

Agricultural Leadership Development: From Networking to Application

Eric K. Kaufman
Program Coordinator
Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL
ekaufman@ifas.ufl.edu

Hannah S. Carter
Director
Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL
hscarter@ifas.ufl.edu

Abstract

Agricultural leadership programs have been widely supported by both the public and private sector and have been praised for the “networking” they provide. However, is there any community benefit? Could these programs be doing more? This paper provides some insight into these issues by looking at contributions of the related research. First, a connection is made between social capital theory and the value of networking. Then, agricultural leadership programs are discussed in terms of benefits they provide to participants and the communities that they serve. Finally, an application component is proposed for use in agricultural leadership programs as a way of improving the effectiveness for the communities that support them.

Introduction

Across the nation and around the world, agricultural leadership programs are being utilized to develop leaders for continued or future service to their community – rural, agricultural, or otherwise. In fact, at least 40 states, three provinces in Canada, and Australia all have agricultural leadership programs developing community leaders. Participants have praised these programs, particularly for the “networking” they provide. However, some important questions remain. First, how does the “networking” provided by leadership programs actually contribute to the betterment of a community? Second, can agricultural leadership programs be doing more to serve the communities that have invested in their programs?

Role of Networking in Community Leadership

According to Rohs and Langone (1993), leadership development programs are a vital and continuing need in communities and organizations across the United States because they help ensure an adequate supply of effective leaders. While the term “leader” remains ambiguous, many people argue that the influence of leaders is recognizable, despite the lack of a universal definition. By teaching new skills, encouraging ideas, and strengthening networking abilities, leadership programs have developed the capacity of citizens to become leaders through more successful engagement (King & Hustedde, 2001).

One technique for enhancing individual leadership capacity has been through the creation of social capital. “Social capital is interpreted to mean both the relations, networks, and obligations existing in social situations and the product of those interactions” (Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998, p. 316). The theory of social capital presumes that the more people connect with each other, the more they trust each other, and thus benefit from one another (Flora & Flora, 1996, 2003).

Scheufele and Shah (2000) propose that the process through which social capital is maintained is a three-way relationship among civic engagement, life satisfaction, and interpersonal trust. Civic engagement refers to people’s connections with the life of their communities. Leadership development programs offer an opportunity for individuals to work together and develop these connections. These connections are what program participants are referring when they cite the valuable “networks” they obtained as a result of their participation.

Creation of Agricultural Leadership Programs

A lack of social capital in rural areas may have been a significant catalyst in the development of agricultural leadership programs. In comparing urban and rural areas, community theorists have identified social structural problems in rural areas that limit the potential of community support (Luloff, 1990; Wilkinson, 1999). The agricultural industry has traditionally had a strong influence on the social structure in rural areas and has actually increased the strain on social ties because of the distance created between people by large farms. As such, farmers and others in the agricultural industry have typically had little social capital on which to rely when dealing with industry and community issues.

Hustedde and Woodward (1996) argue that the key to addressing rural problems is “capacity building” of local leaders. In an effort to address this need, agricultural leadership programs have been developed by public sector groups, such as the Cooperative Extension Service, and by membership organizations, like the Farm Bureau Federation. Although popularity has increased in recent years, agricultural leadership programs actually have a 70-year history of providing for the needs of rural and agricultural communities (Kelsey & Wall, 2003).

Most agricultural leadership programs in existence today have based their framework on the Kellogg Farmer Study Program (KFSP) that was started at Michigan State University in 1965 (Carter, 1999). The KFSP founders recognized the need for effective rural leaders and believed that skills in the social sciences were essential for solving the increasingly complex problems of the agricultural industry (Miller, 1976).

In an analysis of programs based upon the KFSP model, Howell, Weir, and Cook (1982) found common educational objectives to include:

- develop among participants the ability to analyze public problems critically and objectively.
- develop among participants an understanding of the economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of public problems.
- increase the participant's ability to solve public problems by improving his/her leadership and group participation skills.
- increase the participant's understanding of important local, state, national, and international issues. (p. 52)

Similar to the past, modern agricultural leadership programs typically consist of workshops and travel seminars that provide participants with an understanding of the social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions of public problems. These programs encourage the development of effective and responsible agricultural leaders that are capable of addressing industry issues and becoming active participants in public affairs.

Benefits of Agricultural Leadership Programs

Participants in agricultural leadership programs gain knowledge about local, state, regional, national, and international issues affecting their industry. Beyond this, program participants gain “increased self-confidence, broadened horizons, enhanced understanding of community and/or society, improved interpersonal relationships, and improved skills for leadership in group action” (Howell et al., 1982, p. 63). Evaluations from agricultural leadership programs have reported that participants are:

Increasing their leadership skills, increasing their involvement in organizations and activities, increasing their networks, broadening their perspectives on factors that affect their industry and agriculture, becoming more aware of issues, sharpening their critical thinking skills, and becoming more aware of people's differences. (Carter, 1999, p. 19)

In an evaluation of the Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, over 77% of the evaluation participants indicated that increased contacts and networking opportunities were outstanding features of the program. Over 50% of the group indicated that as a result of this program, they were more involved in organizations (Carter & Ladewig, 2004).

Program Challenges

Critics of leadership education suggest that little thought is put into leadership program outcomes. Opponents “contend that leadership education is merely a schedule of interesting and entertaining activities that do little to change the behavior, attitudes, ideas, or skills of the participants” (Hustedde & Woodward, 1996, p. 1).

Kelsey and Wall (2003) found that “agricultural leadership program efficacy has been determined by a number of studies; however, most have not reported on the impacts that participants have had on actual community leadership” (p. 35). One agricultural leadership program showed that program participants were more aware of the issues facing their industry and community as a result of their involvement. However, participants did not necessarily design and implement action plans to address the needs of their personal community. Interview responses from Kelsey and Wall’s research showed that “most participants were not making changes in their communities, nor had they used their networks for community improvement” (p. 43).

According to Miller (1976), the two major objectives of agricultural leadership programs are “(a) to create a better understanding of the economic, political and social framework of American Society and (b) to apply this understanding to the complex problems and unique concerns of agriculture and rural communities” (p. 6). It would seem that descriptions of program success have been based more so on the first objective, with little attention being given to the second. Too often the program administrators are satisfied with improved comprehension, and they seem to forget that the application knowledge is where the real benefit lies.

Participants in the research by Kelsey and Wall (2003) reported that information gained in the program was not effectively used because they did not have the necessary skills to promote change. This problem must be addressed by agricultural leadership program directors. The future success of agricultural leadership programs requires that they move past awareness and develop leaders who will serve as a positive influence in their communities and industry.

Kelsey and Wall (2003) do believe agricultural leadership programs are able to tackle this challenge. As they have reported:

The program provides the long-term contact needed to change leadership behaviors; thus, the potential for incorporating knowledge and skill development exists, but is currently underutilized. Program designers should integrate a leadership project or practicum into the program. Asking participants to create and implement a plan for community development within their home towns would serve to develop leadership skills, needs assessment skills, change agent skills, and increase participant impact on community development, at least in the short term. By experiencing success in a community development project, participants

may also become more motivated to repeat the experience and become truly effective leaders rather than bystanders in their communities. (p. 43-44)

Use of Application Projects

Orientation to community issues is not enough. Agricultural leadership programs must engage participants in development efforts during the course of their participation in the program. Some program directors have illustrated this idea by comparing it to gold prospecting. In many ways, the program staff should serve as outfitters, providing all of the necessary tools and training, while leaving the leadership program participants to the task of mining for the gold nuggets. Internships, practicums, or other group activities have been used by some leadership programs to encourage involvement in community issues by program participants (Hustedde & Woodward, 1996). Although few agricultural leadership programs have incorporated practical application into their program curricula, past participants have suggested that future classes should be engaged in a group project during their tenure in the program (Carter & Ladewig, 2004).

Project CENTRL, an agricultural leadership program in Arizona, has implemented a practical application component in its program. As the program director states, the most important aspect “is giving an opportunity for practical application of the knowledge and skills” imparted by the leadership program (E. Rhodes, personal communication, January 15, 2004). These experiences are a way to learn leadership by putting skills and knowledge about issues or the community into practice. While leadership group activities can be beneficial to the participants and the community, they can be difficult to implement and manage. Program participants may find these activities too demanding for the limited time frame of the leadership program and the time they are already devoting to participation. Whether such activities are included in a leadership program’s curriculum may depend on the individual(s) directing the program, the program resources, and the objectives of the program (Hustedde & Woodward, 1996).

The challenges of implementing application projects can be overcome. Program administrators need to (a) know the needs of their audience, (b) have clear learning objectives for the project, and (c) evaluate the process to determine whether the educational effort was successful. The true success of an application project will be determined by what participants do after the program. When adequate time and attention is given to reflection and learning in application activities, program participants are more likely to recognize an activity’s value and apply skills gained from the activity toward future community development projects.

Many leadership program administrators have found journaling to be helpful in encouraging participants to digest what they are learning and put deep thought into how they can further apply the knowledge and skills gained. These journals may be

an open-ended assignment, but they are likely to be more effective if participants are guided with some questions to which they should respond in their journal. Ideally, leadership programs should engage participants in a way that allows them to identify real-life community problems, develop potential solutions, and carry a selected solution through to completion. An example of project guidelines for such an assignment is included in the appendix of this paper. The guidelines are presented as a handout to be given to leadership program participants, but may be adapted to other formats for presenting the project instructions.

While individual projects will vary considerably and each requires application of a different set of skills, the suggested project guidelines help to ensure several key components. The first is a proposal, during which participants will apply valuable goal setting techniques. Presentations of the project proposal and summary report allow participants the opportunity to formally apply communication skills. In addition, the assignment guidelines encourage active application of team-building skills and will likely lead to effective delegation. Although leadership programs should adapt the project instructions to best fit their individual program goals, the general structure should be preserved in order to obtain full benefit of the application project.

Conclusion

Tymon and Stumpf (2003) have argued that “the concept of social capital will be key to individual and organizational success throughout the twenty-first century” (p. 12). However, the networks accumulated in social capital are not enough. Quality networks are only part of the infrastructure necessary for leading rural communities and the agricultural industry toward a successful future.

Currently, agricultural leadership programs using the KFSP model have demonstrated success in building diverse networks. They have also demonstrated an increased awareness of community issues, be they in the local community or the larger agricultural community. However, the potential and expectation exists for the programs to develop community leaders who can maximize benefits from the available resources and bring positive development to their communities.

What can be done in agricultural leadership programs to enhance effectiveness? Application projects must be implemented that involve program participants in the actual steps and stages of civic engagement. What is at stake? Not only the success and reputation of leadership programs, but the futures of the communities that program participants serve.

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Biography

Eric K. Kaufman earned a B.S. in agricultural education from Ohio State University and then worked for several years as a high school AgriScience instructor. In 2004, Eric graduated with his M.S. in agricultural leadership from the University of Florida, and he is currently continuing toward a Ph.D. in the same program. His graduate assistantship responsibilities include serving as program coordinator for the Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources. Eric has been involved in writing leadership development curricula for the National FFA Organization's *Collegiate LifeKnowledge* program and for Florida Farm Bureau's *Strengthening the Voice* program. His primary research interests include organizational leadership and program evaluation.

Hannah S. Carter began her professional career with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension working within Maine's potato industry. In 1999, she graduated with her M.S. in agricultural education and communication from the University of Florida and in 2004 earned her Ph.D. from the University of Florida in agricultural leadership. Dr. Carter then joined the Department of Agriculture Education and Communication faculty at the University of Florida, where her appointment is to direct the Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, teach undergraduate and graduate classes on leadership development, and further her research in organizational leadership.

Leadership Application Project Instructions

Introduction

The leadership application project is intended to serve as an exercise in practical leadership. Your active leadership role in this important project is a valuable and integral part of your overall experience in the agricultural leadership program.

The project guidelines presented to you are designed to give helpful information in the early planning process, not to prescribe or define your project. Be sure to select a project that has some special meaning to you, while complimenting your abilities and leadership potential.

Your leadership application project is intended to be a “team” project for which you provide a significant source of the leadership. Although the initial plan will be your idea and design, a key part of the project is involving others in the implementation of the plan. Efforts should be made to include at least one other member of your agricultural leadership program class.

The Proposal

It is important to give ample time and thought to selecting your leadership application project. Start by thinking about an organization, community, or “cause” toward which you can apply the knowledge and leadership skills gained from the agricultural leadership program experience. You will be responsible for identifying a real need, developing alternatives to meet that need, selecting an alternative to implement, implementing the solution, evaluating results of the activity, and making recommendations for future endeavors related to the situation you addressed. The following “S.M.A.R.T.” approach provides some practical suggestions in making your final selection:

- S – Specific: Be able to give a clear title and definition to your project.
- M – Measurable: Your progress, goals, and success should be easily assessed.
- A – Appropriate: Make sure the project is meaningful to you and needed by others.
- R – Results: Conduct a project which will continue to give positive impacts.
- T – Timely: Project must be completed during the two-year program.

You must prepare a brief written and oral presentation (1-3 minutes) of your project proposal at the third seminar of the agricultural leadership program. Both of these will be presented to the rest of your class and the program staff. Your written one-page proposal should be a brief description of your plans, providing the following information: 1) Title & Situation Description, 2) Primary Goals & Objectives, 3) Anticipated Involvement & Impact, 4) Key Steps & Timetable, and 5) Required Resources. The oral presentation should, in your own creative way, capture the highlights of the proposal outlined in your written report and be persuasive as to the importance of the project. Part of the goal is to enlist the support of a few of the other program participants.

Implementation

The elements of implementation will certainly vary from one application project to another. However, all projects should involve coordinating a “team” of contributors to the project. Efforts should be made to include at least one other program participant in the implementation of the selected project. In addition, it will be important to maintain detailed records of the progress and accomplishments of your project.

Summary Report

Several seminar sessions will provide you with time to update and share project progress with others. A final presentation will be made at the final seminar, graduation!