

EXPLORING LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES IN EXTENSION

Lori L. Moore
Assistant Professor, University of Idaho
1134 W. 6th Street, PO Box 442040
Moscow, ID 83844-2040
lmoore@uidaho.edu

Rick D. Rudd
Associate Professor, University of Florida
305 Rolfs Hall, PO Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611-0540
rdudd@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this roundtable discussion was to provide insight into the question, Do subordinates and superiors seek the same leadership skills in Extension leaders? Using a nominal group technique, participants in the session generated a list of leadership skills needed by Extension leaders in each of six leadership skill areas. The list that was generated was then compared with the findings of a research study conducted to create a leadership competency instrument for use with Extension leaders in state director and administrator positions. When the two lists were compared, several similarities and overlaps were found. There were also some obvious differences between the two lists. Findings suggests that various groups are seeking similar leadership skills in Extension leaders, but that all levels of the organization need to be involved in the identification of core leadership skills and competencies for leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Within an organization, identifying critical leadership competencies required for effectiveness helps define what skills leaders need (Pernick, 2001). The identification of key competencies provides for both individual and organizational growth and helps the organization meet future demands (Pickett, 1998).

The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) is a unique organization in terms of structure and function. It is a publicly funded, non-formal educational system that links the activities of the USDA, CSREES, 51 land-grant universities created under the Morrill Act of 1862, 17 land-grant institutions created or supported under the second Morrill Act of 1890, 34 land-grant institutions created from 1890 to 1994, and approximately 3,150 county administrative units (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 1997; McDowell, 2001; Rasmussen, 1989). The senior leaders of the organization are the state directors and administrators housed within the land-grant universities in each state.

Performance evaluations have become standard practice in both public and private sector organizations (Patterson, 1987). Today's environment of accountability requires employee evaluations in many organizations and institutions, including the CSREES. Performance

evaluations are designed to evaluate how well an individual actually performs their responsibilities. In contrast, a competence assessment is designed to evaluate individual knowledge, education, skills, experience, and proficiency to perform those assigned responsibilities (Herringer, 2002). Unfortunately, in many instances, it is performance evaluations rather than competence assessments that are considered when selecting individuals to be promoted within an organization. Many Extension leaders, including those in the state director and administrator positions, are promoted almost exclusively from within based on their performance in previous positions (Patterson, 1997; Pittman & Bruny, 1986). This practice is problematic in that promotion based on doing a good job in a previous position does not necessarily lead to a good Extension leader.

The concept of identifying core competencies is not new to Extension. Many such studies have been conducted for a variety of positions within Extension. In their 1979 study, Beeman, Cheek, McGhee, and Grygotis first assessed the importance of core competencies needed by Extension agents in Florida as perceived by both county agents and state staff, and then compared the perceptions of each group toward the importance of each competency. Betts, Firth, Watters, & Shepherd (1996) reported that an Arizona team determined core competencies for county agents working with youth- and families-at-risk. Cooper and Graham (2001) identified 57 competencies needed by county agents and county Extension supervisors in Arkansas. Their study also compared the perceptions of each group toward the level of importance of each competency.

In terms of leadership competencies, the literature related to Extension is arguably thin. In an attempt to more clearly define leadership development, the National Impact Study of Leadership Development in Extension (NISLDE) asked Extension staff what leadership meant to them. The result was the identification of 13 broad leadership competencies: (1) solving problems, (2) directing projects or activities, (3) forming and working with groups, (4) planning for group action, (5) managing meetings, (6) communicating effectively, (7) developing proficiency in teaching, (8) mobilizing for group action, (9) understanding and developing oneself, (10) understanding financial matters, (11) understanding leadership, (12) understanding society, and (13) understanding social change (Paxson, Howell, Michael, & Wong, 1993).

Some leadership competencies may be transferable, but it is nonetheless important to look at specific competencies needed within a particular organization (Barner, 2000; Fulmer & Wagner, 1999; Pickett, 1998). An Extension leader must fulfill a number of different roles, and therefore, must prove their competence in many different areas. However, no study could be found that attempted to identify the leadership skills and specific leadership competencies desired in the senior leaders of the organization.

According to Barner (2000), "it makes no sense to try to identify essential leadership capabilities unless one knows the business context in which the leaders will be expected to excel" (p. 47). Thus, for Extension to become a best-practice organization, leadership competencies identified specifically for Extension leaders must be developed. But, who should develop such competencies? Current Extension leaders, the administrative heads to whom the current leaders report, and the subordinates of the current leaders all have a vested interest in the development of such a list of core competencies. The question must be asked then, "Are all three

groups looking for the same thing?" Do current leaders believe that the competencies administrative heads perceive as essential are in fact important to their success as leaders of the day-to-day operations of Cooperative Extension Systems across the country?

BACKGROUND STUDY

As part of a research study examining the leadership styles and skills of current Extension leaders, Moore (2003) conducted a qualitative study designed to identify the leadership skill areas, skills and specific leadership competencies Extension leaders need to be successful, as perceived by their administrative heads. In the study, Moore conducted qualitative long interviews (McCracken, 1988) with seven administrative heads of agriculture, as identified by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC). Prior to the interviews, participants were sent a skills summary sheet developed by Moore. This summary sheet was based on a review of literature and included sections on five skill areas: human skills, conceptual skills, technical skills, emotional intelligence skills, and industry knowledge skills (Goleman, 1998; Katz, 1955; Robbins, Bradley, & Spicer, 2001). The summary sheet described the skill category and provided two examples of specific leadership competencies within each skill area. The purpose of this skills summary sheet was to help participants focus their thinking on the types of competencies needed by Extension leaders.

Analysis of the data revealed six leadership areas of competence: human skills, conceptual skills, communication skills, technical skills, emotional intelligence skills, and industry knowledge skills. As expected, the five skill areas identified in the literature review prior to the interviews and addressed in the skills summary sheet emerged as important leadership skill areas for Extension leaders. However, communication skills emerged as an additional leadership skill area of importance (Moore, 2003). From the comments of the administrative heads of agriculture, a total of 45 leadership skills were identified and clustered into one of the six leadership skill areas (see Table 1). Skills were clustered into a skill area based on the review of literature.

ASSOCIATION OF LEADERSHIP EDUCATORS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Participants attending the Exploration session of Concurrent Workshops IV at the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) Annual Conference participated in a nominal group technique activity designed to identify leadership skills needed by Extension leaders. Session participants were given the same skills summary sheet given to the administrative heads of agriculture who participated in the study conducted by Moore (2003).

Participants were divided into six groups. Each group was given one of the skill areas identified as important in the background study (Moore, 2003). Each group developed a list of leadership skills needed by Extension leaders within their skill. Each group shared their list and an overall list that encompassed all six leadership skill areas was created.

Session participants generated a total of 50 leadership skills (see Table 2). Some skills, such as delegation, motivation, conflict resolution/management, and listening skills were mentioned in more than one skill area. These skills were left in each skill area participants listed them in, regardless of overlap, yielding a total of 45 unduplicated skills.

Table 1
Skill Areas and Leadership Skills Needed by Extension Leaders as Identified by Administrative Heads of Agriculture

Skill Area	Number of Skills	Leadership Skills
Human Skills	11	Relationship builder Open/approachable Team member/player Evaluate people Team leader Cultural awareness/diversity Identify talent Mentoring Leadership development Coaching Understand social problems
Conceptual Skills	6	Vision Strategic/sequential planning Decision making Critical/creative thinking Goals (set and achieve) Organizational change
Technical Skills	5	Budgeting Finance/fundraising Computer skills Internet skills Competent (in technical area)
Communication Skills	7	Listening skills Speaking skills Communication (settings) Reading skills Electronic communication Media interaction Written communication
Emotional Intelligence Skills	9	Time management Empathy/respect Maturity (criticism/emotions) Energy/enthusiasm Honesty/integrity Conflict resolution Sense of humor Negotiation Motivation
Industry Knowledge Skills	7	Context/role of Extension Know constituencies Political environment Create linkages Extension priorities Understand program areas Networking abilities

Table 2

Skill Areas and Leadership Skills Needed by Extension Leaders as Identified by Association of Leadership Educators Roundtable Discussion Participants

Skill Area	Number of Skills	Leadership Skills
Human Skills	9	Personality types Delegation/power sharing Compassion Personal and group development Positive role model Coaching/enabling/challenging Communicate/create buy-in for vision Conflict management Promote creative/critical thinking
Conceptual Skills	6	Develop and promote mission/vision Decision making Needs Assessment (organization and constituents) Organizational Roles Motivation Analyze and organize information
Technical Skills	11	Delivery methods (interactive video, on-line, etc.) Recruitment and marketing skills Strategic planning skills Human resource management Evaluation (use of tools) Electronic communications Programming process Local programming Group facilitation Delegation Resource development
Communication Skills	12	Listening skills Questioning skills (probing, inquiry) Delegation skills Audience identification Presentation skills (hi-tech/low-tech) Organizing stakeholders Conflict resolution "Deal" with hard issues Synthesis skills (summarize, paraphrase) Provide feedback (good and bad) Observation skills (internal and external) Written communication skills
Emotional Intelligence Skills	6	Time management (balance personal and professional) Encourage total participation Understand personal strengths and weaknesses Motivation Listening skills (active/compassionate) Willing to say "I am/was wrong"

Table 2 (continued).

Skill Areas and Leadership Skills Needed by Extension Leaders as Identified by Association of Leadership Educators Roundtable Discussion Participants

Skill Area	Number of Skills	Leadership Skills
Industry Knowledge Skills	6	Political environment Networking Recognize industry overlaps Industry above and beyond agriculture Funding (traditional and non-traditional; new and old) Create partnerships

COMPARING THE TWO LISTS

When the list generated by the administrative heads of agriculture (Moore, 2003) and the list generated by ALE session participants were compared, several similarities and overlaps were found. Each group identified 45 unduplicated leadership skills needed by Extension leaders. A total of 22 leadership skills were identified by both groups. Ten of the 22 leadership skills that were identified by both groups were clustered within the same leadership skill area (see Table 3). The remaining 11 leadership skills that were included on both lists were clustered into different skill areas (see Table 4). Although these skills may have different nomenclature between the two groups, the intent behind the skill was essentially the same.

Both groups were looking for leaders who could make decisions, plan ahead, solve problems, and motivate those around them. Communication skills, especially listening skills, were also important to both groups. In terms of time management, both groups felt it was important for leaders to be able to manage both personal and professional time as well as respect the time of each person within the organization. Due to the uniqueness of the organization, it was not surprising that understanding the context and role of Extension was viewed as an important leadership skill by both groups.

Table 3

Leadership skills identified by both groups in the same skill area

Skill Area	Leadership Skill(s)
Human Skills	Coaching
Conceptual Skills	Vision Decision making
Communication Skills	Listening skills Written communication
Emotional Intelligence Skills	Time management Motivation
Industry Knowledge Skills	Political Environment Create linkages/partnerships Networking

It is interesting to note that both groups generated lists with a total of 45 unduplicated leadership skills needed by Extension leaders and that almost half of the skills identified, 22 of 45, were the same for each group. These findings suggest that, while they may not be categorizing the specific skills into the same skill area, both groups are looking for similar leadership skills in Extension leaders. Not all of the ALE session participants were directly involved in Extension, and although they were asked to identify the leadership skills they believed Extension leaders need to be successful, it is possible that they were not thinking of leadership skills specifically in the context of Extension. While it has been noted that the development of leadership skills and competencies within the context of the organization is important (Barner, 2000; Fulmer & Wagner, 1999; Pickett, 1998), the apparent similarities between the two lists were nonetheless encouraging.

Table 4

Leadership skills identified as important by both groups but in different skill areas

Leadership Skills
Evaluate people/Use of evaluation tools
Identify talent/Understand personal strengths and weaknesses
Strategic/sequential planning
Critical/creative thinking
Finance/funding
Electronic communications
Media interaction/Delivery methods
Maturity (criticism/emotions)/"Deal" with hard issues
Conflict resolution
Context/role of Extension/Organizational roles
Know constituencies/Audience identification
Understand program areas/Programming process/local programming

Although it is important to note that there were 22 leadership skills identified as important by both groups, it is equally important to note that there were several leadership skills identified by one group but not the other. For example, delegation/power sharing skills was identified by three of the small groups of ALE session participants, but was not identified as an important leadership skill for Extension leaders by the administrative heads of agriculture. On the other hand, the administrative heads of agriculture identified skills such as mentoring and leadership development of subordinates as an important skill for Extension leaders to have, while the ALE session participants did not include such skills in their list of important leadership skills they are looking for in Extension leaders.

Some of the most interesting findings that emerged from examining the two lists center around the differences between the two lists. ALE participants were concerned with understanding personality types and working within groups made up of different personalities. The administrative heads of agriculture were concerned that the leader had empathy for others and an understanding of society and social, as well as organizational, change. It is interesting that ALE participants made no reference to the leader as a change agent. ALE participants wanted a leader who was not afraid to admit when he/she was wrong while the administrative

heads of agriculture wanted a leader with a sense of humor. It appeared as though the administrative heads of agriculture identified more skills that focused on the leader being able to see the big picture and their role within the organization as a whole, while the ALE session participants identified skills that focused more on the effect the leader had on individuals within the organization. Some of these differences may be attributed to the relative homogenous group of administrative heads of agriculture that were interviewed as compared with the heterogeneous group of participants in the ALE roundtable discussion. Even with this in mind, the findings are still interesting and provide much insight into the question to superiors and subordinates seek the same leadership skills and competencies in their leaders.

Overall, the similarities and differences between the two lists support the notion that each of the various stakeholder groups within an organization has a vested interest in being involved in the development of core leadership competencies for the leaders of the organization. Some of the leadership skills are transferable from one group to another. However, some leadership skills appear to be of more importance to one group as opposed to the other.

The identification of the leadership skills deemed important by the superiors of the current leaders was an important first step. However, the findings that emerged when the two lists involved in this roundtable discussion were compared and contrasted remind us of the importance of including all levels of the Extension in the identification and development of core leadership skills and competencies for its leaders. Future studies should be conducted with participants at all levels within Extension to provide empirical evidence to substantiate the findings of this roundtable discussion.

REFERENCES

- Barner, R. (2000). Five steps to leadership competencies. *Training & Development*, 54(3), 47-51.
- Beeman, C. E., Cheek, J. G., McGhee, M. B., & Grygotis, E. M. (1979). Professional competencies needed by Extension agents in the Florida Cooperative Extension Service: A report of research. Gainesville: University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.
- Betts, S. C., Firth, A. M., Watters, S., & Shepherd, S. (1996). Families-at-risk. *Journal of Extension*, 34(2), Retrieved March 22, 2003 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1996april/a4.html>
- Cooper, A. W., & Graham, D. L. (2001). Competencies needed to be successful county agents and county supervisors. *Journal of Extension*, 39(1), Retrieved March 22, 2003 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001february/rb2.html>
- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (1997). *Strategic directions of the cooperative Extension system*. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Agriculture.
- Fulmer, R. M., & Wagner, S. (1999). Leadership: Lessons from the best. *Training & Development*, 53(3), 29-32.

- Goleman, D. (1998). What makes a leader? *Harvard Business Review*, 76(6), 93-102.
- Herringer, J. M. (2002). Once isn't enough when measuring staff competence. *Nursing Management*, 33(2), 22.
- Katz, R. L. (1955). Skills of an effective administrator. *Harvard Business Review*, 33(1), 33-42.
- McCracken, G. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- McDowell, G. R. (2001). *Land-grant universities and Extension into the 21st century: Renegotiating or abandoning a social contract*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Moore, L. L. (2003). *Leadership in the Cooperative Extension System: An examination of leadership styles and skills of state directors and administrators*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville.
- Patterson, T. F. (1987). Refining performance appraisal. *Journal of Extension*, 25(4), Retrieved March 22, 2003 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1987winter/a5.html>
- Patterson, T. F. (1997). Fundamentally flawed: Extension administrative practice part 1. *Journal of Extension*, 35(6), Retrieved May 1, 2002 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1997/december/comm2001.html>
- Paxson, C. M., Howell, R. E., Michael, J. A., & Wong, S. K. (1993). Leadership development in Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 31(1), Retrieved April 29, 2002 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993spring/rb2.html>
- Pernick, R. (2001). Creating a leadership development program: Nine essential tasks. *Public Personnel Management*, 30(4), 429-444.
- Pickett, L. (1998). Competencies and managerial effectiveness: Putting competencies to work. *Public Personnel Management*, 27(1), 103-115.
- Pittman, J. D. & Bruny, L. (1986). Promotion from within anyone qualified? Training program creates a pool of potential administrators. *Journal of Extension*, 24(2), Retrieved May 8, 2002 from <http://www.joe.org/joe/1986summer/a2006.html>
- Rasmussen, W. D. (1989). *Taking the university to the people*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Robbins, C. J., Bradley, E. H., & Spicer, M. (2001). Developing leadership in healthcare administration: A competency assessment tool. *Journal of Healthcare Management*, 46(3), 188-199.