Leadership Practices Employed by 4-H Youth Development Educators in a Northeast State

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Abstract

This quantitative study was completed in order to gather initial data on the leadership practices currently being employed by county level 4-H educators in a northeast state. A survey instrument including the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), and a demographics questionnaire, was sent to all extension 4-H educators. Findings had educators self reporting the use of transformational leadership skills fairly often while transactional skills only once in a while. Also, educators reported the moderate use of skills including role modeling and engaging others in activities;

but low usage scores were reported in areas of visioning, bringing people on board, and rewarding people for successes. Recommendations include staff development opportunities that will specifically address the gaps in leadership skills.

Introduction & Conceptual Framework

"I responded that our future can be significantly affected by each of us--by how well we do our job, how we listen and respond to the real issues facing our clientele, and whether we remember that we work for the people--and that the people ultimately decide if Extension will continue to exist" (Felis, 2005, pg. 1).

A growing need for leadership is evident in the shifting demographics of today's society, as well as in the changing nature of the problems individuals are asked to address. Society is facing inevitable change as social and economic landscapes evolve to accommodate new needs of the population. More and more, educational responsibilities are being turned over to local governments and community organizations like Cooperative Extension. This increased responsibility equates to a need for all Extension Educators to assume positions of leadership, if indeed they are to succeed in this increasingly competitive environment. Educators must develop the skills and capacity to work in collaborative groups to address complex problems and improve the quality of life within their communities. Because of the significant changes to society, the leadership philosophies taught in the programs of the past no longer address the complex problems found in the communities and organizations of today (Sandman & Vandenberg, 1995). The management and leadership skills formerly found at the top of the most wanted list, no longer apply, and new leadership skills are needed for success (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000). It will take a savvy organization, composed of a staff that is competent in these new leadership areas, to meet the needs of society's changing demographic (Cooper & Graham, 2001).

A significant component of the Cooperative Extension System is the investment in youth development through the 4-H program. The efforts of 4-H are guided by Extension educators focusing on 4-H youth Development. The 4-H educator's job is to facilitate, coordinate, and lead volunteers who work directly with youth in rural, urban, and suburban areas. 4-H Youth Development educators need to properly meet the needs of young people, their parents, and the volunteer leaders within their programs. According to Stedman and Rudd (2006) as the numbers of 4-H contacts rise, the need for Extension Educators to have the skills that will recruit, retain and motivate volunteers will be the keystone to successful 4-H

programming. Leadership is the key competency for those educators (Boyd, 2003).

These researchers would suggest that Extension educators who have mastered various leadership practices are more likely to have a greater impact on citizens in their communities. With the knowledge of how many people our Extension educators reach each year, it is essential to discover if they possess the kinds of leadership skills that will make them as successful as possible at positively impacting those lives. For educators and staff development staff alike, this knowledge would be able to guide future in-service program to strengthen the organization. For purposes of this study, the researchers focused on transactional versus transformational leadership skills. Burns (1978) defines transactional leadership as focusing on the exchange between leaders and followers. He believes that the bulk of leadership models fall under this heading. By distinction, transformational leadership has the leader engaging others, creating community and raising the level of motivation in both leader and follower (Burns, 1978).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate leadership practices of Cooperative Extension educators with an appointment in 4-H Youth Development. The results of this study will guide the efforts of staff development in order that the educators are equipped with the competencies needed to be successful in their positions.

Methods/Procedures

Population and Sample

The target population for this descriptive study were all current extension educators with a substantial (51% or greater) appointment in 4-H and Youth Development (*N*=79). The population was determined by obtaining a current list of employees and their positions from the Human Resources Office.

Research Instrumentation

The researchers used two instruments to gather data. Bass and Avolio (1995) developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). The MLQ measures elements of transformational and transactional leadership, and measures organizational outcomes (Brown, Birnstihl, & Wheeler, 1996). Kouzes and Posner (2003) developed the 30 question Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI)

measuring leadership practices in five different constructs. The MLQ and LPI measure the competencies leaders are currently using successfully, and what areas may provide opportunities for improvement. These instruments were chosen based on previous studies addressing this issue in other states (Woodrum & Safrit, 2003).

Procedures

The researchers followed procedures outlined in Dillman (2000) for mailed surveys. The first packet of information contained the survey instruments, consent forms, and a letter of introduction to each individual. A follow-up reminder postcard was sent four weeks later to those individuals who had not returned a survey. A second packet was sent to non-respondents four weeks after the post card containing the letter of introduction, consent forms and survey instruments. The time frame was based on recommendations from staff and administrators based on the time of year and commitments of the county educators. A total of 79 surveys were sent, and 48 surveys were returned by educators for a 61% response rate. All research data were entered and analyzed using the SPSS 12.0 program. Researchers compared data from on-time respondents with data given by late responders to control for non-response error.

According to the authors of both instruments, the MLQ and LPI, have continually produced valid assessments of leadership practices among managerial leaders. Because study participants are administrators and directors of Extension personnel, the researchers concluded the instruments were valid for purposes of this research study. Based upon data collected, the researchers calculated a post-hoc reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) to measure internal consistency as an indicator of the instruments providing reliable scores. The five constructs of the LPI resulted in a reliability level of .889 and the 12 constructs of the MLQ resulted in a reliability of .83.

After analyzing the relationship between leadership constructs and finding high correlations (r values greater than .3), a MANOVA was used to examine overall effect and the result was significant per Hotelling's trace ($p<.001$). While the sample for this study was a census, the researchers believe that in the future, the population will not be unlike the current group of individuals. The population is therefore an abstract one, and use of inferential statistics is appropriate (Huck, 2004).

Results

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire: Transformational Leadership Skills

By engaging in transformational leadership, a leader motivates and inspires their followers to a higher level of action and purpose. In the case of the educators, the aggregate mean score for the transformational constructs is 3.07. *Individual Consideration* had the highest mean score of 3.28, while *Idealized Influence – Behavior*, had the lowest mean score of 2.96. Figure 1 shows the mean usage scores for transformational leadership skills.

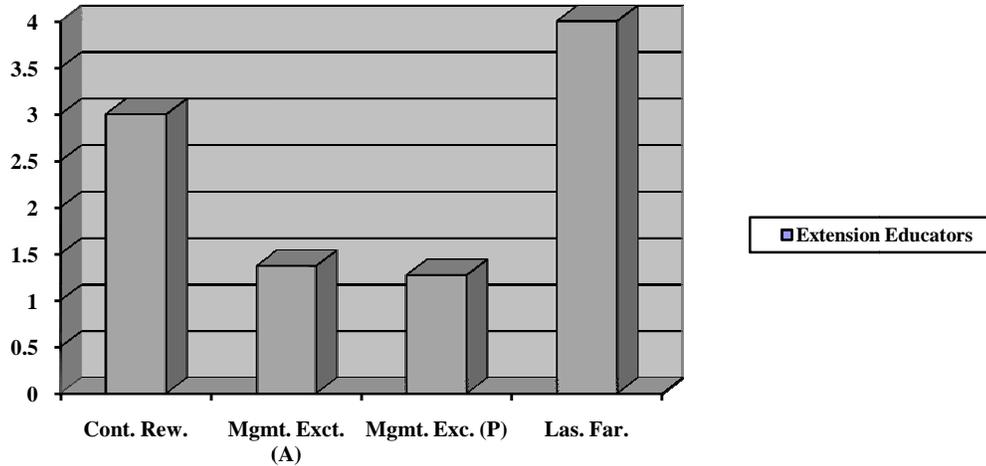**Figure 1. Mean Usage Scores for Transformational Leadership Skills**
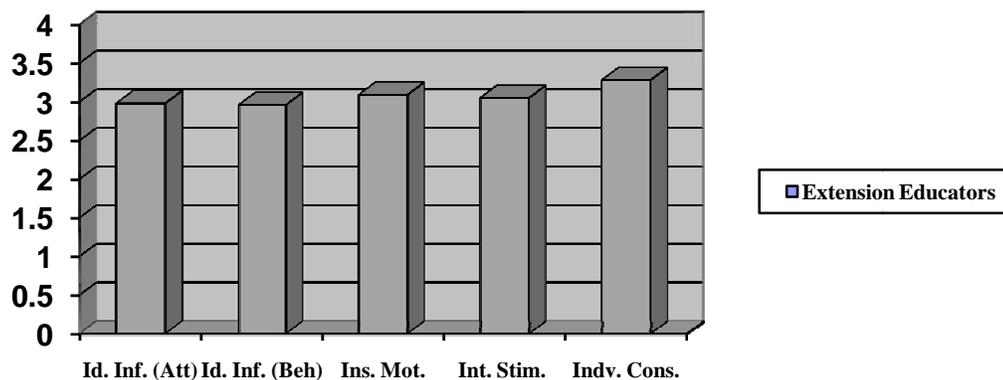
Scale: 0= Not at all, 1= once in a while, 2= sometimes, 3= fairly often, 4= frequently if not always

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire: Transactional Leadership Skills

When a leader uses transactional leadership skills, they inspire their followers to act by offering an exchange of rewards or punishments. Further, the overall mean score for educators on the transactional constructs of the MLQ was a 1.64. *Contingent Reward* had the highest mean score of 3.0; while *Laissez faire Leadership* had the lowest score of .90. Table 2 below presents the means and standard deviations for transactional leadership skills.

**Figure 2. Mean Usage Scores for Transactional Leadership Skills**

Scale: 0= Not at all, 1= once in a while, 2= sometimes, 3= fairly often, 4= frequently if not always

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire: Leadership Outcomes

Leadership outcomes include how effective a leader is evaluated to be, how satisfied followers are with the leader, and how much extra effort a leader puts for to ensure success. When measuring leadership outcomes, the educators had an aggregate mean score of 3.0. *Satisfaction* had the highest mean score of 3.23; while *Extra Effort* had the lowest mean with a score of 2.75 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Mean Usage Scores for Leadership Outcomes**
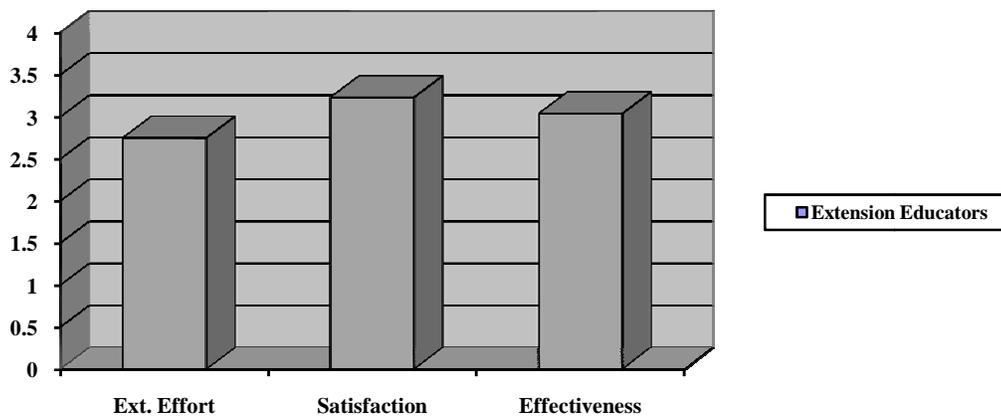
Scale: 0= Not at all, 1= once in a while, 2= sometimes, 3= fairly often, 4= frequently if not always

Leadership Practices Inventory

When modeling the way, a leader provides an example for followers by aligning their behavior with the values that are shared within an organization. For the construct of modeling the way, the educators had an aggregate mean of 7.77. When a leader inspires a shared vision, they can share with followers the possibilities that lay before them. For the construct of inspiring a shared vision, the educators had an aggregate mean of 7.06. Continually searching for ways to change, grow and strengthen the organization, learning from mistakes, and taking risks to improve performance, are all characteristic of a leader who can challenge the process. The construct, challenging the process, educators had an aggregate mean of 7.45. By fostering collaboration, promoting group goals, and building trust among team members leaders can enable others to act. The construct, enabling others to act, the educators had an aggregate mean of 8.39. Recognizing contribution, showing appreciation for the excellence of others, celebrating the victories of the team, and creating a spirit of community encompass the meaning of encouraging the heart. The final construct, encourage the heart, the educators had an aggregate mean of 8.26. Table 4 illustrates the usages of the Practices measured by the LPI.

Figure 4. Mean Usage Scores for LPI Skills
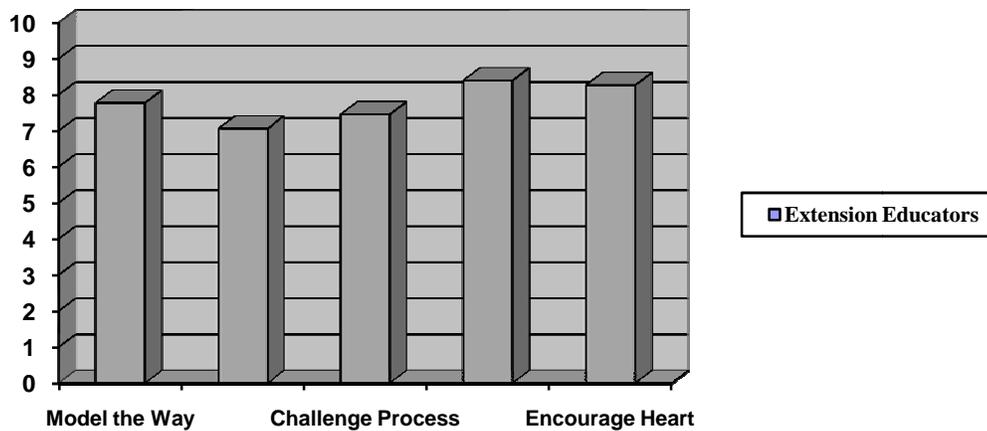
Conclusions and Discussion

The study examined the self reported leadership practices of Extension 4-H Youth Development educators. The results of this study will enable state extension specialists and extension administrators within Cooperative Extension to prioritize leadership development opportunities for extension educators, thus stimulating more effective practices within our organization.

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire

Educators reported they rarely employ transactional skills, with the exception of contingent reward. These researchers believe that because educators are themselves evaluated using transactional methods which contributes to the educators' comfort level with, and use of, those kinds of skills when working with others.

It may also be concluded that the educators believe that they use transformational leadership skills fairly often, specifically providing leadership in the areas of individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. The skills of idealized influence are, admittedly, used less frequently. The behaviors within the practice of idealized influence (MLQ) are similar to those found within the construct of modeling the way (LPI). These researchers conclude that the educators are not as at ease in being "out in front" providing personal examples, but are more comfortable acting from "behind the scenes".

Leadership Practices Inventory

Further, the skills Kouzes and Posner (2003) believed to be necessary for the success of a leader are employed by the educators fairly often or usually. Educators are particularly comfortable with actions related to the areas of encouraging the heart and enabling others to act. This idea of encouraging individuals and groups from "behind the scenes" is very similar to the skills discussed previously from the MLQ (Bass & Avolio, 1995). Educators appear to be very comfortable with the idea of being an encourager; treating people well and rewarding them for the jobs that they do for the larger organization. However, again, those skills that require the educators to be "out in front" providing positive role models, promoting a common vision, and exploring new and creative ways to attack problems, the data shows that educators are less comfortable in those roles. They admit to not using those skills as often.

As Beckhard (1996) tried to explain, essential to understanding this idea of leadership is to understand the relationship between leader and follower; in this case between educator and their clientele. While there are several areas in which educators are using positive leadership skills with some level of success, it is clear that there are areas where improvement is necessary. This improvement will move our educators from practicing fairly often to very frequently and almost always. More importantly, these researchers believe that getting educators moving out from behind the scene, to the forefront and providing a positive figure that inspires, energizes and motivates their followers is vital to the future success of the larger organization.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers have developed the following set of recommendations.

The yearly evaluation process for the educators should begin as an evolutionary process, moving away from a strictly transactional evaluation to include more emphasis on an educator's use of transformational methodologies. This evolution could encourage the educators to practice transformational behavior in their contact with their volunteers and other clientele. Along with an evolution in the evaluation process, supervisors and administrators should encourage educators to step away from the use of contingent reward and other transactional behaviors and focus on working toward a more transformational work environment. Supervisors need to be vigilant in assuring that educators and clientele work together to set standards. Supervisors and administrators should also work with educators to assist them in asking for feedback from clientele, and then using that feedback to constructively improve educator performance and programs. This would be consistent with the skills outlined by Kouzes and Posner (2003) for effective leaders.

The researchers recommend that educators be provided with an atmosphere where they can feel secure about continually developing their own philosophies of leadership and leadership styles. In providing this type of environment, educators can gradually work toward development of these philosophies and styles to sharing them with individuals and group with whom they work. This sharing will place them firmly on the road to providing a meaningful example for volunteers and clientele. These behaviors are consistent with Kouzes and Posner's (2003) skills of effective leadership.

Keeping with the idea of moving our educators to use these skills more frequently, these researchers recommend the development of a series of regional and statewide staff development opportunities that address areas where educators are not employing the most effective leadership skills with regularity. By engaging in such an effort, educators could reform their practices, philosophies, and behaviors to better serve their clientele groups of all ages. Specifically, this research team recommends the following for these development opportunities:

o   Opportunities to learn positive ways in which to be role models for their youth and adult client groups. Training content should first focus on how to seek out constructive feedback from clientele groups. This is consistent with Kouzes and Posner's (2003) skills of inspiring a shared vision. This feedback could include programmatic needs assessments, program evaluations, and evaluations of teaching by both clientele and peers. This feedback will initially begin to shape future performance. It will also engage the educators in thinking about the ways in which they interact with clientele, Kouzes and Posner's (2003) skills in modeling the way. If educators are mentored by supervisors and administrators, this evaluation of interaction can only help them improve the way in which they role model. Training content should also provide educators with a way to help them work with client groups to create a sense of purpose among and between themselves and their followers. This will only help educators to maintain that figure of inspiration and motivation as all parties will be buying into the same purposes and working towards common goals.

o   Professional development programs that build on creative and innovative ways to reward their follower group(s). Training content should focus on moving educators away from the actions of contingent rewards and towards ways to discover creative and innovative ways to recognize jobs well done. This is consistent with the transformational skill of individualized consideration (Bass, 1997) as well as Kouzes and Posner's (2003) skills of enabling others to act and encouraging the heart. Specific examples of creative rewards should be provided by the trainers, and discussions should be encouraged among participants so that ideas can be shared. Educators should also be offered the training on how to develop positive relationships with the groups with whom they work. Training of this type would include who to know your followers and techniques to remember small details that inevitably help the educators recognize the strengths of the group members. These details not only allow the educator to utilize the strengths of the group, thus making the group more effective;

but will also allow the educator when the time comes to have a greater idea of how to reward clientele groups more creatively.

o   Workshops on creating and inspiring a vision that the entire group: educator, youth and volunteers, can share. Just as trainers think about ways in which we teach positive role modeling, so it should also include ways to create and inspire a vision. Specific training content would include how to engage the educators in thinking about the future, focusing on the larger organization's positive characteristics as well as those that are specific to the 4-H Youth Development program. Training should also include methods that help educators communicate those positive issues and topics to clientele groups, developing ways to communicate the power of positive visions and the contributions of visions to creating a preferred future. To master these skills would allow educators to practice, more effectively the skills of challenging the process and inspiring a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2003) and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1997).

Future Research

In the future, Cooperative Extension could implement similar studies in other programmatic areas (agriculture, community development, etc.), enabling the larger organization to provide staff development opportunities that are helpful and engaging to the county based educators, that will improve their leadership skills, thus improving their interactions with clientele and strengthening the organization as a whole.

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Biography

Dr. Jacklyn Bruce is an Assistant Professor of Youth and Adult Leadership Development at The Pennsylvania State University in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education. In this position, Dr. Bruce provides leadership for a variety of state level leadership development programming for the Pennsylvania 4-H program, maintains a rigorous research program in the area of transfer of leadership training and skills and an outreach program on working with teens for Pennsylvania's 4-H Youth Development Extension Agents.

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