

Enhancing Leadership Skills in Volunteers

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Abstract

This article describes how professionals leading volunteers can purposefully work toward developing the “leadership identity” of individual volunteers. These concepts and the application of them are presented in the context of Cooperative Extension volunteer groups. Specific methods of developing the leadership identity and capacity of individual volunteers and for developing shared leadership within volunteer groups are offered. This article contains many implications and applications for all types of volunteers, including those outside an Extension context.

Introduction

Leadership development has been a fundamental objective of Cooperative Extension since its inception. Developing leaders on the local level to lead change and solve local problems is an integral part of Extension’s program development process, and is a unique attribute of Extension. Steady population growth, combined with tightening budgets, underscores the need for Extension volunteers with effective leadership skills to meet the ever increasing demand for quality, relevant educational programming. Leadership competencies in volunteers are

essential for volunteer administrators to enjoy a shared ownership and responsibility of Extension volunteer programs with volunteers, and for volunteers to reach their maximum potential.

This article focuses on one definition of leadership that is very fitting for Extension work: “Leadership is a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 1998, p. 21). Extension volunteer administrators and Extension volunteers are a team. Leadership is not simply about a position, title, or specific function within a volunteer program. People display leadership when they take action for the common good – internally within the volunteer program, and externally interacting with the public through advocacy or educational programming. Komives et al. (1998) notes that this kind of leadership involves elements of inclusiveness, empowerment, ethics, purposefulness, and process orientation. Extension educators should evaluate how well they are addressing elements and how purposeful they are about developing leadership characteristics in their volunteers. While volunteers will continue to develop leadership skills on their own, purposefully nurturing these skills will increase the rate at which they are developed and thus benefit Extension audiences.

The Importance of Leadership in Extension

Building leadership skills in volunteers, and having volunteers demonstrate leadership ability is a component of all major volunteer administration models (Boyce, 1971; Culp, Deppe, Castillo, & Wells, 1998; Penrod, 1991; Safrit & Schmiesing, 2004). Research studies continue to emphasize the importance of volunteer administrators developing leadership skills in volunteers as an essential component for successful volunteer programs (Boyd, 2004; Lockett & Boleman, 2008; Safrit, Schmiesing, Gliem & Gliem, 2005).

Leadership is an important aspect of all Extension volunteer programs. Extension programs are most impactful when Extension professionals and volunteers have a partnership and a balance of program ownership and responsibility (King & Safrit, 1998; Snider, 1985). Snider (1985) notes that there are opportunities for volunteer administrators to give volunteers more program ownership when the agent allows volunteers to perform specifically identified program management tasks. Volunteer administrators that capitalize on skills of veteran volunteers enhance the overall quality of volunteer programs while offering volunteers more ownership in the program and providing options for continued involvement (Van Der Zanden, 2001).

Improving Leadership Skills in Volunteers

Extension volunteer programs are likely already improving the leadership skills of volunteers simply by the interactions and functions that naturally take place. By understanding how Extension volunteer administrators can add more purpose to activities that are already taking place, Extension volunteers will be better positioned for intentional leadership development.

Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) examined the process that people go through to obtain leadership attributes. They labeled the compilation of these skills as the person's leadership identity. Leadership identity is a person's leadership capacity or tendency to lead others over time. Komives et al. outlined how leadership identity develops and changes over time, along with how other people influence and form that identity. They noted that there are three primary categories of influence and development which, interacting together, contribute to the development of a person's leadership identity. These categories include Developing Self, Developmental Influences, and Group Influences. The components of each category are outlined in Table 1 (Komives et al., 2005).

Table 1. *Factors Contributing to the Development of Leadership Identity*

Developing Self	Developmental Influences	Group Influences
Deepening Self-Awareness	Adult Influences	Engaging in Groups
Building Self-Confidence	Peer Influences	Learning From Membership Continually
Establishing Interpersonal Efficacy	Meaningful Involvement	Changing Perceptions of Groups
Applying New Skills	Reflective Learning	
Expanding Motivations		

Volunteer administrators and Extension volunteer programs can influence individual leadership capacity in volunteers within the context of all three of the categories of Developing Self, Developmental Influences, and Group Influences. Understanding these categories will help volunteer administrators of Extension volunteers focus their efforts for building the leadership identity of those volunteers in both a positive and effective manner. Volunteer administrators can have a direct impact on the Developmental Influences and Group Influences categories; therefore, the primary focus of this manuscript is on these two categories.

Developing Self

An individual's leadership identity develops as a result of personal growth. Komives et al. (2005) listed five properties with dimensions of personal growth, which change throughout the formation of leadership identity. These properties include: deepening self-awareness, building self-confidence, establishing interpersonal efficacy, applying new skills, and expanding motivations. Although self-development occurs internally, all of the factors in the Developmental Influences and Group Influences categories affect each individual's self-development and formation of a personal leadership identity.

Developmental Influences

Komives et al. (2005) noted four essential developmental influences that foster the development of leadership identity. These include adult influences, peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning. Every Extension volunteer program offers all of these essential developmental influences for group participants. Descriptions of these developmental influences based on the findings of Komives et al. (2005) follow below.

- **Adult Influences.** Adults play different roles in influencing youth movement through the leadership identity development stages. This primarily takes place within Extension's 4-H/Youth Development program area. Adults are very important in building confidence and serving as an early building block of support.
- **Peer Involvement.** The camaraderie and mutual learning that comes from fellowship with like-minded volunteers keeps volunteers engaged in Extension programs over time. Peer involvement from active volunteer members is a great source of aid in learning and orientation of new volunteers.
- **Meaningful Involvement.** Volunteer experiences often offer hands-on experiential learning opportunities where leadership identities evolve. These experiences enable volunteers to experience diverse peers and program participants, learn about self, and develop new skills. Volunteers develop an understanding that they are part of something bigger than themselves and their individual achievement helps the whole volunteer program.
- **Reflective Learning.** Structured opportunities for critical reflection can be an important component of people developing their leadership identity.

Processing experiences creates deeper learning, promotes self-assessment and volunteer program improvement.

Group Influences

Group involvement, such as volunteering within an Extension program, builds individual leadership competencies. Group influences include engaging in groups, learning from membership connection, and changing perceptions of groups (Komives et al., 2005). Cooperative Extension engages volunteers in group settings through many different volunteer programs. These group settings afford important opportunities for improvement of leadership skills. Descriptions of these group influences based on the findings of Komives et al. follow below.

- **Engaging in Groups.** Research has shown that group involvement makes a tremendous impact on the development of leadership skills in individuals. A strong relationship exists between a group's culture and the individual's view of themselves and how that culture influenced their leadership identity. People naturally seek a sense of belonging in groups, and will find in volunteer programs a sense of place as the program's mission and core values reflect their own.
- **Learning From Membership Continuity.** Membership continuity refers to individuals being involved in Extension volunteer programs consistently over time instead of volunteering sporadically or for only one event. Volunteers committed to Extension groups are exposed to multiple learning opportunities that add to their leadership competencies, such as organizational and management skills. Seasoned volunteers become increasingly aware of their responsibility for the development of newer volunteers. They assume responsibility and take on positional leadership and active member roles.

Group interaction influences volunteers' self-awareness as well as shaping how they view groups and their role with others in groups. Volunteers will come to realize that they must depend on others in the group to accomplish mutual goals. An important concept that is reinforced by working in groups is that working along with others is more productive than working alone. This is a foundational truth that is the basis for all of Extension's volunteer groups.

- **Changing Perceptions of Groups.** Being an active participant in volunteer groups tends to change individual perceptions of our groups. Volunteers sometimes begin their involvement viewing the volunteer

program as just a collection of friends or like-minded people. As they better understand the purposes of the program, this collection of people begins to be seen and understood as an organization with structure and roles. Eventually, volunteers will see the volunteer program as an entity to develop and that they have a leadership responsibility within that group development.

Implications and Discussion

Extension professionals serving as volunteer administrators should strive to develop leadership skills in volunteers by purposefully implementing actions and programs which will influence all three of the primary factors contributing to the development of leadership identity. A discussion of specific steps which could be taken by Extension personnel related to each of these factors follows below.

Developing Self

Extension professionals can seek to create an environment within volunteer programs that is positive, encouraging, and favorable for volunteer self-development. This can be accomplished by establishing a volunteer program culture that promotes growth and personal capacity expansion by setting an example of thoughtful, positive feedback to volunteer efforts, and sending the clear message to all volunteers that a positive and supportive attitude is expected for fellow volunteers. Extension professionals should seek to provide a framework that allows for mistakes to be made by volunteers, creating learning opportunities without any of those mistakes becoming catastrophic.

Developmental Influences

- **Adult Influences.** Extension professionals can increase a child's leadership ability by prompting them to serve on a county youth board, task force, committee, or as a teen leader; and then offering them encouragement and guidance in those roles. Verbal and written communication during this time, affirming the child's leadership aptitude, makes a lasting impression and leads to the acceptance of more leadership responsibility.
- **Peer Involvement.** Formally establishing mentor programs within adult volunteer groups promotes leadership building with newer volunteers. Observing seasoned volunteers fulfilling their roles, conducting Extension educational programming, and answering questions gives newer volunteers insight and knowledge to draw upon in similar situations. This

is an empowering function of the group, and is a catalyst for individual leadership development. As time goes by, mentor relationships transition from new volunteers being followers to new volunteers being collaborators and friends.

- **Meaningful Involvement.** Involving advisory groups such as Leadership Advisory Boards or Program Area Committees in any aspect of issue identification or the development and delivery of Extension educational programming, exposes volunteers to information and experiences that build on their leadership identity. This is the same result for all volunteers when they are engaged in educational programs and worthwhile projects. The key word here is “meaningful” involvement. It is important that volunteers’ time is not wasted; which makes them feel that they do not matter. When used to their capacity, volunteers benefit personally with added skills and Extension benefits from their perspective, creativity, knowledge, and hard work.
- **Reflective Learning.** Examples include meaningful conversations, completing a survey, an outcome interpretation piece, or even journaling. Having committee chairs or project leaders complete a summary form that lists items such as: accomplishments, lessons learned, and ideas for future projects, allows volunteer leaders a chance to realize that growth has occurred and valuable insight was gained along the way.

Group Influences

- **Engaging in Groups.** Group interaction yields many fundamental competencies that are essential for quality leadership such as: relationship building, trust, valuing diversity, conflict resolution, and facilitation skills. Group interaction is not limited to the effect of the entire volunteer program on a volunteer; the same benefits are also derived from subgroups like committees and projects. Serving within the context of a group is often the security and empowerment that many volunteers need in order to be fully engaged and productive, as opposed to timidly feeling like a “lone ranger” afraid of messing up. A group will also act as a type of “checks and balances” for volunteers who’s leadership style is too directive, which is a problem that is not uncommon in Extension volunteer groups. Groups have a way of pulling those volunteers back and supporting them in practicing shared leadership. Therefore, volunteer administrators should make it a priority to determine, at least annually, the projects and/or committees in which every volunteer will serve. Every volunteer should

know their role and understand who they will be working with, and for what purpose.

Part of our job as volunteer administrators, as well as one function of the volunteer group as a whole, is to gently remind individual volunteers that they are here to serve the group and Extension's mission, not stand out as leaders themselves. This helps create a volunteer program culture that is team-oriented, encouraging, accepting, and relaxed.

- **Learning From Membership Continuity.** One of a volunteer administrator's key objectives should be creating a volunteer experience that encourages continued volunteering with Extension. Culp et al. (1998) calls this engaging and sustaining volunteers. Volunteer administrators should take the time necessary to familiarize themselves with a volunteer administration model, in an effort to have a functional and effective volunteer program. Strive to maintain a safe place for volunteers to try on roles and practice processes. This will happen when there is continuity in volunteer programs due to organized structure and policies, which promote volunteer retention.
- **Changing Perceptions of Groups.** Extension volunteer administrators should take an active role in facilitating the positive perception change within volunteers. This will be accomplished through orientation activities, trainings, strategic planning, and advocacy/interpretation events. By gaining an insider's systems-view of the volunteer program, volunteers are prepared and motivated to serve in advocacy roles for the volunteer program specifically and the Extension agency as a whole.

As with all developmental processes, the individual volunteers in a given program will be at various points developmentally in the process of becoming leaders and finding their leadership identity. This has the potential to cause conflict when there is a lack of understanding and perspective regarding other people's thoughts and actions. Volunteer administrator's words and actions will "set the pace" for creating an environment of security, trust, and acceptance.

Summary

These concepts and the application of them in Extension volunteer groups offer a purposeful way of developing the leadership capacity and identity of individual volunteers and for developing volunteer groups to be supportive environments for shared leadership. Volunteer administrators cannot make volunteers change;

however, an environment can be created in which conditions exist which promote learning, engagement, and trying new things in a supportive climate.

These concepts may also prove useful in helping understand why some individuals are frustrated in particular volunteer group experiences. For example, a specific volunteer may have progressed through many stages of developing leadership skills, understands the value of shared leadership, and finds themselves on a project committee where the committee chairperson leads with a very directive, positional leadership style. Being aware of these potential frustrations gives a volunteer administrator a better perspective on the source of some conflicts and how to handle them.

This information is helpful for designing educational programs and a volunteer program environment full of learning experiences to foster leadership identity. As the confidence of individual volunteers builds over time, they will take risks and become more involved. They will be empowered to take more active group roles.

Leadership development keeps experienced volunteers challenged, interested, and committed to the organization's future (Connors, 1995). These individuals will benefit personally and professionally from a purposeful effort to enhance their leadership skills, and Extension will benefit from the enhanced performance of these individuals in planning and conducting educational programs.

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