Survival Tips for Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Educators

Here are some ideas to help you be successful in your career as a professional Extension Educator.

- **Learn from your mentor and others.**
  - Make good Extension friends to laugh with, share with, ask for input from and give you a neutral perspective.
  - Use the wisdom of the support staff and coworkers who have been around.

- **Be a team player.**
  - Learn how to get along with co-workers.
  - Appreciate your co-workers for their strengths and value them for who they are. Don’t be afraid to ask them to share their expertise.
  - Recognize your own strengths and weaknesses and how you can best contribute to the team.
  - Develop a mutual respect with your support staff – they can make you look really good or really bad.
  - Get to know your Extension Program Advisory Committee, County Commissioners, Excise Board Members and other leaders in your programs by:
    - taking time to meet with them individually
    - asking what they think are the top 2 or 3 most important things that you should address.
  - Expect to have lots of bosses (i.e. the County Commissioners Excise Board and Extension Advisory Committees, co-workers, district directors and clientele). They all think they know what you’re supposed to be doing.
  - Develop allies – those people who will go to bat for you on controversial issues or in a crisis.

- **Get to know your county – the people and communities and their customs (norms). Get to know the courthouse culture too.**
  - Respect the “norms” of the county/district.
  - Be visible. Meet people in your county.
Respect the diversity of people’s ideas, opinions and cultures.

Effective educators interact with lots of people, yet they recognize that it is impossible to please everyone all the time.

- **Build relationships.**
  - Seek out others’ opinions.
  - Listen and don’t judge others.
  - Avoid making negative comments about anyone – it may come back to haunt you.
  - Keep others informed – make sure people know what you are doing and why you are doing it.
  - Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
  - Make connections with the local media – gain their trust as a source of unbiased, factual information.
  - LISTEN to the public and decisions makers for program ideas. Don’t just work on your “pet” projects.

- **Always be prepared!**
  - Adequately prepare for presentations.
  - Always carry extra supplies and an extension cord for your projector when going somewhere to make a presentation.
  - You don’t need to be an expert – just know where to find the answers!

- **Choose your battles wisely.**
  - Don’t make big changes in the program until you get a feel for the current program – listen and learn.
  - Ask people what the needs are in the county. Identify a significant program need and begin working on it.
  - Don’t over react to situations that arise.
  - Recognize that there are times of the year that are more stressful than others and develop a plan to handle difficult situations that may happen.
  - Avoid the phrase, “we did it this way in “XYZ” county, district or state.”

- **Set priorities and learn to manage your time.**
  - Take time for yourself to manage your time. Schedule it on your calendar so you don’t overbook. Have a life outside of Extension.
  - Night meetings and weekend training sessions are on-going demands on Extension work; however, successful educators find a balance between work and personal time.
  - Learn to prioritize: meet deadlines and return calls/e-mails to show you are responsible.
- Be on time for appointments and meetings.
- Look at the big picture and don’t be afraid to cut programs that no longer fit.

- **Be accountable.**
  - Use public resources carefully. Maintain a high ethical standard with resources such as travel and maintenance/operation accounts and use of equipment and clarify the difference between what’s job related and what’s personal.

- **Be loyal to the organization.**
  - Actively promote Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and Oklahoma State University. Get involved in the organization – committees, professional associations, etc.
  - Keep internal conflicts internal. Never desert or criticize the organization externally.
  - Remember who signs your pay check. The funding sources for your programs have, and deserve, the right to have input into your work and how you do it.
  - Get to know the university, Extension organization, and “campus” culture.
  - Follow the few rules we do have in Extension (i.e., submitting travel expenses, monthly PAR’s, etc.)
  - Take advantage of the “perks” that support your professional improvement opportunities, vacation, etc.
  - Expect change! Pay attention and know what is going on in the organization.

- **People are the reason you have a job…enjoy them as you help them.**
  - Give more than your fair share. Don’t be afraid to do “grunt work” such as scrubbing the concession stand floor WITH your volunteers. Work with people side by side.

- **Remember you are a professional.**
  - Dress appropriately.
  - Extension educators are visible to the public both on and off the job.
  - Maintain sound ethics and behavior both inside and outside the workplace.
  - We are role models whether we like it or not.

*Adapted from a tip sheet developed by the Minnesota Association of Extension Educators.*