

Evaluating Leadership Development for Public Officials Using Retrospective Pretest Methodology

Gregory A. Davis, Ohio State University Extension
Findlay, Ohio 45840
Davis.1081@osu.edu

Joseph E. Lucente, Ohio State University Extension / Ohio Sea Grant College Program
Toledo, Ohio 43604
Lucente.6@osu.edu

Donald P. Lacy, Ohio State University Extension
Columbus, Ohio 43210
Lacy.22@osu.edu

Association of Leadership Educators
Annual Conference:
The Soul of Leadership
July 14-17, 2004
Memphis, TN

Evaluating Leadership Development for Public Officials Using Retrospective Pretest Methodology

Abstract

This paper describes how the retrospective pretest methodology was used to determine change in knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward local government leadership competencies of a group of local elected and appointed public officials including those serving on local government boards, task forces and commissions involved in a traditional Extension educational program.

Introduction

Documenting changes in knowledge and behavior can be done simply and efficiently using the retrospective pretest evaluation (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989; Stevens & Lodl, 1999). The retrospective pretest design, unlike the typical pretest-posttest, is administered only once. Because of time limitations, this characteristic made using the method more appealing to the audience and the educators as administrators of the instrument. Only a few minutes were required to complete the short questionnaires.

Background: The Retrospective Pretest

With the retrospective pretest, participants are asked to share the knowledge or attitude they had toward a particular subject *before* some experience, program, or treatment and *after*. When participants are asked to respond to a question about how much they know about a particular subject after they have some basic knowledge of the subject itself, they are more able to accurately reflect on the degree of change in knowledge or attitude (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989). Furthermore, respondents oftentimes overestimate their level of knowledge on a particular subject when using the traditional pretest-posttest (Pratt et al, 2000). With the retrospective pretest methodology, respondents are given an opportunity to learn how much they know about a subject prior to responding to a questionnaire.

How it Works: Practical Application of the Evaluation Tool

What impact does leadership skill development programs have upon public officials? The local Leadership Academy, developed in the Toledo area in Ohio, was used to evaluate change in knowledge and skills. The academy was developed through a partnership between The Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University Sea Grant College Program and the Toledo Area Chamber of Commerce. Participants in the Academy completed ten sessions over a ten-week period with each session lasting two hours.

The participants, which included elected officials from county, municipal, and township governments, and appointed individuals who serve on local government committees, commissions, boards or task forces, were evaluated on pre and post-test knowledge of specific skills and concepts associated with community leadership. The evaluation occurred in leadership training programs occurring over three years.

An instrument was developed for the program that was designed to measure prior knowledge and evaluate knowledge gained and perspectives changed as a result of the program. An example of the instrument for one session follows.

The retrospective pretest was designed with instructions at the top, an example, and numerous statements. The statements were developed using the learning objectives for each program session. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement before and after the workshop using a four-point, Likert-type scale; (1 - strongly disagree and 4 - strongly agree).

Ohio Local Government Leadership Academy Program Survey

Please rank your level of understanding by circling one of the following using a scale of 1-4, with **1 being poor** and **4 being good**.

Leadership Topic: Conducting Effective Meetings

<u>before</u> today's presentation	My level of understanding of the following	<u>after</u> today's presentation
1 2 3 4	1. Meeting types: regular meetings, work sessions, public forums and public hearings.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	2. Legal requirements, notices, Sunshine Law, open meeting requirements, executive sessions.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	3. Pre-meeting activities, agenda preparation/distribution/"Five Day Rule", supporting documents, press briefings, etc.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	4. The meeting environment, accessibility, physical details, etc.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	5. Process, rules and procedures, code of ethics, etc.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	6. Conducting the meeting, roles, public address, agendas, etc.	1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4	7. Meeting Closure, the press, follow-up, minutes and records.	1 2 3 4

If necessary, what could have been done better or included to enhance your understanding of this session? (Use back if necessary).

Please turn in at end of session. Thank you for your cooperation.

Results to Date (data from program year #3 is not yet available, but will be incorporated into this table prior to the conference)

Following is a summary of the evaluation data collected for each session. The data for each module from within each session are not reported in this paper. However, the overall statistics incorporate the information from each module to produce a session statistic. The numbers (N) for each session varies since participants were required to attend only seven sessions to earn their Certificate.

<u>Prior Knowledge</u>	<u>Session Topic</u>	<u>Knowledge Gained</u>
35%	Public Officials and Public Service	65%
39%	Conducting Effective Public Meetings	60%
7%	Communicating and Working With the Media	93%
30%	Working and Communicating With Citizens	71%
6%	Building Sustainable Communities	94%
20%	Team Building	80%
25%	Leadership Skills and Styles	97%
7%	Conflict Management and Dispute Resolution	92%
13%	Intergovernmental Relations	88%
24%	Technology in Local Government	76%

One of the interesting observations that emerges from an examination of the data is that there is a reverse relationship between prior knowledge and knowledge gained. The logic is obvious, but too often we fail to assess the impact between starting point and ending point when we report results. Where knowledge is already high or assumed to be high, there is less chance that gains will be high. As an example, the four sessions where prior knowledge is low the gains were in excess of 90%. The reverse is true, where prior knowledge is the highest, knowledge gains were the lowest. For example, in the area where prior knowledge is rated the highest, Conducting Effective Meetings, knowledge gain was the lowest. The data do not, however, support an argument that we should focus on those areas where knowledge gained can be the greatest. Important learning occurs for “experts” at the margin where new insights or skills can improve an already effective leader.

Conclusions and Future Implications

This program evaluation tool provide rich data with a modest investment of time, relative to more traditional pretest – post test evaluative measures. Program participants had little difficulty understanding and completing the questionnaire. Furthermore, participants were able to complete the instrument in a timely fashion, yielding very useful data compared to other evaluation tools requiring a similar investment of time. The data gathered were relatively easy to analyze and communicate a change in knowledge, awareness, confidence, and attitudes as ably as other more complex and involved evaluative measures.

From our initial experience with the issues surrounding knowledge gained during the course of the ten week program, we concluded that we need to assess prior knowledge and knowledge gained differently. There are two levels of measurement for each category. One is the self reported estimate of prior knowledge and knowledge gained. Another way to assess prior knowledge and knowledge gained is through an assessment of specific sets of information that will be provided during the sessions of the Academy. One of the very difficult problems to overcome with adult learners, and especially elected officials, is to collect the information in a discrete manner. Most public officials are very aware of their own image and would be reluctant to provide information if there were any chance the assessment information could be attributed to them in any manner that could be embarrassing. The important questions needing attention include:

1. What are the best surrogate measures of knowledge that we can use? Is self reporting an adequate measure of prior knowledge and knowledge gained?
2. Is there a way to collect accurate information about the level of prior knowledge and knowledge gained that elicits accurate responses from adult learners, especially elected officials? Can information be collected in an environment where there is a sufficient comfort level to allow public officials to provide very accurate information that is not tainted by posturing or spin?
3. Are measures of knowledge gained the only true measures of the value of a program? Or, does valuable learning occur outside the parameters of specific topics and sub-topics within the sessions? Do we need to focus equally as much on value of an experience as we do on knowledge gained?

In teaching and learning situations involving public officials, interactions that occur within a program may provide the beginnings for a change in behavior. There is likely an important “time lag” between program content and the application of ideas within the operating environment of a public official. This time lag and impact issue will continue to plague educators and trainers as public sector leadership programs are developed and presented.

References

- Arnold, M. E. (2002). Be "Logical" about program evaluation: Begin with learning assessment. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 40(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/a4.html>
- Davis, G. A. (2003). Using a retrospective pre-post questionnaire to determine program impact. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003august/tt4.shtml>
- Diem, K. G. (2003). Program development in a political world--It's all about impact! *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003february/a6.shtml>
- Diem, K. G. (2002). Using research methods to evaluate your Extension program. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002december/a1.shtml>
- Lucente, J. E. & Lacy, D. P. (2003). Measuring the impact of leadership skill development on public officials. Association of Leadership Educators Annual Conference Proceedings.
- O'Neill, B. (1998). Money Talks: Documenting the economic impact of Extension personal finance programs. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 36(5). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1998october/a2.html>
- Pratt, C. C., McGuigan, W. M., Katzev, A. R. (2000). Measuring program outcomes: Using retrospective pretest methodology. *American Journal of Evaluation*. 21(3).
- Richardson, J. G., Gamble, K. J., Mustian R. (1998). Creation of a web based accomplishment reporting system. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]. 36(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1998april/a1.html>
- Rockwell, S. K., & Kohn, H. (Summer 1989). Post-then-pre evaluation. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]. 27(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1989summer/a5.html>
- Stevens, G. L, & Lodl, K. A. (1999). Community coalitions: Identifying changes in coalition members as a result of training. *Journal of Extension* [On-line]. 37(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999april/rb2.html>