ANY GOVERNMENT AGENCY CAN DO EE

Bernadette D. Joeman, Phylesia J. Rama and G. Hubert Petol
Rainforest Discovery Centre, Forest Research Centre
Sabah Forestry Department, Sabah

Abstract

This paper presents ideas on how any government agency can conduct environmental education (EE) programmes. These ideas are experiences gained by the staff of the Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) since it was established in 1996. Working with various government agencies has been very enriching and this has improved the RDC staff capabilities in implementing our long-term environmental education programme. We will be sharing our experiences that may be applied by the various levels within an organisation to increase the impact and effectiveness of its EE programme, unit or section. On the individual level, there are thoughts on self-improvement for those involved in EE, regardless of status within a department. Promoting teamwork is given emphasis at the team level. Some aspects that can be improved at the managerial level are important for effective EE programmes. Finally, the agency level gives some ideas for consideration by policy makers within an agency.
INTRODUCTION

The Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) is situated at the edge of the Sepilok Arboretum, just 25 km west of Sandakan town. Previously known as the Rainforest Interpretation Centre or RIC, the RDC currently consists of two exhibition halls, the Plant Discovery Garden and a 800m Rainforest Walk. Future facilities include the Rainforest Discovery Trail and an 800m long canopy trail. However, it is best known in Sabah for its environmental education (EE) programme, which is run by the Environmental Education Unit, itself managed under the Natural Forest Management Programme at the nearby Forest Research Centre, the R & D division of the Sabah Forestry Department (SFD).

The main aim of the environmental education programme is to bring about positive changes in the attitudes and behaviours of the public towards the forests and the environment as a whole through effective interpretation and environmental education. The target groups for the Programme are school students, teachers and the public in the Sandakan District.

Working with various government agencies has been very enriching and this has improved the RDC staff capabilities in implementing our long-term environmental education programme. In this paper, we will be sharing our experiences that may be applied by the various levels within an organisation to increase the impact and effectiveness of its EE programme, unit or section. On the individual level, there are thoughts on self-improvement for those involved in EE, regardless of status within a department. Promoting teamwork is given emphasis at the team level. Some managerial skills are discussed at the managerial level. Finally, the agency level gives some ideas for consideration by policy makers within an agency.

WHAT IS AN EE PROGRAMME?

An EE programme normally refers to a long-term programme relating to EE. Some agencies, however, also refer to their two- or three-day activities as EE programmes. Thus, the phrase can cause miscommunication between agencies when it involves discussions on EE programmes. Although it is easy to differentiate between the two programmes from their duration, it is recommended that agencies use the word ‘programme’ for long-term plans.

The problem with short-term programmes is that agencies report them as their EE programmes during meetings, seminars and conferences. When used to refer to EE programmes, these activities/events do not seem to be part of a strategy to achieve an objective or a goal. Rather, they appear as isolated events, achieving only the immediate objectives of the activities themselves. At worst, these can be considered as ‘one-off activities’ that serves only to satisfy an agency’s target to organise EE activities within a year, mainly for reporting purposes. Thus, these report-based activities lack the direction and focus of a proper long-term programme with specific objectives and goals.

What, then, is an EE programme? An EE programme has medium- or long-term goals and objectives concerning EE, and it has a list of activities that are to be conducted within a span of 3 to 5 years, or even more. This is a simpler version of the conventional definition of the word but, surprisingly, many agencies do not use the word ‘programme’ in this context when it comes to EE. Having a properly planned EE programme is crucial for an agency involved in EE. One clear benefit is that all activities and events can be planned months and years in advance to coincide with increasing levels of personnel expertise.

It is also not unusual for an agency to have more than one EE programme. This depends on each programme’s goals and objectives. For example, the RDC still has only one EE programme. To cope with our expanding interests and tasks, we either expand the objectives of the programme or add to another closely-related programme. For example, our EE programme has expanded to our Community Involvement, Tourism Development and
Training Programmes. Another important point to remember about any programme is that its ability to expand is directly correlated to the level of creativity of those in charge.

IMPLEMENTING AN EE PROGRAMME AND ITS ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

From this point on, we will be sharing our ideas on how to implement an EE programme. These are derived from our experiences gained since the RDC was established in 1996. Working with various government agencies has been very enriching and this has improved our capacity in implementing our long-term EE programme. We will be sharing our experiences that are mainly concerned with the individual, the team and managerial levels. These can be applied to increase the impact and effectiveness of an agency’s EE programme, unit or section.

THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

The word ‘individual’ in this paper refers to anyone in an agency regardless of position. The individual level is the most important level because an individual’s thoughts, attitudes and actions define his or her creative life, which of course includes his or her work.

Be the change.
One must not wait for change to come along and try and adapt to it. To improve one’s job satisfaction and therefore EE programme, one must BE the agent of positive change. A person with new and radical ideas is able to encourage change in an agency or a team. However, not everyone is capable of this. Sometimes, we need to change our attitudes towards others, life and work to encourage change. Self-improvement in various aspects of life and work is important.

For example, some of us may need to accept that information and communication technologies (ICT) are indispensable in our working lives and therefore may need to be more ICT savvy. We need to be relatively competent in using computer software that can improve our implementation of EE programmes. In turn, we can later train our peers in ICT and be the change. Other skills that are important in effective implementation of EE programme are communication, presentation, interpretation and organisational skills. These can be learnt singly or as a team (e.g. organisational skills). It is important not to follow a strict schedule to improve oneself—it is better to learn new skills consistently and at one’s own pace. This will give time for the newly acquired skills to develop and be used constantly in one’s daily work. In time, our EE team will change for the better.

Be patient
We do not always perform to our expectations although we have tried our best. A small part of an EE event that we organised may not be satisfactory, or the whole event may be a failure. Look into the problem and the circumstances that lead to the failure. Identify it, learn from it, fix it and let go. We are sometimes our worst critic. It is important to be patient with ourselves and look forward to improving.

Likewise, if we are part of a team, we must be patient with our team members should they perform less than we had expected. No matter what their formal education background may be, some people learn fast, others slow. Repeated mistakes will give us clues to a person’s abilities. Choose another task where he or she may excel. We have to be positive and guide them closely in the future, even if they are our superiors. It is not uncommon for a lower staff to teach someone senior as it is not uncommon for children to teach their parents about life.

Be enthusiastic
How many times have we attended a supposedly interesting talk where the speaker dampens our interest due to his or her lack of enthusiasm when presenting the talk?
Enthusiasm is really like a disease—it will either spread rapidly like an epidemic, infecting everyone, or it will just spread leisurely, infecting only a few. Nevertheless, enthusiasm will spread. If we are enthusiastic about our work in EE, our enthusiasm will spread to our immediate team members and, eventually, to other agencies involved in EE as well.

There are many ways where enthusiasm can contribute to a better EE programme. If we are enthusiastic about our daily work, our team members will sooner or later be infected and work is more rewarding for all. It is also very important to be enthusiastic about conducting a school visit, a nature camp, a seminar or a workshop. The excitement and attention levels of our audiences—school children or course participants—are largely dependent on our enthusiasm levels. Our environmental message for them will be more easily accepted if we have their attention. Furthermore, it will be a more rewarding experience for us if our audience is excited and attentive.

If we have a great idea for an EE programme and want to get support for it, it would be easier to garner support for it from our bosses, superiors or other agencies if we market our idea enthusiastically. When applying for funding, writing proposals in an enthusiastic manner using active voices can increase your chances of getting approval.

The RDC has many experiences concerning enthusiasm at work. One example is about a teacher, Mdm Ooi Mee Har, who attended our first teacher training course in 1998. She said we had ignited her enthusiasm for EE with the course. At first, it was a steep uphill task for her to change the mindset of the teachers and children in her school. Eight years on, with her enthusiasm levels still soaring, her school is now rightly one of the best models for an eco-friendly school for EE in Sabah. With many awards and trophies, the school continues to spread their experience—and enthusiasm—to other schools.

Be proactive

During implementation of EE programmes, we get requests from schools, special interest groups and other agencies to conduct activities such as visits, talks, courses or nature camps. While this is not a negative thing, it is still a reactive response, i.e. we react to the requests of others. Some people are quite comfortable with this approach to work but it is like a gifted artist admiring the paintings of other artists but does not paint one himself. To fully realise our potentials, we have to strike a balance between being reactive and proactive.

To be proactive means we have to act in anticipation of future problems, needs or changes. The word ‘future’ in this sense may be in a few days or up to 5 years. For example, if we plan to organise a 3-day EE seminar in the future, we must first train ourselves and our team by organising less demanding events like meetings, group visits or workshops. From these experiences, we organise longer events like nature camps or teacher training courses to get used to the logistics and preparations for an EE seminar.

Similarly, if we plan to conduct many activities in the future, we must train ourselves and also look for ways to fund these activities. We can also initiate inter-agency collaborations to organise workshops, courses or seminars.

This is similar to what the RDC has done. In the past, we had only 4 staff but we wanted to do more activities under our EE programme. We wanted to conduct nature interpretation courses, 5-day teacher training courses, 3-day student camps, etc. However, we lacked the manpower to conduct these activities. Thus, we sought assistance from peers in other agencies. Over the years, this led to our informal network of teachers and EE practitioners throughout Sabah. Today, with still the same number of staff, we have more activities in our EE programme. Organising and conducting EE activities like those mentioned above is easier for us with the help of these people as facilitators and resource persons.
TEAM LEVEL

The word ‘team’ here refers to a certain number of people in an agency involved in implementation of the agency’s EE Programme. When a team is cohesive and inter-dependent, work gets lighter and more enjoyable, and the team can accomplish many things, both great and small.

Work as a team
Allow us to use the analogy of a football team to demonstrate teamwork. To score a goal, a ball has to be kicked, headed, looped and dribbled by many players from the same team until it lands in the opponent’s net. No matter how skilful a player is, he cannot score a goal without the help of other players in the team. In another words, all players have to play as a team.

Likewise, an EE team must work as a team to reach its goals. A team member who is very capable in many aspects of work is still unable to excel if he or she works alone.

Every member is important
The team’s star striker is normally the highest paid and probably more well-known compared to a goalkeeper or defender. However, the latter two are just as important as the striker during a match: if one fails in his job, the team may lose. It is very important to realise that in a football team, every player is just as important as another.

Likewise, the person in charge of an EE team may be higher paid and more well-known than a subordinate. However, the latter is just as important in the team. It is important for both superiors and subordinates to realise that they need each other for an EE programme to succeed and that, in reality, no one is more important than the other.

Every team member should have common basic skills
Football players all have the basic skills that are important to be in a team—they all know how to kick, control and dribble a ball. In addition, each also has specific talents that require them to be placed in various positions in the pitch during a match.

Likewise, every EE team member must possess common basic skills but also have unique qualities that make them suitable for special tasks. For example, every RDC staff can organise a course or seminar, conduct simple talks and group visits, make minor decisions relating to office matters, have computer skills, design brochures, change a light bulb, clean the air conditioner filters, etc. However, each also has talents, skills and capabilities that require them to be given specific tasks like computer maintenance, writing proposals, designing interpretive posters, doing administrative duties, planning a 5-year plan, etc.

Gain more skills and sharpen existing ones
A football team practice and train together constantly. Constant training will improve every player’s skill level and increases the team’s chances of winning with the standard number of players allowed.

Likewise, an EE team should work together constantly, helping each other improve working skills. Higher level staff should willingly assist their lower staff to improve themselves, and vice versa. With more varied skills, there are more things that they can do as a team with the same number of people. For example, the RDC still has a staff of 4 staff since 1998 to implement its EE Programme. Constant training to increase skill levels of everyone has led to more EE activities and diversification of the original EE Programme without any need to increase the number of staff.
Have a team coach

Every football team has a coach who recognises and appreciates every player’s weaknesses and strengths. He also knows who needs more training and who is ready to play in a very competitive match.

Likewise, an EE team should have a person who understands the team’s capabilities well. The person can then formulate strategic plans for activities under an EE programme that showcases the team’s strengths and, at the same time, to train the team up for even more challenging tasks in the future. For example, when the RDC organised and conducted its first teacher training course called the EERace, two officer-level staff were in charge of almost all aspects of logistics and course content. For the second EERace, two administration-level staff were put in charge. Although there made minor mistakes, they were still excellent considering that they were administrative personnel.

Accept setbacks

Every football team knows that, although they may feel that they are the best team around, there can only be one winner. In a match between two very competitive and equally talented teams, the winner is determined by circumstances. Thus, seasoned teams are familiar with victories and, more importantly, defeats. However, when defeat comes, they never give up and they train even harder until they win a highly acclaimed championship title.

Likewise, an EE team may sometimes be overwhelmed with the feeling of defeat when something negative happens before or during an EE activity. They may be demoralised and stop organising the activity or just lose interest in their job. The situation may get worst if their superiors exaggerate the incident. To get past these times, it is important for the team not delve in negative thoughts. Thinking positively helps. Get over it and move on.

The constant lack of support from superiors may also be a form of setback. We realise that the cause of this problem differs from one agency to another. There is no one way to tackle this but our view is not to make it as an excuse for not performing.

Teamwork beyond your team

The concept of working together as a team can also extend to an inter-agency team. This is made up of teams from various agencies, working together towards a larger, state-level objective. Those of us from Sabah are very fortunate because we have such a team; it is called the Sabah Environmental Education Network (SEEN). SEEN members consist of government agencies and NGOs. The spirit of SEEN, which is the spirit of cooperation, has been in the air long before SEEN was officially launched in March 2004. However, this spirit was among a small group of friends who implement EE regularly. In June 2002, we organised the Seminar on Environmental Education for Practitioners. This was when the idea of setting up SEEN was proposed and agreed by those present. In 2005, SEEN was officially launched and its first secretariat is the Environmental Protection Department.

THE MANAGERIAL LEVEL

The word ‘manager’ in this paper refers to the person in charge of an EE team, either directly or indirectly. A manager should have the appropriate managerial skills to direct the activities of the EE team. Some of these skills described below. They are abilities that can be developed over time.

Technical skill

A manager should possess a high level of relevant technical skills. He/she is said to have a technical skill when he/she has sufficient knowledge and expertise on a subject. He/she possesses an analytical ability within that subject and also has a knack for problem-solving. Competency in a certain skill alone does not constitute a technical skill. For example,
manager who is competent in designing a web site and is also able to solve software bugs is said to possess a technical skill.

Managers with technical skills are important as they know the gist of their skills and are able to impart this in-depth knowledge to their team members.

**Human skill**
This skill is mainly related to working with people. A manager must be constantly aware of his/her own attitudes, assumptions and beliefs about other individuals. He/she must also be aware of other people’s attitudes, assumptions and beliefs. A manager must be able to communicate effectively to pre-schoolers, secondary school students, villagers, staff and department heads, all the while being aware of their education levels, race, beliefs, values, etc.

At the RDC, we always make a point to get to know our audience before conducting any guided walk, meeting, seminar or course. The information will help us in our presentations, especially in making it more personal and interactive.

**Conceptual skill**
A manager should have the ability to ‘see the big picture’ in whatever situation. ‘Seeing the big picture’ simply means being able to ‘see’ how events, concepts or ideas are linked together and how changes in each affect another. A manager with this skill ‘sees’ an EE programme as an integrated whole—past events, goals, objectives, future events—instead of just isolated events, activities and ideas that are not related to each other. Thus, his/her planning for future events is done with this big picture in mind. Once a manager has this skill, it can be used in many situations where there is a need to integrate different events, concepts and ideas to understand issues better and in detail.

The format for our teacher training course, called the EERace, was conceptualised after we organised a workshop to assess our previous. Twenty-four teachers were divided into 4 discussion groups. It is from integrating all the differing ideas and suggestions that we came up with the new (and exciting) course format.

**Social skill**
Social skill plays an important part such as in facilitating, coaching, influencing and coordinating with others. Part of it is the ability to understand and manage people. This is very important when understanding and managing people in work or organisational settings. In other cases, this deals with the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, and to act accordingly while regulating our own moods. There are many situations where we get carried away with group consciousness and go along with their emotions and opinions. However, it is best that we monitor ourselves constantly and act accordingly to the situation, even if it is disagreeable with the group.

**Creative skill**
We believe that creativity is essential for a competent manager. Many people mistakenly associate the word ‘creative’ for ‘being artistic’. This word actually refers to an ability to ‘create’ in the true sense of the word. This word refers to the ability to create opportunities, learning possibilities and ideas that are related to our work. It refers to the ability to turn good and innovative ideas into reality.

**Working skill**
In an EE programme, there are many duties and responsibilities that are shared between and divided among team members. Sadly, there are some managers who only delegate tasks to their subordinates. For example, when organising any EE events or activities, they delegate almost all tasks to their subordinates, leaving themselves free to pay attention to details like seating positions of invited guests, quality of the sofa sets, souvenirs for the...
guests of honour, etc. While these are necessary, they do not affect the success of the events.

In implementing an EE programme and its associated activities, a manager should do all managerial-level tasks. These include planning, organising and conducting events (school visits or talks, meetings, seminars, workshops, etc.), seeking funds, prepare working papers, guiding team members in their respective jobs, etc.

Upgrade skills whenever possible
A manager must look for opportunities to upgrade the team’s skills constantly. These include:

- multimedia skills (ICT, photography, graphic design, etc.),
- oral skills (presentations, chairing a meeting, training, etc.),
- writing (reports, papers, text for printed media or web, etc.),
- organisational skills (school visits, meetings, workshops, courses, seminars, etc.),
- presentation skills (briefings, oral presentations with or without visuals aids, training talks, etc.)

For example, your agency wants you to be in charge of filling an exhibition hall with exhibits and funding is sufficient. An easy way would be to hire a consultant firm to plan, design and build all the panels, including posters.

However, if the time frame permits, it would be better to undertake the task and train yourself and your staff at the same time. The funds can be used to pay for relevant short courses, purchasing appropriate printing equipment, making poster panels designed in-house, buying publishing software, reference books, etc. When the exhibition hall is ready, the team would have acquired more skills and equipment.

AGENCY LEVEL

The word ‘agency’ in this paper refers to the governmental and non-governmental agencies/departments involved in EE or nature education, and they are normally represented by directors, CEOs, chairpersons, etc.

Support EE
Agencies must be clear on their policies concerning EE. Most do not consider it a priority within their organisation and, understandably, do not have any unit/section on EE. The sad fact is that some agencies do have EE-related units or sections but they lack the ability to provide full support to them.

Support from the highest level in an agency is very important. For example, EE in SFD is also not viewed as a core business but it is still regarded as a necessity. EE and its associated events and activities can create awareness of the importance of forest conservation and sustainable forest management. The RDC have always received full support from our past and present directors. With this long and constant support, the RDC’s EE and other programmes have expanded.

Support staff at all levels
With SEEN, the RDC has many friends around Sabah dealing in EE, either directly or indirectly. Many are practitioners, i.e. they are the ones actively doing EE on the ground. These people are good in what they do and they have great potentials to be excellent EE practitioners. However, most of these practitioners are not officers and this is where the main problem lies—most government agencies only allow officer-level staff to go for meetings, courses, seminars and conferences. This is duly justified if the officers will impart knowledge and information to the lower staff. However, this is rarely the case. Government
agencies should realise that their employees are their assets. Good, competent staff at any level must be allowed to expand their skills and also learn new ones.

Through SEEN, we are often informed of EE-related courses, seminar or conferences relating to EE in Sabah and elsewhere. However, lower-level staff are rarely present in local events. It is very important that agencies encourage these people as it gives them exposure to what other agencies are doing in EE. Besides getting to know other EE practitioners, they can also benchmark themselves and their EE programmes.

Support local trainers
It must be our inherent low self-esteem and self-confidence as a people of Sabah that our agencies are so fond of enlisting the help of foreign consultants or experts. Most of them are no doubt excellent at what they do. However, we as a state sometimes fail to look within Sabah for such people. For example, in 1999 we were asked by a friend to design an EE programme for her section. We agreed to help but our friend’s superior said there was no need. Six years later, with the help of a foreign volunteer, the agency now has a proper EE programme.

At the agency level, we also get consultants to train our staff in EE because they fail to recognise the expertise of their own staff. For example, recently the SFD enlisted the help of an EE expert from a local university in Peninsula Malaysia to train some staff on EE and interpretation. The irony is that the RDC have been conducting these training courses for other government agencies since 1999.

Policymakers must stop harbouring the idea that ‘other people’ are always better than ‘our people’. We are very fortunate nowadays because we can contact SEEN if we need trainers to train our staff. There are many SEEN members who are very capable in various aspects of EE.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this paper has succeeded in any small way to encourage agencies to have effective EE programmes. EE programmes are not at all difficult to design and implement. However, these programmes do not run on their own like computer programs do. As with almost every human endeavour, they need people to implement them. The success of an EE programme largely depends on the people implementing them. And if you are involved with EE in your agency, then the success of your EE programme depends on you. If you love your job and your team members, it is impossible to fail.

Remember: There is no one way to have a perfect EE programme but there are thousands of ways to have an effective one.