

THE COMPETENCIES OF ADVISORS; THE RESULT OF A LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract

The task of extension and dissemination of information for agricultural production in the new economic conditions of a market economy is governed by the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (MA CR). The professional education of advisors is a compulsory condition for the use of governmental subsidies for their services. There is a two year transitional period for obtaining, or the completion of, this qualification. Compulsory education will be followed by the anticipated accreditation, which is valid for a period of 5 years. The initial course to obtain certification as an advisor has two parts: technical updating and methodological training. The first one is organized and provided by national or foreign specialists. Methodological training is the task of the Department of Education (DoE) of the Czech University of Agriculture (CUA). CUA runs several-day courses on the Pedagogical-psychological bases of advisory work. The paper analyses three aspects of the course:

1. Methodological tools of extension work. This is focused on the meaning, importance and aims of advisory work; the structure of the system to transfer knowledge; and the main methods and forms of extension work.
2. Psychological bases of effective communication and the problems of stress. This analyses personal factors in interactions with clients; the management of strategic behaviour and assertive behaviour; the management and control of conflict situations.
3. Communication and presentation skills. This develops the means of communication, verbal and nonverbal; methods for communication with clients face-to-face and also indirectly; information and communication technology (ICT) including electronic.

The courses are managed as workshops after short introductions, followed by practical training. Conduct of the workshops, methodological approaches, and work with audio-visual devices are analysed in the paper. The experience of lecturers, and the results of feedback and evaluation of the courses by participants, are also discussed.

Key words: learning process, extension education, competencies, communication skills

Introduction

Extension and dissemination of information for agricultural production operate under the relatively new economic conditions of a market economy. Structural change in the early 1990 s, by farm restitution to a private sector, created many 'new' farmers with holdings averaging 30 – 40 ha, and new cooperatives under private management. The previous linkages between state farms and research institutes no longer existed. Decision – making in agriculture became the responsibility of large numbers of farmer entrepreneurs and managers. Whilst a supply of information cannot guarantee good decisions, it is difficult to see how farming can develop rationally and efficiently without easy access by farmers to innovative and reliable information and advice. Arrangements for an information system are the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic (MA CR). Despite serious long-term efforts aimed at the development of a uniform system no decision has yet been made to establish one state-controlled system. An alternative seems to be feasible through

the training and education of advisors to work with farmers in various ways. Here, the state (through the agency of MA CR) assumes the responsibility for a system of education leading to accreditation as a qualification, and a prerequisite for granting the status and competence of **advisor** as a professional.

The state budget reserves funds for MA CR to have at its disposal the financial means to support agricultural extension and the development of the information system. Within its agrarian policy, MA CR sets priorities for where the funds may be used in the form of grants. The priority determined for the forthcoming period is for an economic and business advisory service to include decision-making processes, economic corporate analyses, the preparation of business plans and financial analyses. Separate provision is made for state-subsidised programmes of sustainable rural development and environment management.

At present, agricultural extension is offered and provided by:

- private individual consultants
- commercial companies
- service organisations (commodity units, communities, associations)
- secondary agricultural schools
- universities of agriculture
- research institutes

The system is open, and is gradually developing towards an expected stabilisation. Until 1999, only 20 – 40 individuals stated the profession of advisor as the major and decisive source of their income. In the majority of other cases, advisory activities were provided by individuals as a supplementary service to their other activities (agricultural research, education, administration) or as a support to their business and other service activities.

1. Education of advisors in Czech Republic

The profession of advisor came into being in the new conditions of Czech agriculture and agribusiness after 1990, and with later cooperation with some West European countries and American universities to assist the development of a new agricultural extension. This has lately changed its focus. It is now linked to advisory services for rural development and for issues of public interest. The conditions for funding have also changed. All these facts have to be taken into account and reflected in the system of training and education of advisors.

1.1. Focus in 2000

The target group for training comprised all advisors in the extension system of MA CR, i.e. **state advisors** of the MA advisory network and **private advisors** in the MA Register of those incorporated in the supporting programme of advisory groups.

The basic course for advisors in the state network lasted seven weeks and dealt with the analysis and optimisation of the economy of agricultural enterprises. Another upgrade course for state advisors was organised in five-week sessions. 35 advisors of the state advisory network completed their training. After the conclusion of the course they prepared a development project and passed on oral examination in the form of an interview.

For the advisors registered at MA CR, courses dealt with the following issues:

- creation of projects according to EU rules
- communication skills and psychology of work
- special innovation courses according to agricultural specialisation

The training was completed by a knowledge test. 201 of the 203 participants passed successfully and received certificates in the following specialisations:

Protection of plants	29
Technology of plant production and plant nutrition	32

Plant nutrition	27
Animal nutrition	30
Ecological agriculture	56
Economy and management	27

1.2. Focus in 2001

The education of advisors in 2001 largely made use of internet and its services. It was obligatory for the advisors active in the advisory groups (approximately 160) to participate in the training. Research institutes, universities of agriculture and other organisations were invited to develop educational courses for offer on line to advisors on web pages of Agricultural and Food Information (Zemědělské a potravinářské informace - ZPI). Provision of the courses is according to interest. Eighteen courses were offered, and 9 of them started. For information on the courses organised, see internet (www.agronavigator.cz/poradenství) in the registered part for advisors. Access rights were sent to all advisors in the MA Register (approximately 500) by letter, together with a CD ROM containing comprehensive information for the advisors. Participation in courses is open, however, at full price. Courses for advisors active in advisory groups receive 90 % funding MA CR. Courses for state advisors have been prepared by the Research Institute for Plant Production in Prague and Brno.

The system of education for advisors will be followed by the **accreditation of advisors**. This is being prepared by MA CR in cooperation with universities of agriculture and some research institutes. The content, scope, form and legal basis are under discussion. The plan includes preparation of a project, a written knowledge test and an interview. Successful graduates will be accredited with the certificate of **Advisor for**

The process of accreditation of advisors is expected to come into effect from 1 January 2002.

2. Experience of the Czech University of Agriculture (CUA) in the education of advisors

Working as advisors in the Czech Republic are employees of private advisory companies, companies of services for farmers, research institutes, breeding stations, university staff and other specialists. They have different levels of education, different specialisations and are of different ages. Therefore, the management of courses is highly demanding and complicated.

Preparatory courses for obtaining the certificate of an advisor consist of two components: technical updating and methodological training. Training in *technical updating* is organised according to subject specialisation by both national and foreign experts. The main organiser of the *methodological training* is the Czech University of Agriculture in Prague (CUA), Department of Education, which organises several-day courses on *Pedagogical-psychological bases of advisory work*.

Training for advisors depends for its success on very close collaboration and consultation between the University (CUA) provider and the MA CR and trainees as requesters. Planning the courses was an iterative process during several years of establishing contacts and rapport between the University and MA CR, and especially between the actual trainers and officials involved. This included collaboration in three research studies to analyse the kinds of information and advice actually needed by farmers of various categories, and the actual sources being used by farmers. The staff of the Department of Education CUA were able to bring considerable experience of success in training for teachers to bear on the problem of training advisors. They also had access to high quality educational technology for use in the courses. The participative nature of the training courses made it possible to remain flexible and responsive to needs expressed whilst the courses were actually in progress. It is also significant that the staff involved in both MA CR and CUA had made substantial study of

similar training courses conducted in other European countries, and were able to apply some of this experience in the Czech Republic. A literature base on Extension is also gradually being organised in MA CR and CUA, as a resource for trainers and trainees. The collaboration described above applies to both cooperative MA CR and CUA and single agency training courses. It is stressed that this must be an on-going process if new roles for advisors, and rising levels of competency, are to be adequately reflected in the provision of training. Course content has to be a mix between what experience shows is needed and what can realistically be offered.

The courses have the following three parts:

a) *Methodological tools of extension work*

This presents to the participants the structure of the system of transfer for research findings and innovative ways of thinking, and information about the methods and forms for use in advisory activities. Participants discuss cases when it is suitable to use particular methods. They considered it useful to make clear the differences between the basic methods such as lecture, explanation, discussion and debate. Training in various types of discussion proved particularly interesting and purposeful. The forms of advisory work such as individual consultations, work within a group, and work with groups were practiced.

b) *Psychological training*

This training was based on the analysis of personality factors, the typology of personalities of clients and ways of working with them. Participants considered that understanding assertive behaviour, and avoiding and managing conflict situations were very useful. Most participants found quite new the course content relating to stress, its types, the analysis of stress factors, prevention of stress and how to work under stress.

c) *Communicative and presentation skills*

The third, final part of the methodological training dealt mainly with practising communication and presentation skills. It was evident that in spite of the fact that the participants (specialists in their fields) often presented specialised papers to the public, most had received no previous training in rhetoric skills or the targeted use of non-verbal means of communication. For many, the terms proxemics, posturology, kinesics or gestic and their use in communication were quite new.

2.1. Training methodology and procedures

The basic method used was the role play method with subsequent analysis and discussion.

The methodological procedure was as follows:

- Communication of the objectives, basic applied concepts and the possibility of their application.
- Individual assignment of simulated situations such as a telephone call with a client on a current topic, offer of one's own advisory service, or solving a conflict situation (the client did not pay for the provided advisory services...), or explaining to the client the benefits of integration into a state program.
- Simulation of the assigned situations when participants presented 5-7 (maximum 10) minutes from the presentation they had prepared. The micro-presentations were recorded by video camera. Other participants were either directly involved in the role play, or observed it.
- Analysis and discussion of micro-presentations, assessing the speech skills of advisors, their non-verbal communication, respecting of psychological laws in the approach to the client and fulfilment of the assigned objective.

Analysis was carried out in the following steps:

- Opinions of other participants on the respective micro-presentation
- Statement of the lecturer

- Projection of the video record and verification of the facts discussed
- Statement of the main participant on the presentation, and comments
- Final assessment, generalising the principles of communication and presentation

Initially, the prepared methodological procedure received different responses from different groups, starting with an initial refusal to act, followed by reservation up to willingness to cooperate. It was the task for lecturers to attract the participants to the prepared methodological procedure. However, after the first micro-presentation and its evaluation, the situation changed considerably in favour of a cooperative and active approach. The participants have found that the training is very efficient, useful and instructive and that they have a unique opportunity to see themselves working, albeit in a simulated situation. They have also found that their competencies for advisory work may be considerably improved.

3.2. Evaluation of the training methodology of the course for advisors

More comprehensive conclusions were made after evaluation of the results of questionnaires distributed after the completion of courses by MA staff. Participants evaluated the course as a whole, and responded to questionnaires, which were distributed in order to identify the efficiency of the part of the course dealing with the methodological training of advisors. Some findings from the feedback are shown below:

- When answering the question in the MA questionnaire if the course was useful, the respondents had at their disposal the following scale ‘very useful’, ‘useful’, ‘not very useful’, ‘unnecessary’. The answers were **94 %** very useful and **6 %** useful.
- Answers to the question (on the methodological part of the course) whether ‘this part has met your expectations from the viewpoint of the transfer of the acquired knowledge to practice’ were **100 %** yes.
- Answers to the question ‘which topics attracted you and why?’ clearly showed that the participants were attracted most by psychological topics and training in communication and presentation skills. None of the included topics was placed in the category of ‘unnecessary’.
- As answers to the question ‘how did the used methods and forms of instruction suit you?’, 100 % of participants appreciated ‘that they could see themselves’. For most of them, this was for the first time in their lives.

Conclusions

Based on the experience acquired in the training of advisors for agricultural and rural extension in the Czech Republic the following conclusions can be stated:

- The MA CR concept of the education of advisors has proved useful, mainly from the viewpoint of improved quality of the advisory service in the public interest, and also in the activities of advisors in general.
- Advisors who have obtained the certificate are seen to be highly qualified specialists in the field in which they provide the advisory service.
- Advisors are willing to undergo further training, albeit highly demanding in the forms, methods and content presented to them.
- Advisors are willing to get acquainted with new findings in their respective fields of specialisation. They also have an active approach to widening their competencies in the field of the methodology of advisory work and the ways of presenting information.

- Universities have a role in the training of advisors both in the vocational and methodological parts of the training.

When considering the necessary, but sometimes also hasty tendency for changes and development in farming, it is essential to carry them out decidedly but thoughtfully and responsibly, making good use of information and advice. The remedy of wrong decisions in agriculture often lasts for several vegetation or reproduction cycles; in education it may take whole generations. One has to take risk carefully into account when applying anything new, or when, on the other hand, rigidly persisting in what becomes out-of-date and anachronistic. A well-educated person should be able to cope with change, especially if helped by a well – educated advisor.

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