Continuing Education Needs of Leadership Program Alumni[1]

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Abstract

An assessment identifying the leadership education needs of three groups of leadership program alumni was developed through focus group interviews. Respondents (386 of 1,063 or 36%) were most interested in training on: engaging others in a common vision, inspiring others, attracting the right people for the task, and influencing others. They preferred to participate in one or two workshops per year. Face-to-face delivery was the format most preferred by respondents with distance-delivery strategies identified as the preferred means by 34% or less, and respondents preferred to pursue regional collaborations in their state. The results will be the basis for advanced leadership development training for alumni of leadership development programs offered through Cooperative Extension. It was recommended that this study be replicated with community leaders that have not participated in formal leadership programs as the basis for developing initial and advanced training needs.

Introduction

One of the issues facing Cooperative Extension is the development of programming to increase the pool of effective leaders in rural communities. Rural communities face many challenges including: maintaining a viable economy, retaining young people, ensuring the sustainability of natural resources and the environment, and supporting a changing social structure.

Local officials are often part-time volunteers in service to their communities. They frequently find themselves overwhelmed at the number and scope of decisions they must make. They also encounter stress from criticism expressed by their constituency (Rinehart, 1995). Local funds are often insufficient to support programs and services. Local leadership often lacks the skills to mobilize citizens to address community concerns. Thus, leadership and managerial skills in such situations are essential qualities for elected and appointed officials. Extension programs must be poised to equip local leaders with skills to manage and direct change in their towns and cities (Rohs, 1988).

Although the Extension System has a long history in leadership development, there is little widespread understanding of the range of skills taught or the amount of effort directed towards teaching leadership skills (Paxson, 1993). Vague and competing definitions of leadership development and the miscommunication about how Extension teaches leadership development identifies a need for both research and policy. Despite the large volume of formal leadership training there has been little research on its effectiveness (Yukl, 2001). Extension needs to decide which skills should be taught as part of its leadership development effort (Paxson, 1993). There is also a need for accurate assessments of leadership program impacts when employing self-reporting measures such as pre-post and then-post designs (Rohs, 2002). Calculating the monetary return on the investment of leadership education programs also presents a challenge–converting outcome measures to monetary values is not easily done (Rohs, 2003).

The development of leadership skills is a process not an event. Community leaders may take part in a leadership development program, however, when the program ends the need for continued development does not end. Studies suggest that rural leaders learn best by a process of action and reflection. Complex leadership skills are difficult to learn in a short training course with limited opportunities for practice and feedback (Yukl, 2001). Practice and feedback often occur in three ways: short refresher courses, follow-up sessions, and specific projects (Yukl, 2001). Follow-up sessions at appropriate intervals after training are important to help leaders discuss successes and problems. Leaders can also practice acquired skills by implementing specific projects. Refresher courses help leaders refocus efforts and refine skills. Learning results from both success and failure in attempting to achieve particular goals. This is one reason why rural leadership development process is as important as the product (Dhanakukmar, Rossing & Campbell, 1996). The need for advanced leadership training is varied

and the data collected in this needs assessment will assist Cooperative Extension faculty in the establishment of educational programs to meet these needs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain information about the continued leadership education needs of community leaders that had already participated in established, in-depth leadership training programs. An important part of the assessment also included how they preferred that information to be delivered. The data collected will help shape the leadership development training efforts of the Cooperative Extension, supporting academic departments and programming teams.

Methods

For the purpose of this needs assessment, three established, in-depth leadership development programs were studied. Program One annually selects 30 farmers, ranchers and agri-business leaders. During the two-year program participants are involved in 13, three-day seminars and two study/travel seminars. Program Two recruits family and community leaders who participate in a Cooperative Extension-sponsored institute that takes place over two-weekends. The leadership institute assists individuals in developing skills to help them take an active part in their community. Program Three is for extension faculty in the north central United States and consists of four, one-week retreats to study and experience leadership.

Two focus groups were conducted to establish the questions for the study (Worthen, Sanders & Fitzpatrick, 1997). A group of four alumni of Program One from eastern Nebraska and a group of four alumni of Program Two from the western Nebraska Panhandle were interviewed. During the focus group, participants were asked to describe their current leadership development needs, preferred method of delivery and plans for future leadership involvement. The results of the focus groups were transcribed and returned to the participants for validation. Questions for the survey were developed from the similarities in the focus group sessions. The first section of the survey contained 18 leadership-training topics. The respondents were asked to rate their helpfulness in increasing their effectiveness as leaders in their community using a Likert-type scale (1=Not helpful, 3=Somewhat helpful, 5=Very helpful). Other questions focused on: level of leadership development training desired; preferred means of receiving training; collaboration strategies; past, current and future leadership roles; and demographics (e.g., level of education, age, gender, occupation).

Alumni rosters were obtained from the sponsoring units of the three programs. Because of the differences in population sizes, it was decided the sample would be the entire population. Cover letters, questionnaires, and return envelopes were mailed to all alumni during the spring of 2001. Appropriate follow-up procedures were used (Salant & Dillman, 1994). Data was coded, entered and analyzed using

SPSS-PC. The data collected was deemed reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. Comparisons of first, second and third respondents indicated no differences in respondent groups.

Surveys were mailed to 1,063 adult alumni of the three leadership programs in Nebraska. Three hundred and eighty-six surveys were returned (Program One, 215/500 or 43%; Program Two, 156/545 or 29%; and Program Three, 15/18 or 83%). Male and female respondents were balanced across the study, however, they were not balanced within program response groups. Seventy-six percent of program one respondents were male, 75% of Program Two respondents were female, and 60% of Program Three respondents were male. Most respondents (75%) ranged in age from 41-60 years. The majority of respondents had attained a bachelor's degree (159 or 41%), 103 or 26% had attained a graduate degree (Masters, Ph.D. or Ed.D.), 36 or 9% had attained an associate's degree, and 66 or 17% had attained a high school diploma.

Findings

When ranked by mean score, the top six topics alumni of leadership development programs identified as helpful were: 1) engaging others in a common vision; 2) inspiring others; 3) attracting the right people for the task; 4) influencing others; 5) generating solutions to problems; and 6) improving facilitator skills (see Table 1). The items alumni identified of less importance but still "somewhat helpful" were: 1) gathering information through use of computers and Internet; 2) developing multimedia presentations; 3) growing from failure; and 4) mentoring emerging leaders. Participants in Program Three, Cooperative Extension faculty, rated 1) gathering information through use of computers and Internet, 2) developing multimedia presentations and 3) improving presentation skills, considerably lower than respondents in the other programs. Program Three participants also rated "seeking funding" considerably higher than the other two groups.

Table 1. Training Topic Means and Standard Deviations of Leadership Program Alumni

Topic	Program 1 N=215		Program 2 N=156		Program 3 N=15		Total Mean N=386	Total SD N=386
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Engaging others in a common vision	4.07	.78	4.10	.83	4.13	.64	4.08	.80
Inspiring others	4.02	.77	4.06	.82	3.93	.96	4.04	.79
Attracting the right people for the task	3.98	.86	4.01	.86	3.80	1.15	3.99	.87
Influencing others	4.00	.81	3.98	.85	3.53	.99	3.97	.83
Generating solutions to	4.03	.84	3.83	.95	3.67	.90	3.94	.89

problems								
Improving facilitator skills	3.92	.82	3.98	.90	3.80	1.08	3.94	.86
Improving presentation skills	3.94	.88	3.82	.99	3.20	1.08	3.86	.94
Listening	3.94	.97	3.73	1.12	3.13	1.19	3.83	1.05
Helping followers implement ideas	3.72	.87	3.82	.81	3.87	.92	3.76	.85
Influencing groups through public speaking	3.82	.97	3.61	1.04	3.53	.99	3.73	1.00
Rewarding and recognizing others	3.66	.90	3.73	.99	3.53	.99	3.68	.94
Seeking funding	3.56	1.02	3.70	1.17	4.00	1.07	3.63	1.08
Managing time effectively	3.74	1.00	3.50	1.08	3.07	1.27	3.62	1.05
Developing a sharper personal image	3.61	.96	3.57	1.10	3.33	.82	3.58	1.01
Mentoring emerging community leaders	3.54	.90	3.61	1.04	3.40	1.12	3.56	.96
Growing from failure	3.54	.99	3.43	1.04	3.20	.87	3.49	1.00
Developing multimedia presentations	3.39	1.05	3.46	1.15	2.67	1.23	3.39	1.11
Gathering information through use of computers and Internet	3.41	1.05	3.37	1.26	2.33	.90	3.35	1.15

Note. 1=Not helpful; 2=A little helpful; 3=Somewhat helpful; 4=Helpful, 5=Very helpful.

When comparing helpfulness of leadership topics by level of education, respondents that had graduate degrees reported four topics would be less helpful than respondents with bachelors, associate or high school degrees: 1) improving presentation skills, 2) generating solutions to problems, 3) growing from failure and 4) developing a sharper image. In each instance graduate degree recipients report significantly lower needs for training, across topics (see Table 2).

Table 2. MANOVA of Leadership Development Topic by Levels of Education

Topic	High School Diploma N=66		Associate Degree N=36		Bachelors Degree N=159		Graduate Degree N=103		F
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	
Managing time effectively	3.70	1.00	3.97[b]	.85	3.69[c]	1.00	3.60[bc]	1.05	4.94*
Inspiring others	3.95	.88	4.00	.73	4.11	.74	3.99	.80	.97
Engaging others in a common vision	4.05	.83	3.89	.71	4.19	.72	4.04	.83	2.21
Influencing others	4.10	.81	3.97	.75	4.03	.80	3.81	.89	1.83
Listening	3.93	.99	3.97	.91	3.93[c]	1.19	3.52[c]	1.15	4.01*
Rewarding and recognizing others	3.82[a]	.89	3.69	.79	3.78[c]	.89	3.39[ac]	.99	4.16*
Gathering information through use of computers and Internet	3.57[a]	1.14	3.36	1.05	3.46[c]	1.10	2.97[ac]	1.20	4.77*
Developing multimedia presentations	3.49	1.06	3.39	.96	3.46[c]	1.11	3.12[c]	1.15	3.21*
Helping followers implement ideas	3.73	.78	3.80	.72	3.70	.91	3.84	.83	.42
Improving facilitator skills	3.93	.94	3.97	.91	4.05	.78	3.74	.90	3.44*
Seeking funding	3.73	1.06	3.80	.83	3.55[c]	1.07	3.62[c]	1.19	.88
Improving presentation skills	4.07	.80	4.20	.68	3.97	.82	3.39	1.12	12.72*
Growing from failure	3.52[a]	1.00	3.72[b]	.85	3.59[c]	1.00	3.16[abc]	.97	6.02*
Mentoring emerging community leaders	3.60	.91	3.58	.73	3.56	.93	3.48	1.10	.57
Influencing groups through public speaking	3.90[a]	.94	3.75	.73	3.82[c]	1.03	3.71[ac]	1.00	4.48*
Generating solutions to problems	3.98[a]	.81	4.19[b]	.71	4.06[c]	.84	3.59[abc]	.99	7.97*
Developing a sharper personal image	3.78[a]	1.01	3.81[b]	.82	3.65[c]	.97	3.23[abc]	1.04	5.89*
Attracting the right people for the task	4.20[a]	.68	4.08	.73	4.01[c]	.88	3.76[ac]	.95	4.68*

Note. 1=Not helpful; 2=A little helpful; 3=Somewhat helpful; 4=Helpful, 5=Very helpful.
*Significant difference (p<.05) among 4 means.
[a]Denotes significant difference between High School and Graduate degrees as a result of Tukey Post Hoc tests.
[b]Denotes significant difference between Associate and Graduate degrees as a result of Tukey Post Hoc tests.
[c]Denotes significant difference between Bachelors and Graduate degrees as a result of Tukey Post Hoc tests.

Alumni of established leadership educational programs most frequently preferred to attend one or two yearly workshops to improve their leadership skills (see Table 3). However, they were also interested in certification programs, obtaining Continuing Education Units and degree programs. Twenty-two percent (84 respondents) expressed interest in completing a leadership development graduate program. Program One participants were twice as interested in leadership development programs as Program Two participants.

Table 3. Frequencies for Preferred Levels of Leadership Development Training

Education/Training Level	**Program 1** *N=215*	**Program 2** *N=156*	**Program 3** *N=15*	**Total** *N=386*
One or two yearly workshops	156 (73%)	102 (65%)	10 (66%)	268 (69%)
Enroll in leadership courses for CEU's for your employment	63 (29%)	17 (11%)	15 (100%)	105 (27%)
Series of workshops to achieve a leadership certificate	57 (27%)	34 (22%)	6 (40%)	97 (25%)
Enroll in leadership development course for undergraduate credit	63 (29%)	17 (11%)	15 (100%)	95 (25%)
Complete a leadership development graduate program	72 (33%)	10 (6%)	2 (13%)	84 (22%)

Face-to-face delivery was an overwhelming choice of training method across all respondent groups (Table 4). All other forms of delivery were identified by 38% or less of the respondents. Satellite delivery was the least preferred (13%), however there was nearly a 100% percentage difference in preference between "satellite" and "satellite with onsite facilitation" as means of training delivery.

Table 4. Frequencies for Preferred Means of Training Delivery

Methods of Delivery	**Program 1** *N=215*	**Program 2** *N=156*	**Program 3** *N=15*	**Total** *N=386*
Face-to-face	181 (84%)	121 (78%)	13 (87%)	315 (82%)
Videotape	57 (27%)	51 (33%)	0 (0%)	108 (28%)
Satellite with onsite facilitation	48 (22%)	43 (28%)	7 (47%)	98 (25%)
On-line (Web-based)	82 (38%)	43 (28%)	8 (53%)	133 (34%)
Satellite	23 (11%)	26 (17%)	2 (13%)	51 (13%)

When asked if they were interested in collaborating with other alumni from their program, respondents preferred primarily to work with alumni from their region

of the state (43%), followed by working with alumni from several surrounding counties (28%), their county (9%), their community (5%) or multi-state groups (4%). If they were to assemble a leadership group that would encompass alumni from their program and other programs, they preferred that the leadership group be from their region of the state (47%) followed by working with alumni of their surrounding counties (31%), county (7%) or community (6%).

Conclusions and Recommendations

When ranked by mean scores, the top six topics alumni of leadership development programs identified as useful were more leadership than operational skills. These skills included: engaging others in common vision, inspiring others, attracting the right people for the task, influencing others, generating solutions and facilitation skills. We might suggest these high-level skills are better obtained through education, action and reflection. Respondents, however, preferred to attend yearly workshops in face-to-face settings. Such single meeting, event driven programming may be less likely to produce results in transformational skills.

Low mean scores on technology-related topics such as satellite and web-base program delivery may be a result of educational levels or access to technology at work and access to technology training at work.

It appears as if the Program One respondents are interested in process-driven programming (undergraduate, graduate, certificate, etc.) more than Program Two respondents. This could be a reflection of the type of leadership program they participated in–Program One participants made a significantly greater time commitment to gain leadership skills than alumni of programs two and three. Program One participants have invested a considerable amount of time in leadership development and are willing to invest even more time to develop key skills.

When leadership topics were compared by educational levels, respondents with graduate degrees reported four topics would be less helpful than respondents with bachelors, associate or high school degrees: improving presentation skills, generating solutions to problems, growing from failure and developing a sharper image. Many of these skills are developed in formal education programs.

The desire for high touch, face-to-face programming, that could be expensive, may be tied to two factors. Participants may be comfortable with prior classroom learning experiences, and may not have been involved in extensive distance-delivered programming. It is also possible that participants value networking with others as a means of learning and sharing experiences. This is more likely to occur in a face-to-face situation.

Regional programming across the state may attract those seeking a more advanced set of leadership skills. This may stem from a desire to gather new ideas

from other communities. Program One and Program Three participants traveled to new locations for study of leadership during their original leadership development training. This survey reflects they see merit in connecting with others from different regions.

It is recommended that the next step of the data collection be pursuing responses from community leaders who have not participated in established, in-depth leadership development programs. The comparison between continued educational needs of leadership development program alumni and non-alumni should provide direction in developing initial and advanced leadership development program curricula.

In general, inconsistencies of leadership programming content and duration across Cooperative Extension-sponsored leadership initiatives complicate comparisons of multiple program outcomes and needs. Therefore, Cooperative Extension faculty are encouraged to implement guidelines for leadership programming that will lead to content similarity, replications, and benchmarks.

Educational Importance

Cooperative Extension is involved in leadership development initiatives in a variety of program scopes and intensity. This needs assessment provides the basis for developing a planning tool to establish continuing leadership education programs for rural leaders. Complex skills related to leadership are difficult to learn in short training courses (Yukl, 2001). Opportunities to practice skills, discuss leadership strategies and take refresher courses provide leaders with action and reflection. Learning results from both success and failure in attempting to achieve particular goals. This is one reason why the process in rural leadership development in Extension is as important as the product (Dhanakukmar, Rossing & Campbell, 1996). Matching what we know to be effective in leadership development with the needs identified by alumni will challenge us to develop a program with the right set of skills delivered in the best way to strengthen the leadership pool of effective leaders in rural communities.

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