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A SCALE FOR RATING FIRE-PREVENTION CONTACTORS

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SUMMARY

A scale is constructed to help fire-prevention program administrators determine if an individual contactor is effective at influencing people. The 24 items in the scale indicate the qualities that an effective contactor should have.

Additional keywords: personal contact, prevention-effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Research and field experience have shown that person-to-person contact is more effective than impersonal media for influencing people's opinions, beliefs, and actions regarding forest fire (Bertrand and Baird 1975). But efforts to influence others are not likely to succeed unless the person making the contacts is right for the job. How can a fire-prevention program administrator determine if an individual contactor is effective at influencing others? What are the attributes of an effective contactor? We tried to answer these questions by asking a large number of experienced fire-prevention people what attributes characterize an effective personal contactor. The result was the development of a scale for rating contactor effectiveness.[1]

[1]The technique used for constructing the scale was developed by L. L. Thurstone and his associates (Thurstone and Chave 1929). The clearest description of the technique is presented by Edwards (1957), p. 83–98.

SCALE DEVELOPMENT

We started with over 100 attributes of effective contactors, but after eliminating those that were ambiguous, redundant, or clearly irrelevant, we reduced the list to 34. Then we asked the original submitters to rate the importance of each attribute. The results of that inquiry allowed us to compute an average value, on a scale from 0 to 11, for each of the 34 items. We also determined how closely our "judges" agreed on the importance of each one, and we eliminated ten items on the basis of their disagreement. The final version of the scale was field tested with 100 contactor-employees of a state forestry agency. The results were consistent with other measures of effectiveness for these employees—namely fire occurrence trends and supervisor's rating. The 24 items and the value of each are shown below. Item values are in parentheses.

USING THE SCALE

To use the scale to rate a contactor, the rater simply indicates with a checkmark those attributes he thinks the contactor has and adds their values. The rating sum can be divided by the total of all values (233) to obtain a percent score. Although the scale was constructed with the supervisor of contactor personnel in mind, anyone familiar with an employee can rate him or her. In fact, an average score from several ratings will be more reliable than a single score.

Some of the items in the scale are "personality characteristics" (such as dependability, moral char-

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acter, good sense of humor) and are difficult to alter. A contactor who lacks a number of these may never be effective. Conversely, some of the qualities can be learned, like knowledge about the community, fire history, and basics about fire prevention. The contactor who lacks learnable traits but has good personal attributes can be made more effective at influencing others by specialized training.

Fire Prevention Contactor Effectiveness Scale

1. Respect for the people being contacted (10.3)
2. Ability to communicate on the level of people contacted (10.1)
3. Respect from the people contacted (10.0)
4. Good personal hygiene (10.0)
5. Ability to listen effectively (10.0)
6. Persistence in performing a task (10.0)
7. Dependability (10.0)
8. Tact in dealing with others (9.9)
9. Moral character (9.9)
10. Commitment to the agency and job (9.9)
11. Desire to perform a task effectively (9.8)
12. Personal desire for achievement (9.8)
13. Knowledge about the community (9.8)
14. Knowledge of fire history of area (9.8)
15. Knowledge in the basics of fire prevention (9.8)
16. Personal desire for self-improvement (9.7)
17. Appreciation for the beauty of the forest (9.7)
18. Positive self-image (9.7)
19. Knowledge in general forestry (9.6)
20. Environmental concern (9.6)
21. Good sense of humor (9.6)
22. Active in community affairs (9.4)
23. Strong sense of responsibility (8.9)
24. Inquisitiveness (7.7)

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