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2. Identifying the Influencing Factors Affecting Professional Volunteer Leadership in Extension
 3. Research Paper
 4. Organizations often go through a period where developing the leadership potential of its members is difficult. This study sought to examine the factors which affect individual's perceptions of leadership opportunities.
 5. Alexa Lamm is currently a doctoral student at the University of Florida studying Extension Education with a focus on program development and evaluation. Her background as an extension agent in 4-H youth development, and time spent recruiting members to serve in leadership positions, inspires her leadership research.
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Abstract

Many organizations have been faced with the question of getting more members, or new members to participate in leadership opportunities offered through the organization. Many studies have tried to understand this from a variety of perspectives including motivations, barriers, perceived needs, and now influential factors. Ajzen's (2002) theory of planned behavior takes into consideration three categories of perceived beliefs which place value on different actions, Behavior Beliefs, Normative Beliefs, and Control Beliefs. This study sought to examine the perception of members of a large, member-driven organization as to their perceptions regarding specific leadership actions. What was found was the single act of taking on a leadership position alters individuals' perceptions of leadership. These perceptions drive individuals' desires to be involved, or not, with different opportunities. Actively recruiting and encouraging new members to participate in the leadership of the organization can greatly improve the quality of the leadership experiences these individuals have, reinforcing the desire to affiliate and identify with the normative belief of being part of an organization.

Introduction

In most professional organizations members serve as the governing body in a volunteer capacity. In the case of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA), the board is made up of volunteer Extension agents representing all regions of the United States. The vision of NAE4-HA is to be the national professional development association of 4-H Youth Development professionals. These professionals make up the 4-H program team, which operates the youth development arm of the United States Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension system (NIFA, 2010). The governing board of NAE4-HA is responsible for establishing, managing, and communicating professional development opportunities for 4-H professionals nationwide. While it is imperative for organizational operations to have a board in place that is charged with fiscal and managerial responsibilities, it is difficult to recruit and retain leaders from the general membership (Davis, personal communication, October 23, 2008).

Hesselbein (1997) outlined barriers to leadership as personal and related more to perception than reality. These barriers were divided into self-imposed and institutional. Self-imposed included lack of understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, playing "chicken little" instead of the "little engine that could," and not taking charge of one's own personal learning. Institutional barriers include a culture which does not reward leadership, fuzzy lines of accountability, and no established mentoring plan for leadership.

Nistler, Lamm, and Stedman (2010) found that current leadership within NAE4-HA chose to lead because of a strong need for affiliation and a strong need to achieve. Affiliation need focused on a need to give back to the organization, to give back to the profession, and a strong belief in the association mission. Achievement need focused on personal growth and fulfillment as well as a need to make a difference. The need for power was also indicated within leadership and was expressed as a vested interest in the association and a belief they had something to contribute to the organization.

Zinn (1997) found that teachers' expressed barriers to leadership were varied based on the setting and perceptions of the individual. Zinn found that teachers cited a strong network of friends as a source of support. It was also determined that administrators provided a strong source of support. Support from areas, network, and administrators, supported leadership as opposed to providing barriers. When support was not present barriers to leadership were perceived by teachers.

Developing new organizational leaders aids in the performance of an organization by establishing and creating opportunities for members to enhance their decision making skills (Barnes, Haynes, & Woods, 2006). To sustain an organization long-term, leadership teams must be proactive about engaging and training new leaders (Collins, 2001). Professional development opportunities have been emphasized by both the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and Cooperative Extension, as the umbrella organizations of NAE4-HA, in an effort to build competencies within professionals across the national system (Stone & Bieber, 1997). When the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals surveyed their membership on why they chose to maintain membership in the organization they found a strong need to belong, working with others who have similar interests, and networking were their main motivators (Jackson et al., 2004).

Without new members motivated to step into leadership positions, organizations like NAE4-HA which serve pivotal roles in extension professional development efforts, will cease to exist in their current capacity. While there are many reasons driving personal motivation, there is little research done on why Extension professionals choose not to take on volunteer leadership roles at the national level. This study examined why members of NAE4-HA have not chosen to advance into leadership positions within the organization as compared to those who have made a choice to lead. Further, it seeks to uncover the barriers which exist regarding engaging in a leadership experience, either real or perceived, and how those barriers can be overcome.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study was based on Ajzen's (2002) theory of planned behavior. According to Ajzen, human behavior is guided by three beliefs: behavioral, normative, and control. A person's behavior can be modified; increasing the chance the person will perform a desired action, through the manipulation of any or all of these components (Francis et al., 2004). This study focused on the identification of an individual's beliefs as they related to volunteer participation in leadership positions within a professional organization.

Behavioral beliefs

Behavioral beliefs represent likely outcomes of the targeted behavior and the associated evaluations of these outcomes (Ajzen, 2002). An individual's behavioral beliefs correspond to a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the targeted behavior. It is expected that if an individual believes the potential favorable outcomes of a behavior outweigh the potential negative outcomes they will engage in the behavior. In general, most extension agents will have a positive view of leadership, as they are placed in the role of change agent on a regular basis within their own communities and expected to lead change efforts (Rogers, 2003). 4-H extension agents in particular are charged with the task of enhancing leadership skills within the volunteers and

youth they serve and therefore should exhibit a positive attitude towards leadership (Kleon & Rinehart, 1998; Boyd, 2001; Seevers & Dormody, 1995).

Normative beliefs

Normative beliefs represent what the individual believes other important individuals or groups expect in regards to the targeted behavior. Normative beliefs are linked with how an individual develops their perception of the subjective norm of the targeted behavior (Ajzen, 2002). If a behavior is established as a norm for those who align themselves with a specific group it is expected those individuals will pursue engaging in the behavior. While conducting a Delphi study to determine why extension agents take on leadership roles, Nistler, Lamm, and Stedman (2010) found the need for affiliation was the strongest motivator in running for office. Extension agents in leadership roles wanted to give back to the organization and pursued their leadership role because they enjoyed being a part of a team. This suggests, the belief that serving in a leadership capacity within a professional extension organization, such as NAE4-HA, is an established social norm.

Control beliefs

Control beliefs represent the potential presence of factors that may aid or impede an individuals' performance of a specific behavior (Ajzen, 2002). If an individual believes there are factors in place keeping them from being able to carry out a specific behavior they will be less likely to engage. This includes an individuals' perceived power over those factors (Ajzen). If an individual feels they have enough power to address and circumvent that impeding factor, they are more likely to engage in a behavior than if they feel they have little control of the impediment. Control beliefs are believed to have a direct effect on an individual's perceived behavioral controls as well as these impeding or aiding factors will likely alter their attitude surrounding the specific behavior.

Within Extension there are many factors extension agents have reported as impeding their enhanced engagement in activities such as leadership roles. When examining why extension agents did not engage in in-service education, Mincemoyer and Kelsey (1999) found time was the largest barrier. Franz, Peterson, and Dailey (2002, P12) found "county [agents] most often mentioned a lack of material and human resources such as internal staff capabilities, relationships between campus and county units, lack of time, and financial resources as important limiters of Extension engagement."

Through a review of the theory of planned behavior, it has been established that an understanding of behavioral, normative, and control beliefs must be reached in order to make research based recommendations on how to modify an individual's attitude towards a specific behavior (Francis et al., 2004). This purpose of this research was to identify what influenced Extension agents decisions regarding volunteering for leadership positions within a national professional Extension organization. The research was guided by the following objectives:

1. Describe the differences in personal characteristics of members who have taken and those who have not taken leadership positions.

2. Determine how Extension agents perceive organizational items associated with being a leader.
3. Determine if members who have taken a leadership position vary in how they perceive organizational items associated with being a leader from those who have not.

Methods

In order to identify what influenced Extension agents decisions regarding volunteering for national leadership positions a survey of the members present during an annual NAE4-HA business meeting was conducted. The study was limited to those members in attendance at the annual meeting because they make up the pool of candidates for leadership within the association, as you are unable to run for office if not present at the time of elections. 4-H agents were selected as the population of interest due to the fact that they represent not only youth development, but are typically assigned to work in another aspect of Extension as well (agriculture, family and consumer science, natural resources, etc.) and are most likely to have membership in other Extension related professional organizations offering them multiple opportunities to run for office.

The survey instrument for this study used twelve of the thirty items making up the motivation sources inventory developed by Barbuto and Scholl (1998). This instrument was designed to identify the organizational items which motivate individual's choices towards participation and leadership. A LISREL analysis was conducted on the original 30 question inventory and resulted in a reliability score of .92 (Barbuto & Scholl). The revised, twelve item instrument was reviewed by an expert panel from the University of Florida for content and face validity.

The instrument was distributed to 406 participants with 376 returned containing usable data ($n=376$) for a 92.9% response rate. As the survey was completed during a general administration to a purposive sample, no follow-up procedures were employed. The survey results were evaluated for reliability, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78 (Huck, 2008).

On the instrument itself, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five point Likert-type scale with specific items related to participating in and taking on leadership roles within an organization (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). In addition, participants were asked to identify their age, gender, marital status, whether or not they have children, the number of hours they spend per month on professional development activities, years of service to Extension, years of membership in NAE4-HA, the number of national NAE4-HA meetings they have attended, and whether or not they have held a national leadership position.

The general demographics collected in the survey are displayed in Table 1. The frequency distributions of the members who have not served in a national leadership capacity show these individuals are female (83.0%), are married (66.5%), and have children (59.8%).

Most spend less than ten hours a month on professional development (86.2%). Their ages are equally distributed over all categories. The amount of time they have worked for Extension varies and represents all categories. The amount of time they have been members of the association also varies a great deal, ranging from less than five years (35.7%) to 21 years or more (27.2%).

Table 1.

Demographics of Respondents

Characteristics	Non-leaders (<i>n</i> = 224) %	Leaders (<i>n</i> = 152) %
Age:		
≥ 60 years	11.2	8.6
51-60 years	32.1	39.5
41-50 years	20.5	25.7
31-40 years	21.4	22.4
≤ 30 years	12.5	2.0
Male	17.0	29.6
Married	66.5	67.8
Have children	59.8	56.6
Hours spent on professional development/month:		
1-5	50.0	40.1
6-10	36.2	43.4
≥ 11	10.7	13.2
Tenure in Extension:		
≥ 21 years	27.2	50.7
11-20 years	25.4	26.3
6-10 years	19.2	17.8
≤ 5 years	27.2	4.6
Years of NAE4-HA Membership:		
≥ 21 years	17.0	46.7
11-20 years	22.3	27.6
6-10 years	24.1	17.1
≤ 5 years	35.7	7.2
# of national NAE4-HA meetings attended:		
≥ 21	2.2	21.7
11-20	13.4	33.6
6-10	25.4	28.3
2-5	38.4	13.2
1	19.6	1.3

The members who have served in leadership positions are female (69.7%), are over the age of 40 (73.8%), are married (67.8%), and have children (56.6%). They have also been employed by Extension for at least six years (95.4%), have been members of NAE4-HA for six or more years (92.8%), and have attended a minimum of six national NAE4-HA meetings (85.5%).

Data were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics including independent *t*-tests, means and standard deviations to address the three research objectives. Responses were coded for computer analysis using SPSS. A level of significance of .05 was established *a priori*.

Findings

Comparison of personal characteristics

Significant differences in personal characteristics existed between members who had served in a national leadership position and those who had not (see Table 2). The number of national meetings attended ($t = -11.36, p = .00$), years of membership in the organization ($t = -8.50, p = .00$), length of tenure in Extension ($t = -6.28, p = .00$), and gender ($t = -2.92, p = .00$) were all significantly different. The individual's age, marital status, whether or not they had children, and the amount of time they spent on professional development each month were not significantly different.

Table 2.

Comparison of personal characteristics

Characteristic	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
# of national meetings attended	-11.36	.00**
Years of membership	-8.50	.00**
Tenure in Extension	-6.28	.00**
Gender	-2.92	.00**
Age	-1.87	.06
Hours spent on professional development/month	-1.73	.08
Have children	.55	.58
Marital status	-.28	.79

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Perceptions of items associated with leadership

Survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement as it related to their perceptions of twelve leadership items identified as essential to leadership within an organization. Their responses can be viewed in Table 3. The membership felt most comfortable with seeking out alternative solutions to problems ($M = 4.25, SD = .67$), using technology ($M = 4.25, SD = .78$), and working effectively with individuals and groups ($M = 4.22, SD = .62$). The membership did not agree as strongly with the perception that leadership was a social obligation ($M = 2.87, SD = 1.07$) or that they would enjoy the recognition of being a board member ($M = 2.87, SD = 1.10$).

Table 3.

Perceptions of leadership items

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Able to seek out alternative solutions to problems	4.25	0.67
Comfortable with technology	4.25	0.78
Work effectively with individuals and groups	4.22	0.62
Comfortable speaking to individuals and groups	4.20	0.73
Willing to help recruit more members	3.96	0.85
Importance of attending all organizational functions	3.89	0.87
Believe the leadership board is active in accomplishing its goals	3.87	0.72
Satisfied with the goals of the organization	3.83	0.72
Understand politics and the policy development process	3.63	0.88
Desire to be more involved in the organization	3.37	0.97
Enjoy the recognition of being a board member	2.89	1.10
Leadership is a social obligation	2.78	1.07

Comparison of perceptions of items associated with leadership

Significant differences existed on how tasks associated with leadership were perceived by those who have chosen to serve in a leadership role and those have not (see Table 4). Those who had chosen to take on leadership roles were more willing to help recruit members to the organization ($t = -4.88, p = .00$), had a stronger feeling that leadership was a social obligation ($t = -4.77, p = .00$), enjoyed the recognition of being a board member ($t = -3.90, p = .00$), and felt they had a greater understanding of politics and the policy development process ($t = -3.53, p = .00$) than those who had chosen not to take on leadership roles. They also felt it was more important to attend all organizational functions ($t = -3.46, p = .00$), had a stronger desire to be more involved in the organization ($t = -3.09, p = .00$), were more comfortable speaking to individuals and groups ($t = -2.98, p = .00$), and felt they worked more effectively with individuals and groups ($t = -2.76, p = .01$) than their counterparts. Areas where the two groups did not have significant differences include their comfort level with technology ($t = .30, p = .76$), their satisfaction with the goals of the organization ($t = -.90, p = .37$), their abilities to seek out alternative solutions to problems ($t = -1.60, p = .11$), and their belief the leadership board is active in accomplishing its goals ($t = -1.65, p = .10$).

Table 4.

Comparison of perceptions of leadership items

Items	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Willing to help recruit more members	-4.88	.00**
Leadership is a social obligation	-4.77	.00**
Enjoy the recognition of being a board member	-3.90	.00**
Understand politics and the policy development process	-3.53	.00**
Importance of attending all organizational functions	-3.46	.00**

Desire to be more involved in the organization	-3.09	.00**
Comfortable speaking to individuals and groups	-2.98	.00**
Work effectively with individuals and groups	-2.76	.01**
Believe the leadership board is active in accomplishing its goals	-1.65	.10
Able to seek out alternative solutions to problems	-1.60	.11
Satisfied with the goals of the organization	-.90	.37
Comfortable with technology	.30	.76

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Conclusions

As indicated through the theoretical framework selected for this study, understanding why individuals believe what they do about participating in voluntary leadership opportunities will help illuminate strategies for addressing a decreasing number of people electing to take on leadership positions in member-driven organizations. By characterizing beliefs as either behavioral, normative, or control practitioners will be able to systematically address these concerns. However, the researchers' recommend the findings of this study be generalized only to the population to which it was designed to address.

The first objective sought to establish the homogeneity of the study respondents. What researchers found were differences existed among respondents by the number of national meetings attended, years of membership, length of tenure in extension, and gender. This further establishes that fundamental differences in the respondents could alter subsequent findings.

The second and third objectives specifically addressed members' beliefs about leadership within an organization. Of those items included, the concepts related to advancing the organization versus those associated with personal fulfillment, either achievement or affiliation, were most important (Nistler, Lamm, & Stedman, 2010). Those associated with functions of motivation were scored lowest, including "leadership is a social obligation," "enjoy the recognition of being a board member," and "desire to be more involved with the organization." This indicates there is some dissonance between the motivations of current board members (Nistler, Lamm, & Stedman, 2010) and perceptions of members regarding their leadership opportunities.

Further comparison of these items indicated the act of taking on a leadership position alters ones perceptions about leadership (social construction). These leadership roles often provide members with a better understanding of the organization ("greater understanding of politics and policy development process") and thus elicit a stronger feeling of membership ("stronger feeling of that leadership was a social obligation," "enjoyed the recognition of being a board member") and alliance ("recruit members to the organization"). Additionally, they sought to "be more involved with the organization", "attend all organizational functions", and "speaking to individuals or groups." The greatest conclusion identified is that those who take on leadership opportunities perceive leadership differently than those who do not. The findings revealed in this study reinforce feelings of affiliation (Nistler, Lamm, & Stedman, 2010) associated with leadership roles which also supports the idea of normative beliefs identified by Ajzen (2002).

Recommendations

Recommendations from this study are categorized into two distinct areas: research and practice.

Research recommendations:

- Conduct qualitative interviews or focus groups with members to further elicit information regarding their election to participate in leadership opportunities.
- Identify further the relationship between the specific leadership experiences and beliefs or perceptions developed from those leadership experiences.
 - Evaluate specific experiences for their outcomes/impacts
- Conduct an analysis of the culture within the organization as it relates to leadership.
 - What is it about the culture of the organization which drives these varied perceptions?
- Study more specifically the relationship between specific demographic factors (other leadership positions/experiences, etc.) and perceptions about leadership.

Practice recommendations:

- Actively recruit new individuals into leadership roles. Many times, the same individuals are invited (or volunteer) to participate in leadership positions. This can often be seen as an elite group. All members should feel encouraged to participate.
- Have current board members more actively share their *positive* experiences with members.
- Highlight a board member each month, include their responsibilities, but also their backgrounds – who they are, what they do, and how they feel motivated to contribute.
- Invite members to sit in on board meetings to view or observe the process.

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