REQUIREMENT OF FACILITATION SKILLS OF EXTENSION PERSONNEL UNDER ATMA - A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

After analyzing the weaknesses of Training and Visit system, Government of India reformed the extension approach through introduction of Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA). It follows group approach of extension. Under this system, the role of extension personnel is changed from expert to facilitator. In this changing scenario, extension personnel must develop skills on facilitation. In this paper, attempt has been made to review why facilitation skills are necessary for extension personnel under ATMA.

Key words: Extension personnel, Facilitator, Facilitation skills, Andragogy, Group dynamics, ATMA.

Extension had humble beginning with voluntary effort in United States of America and Europe. Now extension has become one of the arms of the national governments to promote agricultural development. Though the role of extension is increasingly being recognised world over, there are criticisms about the manner in which extension work is being performed. Every approach has its own limitation. Kumar and Hansara (1999) listed some of the common criticism as extension bureaucracy, techno-centric work, top - down approach, providing subsidy or free inputs, emphasising special groups and publicity stunt. In developing countries, small and marginal farmers constitute the major portion of the farming community. But due to various reasons as mentioned above, these segments could not get any benefits from the extension system. These extension systems fail to involve and educate this majority of the farming community. But the basic philosophy of extension is to educate the people for their own development.

Extension system is basically an educational process. It aims to educate the farming communities for their development. But instead of educating the farmers, the extension workers were involved in transferring the technology through a top down approach. The traditional extension has been based on socio- psychological model of diffusion of innovations. This model explains the failure of adoption of innovations by majority of small and marginal farmers based on socio- psychological characters, which assumes that technology is perfect and the most important problem with adoption of technology was not the socio- psychological characteristics but non availability of appropriate technology relevant to the needs of the farmers. It leads to reorient the extension system where extension workers are involving in empowering the farming community (Vijayaragavan, 2004). This situation demands for a bottom- up approach . For that purpose group approach of extension is adopted to build the capacity of farmers by introducing

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Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA). Here, group approach for extension is the main strategy adopted by extension agencies for generating demand for extension. All these efforts are expected to empower farmers to articulate their needs and views (Shingi et al. 2004).

Group approach of extension is a way of disseminating information and technologies on agricultural development through groups of farmers. It aims to develop local skills and empower local people to solve their own problems. Under ATMA, various farmers’ organisations (FOs) are formed like Farmer’s Interest Groups (FIGs), Commodity Interest Groups (CIGs) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) etc.

**Role of extension personnel under ATMA**

The role of extension personnel is to help the farmers from sound opinions and to make good decisions. Instead of transferring technology by the extension personnel now it is seen more as a process of helping the farmers to make their own decisions. The extension personnel’s role is to promote learning process of farmers. (van den Ban and Hawkins, 1998). The extension reforms will get the desire results only when these groups work properly. For effectiveness of the groups, their sustainability is essential, besides empowerment of the members. It demands for facilitating the group process. Therefore, the extension personnel must act as facilitators under ATMA. The extension agent is no longer seen as the expert. The extension agent now becomes a facilitator rather than an expert (DAC, n.d.). This situation demands facilitation skills of extension personnel to act as a facilitator.

**Concept of facilitation and facilitator**

The Geoff Ball and Associates (n.d.) expressed that facilitator helps the group work effectively. The term facilitation as per Wikipedia (Anonymous1, n.d.), is broadly used to describe any activity which makes easy the tasks of others. A facilitator is someone who skillfully helps a group of people to understand their common objectives and plan to achieve them. Facilitator is a helper, enabler or counselor, whose goal is to support groups (Bens, n.d. and Kumar and Kashyap, 2005.) According to Heron (1999) facilitator is a person who has the role of empowering participants to learn in an experiential group. The term facilitation also associated with the idea of ‘empowerment’. Kraybill (n.d.) stated that facilitator working in group and inter-group settings is assisting the members for empowerment.

In summary, we can define facilitation as a process to make group process and activity easy so that the group can perform actively for achieving their goal effectively. Facilitator is an expert on the group process and he works with the group member, helps them to increase group’s effectiveness by improving its process. He empowers the members to achieve the goal.

After the extension reforms, group approach is adopted for empowering the farmers for self reliant and sustainable agricultural development. In ATMA model, farmers’ organisation like Farmers’ Interest Groups, Commodity Interest Groups and Self-Help Groups will play the vital role in agricultural development. The extension personnel will deal the groups instead of dealing individual farmers. Therefore, for effective functioning of these farmers’ organisation, extension personnel should act as a facilitator rather than an expert.

**Importance of facilitation in ATMA**

In extension under ATMA, facilitation is important for empowerment. While working with group for their development, much of the works will be done in group. The processes used for identifying priorities, making decisions and solving problems in a group setting is different from individual as done earlier by the extension personnel. Each member may have his own opinion, idea, priorities etc. Geoff Ball et. al. (n.d.) listed numbers of benefits of group facilitation. According to them, effectively facilitated groups produce higher quality work, and build a broader base of support for timely implementation. A skilled facilitator helps the group stay focused on its tasks, explore the situation more
fully, minimize interpersonal conflict unrelated to task, work through conflict that is central to the work of the group and build openness and support within the group.

Rees (1998) also gave some common benefits to using facilitation skills in group settings. According to him, facilitation helps the group to produce better results. It increases participation within the group that increases productivity. Innovation and problem-solving skills are built among the group members due to facilitation. It encourages people to think and act for the overall benefit of the group.

In brief, we may say that facilitation motivates group members to participate actively in the group process. It results in ownership building, more individual quality contribution, reducing conflict, increases analytical skill to solve problem etc. Ultimately a facilitator helps the group to achieve better result. From the above discussion it can be concluded that facilitators help the group to effectively lead discussions; assess group processes such as problem-solving, participation, decision making, group dynamics etc. Most of our farmers are from poor socio-economic background and many of them are also illiterate. In such cases, the facilitator needs to provide support to the group in understanding various aspects like group dynamics, problem solving, record keeping, conflict management and leadership style etc. For that purpose facilitation will play an important role in extension work under ATMA.

**Role of extension personnel as facilitator**

After discussing the basic concepts of facilitation, facilitator and its importance, now it is clear that extension personnel as facilitator has to perform various roles during facilitating farmers' group. Now we discuss about what role a facilitator has to be performed and whether this role is essential for an extension personnel or not.

Lawson, (1996) pointed out that a group facilitator helps a group to discuss an issue, make a decision or solve a problem. He keeps the group moving, and always towards its stated goals. While the group focuses on the task, he focuses not only on the process but also the people.

The Bonner Curriculum (n.d.) stated that the role of a facilitator is concerned with goal, process and people. The facilitator is attempting to get to a particular outcome or end. The facilitator serves as a coordinator and organiser of the small groups, and ensures everyone is participating and staying on task. A facilitator never imposes a solution on to the group.

Bonner Curriculum² (n.d.) mentioned some specific roles of a facilitator. Facilitators listen closely and encourage participants to contribute to the group. They are responsible for paying attention to group behaviours.

According to Wikipedia (Anonymous¹, n.d.), the facilitator helps the participants to contribute, clarify the purpose of the meeting, keeps the group on track to timely reached the goal, helps the participants to listen others, asks question to stimulate thinking, paraphrases contribution for clarity, encourages passive participants to contribute, summarises and evaluates the discussion etc.

Cameron (2006) mentioned some roles of facilitator in context of facilitating workshop. For example, clear aim or purpose, encouraging contribution, stimulating the process of discussion, questioning, use of facilitating skill, recording or observing the activities etc. Heen and Stone, (2006) mentioned that as a facilitator, he has two purposes: helping participants to learn from their experiences, and helping the group to function effectively.

From the above reviews, it can be concluded that in general, following roles have to be performed by any facilitator during facilitation process. For example, facilitator focuses to the process. He helps in maximising learning and paraphrasing individual's contribution. Facilitator evaluates the group activities and helps to solve problem, conflict arising in the group. As a helper,
he helps the group to fixed group goal. As a guide, he guides the group members to learn from experiences and helps the group to analyse and draw conclusion. He serves as a coordinator for the group activities and maintains proper group dynamics. He listens to the members and helps others to listen too. To reach the stage of sustainability of a farmer's group, an extension personnel as facilitator has to play many roles like adviser, motivator, guide, counselor, organiser etc. He also ensures unity and cohesiveness, maintains group dynamics etc.

After conceptualising the role of a facilitator in ATMA, it is equally important to clarify some other aspects of facilitation. These are andragogy, group dynamics, and facilitation skill. Facilitation process is done in group and the group members are all adults. So, it is important to know how adult learn. Now andragogy will be conceptualised in relation to extension personnel under ATMA.

**Andragogy and facilitation in ATMA**

As a facilitator, extension personnel must know that adult learn differently. Being a facilitator he should conceptually be clear about the principles of adult learning. Because his approach and success directly depend on that factor too.

Until very recently, the pedagogical model has been applied equally to the teaching of children and adults, and in a sense, is a contradiction in terms. The reason is that as adults mature, they become increasingly independent and responsible for their own actions. They are often motivated to learn by a sincere desire to solve immediate problems in their lives. Additionally, they have an increasing need to be self-directing. In many ways the pedagogical model does not account for such developmental changes on the part of adults (Knowles, 1984). According to Knowles the term "andragogy" defined as the art and science of helping adults learn (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990). Smith (2002) reported that andragogy is premised on some crucial assumptions (given by Knowles) about the characteristics of adult learners that are different from the assumptions about child learners on which traditional pedagogy is premised. These assumptions are adults have self-respect, have experience, have readiness to learn, have orientation to learning and have motivation to learn.

Speck (1996) noted that adults will commit to learn when the goals and objectives are considered realistic and important to them. They need to see that the learning and their day-to-day activities are related and relevant. Adult learning has ego involved. Adult learners come to learning with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, self-direction, interests, and competencies.

Therefore, the extension personnel as facilitator should take care of these factors while facilitating a group. They should give due attention to these points so that learning will be joyful, purposeful, and helpful in building relationships besides fulfilling the personal need. Then only farmers will be empowered to solve their problems.

**Group dynamics and facilitation in ATMA**

Another aspect of facilitation is group dynamics because facilitation is done in group. Before studying facilitation skill of facilitator, it is equally important to clear the concept of group dynamics.

Group is formed by individuals thus they bring certain characteristics which are peculiarly his own to the group. These include his interest, abilities, desires, frustration adjustments etc. These are the forces that contribute to the internal dynamics of the group. The main internal dynamics of a group are - identity, size, activities, leadership pattern, definition of roles, social control, group evaluation, participation, goal, human relation skill, communication, heterogeneity etc. On the other hand there are some external dynamics which also affects the group. Some of those forces are community values, community expectation, multiple group members etc (Beal et. al. 1963).

Dynamics of any group is highly complex. We should not know only the individual but also the ways in which they affect each other (Haiman,
He also mentioned that in a group there are different types of members who behave differently. So it is clear that for facilitating farmer’s groups, extension personnel should have the knowledge on group dynamics. At different stages of a group, members will behave differently and therefore the extension personnel should also act accordingly. Knowledge on internal and external group dynamics helps the extension personnel to make the farmer’s group efficient and productive.

**Requirement of facilitation skills for extension personnel under ATMA**

It is clear that a facilitator must possess some skills to perform his role. Now we will review on the skills required for a facilitator and based on that discussion we will try to find out the skills required for extension personnel as facilitator.

An effective facilitator possesses knowledge and skills like listening, observing, recording, using visual aids, questioning, thinking, acknowledging and responding to emotion, paraphrasing, summarising, resolving conflict, using humour, problem solving, decision making, understand groups, energising skills, synthesising ideas, using appropriate language, keeping discussion on track and giving and receiving feed back, evaluating and encouraging skill etc. (Lawson, 1996; Bokor, 2001 and Bonner Curriculum 1, n.d.).

According to The International Association of Facilitator a facilitator should have skills like understanding group process, human relation skills, time management skill, persuasive skill, coaching skill, initiating skill, organisation skill, listening skill, observing skill, questioning skill, summarizing skill, focusing skill, encouraging skill, giving and receiving feed back skill and conflict management skill etc. whereas Thiagi Group (1999) advocates the characteristics like flexible, adaptive, proactive, responsive and resilient.

According to Hawkins (n.d.) effective facilitators know the dynamics of group process and are skilled in using techniques for keeping the group task-focused, encouraging creative thinking, building consensus and keeping all group members involved. A critical skill is the ability to create and maintain a safe, open and supportive environment for all group members. Another is being able to recognise and deal with disruptive behaviors. He also mentioned that listening and observation skills are essential for facilitators.

Based on Like Minded People (n.d.), facilitators should have the skill to observe the group or community. Facilitators must be ready for non-linear discussion. When facilitators are flexible, they can best guide discussion. Facilitators permit participants to use their imagination to brainstorm. Facilitator needs to be patient. Effective facilitation balances the challenging and supporting of others. From the above review it may be summarised that a facilitator should be skilled in observation, flexibility, imagination, patience, balance, affirmation, and connection.

According to www.capsante-outaouais.org there are some indispensable qualities for effective group facilitation. For example, no matter what the circumstances, the facilitator must demonstrate an assurance, both physical and psychological, that will enable him to tackle the most difficult situations. He will be able to play the role of moderator or facilitator, according to the circumstances. The facilitator must be able to react instantly in the face of unforeseen situations. Certain intervention strategies should be developed ahead of time should a crisis situation arise during a meeting of a self-help group; these strategies would enable the team to control the situation as well as ensure the continuity of the regular activities. The facilitator has to know how to listen to the group.

Full Circle Associates (n.d.) mentioned some qualities and skills of online facilitator from which some relevant points are discussed below which seem to be equally applicable to group facilitator at grass root level. According to them, facilitators should have skill in adult learning.
principles; communication styles; learning styles; cultural competency; group and interpersonal dynamics; group facilitation; listening; encouraging, feedback skill; attentive; questioning; conflict management; focusing; listening; observing; organising; pacing; presentation skills; problem solving; resume/restart groups; steer the group in a positive direction and summarisation skills.

The Facilitation Skills Development Process (Anonymous², n.d.) mentioned nine categories of skills for a facilitator. It mentioned that facilitator should have the abilities to collect information from a group and to lead that group in a planning process. Besides these, facilitators should have evaluation skill, observation skill, communication skill on group process, managing group dynamics, understanding organisation and their development and understanding cultural diversity.

From the above discussion it is clear that to become an effective facilitator, he must posses some skills. We have already identified numbers of facilitation skills as mentioned by various authors. These are mainly questioning, flexibility, time management, listening skill, acceptance, presentation, understanding group dynamics, problem solving, understanding adult learner, paraphrasing, analysing, respect, observation, helping, focusing, attending, giving and receiving feedback, summarising, evaluating, conflict management, encouraging, probing, decision making, enabling and motivating etc. If extension personnel are able to achieve these skills, than they will become an effective facilitator.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above discussion that effective facilitation is essential to empower the members of farmers' group for their development. Without empowerment farmer's group can not perform well. If they are not productive than extension reforms made through ATMA will not give any fruitful results. So, for proper functioning of farmers' group under ATMA, extension personnel should help the groups as facilitator. Therefore they must act as a facilitator. But facilitation is a new concept for them. So, due attention should be given on this aspect for developing facilitation skills of extension personnel to get desired results from ATMA. Special in-service training should also be organized for extension personnel to developed facilitation skills. For facilitating farmers' groups extension personnel must acquired facilitation skills.

REFERENCES


