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## Extension Through a New Lens: Creativity and Innovation Now and for the Future

Karen Argabright

*The Ohio State University*, [argabright.2@osu.edu](mailto:argabright.2@osu.edu)

Jerry McGuire

*The Ohio State University*, [mcguire.239@osu.edu](mailto:mcguire.239@osu.edu)

Jeff King

*The Ohio State University*, [king.20@osu.edu](mailto:king.20@osu.edu)



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# **Extension Through a New Lens: Creativity and Innovation Now and for the Future**

**Karen Argabright**

Graduate Associate

[argabright.2@osu.edu](mailto:argabright.2@osu.edu)

**Jerry McGuire**

Graduate Associate

[mcguire.239@osu.edu](mailto:mcguire.239@osu.edu)

**Jeff King**

Director, OSU Leadership Center & Associate Professor

[king.20@osu.edu](mailto:king.20@osu.edu)

The Ohio State University

Columbus, Ohio

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**Abstract:** "How can Extension thrive, not just survive?" This question, posited by the 2010 Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (p.1), echoes the literature addressing change within Extension. In this literature, prominent themes emerge reflecting the need for an organizational cultural transformation, aligned with an opportunity for creativity and innovation. Today's rapidly changing social and economic environments oblige Extension to re-conceive the future through creative thinking and innovative action to reduce barriers to success. Embracing the process of creativity and innovation in our everyday organizational practice will unlock a vast number of new opportunities for Extension.

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## **Introduction**

"How can Extension thrive, not just survive?" This question, posited by the 2010 Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (p.1), echoes the literature addressing change within Extension. Patton (1987), in *The Extension Organization of the Future*, outlined changes needed for

Extension to move from an industrial, through informational, to a knowledgeable organization. Patton (1987) added "...forces moving Extension from an organization of the past to an organization of the future are more fundamental than financial ..." (p. 1). An organization's culture determines an organization's success (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

The need for an organizational culture transformation, aligned with an opportunity for creativity and innovation, have been prominent themes within Extension literature for several decades (Astroth, Goodwin, & Hodnett, 2011; Bloir & King, 2010; Buchanan, 1993; Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2010; King & Boehlje, 2000; Patton M. Q., 1987; Patton M. , 1987; Smith,K.,1988; Smith,K.,1990; West, Drake, & Londo, 2009). Through the creative thinking and innovation of Extension's leaders, a cultural shift will be allowed, guaranteeing Extension's future success.

## **Creativity Defined**

Innovation and creativity have been used synonymously in the literature; however, these concepts are also complimentary (Martins & Terblanche, 2003) because creativity is the foundation on which innovation relies (Mumford, Hunter, & Byrne, 2009; Steiner, 2009). Broadly defined, creativity is "the nature of thought processes and intellectual activity used to generate new insights or solutions to problems" (Mumford, Hunter, & Byrne, 2009, p. 67). Creativity is identifying the unknown, seeking clarity, and challenging our habits, behaviors, and traditions. Ultimately, creativity is a different way of thinking and being (Linkner, 2011).

## **Innovation Defined**

Innovation is applied creativity, (Weiss & Legrand, 2011) where new ideas are implemented, adapted, transferred, and used to improve social and economic conditions (Rivera & Sulaiman, 2009). Innovation is both a process and an outcome (Weiss & Legrand, 2011). Innovation as a process, the strategic implementation of creative ideas, can affect all aspects of organizational practice, (Weiss & Legrand, 2011) including organizational interactions that drive institutional revolutions (Duderstadt, 2011). As an outcome, innovation manifests in products (e.g.. structural changes, operating procedures, services, or programs) that have the potential to change the way we do things.

## **Creativity & Innovation**

Innovation builds on creativity, those unique thought processes manifested by challenging the status quo. A distinction between creativity and innovation lies in the intended purpose, solely thought or thought put into action. Built on a foundation of creative ideas, innovation challenges the use of assumed notions in new ways. Organizations that think differently about situations consent to creativity and innovation. Unique and useful strategies emerge by encouraging and supporting development of creative thoughts, applied in real situations.

## **Cultures of Creativity & Innovation**

A synthesis of literature exposed themes identifying characteristics evident in creative and innovative organizations (Weis, & Legrand, 2011; Politis & Politis, 2010; McLean, 2005). Cultures within creative and innovative organizations possess most or all of the following characteristics.

**Organizational encouragement:** encouragement of managed risk-taking, idea generation, collaboration, shared decision making, open flow and honest communication, and supportive nature.

**Supervisory encouragement:** clarity of goals and direction, supporting open interactions, effective collaborative cross-functional teams, and guidance as opposed to control.

**Encouragement through diverse work groups:** groups with diverse experiences, ideas, and personalities.

**Challenging work:** going above and beyond in our work, challenging norms, and stimulating innovative processes with the courage to implement solutions.

**Leaders exhibiting innovative practices:** leaders who engage in taking and hedging risks while focused on delivering value for the organization, viewing creativity and innovation as a priority, and establishing trust.

**Freedom and self-sufficiency:** empowering employees to choose their own manner of how to achieve clearly defined organizational goals by incorporating diverse viewpoints.

Organizational leadership plays a pivotal role in the implementation and success of these characteristics. Demonstrated leadership is the most important factor for innovation and is rewarded among all levels in transformative organizations (Weiss & Legrand, 2011). Leaders are champions and drivers of success in achieving the organization's goals (Weiss & Legrand, 2011). Humble leaders are more receptive to new possibilities than are arrogant leaders who tend to rest on previous accomplishments (Weiss & Legrand, 2011). Bureaucratic characteristics (Hall, 1963) found to impede cultures of creativity and innovation include hierarchical authority structures, inflexible rules, stifling regulations, and technical incompetence (Politis & Politis, 2010).

Clearly, positive leadership, encouragement, collaboration across all levels, flexibility, and transparency build and sustain an organizational culture of creativity and innovation. Though Extension may never be able to completely rid itself of all barriers impeding creativity, it can certainly alter attitudes minimizing the interference. Actively demonstrating these leadership characteristics within Extension can help create this type of culture.

## **Extension Through a Lens of Creativity and Innovation**

Extension's outreach mission diligently executed for many years and an exemplar of positive impact on those served, trails the unprecedented rate of change in societal needs. Extension's execution, as a result of the barriers mentioned above, is lagging. It has not gone without notice that society's expectation for change within Extension exceeds Extension's own perceptions of the need for a faster rate of change (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2002).

Aside from ongoing fiscal concerns, researchers point to Extension's need for a futurist perspective (Patton, 1987) and completely reinventing the organization (King & Boehlje, 2000); staffing for creativity and innovation (Smith, 1988); leadership for the future (Smith, 1990) and accepting varied leadership styles (Astroth, Goodwin, & Hodnett, 2011; Fehlis, 2005); collaborative work environment (Buchanan, 1993) and increased need for flexibility; change in moving forward (Bloir & King, 2010) and addressing changes in a proactive fashion; and a reduction of the "entitlement" mentality (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2010).

These calls forecasting Extension's need for change have been relentlessly declared for decades, with little or no commitment to follow through. During this time, programming costs have gone up, while the ability to meet those demands is declining. Public calls for accountability grow louder, while Extension struggles with evaluation methodology, bias, and subjectivity (Lamm, Israel, & Harder, 2011). Federal budgets are facing further cuts while state and local budgets relatively decline. The future cannot, nor will not, look like the past.

Let us not try to "fix" the problems of the past, but instead use our wisdom to become smarter at what we do and how we do it. Today's rapidly changing social and economic environments oblige Extension to re-conceive the future through creative thinking and innovative action to reduce barriers to success. Embracing the process of creativity and innovation in our everyday organizational practice will unlock a vast number of new opportunities for Extension.

Extension must continue to succeed as a knowledge-based organization within an information-driven culture. Success and the ability to thrive as a knowledge-based organization is dependent upon creativity and innovation (Martins & Terblanche, 2003). If implemented successfully, there are a multitude of benefits for an organization (Roffe, 1999), including smarter ways of meeting customer needs, increasing the number of knowledge-based careers (McLean, 2005), improved performance, enabling quicker responses to changes in the external environment (Jaskyte, 2004), financial security, improved employee morale, and job satisfaction.

Within Extension, creative and innovative processes, resembling those of the cultural characteristics mentioned above, could be embedded in daily practices eliciting and supporting creative and innovative behavior. Extension has the capability to become a supportive environment in which leaders are open to new ideas and possess the willingness to hedge risks while focused on the ultimate goals. There is a great opportunity for Extension to release itself from funding as a sole motivator and objectively re-evaluate practice as it is presently known.

Some potential examples of creative and innovative processes within Extension include:

- Stabilization of credibility by reforming Extension's evaluation methodology to a third-party system or internally reward objectivity and greater transparency thereby suppressing bias.
- Programs based on needs or wants with an eye towards potential of privatization or competition.
- Creating a contractual structure for community and locally funded programs thereby lightening

administrative overhead and reducing drag on priorities that have regional, multi-state and national significance.

- Establishing an organizational design incorporating internal and external competitive funding structures fueling entrepreneurial endeavors of Extension personnel allowing them the administrative liberty to create, design, and execute needs specific programs.

Without an innovative approach toward creating Extension's future, troubles will fester, and morale will continue to decline. There is no question that some ideas will undoubtedly fail. Some plans may never get past initial discussions. Some audiences will not be served. One thing is certain, Extension's priorities must transform to meet the needs of the people, the way they need to be met, doing things in ways that have never been done before. It is time for Extension's leaders to leverage knowledge, release constraints on talent, destroy existing barriers, and discover Extension's full potential. How can you help expose and re-ignite the spirit of creativity and innovation within Extension? What could Extension's future look like?

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