

Diffusion of Systems Thinking to Learners

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Abstract

Using concepts learned through participation at Systems Thinking conferences and other learning opportunities, a core group of Cooperative Extension faculty have instituted what is hoped will be a continuing learning opportunity for other Extension faculty in the state. This core group of faculty has developed a three hour graduate level course to introduce systems thinking concepts to additional faculty throughout the state. In addition to offering the course as a for credit course, faculty were invited to participate in a not for credit format.

Introduction

Systems Thinking is a field of study that has been promoted in recent years by researchers such as Peter Senge, Dee Hock, Margaret Wheatly and others. Senge details 5 disciplines, personal mastery, team learning, shared vision, mental models and systems thinking as a core to developing a new way of thinking to solve problems confronting us in our personal and professional lives. Hock and Wheatley present useful ideas about inculcating these disciplines into our daily lives.

The LSU AgCenter, not unlike many other university campuses, is facing a number of complex issues that call for different methods of resolution than what may have been practiced in the past. This presentation will seek to share what we have learned as individuals as we have made an attempt to increase the number of faculty who might use system thinking concepts to enhance their personal and professional productivity.

Specific learner objectives for this presentation include:

- Learners will become aware of system thinking concepts and their applicability to daily living
- Learners will become aware of one process being used to diffuse system thinking concepts to faculty within an Extension organization

- Learners will be given specific ideas and methods for teaching systems thinking to fellow faculty

Background

Various individuals within the LSU AgCenter began reading and studying the concepts of Systems Thinking some years ago. A number of faculty (7) have had the opportunity to attend Systems Thinking and Servant Leadership Conferences over the past eight years, to further enhance their learning relative to these concepts. As Cooperative Extension Service administration within the state began increasing their support, both financial and moral, to this effort they also began to expect a higher return on investment from faculty participation in these learning opportunities. Working with administration it was determined that a legitimate expectation would be that faculty attending these conferences return and share the information learned with fellow faculty. Initially a workshop was envisioned but it was quickly realized that a typical one day seminar would not be conducive to faculty becoming aware of these concepts much less internalizing them. Subsequently, faculty who had participated in Systems Thinking and Servant Leadership conferences began developing a three hour graduate course. Recognizing that some faculty who might be interested in systems thinking might not be interested in graduate credit, plans were made to offer the course on a not for credit basis. The professor of record for the course is an adjunct faculty member of the School of Human Resource Education and Workforce Development (SHREWD) while 6 additional Extension professionals are serving as presenters for the course.

How it works

The course is opened to Extension faculty primarily and expectations of Extension faculty participating in the not for credit format are the same as those faculty taking the course for graduate credit. The course has been designed to be very interactive and structured to allow participants time between sessions to reflect and hopefully internalize the concepts covered in each session. Journaling exercises are being highly encouraged for personal growth.

The initial meeting of the group was held as a two day retreat in January of 2004 and subsequent sessions will be held in February, April and May.

Participation requirements include journaling exercises, readings, participation in a discussion board and development of a project plan using Systems Thinking concepts as mechanisms to resolve some of the issues facing individual faculty.

Results to Date

Participants seemed to have enjoyed the first session which included film clips, interactive games, discussion, reflection and journaling. More importantly through questions posed by participants as well as comments made regarding discussion questions

posted, participants seem to be internalizing the concepts and working to change their ways of looking at and trying to solve problems confronting them.

Implications

Hopefully this class will be the first of many designed to help faculty learn different techniques to solve some of the problems facing them in their personal and professional lives. In addition, other leadership opportunities are being explored including managerial assessment of proficiency (MAP training), participation in Servant Leadership Conferences and other leadership development opportunities. It is hoped that by increasing the number of participants in these opportunities the LSU AgCenter will begin to build a cadre of people better suited to deal with the problems facing us in the complex world.