

Perceptions of Leadership Skills as an Indicator of a Community's Social Capital

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Abstract

The leaders of two local and regional organizations, Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and Workforce Development Board (WDB), were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the leadership skills of each other as an indicator of the social capital within the community. Results showed the majority of both groups did not know if their counterparts possessed basic leadership abilities that included communication skills, task and maintenance skills, conflict management, etc. However, neither group gave the other low ratings on any of the skills. The implications of these findings are that there is little interaction between these two groups on local and regional projects and programs. This suggests the social capital that results when local leaders interact and influence other parts of the community is not being realized and thus is not utilized for local and regional initiatives to the extent that it could be.

Introduction

At the Wednesday afternoon board meeting of the Regional Workforce Development Board, the chair calls the group to order so that the business of the day can begin. Seated around the table are representatives of the businesses in the region, the educational institutions, several nonprofits, and some government agency heads – about 15 people. The percentage of members from each representative group is prescribed by statute – 51% must be business enterprises and 49% must represent other organizations in the community.

On the following Thursday afternoon, the County Extension Director meets with the director's community advisory board comprised of representatives from three other advisory groups. At the table are representatives from the agriculture agent's advisory board that may include cattle ranchers, swine producers, citrus growers, dairy farmers, landscape nursery owners, and others. The family consumer sciences agent's advisory committee is composed of representatives from target audiences with specific economic or social needs such as teen mothers or

caregivers for the elderly. The 4-H agent's advisors are involved with youth programs.

The CES and WDB advisory groups convene on a regular basis in communities of different size and complexity throughout the United States. What is the importance of these meetings to members attending and to the community at large? The members and the leaders of both groups can be described as part of a community's social capital that refers to aspects of social organization including networks, norms, and trust. Such facilitate coordination and cooperation thereby benefiting everyone. Social capital is not only a desirable end in itself, but it strengthens investments in physical and human capital (Putnam, 1993).

The leadership capability within a community is a valuable asset which government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private enterprise actively and aggressively seek to increase and enhance by training and education, recruitment of new officers and personnel, and recognition of accomplishment. For example, Ladewig and Rohs (2002) report on the regional program developed by the Cooperative Extension Directors and Administrators to improve the collective leadership of current and potential leaders through a competency based program based on managing tasks and leading people. Other leadership education includes local and regional programs by community colleges, professional associations, and County Cooperative Extension Services. Improving leadership capability is the source of many popular books and programs. It has been a prominent topic for several decades and its appeal is not declining.

In this study, local leadership is viewed as a component of the broader concept of social capital that is required to build other forms of capital within a community. Green and Haines (2002) identified it as human capital, physical capital, financial capital, and environmental capital. These types of community capital are interrelated and interact through leaders operating locally, regionally, and nationally. The effectiveness of these leader relationships is an indicator of a community's social capital (i.e., how well the leaders work with each other to identify local problems and issues and attain group goals). How do these leaders perceive each other in terms of possessing specific skills and competencies needed to function effectively in the community? Do they see each other as having levels of skill and competency to be a community leader? Do they interact enough with each other to know and understand the others' leadership capabilities and community connections? What are the implications of the perceptions of these two sets of leaders for local communities?

This paper examines the perceptions of leadership skills and competency of two groups in leadership positions in the community: Cooperative Extension Directors (CEDs) and Workforce Development Board Directors (WBDs). The perceptions of each group about the other are used as an indicator of social capital within a community.

Background

A survey of the Workforce Board Directors and the Extension County Directors in Florida was conducted in 2001. Both groups were asked about their perceptions of the leadership skills of the other group.

The County Extension Service (CES) is an organization within each of Florida's 67 counties that conducts the University of Florida's educational outreach in agriculture, family and consumer sciences, youth development, and other specialties related to a county's needs based on geographic location and population interests. Workforce Development Boards (WDB) are regional organizations in 24 community college districts in the state dedicated to improving the human capital through vocational and technical education, welfare transition, and human services programs. These two organizations have some similarities in governance, organizational structure, and regional economic interests. Advisory groups help to determine program content and direction for CES local operation. The CED is accountable to these local advisory committees, the county commissioners and, to varying degrees, the Extension Administration at the University of Florida. The WDB is accountable to the regional trustees who represent business and industry, education, and social service agencies in the area as well as the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation (formerly the Florida Department of Labor). Both CES and WDB are dedicated to improving the local and regional economy and their programs reflect this mission. This is particularly true in rural communities that have limited employment opportunities and high rates of unemployment.

The leadership capability of these two groups is important in every region but it is particularly important in areas with limited physical, financial, environmental, and human capital. Local leadership is the social capital of the community that connects all the other types of capital on both the vertical and the horizontal dimension, with the horizontal dimension depicting the interactions at the community level (Warren, 1987). The more interactions and connections there are within the community, the more enterprise there is and the greater the overall vitality. The importance of local leadership cannot be overlooked in the importance of developing and sustaining vital and thriving communities, large and small.

Method

A telephone survey instrument was developed with the help of the University of Florida Survey Research Center. The instrument was pre-tested with CES and WDB personnel after that a few modifications were made in the format of the questions. Surveys were administered in 2001 in the spring by the UF Survey Research Center. The population for this study was a census consisting of 67 CEDs and 24 WDBs. The CES and WDB Directors were surveyed with a response rate of 96% (N=64) of the CES Directors and 79% (N=19) of the WDB

Directors. Of those responding, 74% (N=14) of the WBDs and 72% (N=46) of the CEDs answered the perceptions of leadership questions on the survey. The Directors in both groups that did not respond could not be reached by phone after three attempts and phone messages to return the call. Responses were coded and arranged on a scale to reflect a range of perceptions from “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” “poor” to “do not know.” Eight leadership skills were chosen to assess the perceptions of each group about the others’ skills.

These eight leadership skills are common to both CES and WDB Directors and most administrators. The skills are not inclusive of all the tasks and personnel competencies employed by either set of directors, but they are a generic list selected for the purpose of this study.

- Ability to build teams

Both director groups utilize person within and external to their organization to accomplish tasks and to resolve issues. The ability to build and work with teams extends the capabilities of the leader and the effectiveness of the organization.

- Ability to manage conflict

Within every organization there are real and potential areas of conflict and disagreement. Conflict is a fact of life that does not go away and the successful leader can recognize its emergence and manage it so that it does not destroy the organization and damage its mission.

- Ability to make decisions

The successful leader must make decisions based on sound factual data and consultation with others. These decisions must be consistent with organizational policy and ethical standards.

- Ability to listen and to give feedback

Attending to one’s employees or to members of the community, including board or advisory members, is one of the most important skills a leader can have. To be able to listen effectively and give appropriate feedback is not innate to an individual but a skill that must be learned.

- Ability to manage tasks and to manage people

Task management and people management are different skill sets with task management implying a vertical dimension and people management implying a horizontal dimension. Successful leaders must be able to work in both dimensions.

- Ability to motivate and to reward employees

Managing people implies interaction that can be motivating and rewarding or demoralizing and punishing. The successful leader is positive.

- Ability to work with advisory groups or boards

This is a vital part of most administrators' job description. It is the essence of developing social capital that works for the organization and the community as a whole.

- Ability to obtain input from diverse groups and individuals

The diversity within communities necessitates competence in working with people from different cultures and socio economic backgrounds.

Results

The most striking feature of the data collected from both the WBDs and the CEDs about each other is that both groups professed not to know about their counterparts' leadership skills more often than they said they knew. In the CED responses, 59 to 74% indicated they did not know about the WBDs leadership skills. CEDs rated 2% of WBD leadership skills as poor. Fair ratings ranged from 7 to 11%; good ratings ranged from 15 to 22%; and, excellent ratings ranged from 2 to 17%.

The responses of the WBDs was very similar to that of the CEDs with a range of 43 to 86% indicating they did not know about CEDs leadership skills. The exception in the WBD responses is that 43% of them rated two CED leadership skills as excellent, "ability to listen and give feedback" and "ability to work with advisory boards and groups." However, 43% also indicated they did not know about these two skills.

Overall the CEDs received higher ratings of excellence than they gave their counterparts in the ability to use leadership skills with the exception of "ability to manage conflict" and "ability to manage task and people." On both of these skills the percent difference was small between the two with WBDs receiving higher ratings of "excellent" than the CEDs. On the other hand, CEDs gave WBDs higher ratings on the leadership skills in the "good" column than WBDs gave them although the percent differences were also small. CEDs used the "fair" rating on every leadership skill although these ratings did not exceed 11% of the CED responses in any leadership skill. The WBDs used the rating of "fair" on only three skills and these percentages were also small. Only 2% of CEDs described WBDs as "poor" and these were on four skills: (a) ability to manage conflict, (b) ability to listen and give feedback, (c) ability to work with advisory groups and boards, and (d) ability to obtain input from diverse groups and

individuals. None of the WBDs perceived the CEDs to be “poor” in the designated leadership skills.

Table 1. Ratings for county extension directors by workforce board directors.

Leadership Skills	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't Know	Refused
Ability to build teams	35.7% (5)	14.3% (2)	0.0%	0.0%	50.0% (7)	0.0%
Ability to manage conflict	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	0.0%	0.0%	85.7% (12)	0.0%
Ability to make decisions	28.6% (4)	21.4% (3)	0.0%	0.0%	50.0% (7)	0.0%
Ability to listen and give feedback	42.9% (6)	14.3% (2)	0.0%	0.0%	42.9% (6)	0.0%
Ability to manage tasks and people	7.1% (1)	21.4% (3)	7.1% (1)	0.0%	64.3% (9)	0.0%
Ability to motivate and reward employees	0.0%	21.4% (3)	7.1% (1)	0.0%	71.4% (10)	0.0%
Ability to work with advisory groups or boards	42.9% (6)	14.3% (2)	0.0%	0.0%	42.9% (6)	0.0%
Ability to obtain input from diverse groups/individuals	21.4% (3)	7.1% (1)	7.1% (1)	0.0%	64.3% (9)	0.0%

Table 2. Ratings for workforce board directors by county extension directors.

Leadership Skills	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Don't Know	Refused
Ability to build teams	10.9% (5)	21.7% (10)	8.7% (4)	0.0%	58.7% (27)	0.0%
Ability to manage conflict	8.7% (4)	15.2% (7)	6.5% (3)	2.2% (1)	63.7% (29)	4.4% (2)
Ability to make decisions	15.2% (7)	19.6% (9)	4.4% (2)	0.0%	60.9% (28)	0.0%
Ability to listen and give feedback	10.9% (5)	17.4% (8)	10.9% (5)	2.2% (1)	58.7% (27)	0.0%
Ability to manage tasks and people	8.7% (4)	19.6% (9)	8.7% (4)	0.0%	63.0% (29)	0.0%
Ability to motivate and reward employees	2.2% (1)	17.4% (8)	6.5% (3)	0.0%	73.9% (34)	0.0%
Ability to work with advisory groups or boards	17.4% (8)	15.2% (7)	6.5% (3)	2.2% (1)	58.7% (27)	0.0%
Ability to obtain input from diverse groups/individuals	10.9% (5)	15.2% (7)	10.9% (5)	2.2% (1)	60.9% (28)	0.0%

Discussion

Table 1 shows the responses of County Extension Directors regarding their perceptions of leadership skills of Workforce Board Directors. Table 2 shows the Workforce Board Directors' responses to the same set of questions. The eight leadership skills were rated by each respondent according to that individual's perception of the abilities of the counterpart group. Table 1 and Table 2 show the number and percent of each group's response to each question about the leadership ability of the other group.

Should it be surprising or expected that these two groups of leaders are more unaware than they are aware of each other's leadership skills? Each group knew that their counterpart would be asked the same set of questions. What is not known here is the basis of their perceptions about the leadership skills of the other. Was it because "do not know" is a safe and noncommittal answer? Or might these perceptions be explained in part by the amount of interaction between these two groups within a community's horizontal functions. Warren (1987) describes horizontal functions of a community as those things that hold it together at the local level. These data indicate there is little interaction between the two groups on the horizontal functions of the community. Warren indicates a

community is a social system and the functions of the local units contribute to holding it together. The CES and the WDB might be identified as local units in Warren's theoretical context of the community as a system. Warren identifies three unit functions relevant to the locality in which they occur: (a) performing one or more of the functions, (b) providing employment and income, and (c) providing a link to the larger society. The context of community functions will be used to discuss the how the leaders of these two organizations might contribute to the community's social capital.

- Performing a locality relevant function

Warren (1987) describes these functions as production-distribution-consumption, socialization, social control, social participation, and mutual support. As indicated by Warren, these functions are carried out by families or by systems external to the community. Neither the CED nor the WBD carries out these functions in direct ways although each organization contributes in indirect ways. For example, the CES seeks to improve the production and distribution of agricultural products. It seeks to improve consumption to the extent that programs are directed to healthy lifestyles and appropriate diet. The WDB is not directly tied to these locality relevant functions. Instead they seek to develop the work force capability of organizations and businesses that provide these functions in the community. Although the locality relevant functions occur in the community or impact it, the interaction of the WDB and the CES would not necessarily be associated with these functions.

- Providing employment and income

Neither the WDB nor the CES are major employers in even the largest counties in the state although their presence is a positive factor in terms of income to the community. Again, they seek to enhance the employment and income of individuals and families through their programs rather than by direct employment or provision of income subsidies for designated recipients or programs. However, the functions of WDB and CES are affected by the region's employment and income due to the support their community unit derives from local, state, and federal funding.

- Providing a link between various units and individuals in the community and the culture and social systems of the larger society beyond the community's borders

It is this local unit function where it might be reasonable to expect the CES and the WDB to interact. According to Warren (1987), "various local units provide channels through which innovations are introduced into the culture of the local community" (p. 277). He acknowledges the cultural change that is introduced by local units is of considerable value and proportion and these bring influence and cultural change from systems external to the community. This is the venue one

might expect the CES and the WDB to interact with and to influence each other and as well as other units in the community. CES provides many linkages to individuals, families and organizations by providing services and information. These include farmers, ranchers, families, youth groups, and service organizations to name a few. The CES does this through providing education and research information to constituencies on multiple diverse topics and issues. The extra community linkages include the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service as the connection to every other land grant university in the United States. That is a connection of no small consequence and there is ample evidence that CES units all over the United States provide a link between community and the larger society.

The WDB also provides many linkages that include connections to the business community in its quest for skilled workers. Beyond the local community the WDB is linked to more than one official state office or authority that funds or impacts regional programs. Education program vendors include nonprofits, community colleges, and universities as well as for profit businesses.

Conclusions

The regional WBDs and the local CEDs contribute to social capital through their individual efforts but the linkage to each other is tenuous given the evidence from the data shown here. The effectiveness of leader relationships and interactions as an element of social capital is not shown in this study. While individual and organizational leadership capability may exist in both groups, the interaction between the two groups does not indicate a contribution to their communities' social capital within the definition given by Green and Haines (2002).

The fact that the CEDs and WBDs do not know if their counterpart has the specific leadership skills studied here does not mean that either group is deficit in leadership skill and capability. There are many programs, regional and national, aimed at improving the skills of current and potential leaders and the leaders surveyed in this study may well have participated in one or more of these programs. What can be concluded from this study is that there is little evidence of interaction between the leaders of these two groups. Why is this important? The social capital of the community is less than it might be when these two organizations do not overlap and intermingle with leaders, members, projects and reciprocal programs. For example, local CES offices have access to programs that deal with family financing, job readiness, elder companions, food safety – all of which are relevant to one or more of the Welfare to Work populations served by the Workforce Boards. Further these programs are available without cost, or at a nominal fee, to the regional Workforce Boards. If Workforce Boards do not access these or similar programs, it is assumed that they would be provided at some cost by another agency or organization. When Cooperative Extension Services do not reach out to other agencies that provide education to mutual

constituencies, opportunities for mutual accountability and visibility are lost for both organizations.

Given the commonalities of the two groups, it might be expected that there would be more interaction between them. There is little indication of this overlap or interaction. Warren's (1987) view of local units that contribute to the community as a system through their interaction with each other is not shown in this study. There is no evidence of a link "a local unit provides between various different local units and its own extracommunity system [as] a two way channel. Impacts move not only from the extracommunity system through the local unit to other community units; they also move from other units on the local community scene through the specific local unit to its extra community system" (p. 278-279). This kind of impact cannot be concluded based on these findings. Thus the contributions to the communities' social capital cannot be concluded from these findings.

What is missing from these data and this study that might have made the results more revealing about the leadership contributions of these two groups of leaders to the social capital of the community? There is no indication as to why the leaders of these two organizations do not show more evidence of interaction. If this information were available it might be used to overcome barriers to joint programming and to stimulate more collaboration especially on governing boards and advisory committees. Leaders that participate in each others' organizations show "cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p.1) and these communities are more likely to thrive and flourish. This happens when "linked communities can join together to respond to issues and concerns in their organizations, neighborhoods, and cities before situations reach a crisis point" (Felkins, 2002, p. 219).

What is the significance of being a leader in one organization and being unknown by other similar groups? These and other questions come to mind when one examines the results of this study. The conclusion however remains when leaders of important local and regional organizations do not interact enough to know and understand each other's organization. They lose the opportunity to support each other and the constituents they serve. When this happens, according to Felkins (2002), the community and its people are "at risk" for the loss of human and social capital that makes communities vibrant and productive places to live and work. Leadership is a component of social capital that is a valuable asset in every community and it is the responsibility of the leaders in the community organizations to utilize it wisely.

Implications

The community will benefit when its leaders interact in ways that might stimulate and increase program collaboration and involvement with each other. The agency

advisory board is an ideal place for this to occur. The resources of each agency can be multiplied when services to a constituency are coordinated.

In addition, when leadership skills are used to make a difference in a community, they can provide linkages that enable leaders and interested people to respond to problems before they reach a crisis stage (Felkins, 2002). These communities face many kinds of problems and leaders with connections to each other can bring perspective to issues affecting all or part of a group.

Further, when local Cooperative Extension and Workforce Board Directors are perceived by others to be leaders, the community's social capital is enhanced, or as Warren (1987) might suggest, these are examples of horizontal functions that hold the community together. Further, the positive perception of both County Extension and Workforce Development organizations is multiplied within the local or regional setting as well as beyond. These organizations have both external and internal obligations that can be met more effectively by persons perceived to be community leaders rather than just administrative heads.

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