

# Perceived Communications and Support Linkages of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers

Robert A. Martin, Assistant Professor  
Emmanuel Nwozuzu, Graduate Assistant, and Amy Gleason, Research Assistant  
Agricultural Education  
Iowa State University

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## Introduction

According to Finch and McGough (1982), the only way an organization can be successful is through communication. In the case of educational organizations, the actions of the administrators, faculty and staff must pass through various communications channels. Barriers are inevitably being erected to impede communication. The results are misunderstanding, insecurity, conflict and/or lack of motivation. According to Davis (1972), if barriers are substantially removed, people not only can but will work together.

Miles (1965), in analyzing healthy organizations, states that in a healthy organization, there is relatively distortion-free communication vertically and horizontally. People have the information they need and have gotten it without exerting undue efforts.

Lucio and McNeil (1979) found that teachers whose wants and needs are in agreement with their principal's expectations express significantly higher job satisfaction than teachers whose wants are in conflict with the principal's definition of the teacher's role. There is often wide disparity between what the principal says is expected of teachers and what the teachers think the principal expects of them.

Studies conducted by Argyris (1962) suggest that sound decision making depends on informal interpersonal relationships (more than on formal structure) based on the following factors: genuineness, descriptive non-evaluative feedback, sensitivity and rationality.

Declining enrollments, advancing technology, updating curriculum, changing student needs and a demanding school community all contribute to establishing barriers to communication because there are various viewpoints to be considered. How do schools currently support vocational agriculture programs and foster communication linkages? Whose responsibility is it to take the initiative for establishing communications linkages? How do school administrators and vocational agriculture teachers communicate?

## Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this study was to determine the extent of the perceived communication linkages between school principals and vocational agriculture teachers. The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

1. To determine the extent of the communications and community support for the vocational agriculture program as perceived by high school principals and vocational agriculture teachers.
2. To identify the perceived current status of contractual support for vocational agriculture activities.

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3. To identify the perceived extent of informal and formal supervisory contact time between high school principals and vocational agriculture teachers.

### Procedures

The descriptive method of research using a questionnaire with a Likert-type scale was used to gather data for this study. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature. The instrument was validated through a review by selected vocational agriculture teachers. Revisions were made based on the review, and the final instrument was prepared for distribution.

The survey form consisted of 30 questions. No demographic data were collected. The instrument was mailed to all vocational agriculture teachers (256) and their respective high school administrators (227) in the state of Indiana during the summer of 1983. After three weeks, follow-up letters were sent, and telephone calls were made to 10% of those not responding to note any differences between non-respondents and respondents. There were no unusual characteristics about the non-respondents. There was an overall 77% response rate (207 teachers, 80%; 164 principals, 72%).

Respondents were asked to complete 23 questions regarding their perceptions of the communication linkages in their schools using a five point Likert-type scale. The scale consisted of numerical values as follows: 1-none; 2-very little; 3-some; 4-considerable; 5-very great. Respondents were also asked to complete seven questions, in a multiple choice format, regarding contractual and supervisory matters in their schools. The Cronbach-alpha reliability for the survey instrument was calculated to be 0.91. The data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, t-tests and frequencies.

### Findings

#### Interest in Vocational Agriculture

Interest was defined as the extent to which the community, students, administrators and teachers showed concern for the vocational agriculture program. Table 1 indicates that there was not a significant difference at the .05 level in the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding community support for vocational agriculture. However, there were differences in perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the interest in the vocational agriculture program on the part of the students, the principal and the teacher. Principals indicated that they support the vocational agriculture program but the teachers do not feel the principals take as much interest in vocational agriculture as they indicate. Principals indicated that students are not as interested as teachers think they are. Principals looked forward to their day more than did teachers.

#### Openness and Receptiveness

Openness and receptiveness were defined collectively as the extent to which teachers, administrators and students talked freely and regularly on a personal basis about school policy and procedure. Table 2 indicates that there were significant differences at the .05 level in the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding all four items on this subscale--principal-teacher talk, student-teacher talk, friendliness and support and approachability. Principals generally indicated that it was their perception that there was more one-to-one communication than did teachers; however, teachers indicated more one-to-one communication on the part of teachers and students regarding school matters.

Table 1

Perceptions of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers  
Regarding the Interest Shown for Vocational Agriculture Programs

Item	Principal (n=169) Mean S.D.	Teacher (n=207) Mean S.D.	T-value	Probability
To what extent does the community support the vocational agriculture program in your school district?	$\frac{3.94}{.74}$	$\frac{3.89}{.77}$	.54	.586
To what extent does the principal take an interest in your vocational agriculture program?	$\frac{4.15}{.85}$	$\frac{3.51}{1.01}$	6.58	.000
To what extent to the students take an interest in the vocational agriculture program?	$\frac{3.46}{.78}$	$\frac{3.76}{.72}$	-3.81	.000
To what extent do you look forward to your working day?	$\frac{4.45}{.53}$	$\frac{3.76}{.89}$	8.94	.000

Table 2

Perceptions of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers  
Regarding Openness and Approachability In Their Schools

Item	Principal (n=169) Mean S.D.	Teacher (n=207) Mean S.D.	T-value	Probability
To what extent does the principal freely talk to teachers about school matters?	$\frac{3.88}{.88}$	$\frac{3.43}{1.09}$	4.35	.000
To what extent do the students talk to teachers about school matters?	$\frac{3.47}{.76}$	$\frac{3.89}{.69}$	-5.47	.000
To what extent is the principal's behavior seen as friendly and supportive?	$\frac{4.16}{.81}$	$\frac{3.74}{1.05}$	4.21	.000
To what extent is the principal friendly and easily approached?	$\frac{4.14}{.81}$	$\frac{3.77}{1.06}$	3.65	.000

## Team Work

Team work was defined as the extent to which there was an expression of confidence in each professional's skills and abilities and appreciation for work done. Table 3 indicates there were significant differences at the .05 level in the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding team building in their schools. Overall, principals perceive there is more confidence building and team work occurring in their schools than was indicated by teachers of vocational agriculture.

Table 3

### Perceptions of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers Regarding Team Work

Item	Principal (n=169)	Teacher (n=207)	T-value	Probability
	Mean S.D.	Mean S.D.		
To what extent do you have confidence in teachers in your school?	$\frac{3.98}{.93}$	$\frac{3.82}{.69}$	1.99	.047
To what extent do teachers have confidence in the principal?	$\frac{4.14}{.49}$	$\frac{3.62}{1.03}$	6.03	.000
To what extent do administrators, teachers and students work as a team in your school?	$\frac{3.94}{.47}$	$\frac{3.19}{.82}$	10.51	.000
To what extent does the principal express appreciation when teachers do a good job?	$\frac{3.85}{.64}$	$\frac{3.30}{1.07}$	5.77	.000
To what extent does the administration use suggestions made by teachers?	$\frac{3.69}{.74}$	$\frac{3.11}{.94}$	6.47	.000

## Solving Problems in the School

Problem solving was defined as the sharing of information about school based concerns and issues that cause stress or reduce it. Table 4 indicates that there was not a significant difference at the .05 level in the perceptions of principals and teachers of vocational agriculture regarding the principal's thoroughness in explaining school procedures and addressing problem issues. However, the principals perceive helpfulness provided among teachers and candid and useful information provided by the administration to teachers to be greater than what vocational agriculture teachers perceive it to be.

Table 4

Perceptions of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers Regarding Problem-Solving in Their Schools

Item	Principal (n=169)	Teacher (n=207)	T-value	Probability
	Mean S.D.	Mean S.D.		
To what extent are teachers in your school helpful in solving school problems?	$\frac{3.80}{.61}$	$\frac{3.32}{.91}$	5.87	.000
To what extent is the communication open and candid between the principal and teachers in your school?	$\frac{4.07}{.56}$	$\frac{3.28}{1.00}$	9.13	.000
To what extent does the principal offer new and useful approaches to problems?	$\frac{3.26}{.81}$	$\frac{2.94}{.95}$	3.41	.001
To what extent does the principal thoroughly explain various school procedures in your school?	$\frac{3.60}{.81}$	$\frac{3.50}{.95}$	1.16	.248

Program Development

Program development was defined as the extent to which there was a sharing of information about goals, objectives and resources. Table 5 indicates that there was no significant difference at the .05 level in the perceptions of principals and vocational agriculture teachers regarding the use of community resources. However, there were significant differences between the respondent groups regarding the usefulness of information, teacher independence, and discussions regarding program goals and objectives, FFA programs and supervised occupational experience programs. The teachers apparently perceive that they have more independence than principals believe they have.

Contractual Arrangements and Supervisory Practices

The findings concerning the general contractual arrangements and supervisory practices in respondent's schools yielded the following information. This information represents only the major highlights gleaned from the data.

1. Over 52% of the vocational agriculture teachers held 12 month contracts.
2. Nearly 8% of the vocational agriculture teachers held 9 month contracts.
3. Approximately 40% of the vocational agriculture teachers held 10 and 11 month contracts.

Table 5

Perceptions of High School Principals and Vocational Agriculture Teachers  
Regarding Communications and Support for Program Development

Item	Principal (n=169)	Teacher (n=207)	T-value	Probability
	Mean S.D.	Mean S.D.		
To what extent does the principal give useful information?	$\frac{3.69}{.92}$	$\frac{3.18}{.97}$	5.10	.000
To what extent does the principal let teachers do their work the way they think best?	$\frac{3.89}{.85}$	$\frac{4.20}{.85}$	-3.42	.001
To what extent do teachers and the principal discuss programs and course objectives?	$\frac{3.47}{.77}$	$\frac{3.11}{.95}$	3.95	.000
To what extent does the vo-ag teacher and the principal discuss the FFA activities?	$\frac{3.60}{.78}$	$\frac{3.30}{.94}$	3.28	.001
To what extent does the vo-ag teacher and the principal discuss supervised occupational experience programs?	$\frac{2.82}{1.01}$	$\frac{2.41}{.89}$	4.07	.000
To what extent has community resources been used in teaching vocational agriculture this past year?	$\frac{3.53}{.91}$	$\frac{3.40}{.91}$	1.34	.182

4. Over 18% of the vocational agriculture departments did not conduct an advisory committee meeting during the 1982-83 school year.

5. Nearly 18% of the teachers conducted less than 10 supervised occupational on-site instructional meetings during the 1982-83 year.

6. Over 7% of the schools in this study did not conduct supervised occupational programs in the 1982-83 school year. Teachers indicated their estimates of the number of supervised occupational visits to be higher than estimated by the principals.

7. Nearly 50% of the schools in this study reported having from 6 to 10 faculty meetings in 1982-83.

8. Over 35% of the vocational agriculture departments in this study indicated having over 16 parental visits to the vocational agriculture department.

9. Nearly 5% of the schools in this study reported having had no visits to the vocational agriculture departments by parents.

10. Over 12% of the teachers in this study indicated not having any school administrative supervisory conference in the 1982-83 school year.

11. Thirty-five percent of the principals and teachers reported having had one supervisory conference.

12. Over 10% of the principals and teachers indicated not having participated in any formal observation of instruction involving the principal or his/her designee and the vocational agriculture teacher.

13. Nearly 35% of the teachers in this study had one formal observation of instruction by the principal or his/her designee.

### Conclusions

There were no statistically significant differences (at the .05 level) between the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding the following items: community support for the school and the vocational agriculture program, the use of community resources, explanation of formal plans, the number of formal plans and procedures.

However, there were statistically significant differences (at the .05 level) in the perceptions of principals and teachers of the following items: teacher enthusiasm for the program, student interest, free exchange of information, student feedback, confidence in each other, confidence in other teachers, friendliness and support of each other, assistance with professional problems, team work, discussion of FFA and SOE activities and accountability of time and resources.

High school principals in this study indicated that they lacked information regarding the scheduled on-site instruction through the supervised occupational experience program. An alarming number of vocational agriculture teachers in this study do not conduct advisory committee meetings, follow-up students in the supervised occupational experience program and have limited formal contact with school administrators regarding supervision or observation of instruction. There appears to be no systematic procedure for planned, sustained communication as far as the vocational agriculture teachers and school administrators are concerned in the schools included in this study.

The results of this study suggest that communication linkages are not well established between vocational agriculture teachers and school principals in this state. While there seems to be general agreement about community support for vocational agriculture programs and community resources are being used to fulfill educational needs through the granting of extended contracts, the data suggest that there does not seem to be open, candid and clear communications between principals and teachers about the true essence of vocational agriculture.

### Recommendations

How can school administrators know what vocational agriculture programs are doing? No one can be enlightened without full access to the facts. School administrators must know what the vocational agriculture program is trying to accomplish, how it is going about achieving its objectives, how well it is succeeding and the problems it is encountering. This information should be written and shared with school administrators and advisory committee members. Merely dispensing this information will not ensure understanding or acceptance, but it is a beginning of the development of a systematic strategy of communication. Teachers and school administrators in Indiana should give consideration to the results of this study. Educators in other states may want to consider the

implications of this study. With these comments in mind and using the results of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Vocational agriculture teachers and school administrators should develop a systematic approach to communication.

2. Vocational agriculture teachers and school administrators should make communication a vital part of every instructional management decision, identify problems, possible alternatives and suggestions and submit written reports regarding the program.

3. Vocational agriculture teachers should consider keeping a time log and submit it in writing to the school administration. School administrators should respond with some note of approval or concern.

4. Vocational agriculture teachers should consider writing specific annual program goals and objectives and submit these to the advisory committee and school administrators. Some evaluative feedback sought should be given by the advisory committee and school administration.

5. Vocational agriculture teachers should consider building a database of information from the community regarding educational needs and goals. This data gathering process could be done through advisory committees.

6. Vocational agriculture teachers should consider submitting monthly calendars of activities to school administrators regarding activities. A note of approval or acceptance should be forwarded to teachers by the school administrators.

7. Teacher educators should consider conducting research studies that focus on the use of various communications strategies to determine impact on school climate--especially as it relates to vocational education in general and vocational agriculture in particular.

#### Summary Discussion

This study underscores a key problem among agriculture teachers. We do a good job of talking up our programs to each other, but do we really communicate with the key decision makers outside of our interest area? Decision making depends upon a complicated process of communication of information (Owens, 1970). The amount of information available for decision making has been shown to affect the quality of decisions made (Shaw and Penrod, 1962). The more information is generally known, the greater the chance it will be accepted and acted upon (Torrence, 1955).

Vocational agriculture programs cannot operate in a shell. There must be a free flow of information if the vocational agriculture program is to survive. This study raises several concerns regarding the future of vocational agriculture in schools where decision makers are vague as to what is really happening in these programs.

The results of this study indicate that teacher educators and the profession as a whole should devise communication models for teachers to follow in establishing and maintaining communication linkages with school administrators.

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