**The role and duties of extension workers;**

There are no models of an agent's role which are applicable to all situations. An agent must consider each situation individually and adopt a position or role suitable to that situation.

Indeed, there is a wide variety of views on the extension agent's role in bringing about change among farmers. To illustrate this range of views, a number of different statements on the agent's role, taken from extension practice from different parts of the world, can be examined.

- An extension agent tries to arouse people to recognize and take an interest in their problems, to overcome these problems, to teach them how to do so, to persuade them to act on his teaching, so that they ultimately achieve a sense of satisfaction and pride in their achievements.  
- A change agent is a person whose primary role is to achieve a transformation of attitudes, behaviour and social organization.  
- Change agents are multi-purpose agents serving as links between government and people.  
- A change agent is a person who sets in motion a process of change after realizing that certain changes are necessary for the rural society.  
- A change agent is an activist whose main role is to help people form their own organizations in order to be able to tackle their problems.  
- A change agent is a professional who influences the innovation/decision-making process in a direction deemed desirable by the change agency.

The above statements capture the flavour of the wide-ranging views that exist on the role of the extension or change agent. It is not suggested that any one statement is more valid or important than the rest. They are merely presented to show the complexities of the agent's role and to stress the need for very careful thought by the agent before embarking upon a process of change.

However, a lot of the ideas about the agent's role can be assembled into two very broad categories. The agent can be seen as having two main, but different, areas of responsibility.

**Knowledge/communication/innovation**

The extension agent is responsible for providing the knowledge and information that will enable a farmer to understand and make a decision about a particular innovation, and then for communicating that knowledge to the farmer. In this role, the agent is seen as a vehicle of knowledge, usually of a technical nature, and as a teacher who instructs farmers in the use of this knowledge. The agent is formally trained for this position and is provided with the technical knowledge and information which he must then communicate to the farmers. In this role, the agent's work is usually highly structured and based on existing government policies and programmes of rural development.

**Educator/facilitator/catalyst**

In the role of educator, facilitator or catalyst, which the agent may need to perform in the course of his duties, the agent is associated less with the knowledge/communication aspect and more with the farmers' personal development. The agent is less concerned with specific programmes or targets and more with helping the farmers to gain confidence, to organize themselves and to begin to get involved in extension activities. The agent's role is essentially to help support and actively encourage farmers to develop their own initiatives and to begin to tackle their own problems.

This discussion can be summarized by listing the wide range of key words used in extension throughout the world to describe the role of the extension agent. The list is not intended to suggest that the agent must be all of these things. It does, however, underline the agent's importance in extension practice throughout the world, and the many-faceted interpretation of this role:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Teacher | Facilitator | Organizer | Arbitrator |
| Educator | Broker | Administrator | Advocate |
| Leader | Consultant | Enabler | Catalyst |
| Communicator | Intermediary | Activist | Friend |
| Motivator | Listener | Provider | Stimulator |

The above list shows us the diversity of roles an agent can assume, but he must always be aware that the most important thing is to study the situation, analyse the problems and adopt a position which is relevant to solving those particular problems. Thought must be given to this, and an agent must never simply plunge into a situation without thinking carefully how he may best help to change it.

**Knowledge and personal skills**

Two other important issues are the types of knowledge that an agent must have, and the personal skills required of him to do his job effectively. Again, in extension practice throughout the world, there is considerable diversity on these two issues, reflecting the variety of situations in which agents work. How the knowledge and personal skills required by the agent are influenced by the role the agent performs will be considered.

**Knowledge**

Four main areas of knowledge are important for the extension agent and form the basis of extension training.

*Technical*. The agent must be adequately trained in the technical aspects of his work and have a good working knowledge of the main elements of the agricultural system in which he is working.

*Rural life*. This includes anthropological and sociological studies of the rural area where he is working, local traditions, practices, culture and values.

*Policy.* The agent should be familiar with the main legislation of government or other institutional policies which affect the rural areas, development programmes, credit programmes, and bureaucratic and administrative procedures.

*Adult education.* Since extension is an educational process, the agent must be familiar with the main approaches to adult education and group dynamics? and with the techniques of developing farmer participation in extension activities.

It should be noted that these four areas of knowledge can be dealt with by a training programme, when the agent can be provided with the detailed information available in the four areas.

**Personal skills**

It is more difficult to determine the personal skills required of the agent for extension work, and to train the agent in these skills. The area of personal skills is less easily covered by means of specific knowledge and information and often refers to skills that an agent either has or has not. A vast range of such skills has been suggested; however, these have been grouped together to present a list of the main areas of skills required of an extension agent.

*Organization and planning*. The extension agent must be able to plan extension work, to organize its implementation and generally to manage and effectively control an extension office and its activities.

*Communication.* An extension agent must above all be a communicator, both verbally and non-verbally, and this skill is the basis of all extension activity.

*Analysis and diagnosis.* The extension agent must be able to examine situations which confront him, recognize and understand the problems that exist and propose courses of action.

*Leadership.* The extension agent should inspire confidence and trust in the farmers he serves, set them an example and take the lead in initiating activities.

*Initiative.* The extension agent may often have to work in isolation and unsupervised. He must have the initiative and confidence to do so without depending upon guidance and support from his superiors.

**Personal qualities**

The personal qualities required by a good extension worker are often discussed. These qualities are more difficult to define but, nevertheless, they are qualities to look for when selecting extension agents. Some of the qualities suggested are personal characteristics, and it is important to assess whether an agent possesses them before appointing him to an extension post. The personal qualities required in an extension agent include:

- Commitment to extension work and to working, at times, in isolated rural areas, with a sense of dedication and determination to get some extension activities under way.  
- Reliability, both in terms of carrying out extension work and also in relations with farmers. An extension worker's superior officers must be able to rely on him to carry out his tasks without close supervision, and the local farmers must come to have confidence in his advice and support.  
- Humility in his work with the farmers. The agent must be sensitive to the wishes and feelings of the farmers and work with them in a way that respects them as people who have knowledge and ideas to contribute.  
- Confidence in his own abilities and determination to achieve something. An extension agent is often left to work in isolation with little supervision and needs self-confidence and courage to do so.

The above areas of knowledge, personal skills and qualities are not exhaustive. They are not presented as a check-list against which to judge the competence of an individual to do extension work, but to show the very demanding nature of the work and to act as a guide when selecting and training extension agents.

**Public speaking**

Public speaking is a skill which the agent will be called upon to practice frequently. A principal task of the agent is communication; this inevitably involves public speaking to explain a new idea, conduct a demonstration or generally take part in a community discussion.

Speaking in public is a very useful and effective form of communication, if done competently. A public speech gives the extension agent an opportunity to demonstrate his enthusiasm and technical knowledge. Some people are natural public speakers and easily and competently arrange their material and present it in a way which is both interesting and intelligible to the audience. On the other hand, if an extension agent is poorly prepared to give his speech and delivers it badly in an uncomfortable situation, then his efforts could be counterproductive.

Public speaking represents an important aspect of an extension agent's work and one which he can use to great advantage if he prepares well. Most importantly, a talk must flow well and give the impression of being well-thought-out. There is nothing mote off-putting for an audience than a speaker who fumbles his notes, forgets basic facts or talks too long. A well-prepared and delivered extension talk can make a considerable impression upon farmers and build up confidence in the extension agent.

While not all agents will have the same natural ability to speak publicly, there is much that an agent can do to improve his performance.

[**Public speaking is an important part of extension work**](http://www.fao.org/3/t0060e/T0060E0A.GIF)

Most agents will be able to develop a good approach to public speaking with application and practice. The points listed below are a useful guide to public speaking for the extension agent.

**Preparation**

As with all extension activities, the agent must prepare himself beforehand for a public speaking engagement, no matter how unimportant the event may seem. This preparation includes checking the facts, figures and other information to be included in the presentation, organizing the material in a logical manner and preparing any supporting audiovisual material. It is also useful to check the place where the talk is to be given and to take into consideration the interests, needs and knowledge of the expected audience.

Some agents find it useful to rehearse the talk beforehand, or at least the main points. The agent should not try to memorize the whole talk; instead, he should write the main items in order for reference in large print on paper or on small cards. Another technique is to note the main points on an overhead projector sheet which can be uncovered step by step as the speech progresses. This serves a dual purpose: helping the agent in the presentation and providing a summary of the main topics for the audience.

**Content**

Great care should be taken with the content of a talk, both in terms of the words and expressions used and also in the logical sequence of what is to be said. The subject of the talk should be introduced and a general outline of the subject given. The main body of the talk should contain the key points that the agent wishes to make. He should not put too much content into a talk; a short, concise and well-thought-out talk will have far more effect than a lengthy, rambling presentation.

It is also important to take some care in the use of words and expressions and to adapt these, where possible, to the local context. Similarly, it is important to avoid the use of over-complex technical language or jargon, which might confuse the audience.

**Delivery**

This is the most critical part of public speaking and demands much care and attention. Confidence is very important in delivery. If an agent knows what he wants to say, prepares himself and says it clearly and effectively, he will probably give a good talk. It is useful to develop a friendly style and to talk to or with an audience, and not at them. Under no circumstances should an agent underestimate the intelligence of farmers and talk down to them.

During a talk, posture and body movement are important. Excessive fidgeting, gesticulating or other theatrical gestures can often distract listeners, although some gestures can be used effectively to emphasize a particular point. The agent should continually observe the faces of his audience and take note of signs of interest, boredom or disapproval. A talk should be a two-way communication process in that the agent should be sensitive to the effect he is producing and be prepared to react positively.

The agent should always ensure that his voice is loud and clear enough for all those present to hear. He should try not to be nervous, and should not apologize in advance for any shortcomings. A positive attitude to the delivery of a talk is very important.

Finally, the talk should be relatively short, about 15-20 minutes. Farmers will probably be unwilling to concentrate for longer than that, so the content should be restricted to the time available.

**Questions and discussion**

The audience should be told beforehand about a question and discussion period at the end of the talk, so it has time to prepare itself accordingly. The agent should encourage the audience to raise points, and be prepared to stimulate a discussion. A question and answer session alone should be avoided as this will discourage genuine dialogue and reduce the educational purpose of the talk. Moreover, the discussion should not drag on for too long, or be dominated by just a few farmers. It is also acceptable for the agent to direct questions to the audience in an effort to stimulate a two-way discussion.

**Report writing**

Extension agents are regularly called upon to write reports; indeed, a very common and serious constraint upon an extension agent's work is the frequency and number of reports which he will have to prepare. Invariably, these reports are demanded by an agent's superior and they can often take up a lot of time. Report writing is an important aspect of extension work and should be undertaken responsibly by the agent, but he should do all he can to avoid being overwhelmed by such reports or allowing the demands of report writing to interfere with practical extension work.

Like public speaking, report writing is a skill that the extension agent can develop and put to good use. As a guide to writing a report, the following are a few general hints to bear in mind.

***Ensure*** that all the information and data which will go into the report are available and readily at hand.  
***Plan*** the report beforehand and decide upon its general content, format and style of presentation.  
***Structure*** the content in a logical order, introducing the purpose of the report, followed by the main substance, and then some concluding remarks.  
***Keep*** it brief! At whatever level the agent is operating, a brief, concise and well-structured report is far more useful and effective than a lengthy, rambling one.  
***Check*** over the report, once written, and ensure that the final version is clear, neat and easy to read.

An extension agent who can easily and quickly structure his report-writing duties will get through them with much less bother than the disorganized agent who prepares and writes his report as he goes along. Report writing can be time-consuming, and the extension agent will want to minimize the time spent on this bureaucratic responsibility.

**The use of local leaders**

A good extension agent will always try to enlist the support of local farmers in his extension work. In any extension organization, there will be only a small number of trained, professional extension agents within any one region, with responsibility for thousands of farming families. The solution is for extension agents to seek out and enlist the support of local people who have leadership qualities or influence within the area.

Local leaders can be of invaluable assistance to an extension agent in a number of ways. They can assume responsibility for certain activities in the agent's absence; help to organize local extension groups; assist directly in the spread of new ideas and practices by demostrating them in their fields; and generally serve as a point of contact between the agent and the farmers. By enlisting their help, the extension agent will have a chance to reach far more farmers than he could on his own. Working with local leaders also builds closer ties with local farmers, and encourages farmers' confidence in the extension service and their willingness to participate in extension activities.

**Formal and informal local leaders**

Extension agents will work locally with both formal and informal leaders. In Chapter 3, formal leaders were described as local people who hold some kind of formal position within the bureaucratic and administrative structure. Such leaders can include representatives or agents of government ministries; traditional chiefs or headmen; teachers; religious leaders; political officials; and officials of local institutions (e.g., cooperatives). The extension agent should try to interest such formal leaders in his activities and discuss appropriate parts of his work with them. If he can enlist their general support for his programme, then his extension activities in the area will have a firm basis. Certainly the extension agent should invite these formal leaders to extension meetings or other public extension activities.

When carrying out his extension programme and activities in the field, the extension agent will work with local informal leaders. Informal leaders are farmers, prominent in their area, who show the qualities and abilities which can be of use to an extension agent. Informal leaders will exist in a rural area, and by careful inquiry and observation, the extension agent should be able to identify them. Often, by talking to other farmers and asking whom they see as the natural leaders in the area, the agent will be able to identify the key farmers whose support will be invaluable in promoting extension activities.

**Selection of local leaders**

Extension experience in different parts of the world has suggested the kinds of qualities and characteristics that the agent should look for in farmers who might be good local leaders. Clearly, an extension agent should not hastily invite a local farmer to become a leader of extension activities. He must give some thought to his choice. The following two lists are examples of the qualities to look for in local leaders.

1. Initiative to take the lead and give confidence to others. Intellect to understand issues and identify problems. Industry and energy, to work unselfishly with other farmers. Influence over others, and the ability to persuade and teach. Integrity and a sense of responsibility.  
2. Experience in farming and modern agricultural practices. Educated and literate. Reliable and a regular attender of extension functions. Innovative and willing to try out new ideas. Trusted and liked by his fellow farmers.

The above lists are not meant as check-lists but do indicate the importance of selection, and the care that the agent must give to determining the qualities he feels are important. He must then seek out those farmers in his area who match the qualities.

**Working with local leaders**

The extension agent should take great care to develop the qualities mentioned above. His own relationship with local leaders will also be important and he should always try to be available to support and encourage their work. There are four main aspects of working with local leaders which the agent should keep in mind.

**Inform** local leaders of extension activities and proposals for new programmes, and keep them supplied with extension literature.  
**Visit** them as often as is necessary - enough to ensure that they are not isolated or left on their own. Try to make the visits regular so that the leader can build them into his own work routine.  
**Train** the local leaders in the aspects of extension activities with which they may be unfamiliar; formal training sessions can be set up at which the leaders will learn about a new practice, how to run a demonstration or how to hold a farmers' meeting.  
**Encourage** local leaders to take the initiative and to begin to act with some independence. The more they can become recognized and effective, the better chance the extension agent will have of making an impact in the area.

An extension agent who has the use of the services of a group of good, efficient local leaders has a tremendous additional resource at his disposal and will be in a far better position to get extension work going in that area than if he had to work alone and unsupported.

**Problems of working with local leaders**

While working with local leaders can be of great benefit to the extension service, there are a number of potential problems the agent should be aware of. The agent should keep a watchful eye both on his own relationship with the local leaders and also on the performance of the leaders at field level. If the leaders are carefully selected and supervised, few difficulties will arise; yet it would be wise for the extension agent to keep a watch out for the following potential problems.

- If the agent spends too much time or concentrates a lot of effort on one or more of the local leaders, then the issue of favouritism may arise.  
- The local leaders function as contact farmers who are expected to pass on the knowledge they have received from the agent. This flow of knowledge from the leader to the other farmers does not always work and the agent should pay particular attention to seeing that it does. If the leader is not functioning as a contact farmer, then the agent will need to investigate the reasons why.  
- Some local leaders may become overconfident and domineering, and use their favoured position with the extension agent for their own individual gain.  
- Some local leaders may be less capable than others and may make mistakes and give wrong advice to their fellow farmers. The agent should always ensure that a leader is well prepared before giving him responsibility for extension activities.

The above examples of working with local leaders are included, not to suggest that they will always occur but to remind the extension agent to keep a watchful eye on his use of local leaders and to be ready to respond to such problems if they do arise.

The extension agent is the key element in the whole extension process; without an agent in the field to guide, direct and supervise local extension activities, there would be no extension service available to farmers. The agent's role and relationship with the farmers are the critical aspects of this process and things cannot always be expected to go smoothly.

Extension experience in different parts of the world has stressed the agent's central importance and has highlighted a number of features which distinguish an effective extension agent from a less effective one. An effective agent:

- spends time in developing the skills and attributes of the farmers themselves, and does not merely concentrate on extension projects;  
- gets out to visit and meet farmers and does not become an office bureaucrat;  
- encourages local initiative and self-reliance and does not adopt a paternalistic attitude toward farmers;  
- plans for the long term development of his area, and does not only seek quick results.

Again, the above are suggested as examples of issues that may arise in any extension area. In practice, most extension agents are committed people, working under difficult conditions, often with little support. The work of an extension agent demands the particular qualities of dedication, humility and hard work, and extension services should ensure that an agent is thoroughly prepared before he begins his extension activities.