

WHEN TECHNICAL SKILLS AREN'T ENOUGH: TRAINING FOR THE SOFTER SIDE OF COMMUNITY ACTION LEADERSHIP

Abstract

It is common for professionals in technical and science-related careers to interact with colleagues and the general public frequently in their daily work. However, most do not receive any education or practice developing interpersonal skills. Thus, these professionals may struggle to create positive interactions, especially while in leadership roles or interacting with stakeholders or clientele. We worked with the Wildlife Services National Training Academy to develop and deliver a half-day training on leadership competencies including emotional intelligence, power and influence, and conflict management. This application brief describes the training, including learning activities implemented, and reports evaluative feedback from participants and the workshop developers and facilitator. Recommendations for implementing similar leadership development programming for technical audiences is included.

Issue Statement

Many professionals in wildlife and natural resources careers likely do not enter their vocation with the expectation of interacting with people regularly. Yet more often than not, these individuals are the sought-after experts in local communities, “advocating stakeholders’ positions on local natural resource issues and promoting responsible resource management among the general public” (Gordon, Carter, & Bland, 2013, para. 1). Human relationships with wildlife are shaped by social and psychological influences (Decker, Riley, & Siemer, 2012), including “cultural and emotional experiences, economics, governance, and stakeholder engagement” (Nyhus, 2016, p. 153). Human-wildlife conflicts cause an estimated \$22 billion dollars in damage annually (Beeson, 2016) and present a unique challenge to wildlife and natural resource professionals attempting to balance their

responsibility to the conservation of wildlife resources and the environment (Krausman, 2016) and to their stakeholders (i.e., anyone affected by or affecting wildlife or its management) (Decker et al., 2019). In responding to human-wildlife or even human-human conflict which may include differences in perceived threats to lifestyles, values, and worldviews, these professionals must provide a workable solution quickly while faced with several confounding variables that could pose safety risks (Madden, 2004). Effectively navigating these situations requires not only technical expertise but an array of interpersonal skills.

In 2016, Mississippi State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Wildlife Services program partnered to create the National Training Academy (NTA), with a mission to train participants to effectively resolve human-wildlife conflicts and safety-

related risks by integrating and enhancing safety, communications, and administrative and technical skills (Beeson, 2016). In 2018, the NTA hosted their inaugural Leadership Development Training. The goal of the training was to help participants learn how to communicate effectively with stakeholders, including the public and the media, on highly technical, controversial, regulatory or high-risk topics.

The two-day training included an overview of risk communication theory, message mapping, on-camera interviews, and team exercises to address realistic APHIS communication scenarios. The National Training Academy coordinators contacted Mississippi State University Extension leadership specialists to request an additional half-day session to complement this risk communications leadership training. Designing a quality leadership development program is difficult and requires a systematic approach that considers the unique contextual needs of the program (Byrne & Rees, 2006). The topics agreed upon by both parties included emotional intelligence, power and influence, and conflict management.

Review of Related Literature

Community Action Leadership Development Framework. More than half of the leaders in the wildlife profession in North America will retire by 2029 (TWS Leadership Institute, 2019). Current leaders acknowledge that “critical character attributes such as responsibility and dependability, punctuality, time management, and good judgment” (Henke & Krausman, 2015, p. 16) along with communication and conflict management are no longer skills desired by employers; they are required. Given the evolution of the wildlife management profession, specifically regarding good governance and citizen engagement, from a client orientation to a stakeholder orientation (Stafford, Welden, & Bruyere, 2018), leadership training and interpersonal skill development for early and mid-career professionals are essential.

This training should focus on the learner’s ability to adapt to content and context, while also addressing relationship building (Astroth, Goodwin, & Hodnett, 2011; Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995).

At the end of the twentieth century, there was a philosophical shift in community-based leadership development away from the traditional “heroic” view of leadership and a deficit view of followers (Senge, 1990), toward bottom-up transformation, shared power, and community building (Huey, 1994). This new philosophy emphasized concepts of shared leadership, leadership as relationship, and leadership in community, promoting a model based on values such as trust, commitment, sharing, and ownership (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). Whereas a leader’s role was “to learn how to manage and improve systems” (Astroth, Goodwin, & Hodnett, 2011, p. 3), it should now be focused on influence and customer satisfaction (Maxwell, 1998; Patterson, 1998).

In response to this shift, researchers developed a conceptual framework for community action leadership development in the twenty-first century specifically for Cooperative Extension (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). At its core, four methodological and two content principles guide its application (Figure 1).

From this point of view, leadership development shifts from individual-centered to collective-centered; from a packaged curriculum to an evolving, customized educational process focused on building relationships; and from discrete leadership development programs to leadership development embedded in concrete issues identified by the participants in the process. (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995, para. 10)

Methodological	Facilitation- Learning takes place through informal or non-formal teaching whereby group diversity is valued and conflict is constructive. Based on respect, encouragement, and community building.
	Learner Focus- Learning is tailor-made to the participants by engaging them in visioning, planning, deciding, and reflecting about their learning experiences.
	Leadership Focus- Learning is based on a group-centered approach to leadership development, centered on organizational development and capacity building.
	Issue/Action Focus- Learning is centered on real-life issues relevant to the target audience, learning in action, and on-going reflection or collective self-examination.
Content	Non-prescriptive- Content must be determined by and with the participants.
	Process as Content- Participants learn facilitation, community building, teamwork, group planning and decision making, organizations development, conflict management, and group reflection through having and taking ownership of their learning and development.

Figure 1. Six principles of community action leadership development. Adapted from "A Framework for 21st Century Leadership" by L. R. Sandmann and L. Vandenberg, 1995, *Journal of Extension*, 33 (6).

Despite its development for Cooperative Extension, this conceptual framework is relevant to most public sector organizations. Research suggests that in public sector organizations, employees may have reduced frustration, increased motivation, and strengthened commitment if they feel they are personally and meaningfully contributing to an organization that performs a valuable service (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Romzek & Hendricks, 1982). There is empirical support for community-based action leadership development efforts that highlight to those public employees the significance of their role in the organization and gives them the opportunity to enhance their learning (Moynihan & Landuyt, 2009).

Adult Learners in Organizational Settings. Several models lend guidance to preparation for teaching adults. In 1986, Knowles introduced the concept of andragogy, a teaching model focused on the adult learner (Meriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner,

2007). Knowles's andragogy ultimately advanced six assumptions. First, adult learners' self-concept moves more toward self-direction and away from dependence. Second, adults' wealth of experience is a resource for learning. Third, an adult's readiness to learn is related to their social role. Fourth, immediacy of application takes precedence as learners mature, so that adults focus more on problem-centered learning. Fifth, adult learners are more intrinsically motivated, and finally, adults are concerned with why they must learn something. While there has been some critique of Knowles's assumptions (Blondy, 2007; Rachal, 2002), they still provide a useful understanding of adult learners which can serve to guide practitioners developing programs.

Thus, we took into account Knowles's assumptions of adult learners as we developed our program. In particular, we incorporated rationale as to why the instruction was important at the introduction of the

lesson. The facilitator, who was familiar with the work of wildlife services, relied upon her own knowledge as well as the examples given to us by administrators, to highlight real problems encountered by Wildlife Services employees and solicit examples from participants themselves, thus drawing from their experiences and illustrating the immediate applications of the learning. Finally, we assumed that the workshop participants were intrinsically motivated to learn, since they elected to attend the training. We provided no extrinsic motivation for the learners. Our approach attempted to integrate Knowles's principles of andragogy with the methodological and content principles of the community action leadership development framework.

Description of the Application

Wildlife Services National Training Academy administrators approached us requesting leadership development for their organization. They reserved for us a four-hour session integrated into a previously scheduled two-day crisis communications training. The National Training Academy administrators provided examples of the varying roles and responsibilities of their employees along with a description of deficits they had identified including illustrative examples. We responded with suggestions of potential leadership competencies that might help their employees improve their interactions with stakeholders and clientele, targeting the identified needs. Considering time limitations and our understanding of the additional content planned, we chose three competencies: emotional intelligence, power and influence, and conflict management.

Emotional intelligence has to do with the interactions of our affective and cognitive domains (Northouse, 2013). Broadly defined, emotional intelligence is the ability to manage one's emotions and the emotions of others. Some of the work performed by Wildlife Services employees may be sensitive, confusing, or unappealing to the public. Identified as a critical need was their ability to perceive and respond to others'

emotions while also identifying and managing their own emotions.

Power and influence refer to French and Raven's (as cited in Levi, 2014) power bases including expert, referent, information, legitimate, reward, and coercive, which describe sources of a person's power. Additionally, Yukl's (2013) influence tactics can be applied in attempts to change a target's beliefs or behaviors. Understanding appropriate application of influence tactics can be useful for Wildlife Services employees communicating with stakeholders and clientele, particularly regarding selection and application of human-wildlife interaction management strategies.

Finally, we identified conflict management approaches as useful and practical techniques Wildlife Services employees could implement in combination with emotional intelligence and power and influence. Conflict management approaches taught included avoidance, accommodation, confrontation, compromise, and collaboration as outlined by Thomas (as cited in Levi, 2014).

Once we agreed on the competencies, we developed the content and structure of the training adhering to the logistic specifications. A facilitator familiar with Wildlife Services delivered the training in a group setting, using real-life examples to explain and illustrate the application of the competencies. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon and share their own experiences, connecting them to the concepts they were learning.

Emotional Intelligence. When learning about emotional intelligence, participants listed characteristics of a person who was adept at building and maintaining relationships. As they learned the four quadrants of the emotional intelligence model (Figure 2), participants were encouraged to consider whether characteristics they listed would contribute to the person's emotional quotient (EQ) or their IQ. The facilitator then directed a discussion amongst participants analyzing the characteristics participants had identified, transitioning to content about power and influence by asking how they used

those skills, knowledge, and abilities to get others to perform desired tasks.

	WHAT I SEE (Awareness)	WHAT I DO (Actions)
PERSONAL COMPETENCE	Self-Awareness	Self-Management
SOCIAL COMPETENCE	Social Awareness	Relationship Management

Figure 2. Emotional Intelligence Model. Adapted from *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Importance of Emotional Intelligence*, by D. Goleman, R. Boyatzis, & A. McKee, 2002

Power and Influence. Following a short break, the facilitator showed a short media clip illustrating the use of power and influence. We asked participants to explain why the characters in the clip acted in the way they were instructed or expected to act. Using their responses, the facilitator then described French and Raven’s power bases, followed by influence tactics as described by Yukl (2013). Participants drew a slip of paper with an influence tactic written on it. Working in pairs, they then described a scenario in which to appropriately apply the influence tactic.

Conflict Management. The final competency taught was conflict management. Drawing from real-life examples provided by the NTA administrators as well as the participants themselves, the facilitator taught about levels of conflict (Forsyth, 2010 as cited in Griffith & Dunham, 2015) as well as resolution approaches (Thomas, 1976 as cited in Levi, 2014). Due to time constraints, the planned application activity was not completed. Had time allowed, participants would have role played a scenario applying an assigned conflict resolution approach.

We provided handouts to supplement the

instruction and for participants to reference as they worked to implement the competencies taught. At the conclusion of the two-day training, NTA administrators asked participants to complete an evaluation, providing feedback on each component of the training, including the half-day leadership development session we delivered.

Discussion of Outcomes and Implications

Seventeen participants, including wildlife technicians, biologists, specialists, program leaders, and supervisors, engaged in lecture, discussion, and hands-on activities on the topics of emotional intelligence, power and influence, and conflict management. While we delivered all the planned content, we did not have sufficient time to complete all the planned application and practice activities.

Overall, participants rated the half-day leadership development session positively. On a scale of 1 to 5 (Poor to Excellent), the overall assessment of the session was 3.85 (n = 13). Respondents were asked reflective pre-post perceived knowledge gain on a

5-point scale (1 = no knowledge, 5 = knowledgeable). Participants' mean prior knowledge of "the importance of understanding Emotional Quotient (EQ) and how it relates to better leadership and resolving conflict" was 2.85, with the majority of respondents indicating "some knowledge". After the session, participants reported mean knowledge of 4.31, a 51 percent increase. Written comments revealed an appreciation for learning new approaches and perspectives for handling and resolving conflict, supporting Knowles's assumption that adult learners are problem focused.

The inherent nature of many professionals in a range of wildlife, natural resources, and agricultural fields is to work independently. They may view development of interpersonal skills as less critical than technical expertise. However, these professionals may find themselves interacting with colleagues, clientele, and other stakeholders more frequently than anticipated. As such, this type of leadership and communication training could be significant when these professionals encounter conflict or difficult situations with both the public and colleagues.

Workshop participants generally were engaged and cooperative, however, the training could have been more effective. Participants noted their appreciation of the interactive nature of the session, including the ability to discuss content and application with fellow participants. However, they felt too much content was included on the PowerPoint slides utilized and that the session needed additional time. Knowles's assumptions regarding adult learners include them being more self-directed than youth learners, and more intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1984, as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). We assumed that participants of this workshop freely elected to attend, but this may have been partially erroneous, particularly with regard to our portion of the training. Additional feedback indicated that participants were not aware that our session was included in the two-day training for which they registered; this lack of advance communication may have created a feeling of intrusion and unrelatability. Unfortunately, we did not have access to the APHIS crisis scenarios the participants used throughout

the rest of the training. These scenarios could have served as a useful tool to not only establish instructor credibility and enhance relatability but also help the participants make connections between the content and its applicability to their work environments. Finally, in order to optimize the effectiveness of this training with similar stakeholders in the future, we recommend at least a full day to allow for more hands-on activities and critical discussion. Participants indicated a desire for more time to practice the competencies taught.

Recommendations

Leadership development can increase the capacity of organizations by enhancing interpersonal skills of employees. Particularly, employees who enter into careers not anticipating frequent interaction with clientele, stakeholders, or other publics, may not be well equipped to build and manage those relationships. Leadership development designed with the organization's and participants' specific needs in mind can be of benefit. In this instance, the NTA administrators added the session to the agenda after participants registered for the training. Evaluative comments indicated that this caused some level of discontent for participants. While they appreciated the content, they also indicated that there was not enough time to learn and practice what they perceived as valuable. Therefore, leadership practitioners should encourage organization administrators they partner with to either provide a stand-alone leadership training, or reserve adequate time for leadership programming if combined with additional training. Further, participants should be made aware of the purpose and content of the program preferably at the time of registration.

Our learners enjoyed the interactive portions of the training and requested additional time to practice what they learned. Facilitators should work with administrators of their partner organization to develop real-life examples and scenarios for use in role-play, discussion, and other active-learning strategies.

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