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Developing a Comprehensive Leadership Program for Extension County Directors

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Abstract. This article provides an overview of the development and components of LEAD95, University of Tennessee (UT) Extension's comprehensive leadership program for county-level leaders. The program was designed in accordance with results from a Delphi study, which identified critical skills and resources new county directors need to be successful. The program consists of face-to-face workshops, an online resource tool kit, online learning opportunities, a multirater assessment, and mentoring. Expected outcomes include increased competency, increased job satisfaction, and more consistent leadership and direction among county-level leaders in the UT Extension system.

INTRODUCTION

As Extension services across the United States face the reality of many career employees retiring, succession planning is an issue that merits our attention. Perhaps one of the most critical issues is the leadership role that is vital to the day-to-day operations of Extension, the county-level leader. In 2010, 46 of 95 University of Tennessee (UT) Extension county directors were eligible for retirement within the subsequent 10 years. With pending retirements for nearly half of UT Extension's county directors and fewer experienced employees to promote into these roles, the issue of providing comprehensive leadership development training for county directors became critical for succession planning. Given this changing workforce situation, UT Extension took steps to develop a county director training program, which focuses on developing the leadership skills of county directors through a competency-based model. As members of the implementation team, we describe herein the process used to develop and implement a training program for UT Extension county directors.

METHODOLOGY

Developed by a diverse implementation team of Tennessee Extension county directors, LEAD95 is a comprehensive yearlong training program for Extension county directors, with the primary purposes being to increase competency, increase job satisfaction, and establish consistent leadership and direction across the Tennessee Extension system. To build on and validate the information collected through initial team brainstorming and an environmental scan of existing programs, the team conducted a needs assessment using a Delphi study to obtain input from county employees representing different program areas and roles across the state. After completing the environmental scan and needs assessment, the team developed and identified resources to address training needs.

Recognizing differences in learning and retention styles, we considered early on the inclusion of a variety of teaching methods and components in the training curriculum. LEAD95 provides leadership development through a blended approach with soft skill professional development and technical skill training needed for success in the role of county director. The major training areas are

- communication,
- performance management,

- leadership,

- position expectations, and

- financial management and budgeting.

LEAD95 launched in July 2016 with a cohort of 32 county directors who had been appointed since January 2013. Newly appointed county directors join the cohort at the next quarterly training session following their appointment. The program lasts 1 year, and participants must complete all four quarterly sessions.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

LEAD95 consists of the following five components to address training needs:

- quarterly face-to-face training sessions,

- an online tool kit,

- online learning,

- a multirater 360-degree assessment, and

- a formal mentoring program.

FACE-TO-FACE TRAINING SESSIONS

Face-to-face sessions are based on the concept of intentional relationship building. Research has suggested that strengthening social capital for staff within an organization improves productivity and organizational effectiveness (Andrews, 2010). At these sessions, county directors network with their peers and with administrators as they gain knowledge and develop new skills. These sessions provide time to reflect and learn from peers in a relaxed setting. They also enable county directors to step away from daily responsibilities and see their work through a broader lens.

ONLINE TOOL KIT

The County Director Online Toolkit is a website providing frequently needed resources and information that is keyword searchable and easy to locate. Quick links to university policies and resources save time and provide instant support for both new and experienced county directors. Site users can submit requests for new resources, and the site is updated frequently, making it a reliable source for current information.

ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning is readily available for county directors to use to increase knowledge and build leadership skills at their own pace. UT's online learning management system gives employees access to more than 300 e-learning professional development courses on topics such as business ethics, effective business communication, conflict resolution, organizational change, and workplace diversity. Participants complete at least one assigned online learning module between face-to-face sessions.

MULTIRATER ASSESSMENT

The Leadership Competencies in Extension (LCE) Assessment provides a county director with multirater feedback from their regional director, direct reports, peers, and stakeholders. The LCE assessment includes 81 competencies in six skill areas: human skills, conceptual skills, technical skills, communication skills, emotional intelligence skills, and industry knowledge skills. The assessment measures perceived importance of a competency relative to performing the job compared with perceived proficiency in that competency (Moore, 2003; Moore & Rudd, 2004). Cohort members use the results from the assessment to develop a professional development plan with the support of their mentor and regional director.

MENTORING

A formal mentoring program pairs an experienced county director with a new county director. Following a detailed checklist and timeline, the mentor provides one-on-one support over a 12-month period, specifically for

administrative and leadership responsibilities. Long-term relationships between mentors and mentees provide continued support and ongoing success beyond the initial assigned mentoring relationship.

RESULTS

As of July 2020, 53 county directors had completed the LEAD95 program. At the conclusion of each face-to-face session, participants complete a written evaluation of the training topics provided during the session. Results of the surveys indicate that participants have found the training to be valuable, with 97% of participants indicating that they would recommend the training to their peers. Plans are in process to conduct a comprehensive evaluation to document the impact of the program over time.

CONCLUSION

Developing and investing in a leadership program addressing the needs of newly appointed county-level leaders has been a critical step toward succession planning and a worthwhile investment for Tennessee Extension. A competent workforce is critical for organizational success, and research has suggested that higher level competency is associated with lower turnover rates, enhanced retention, and improved job satisfaction of employees (Brodeur et al., 2011). As Extension systems across the United States face similar challenges of career employees retiring with fewer mid-career employees to promote into leadership roles, it is critical to have a leadership development program for county directors/middle managers to orient new leaders to their roles and to provide a network of support and resources.

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