases, however, FTE allocations reflect the priority levels identified. The completed matrix is a key product of the planning meeting showing a clear and quantitative record of high-priority projects and specific individual and group commitments.

The remaining meeting time is given to preliminary organizational meetings for high-priority projects. Geographic and time constraints make subsequent group meetings difficult to schedule, and brief immediate work allows leaders and teams to carry the momentum from priority setting toward initial project planning. These preliminary meetings often focus on clarifying project goals and objectives, the key actions to be taken, and setting a specific timetable for actions for the coming year.

Planning Follow-Up

With the annual planning meeting completed, faculty return to their diverse job responsibilities (Fig. 1). To be successful, the group planning activity must have vigorous

PROJECT	LEADER	Total Votes	Adams ²	Atkinson ¹	Bordi ¹	Brown ²	Campbell ¹	Cleaves ²	Cloughsey ¹	Duddles ¹	Elefritz ¹	Elwood ²	Emmingham ²	Fitzgerald ¹	Fletcher ¹	Garland ²	Hibbs ²	Landgren ¹	Oester ¹	Rogers ¹	Woodard ¹	Total % FTE
Woodland Workbook	Garland	17	5	--	8	✓	5	10	5	5	--	8	5	10	5	6	5	5	8	--	--	90
Master Woodland Manager Training	Fletcher	13	3	12	10	3	--	5	10	--	✓	8	7	--	20	6	2	10	--	✓	10	106
Forestry for Policy Makers	Cleaves	11	2	3	2	2	✓	15	--	2	3	✓	--	--	✓	2	2	--	--	5	4	42
Forest Protection	Campbell	7	--	--	✓	--	15	--	4	✓	2	--	2	4	--	--	✓	✓	7	--	--	34
Integrated Forest Resource Management	Emmingham	7	5	3	--	--	2	--	✓	2	8	--	10	✓	--	--	5	--	✓	--	✓	35
Total % FTE			15	18	20	5	22	30	19	9	13	16	24	14	25	14	14	15	15	5	14	307

¹County Agent ✓ = add to project mailing list only.
²Campus Specialist

Fig. 4. Project-faculty matrix showing typical individual and total time commitments (listed as % FTE) to high-priority group efforts.

follow-up to stimulate implementation of project plans. A typed copy of the completed matrix (Fig. 4) and preliminary activity schedules are circulated to the entire group as soon as possible after the meeting. In addition, those who were unable to attend the planning meeting are given the opportunity to review the meeting results and commit their own FTE to individual projects. This is often done by telephone so a final, expanded project matrix can be sent out quickly after absentees have made commitments.

A clear and consistent system of accountability offers a way of bringing life to the program-planning process (Durfee, 1976). The final project-FTE matrix provides a concise and highly visible tool for such accountability. It quantitatively summarizes individual and group commitments for planning participants and others (e.g., administrators, client groups). Although sometimes viewed as mundane, progress reports are a useful means of maintaining interest and commitment to individual projects (Cosgriffe and Dailey, 1969; Elwood and Adams, 1989). With planned actions taken, and the use of quarterly reports to highlight and encourage progress, the OEF annual planning cycle is complete.

CONCLUSIONS

Benefits of the Process

We have observed many positive outcomes of the OEF planning process. First, it effectively handles an inher-

ently complex and challenging group planning activity. Program planning is rarely easy, and involving diverse, geographically scattered personnel and programs can be particularly difficult. Yet the process described here has allowed the OEF group to focus and mobilize limited resources toward projects that have high priority and impact. The clear targets and commitments have greatly helped us achieve a notable quality and quantity of group outputs, which clearly exceed those produced before the process was used. Examples of specific outputs include a detailed curriculum for woodland owners (Garland, 1986), the *Woodland Workbook* series of over 60 publications (Elwood and Adams, 1989), and an intensive "Master Woodland Manager" training program for more than 100 volunteers throughout Oregon. Although formal evaluations of these specific group efforts have yet to be completed, initial results are highly positive, and their overall value and impact are widely recognized among woodland owners and forestry professionals in the Pacific Northwest.

The planning process and related group project activities have also fostered OEF faculty communication, team building, and leadership development. This has been particularly valuable in strengthening relationships and mutual respect between county and campus faculty. Project leaders and teams emerge and effectively function with few ego or interpersonal problems. Another revealing outcome has been a major change in attitudes and expectations about planning among our faculty, i.e., from skepticism and discouragement to a very positive, can-

do outlook. Because of the overall success with our group planning process, other program areas and administrators of the Oregon State University Extension Service have studied it and applied elements of the process to their own planning activities. Recent successes from the use of a very similar planning process in industry (Hardaker and Ward, 1987) support an expectation of comparable benefits from these wider applications.

Planning Horizons, Flexibility, and Coordination

The planning process and cycle discussed here have been applied primarily to relatively short-term (i.e., tactical) extension program planning. Long-term, strategic planning is an equally important activity for extension and other group educational efforts. The very nature of education represents an extended, building process that is responsive to the evolving needs of individuals. A curriculum or hierarchy of learning can provide a very useful framework for planning a long-term educational strategy (Garland, 1986). Likewise, an understanding of the fundamental nature and evolutionary phases of major driving issues (Dalgaard et al., 1988) can help structure strategic planning activities.

Although we have described the OEF planning process as a relatively fixed entity, it is instead the product of many years of refinement, and it continues to evolve in response to changing needs. For example, we recently adapted and tested various elements of the process to develop our new 4-yr program plans, an activity of the national planning effort of the Cooperative Extension Service. We believe that any planning process will be most effective if it provides general structure, yet remains inherently flexible. Moreover, different situations may call for not just a flexible process, but for an entirely different overall planning approach (Bruce, 1964). Awareness of the wide range of potential influences on program planning can be very useful in evaluating planning approaches for extension (Scholl, 1989).

Finally, it is important to emphasize the value of linkages and coordination among program planning efforts to address common concerns. The growing technical and social scope of current forestry issues suggests a strong need for coordinated planning of forestry research, education, and assistance programs. Similarly, the concept of issues programming in extension education stresses the value of interdisciplinary efforts and teamwork to effectively deal with the complex problems of contemporary society (Dalgaard et al., 1988).

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