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Characteristics and Motivational Factors of Effective Extension Advisory Leaders: Implications for Building Strong Extension Advisory Councils

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The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics and motivational factors of effective Extension advisory leaders. This Delphi study was conducted with a selected group of County Extension Directors and a group of Extension State Advisory Leaders. The study identified 10 characteristics that distinguish an effective Extension advisory leader. Some of these characteristics are explicit and easy to observe, while others are implicit and difficult to directly observe. Therefore, it is practical to use directly observable characteristics of effective advisory leaders when selecting volunteers. Once potential volunteers are spotted in the community, implicit characteristics of effective advisory leaders should be used to further screen them before they are selected. The study also identified the eight most important factors motivating individuals to volunteer as effective advisory leaders. Understanding these motivational factors is helpful for creating an environment for attracting and retaining effective volunteers. Understanding their motivation for volunteer work and creating an environment for them to meet the motivating factors for volunteering will lead to volunteer satisfaction and retention. The findings of this study can be used to build strong Extension advisory councils.

Keywords: characteristics, motivators, Extension advisory leaders, building advisory councils

Introduction

The volunteers who provide advisory inputs and assist Cooperative Extension in programming, marketing, advocacy, and resource development are referred to as Extension advisory leaders.

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These volunteers provide much needed services to Extension in which they give their time, resources, and talents. Often individuals are motivated to volunteer for more than one reason. A volunteer manager needs to understand that individuals have their own reasons for volunteering, and these needs can sometimes be very complex (Ellis, 1994). Some use volunteering as a way to keep busy and focus on positive things (Clary et al., 1998). According to Walker (1991), volunteers like to be a part of something that is valuable. Some volunteer to fulfill the need to achieve and help others. Fisher and Cole (1993) identified three theories of motivators for volunteerism: personal fulfillment, helping others, and receiving benefits (e.g., receiving recognition and obtaining self-fulfillment).

A study by Braker, Leno, Pratt, and Grobe (2000) examined the benefits of volunteering for Extension and found volunteers receive several benefits from volunteering. These include education, opportunity to help others, social contacts, self-esteem, and getting to spend time with their own children. Wolford, Cox, and Culp (2001) examined reasons people volunteer for Extension programs in Ohio and found volunteers want to be in an environment where they can learn and help others. Volunteers need to know their efforts make a difference. According to Deppe and Culp (2001) who explored Extension 4-H agents' perception of volunteer administration in Ohio, recognition is an important motivator for volunteers. In a study to determine motivational factors of Extension 4-H volunteers in Ohio, Culp and Schwartz (1999) found 4-H volunteers like to be affiliated with a good organization and have the opportunity to participate with their children; they also found volunteers need to be valued and recognized. Yoshioka, Brown, and Ashcraft (2007) cited opportunities for education, helping others, and social interaction as motivators of seniors for volunteering. According to Bolton (1992), Extension advisory leaders must have a willingness to serve the organization. Often they have a strong desire to help others. They must believe in the mission of the organization, and their schedule must allow them to serve. A commitment needs to exist for the Extension advisory leaders to effectively carry out their duties (Gamon, 1987).

A study by Fritz, Barbuto, Marx, Etling, and Burrow (2000) examined motives and recognition strategies of Extension 4-H volunteers in Nebraska and indicated 4-H volunteers tend to be around middle age and have a commitment to 4-H. Volunteers are often outgoing and social. Meeting new friends and working with friends are advantages to volunteering. Volunteers that meet new people and develop friendships are more likely to continue to serve (Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). Volunteers like to seize opportunities to do good things for others (Scheier, 2009). According to Ebling (1985), successful Extension advisory groups need to have a balanced membership (diverse race, gender, geographical area, etc.), an understanding of their role, and a commitment to their assignment.

In times of declining resources and shifting of funding, volunteer advisory leaders are needed more than ever to partner with Cooperative Extension to ensure that strong county Extension

programs meet the needs of diverse clientele (Vettern, Hall, & Schmidt, 2009). According to Seaman (1981), “when functioning effectively, the advisory group can be the most important group in an agency or organization” (p. 19). Advisory leaders provide the necessary input to ensure Extension programs are relevant and responsive to local needs. Extension advisory leaders are passionate about the mission of Cooperative Extension. However, there is an inconsistent level of effectiveness among advisory leaders. There is adequate research regarding volunteerism; however, only limited research has been conducted to identify the characteristics and motivational factors of effective Extension advisory leaders. This study provides information to help fill this research gap.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics and motivational factors of effective Extension advisory leaders. The study aimed to achieve the following two objectives:

1. Determine the characteristics of effective Extension advisory leaders, and
2. Determine the motivational factors that cause individuals to be effective advisory leaders for Cooperative Extension.

Methods

This is a part of a larger research study. The Delphi technique was used to conduct this exploratory study. This type of exploratory research requires gathering information from individuals who have expertise in a particular area. The Delphi technique has been designed to facilitate this type of information gathering (McInturff, 2009). This methodology utilizes several rounds of questionnaires with an expert panel. The process was developed as a technique to examine future events (Custer, Scarcella, & Stewart, 1999). The Delphi technique gathers information anonymously with a series of individual rounds designed to gain feedback from experts. The intent is to receive consensus from the group (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963). Varying numbers of rounds are used depending on the specific study (Skulmoski, Hartman, & Krahn, 2007).

Due to time limitation, this Delphi study was planned to be completed within three rounds of surveying with selected panel members. The first round asked participants to brainstorm as many answers as possible to one or more questions. Answers are compiled and sent back to the group for round two, so respondents can evaluate the group responses and add more ideas if feasible. At the end of the second round, an exhaustive list of responses was compiled. Additional rounds may be necessary to reach consensus (Ludwig, 1997). In the third round, this list was sent back to the group to receive their priority rating of the listed items.

There are several advantages of the Delphi technique. Respondents are not influenced by dominant members, sound is not distracting, and there is no pressure by the group to conform (Dalkey, Rourke, Lewis, & Snyder, 1972). Another advantage is respondents can see all the feedback and feel more connected to the process. Disadvantages of the Delphi technique also exist. Some evidence suggests people tend to follow the norm after repeated rounds (Weaver, 1971). Since this method of research involves several rounds with questionnaires, responses can be low, and it can take a lot of time to participate (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

Two panels of experts were used for this study. One panel consisted of 20 State Advisory Council members that volunteer for North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. The other panel consisted of 20 County Extension Directors employed by North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. County Extension Directors were recommended from each of Cooperative Extension's six districts by their District Extension Director based on their strong history of support for the advisory leadership system. County Extension Directors and State Advisory Council members who agreed to participate in the study were contacted.

As mentioned, this study utilized three rounds to gather data and reach a consensus. For round one, each panel of experts received a group of questions that was administered through an online survey. The questions were identified through careful study of the literature and needs that have been expressed by State Advisory Council members and Extension Administrators. These questions were reviewed by Extension education professionals for establishing the content validity of questions to research objectives of the study. The following questions related to this study were asked of the County Extension Directors:

1. What are the characteristics of effective Extension advisory leaders?
2. What are the motivational factors that cause individuals to be effective volunteers for Cooperative Extension?

The following question related to this study was asked of the State Advisory Council members:

1. Why do you volunteer for North Carolina Cooperative Extension?

Findings

Round three was used to build consensus about the priority of each of the response categories. Participants rated these categories with 1 = *most important*, 2 = *second in importance*, 3 = *third in importance*, and so on for each question. Rating levels on this scale have been considered as ordered response categories that are equidistant from each other. Therefore, descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were used to analyze the ratings for each of the response categories. The lower the mean value, the greater the priority of rating on this scale.

The County Extension Directors were asked to rate the importance of the identified 20 characteristics for effective advisory leaders in Extension using a 20-point scale ranging from 1 = *most important* to 20 = *least important*. The mean of responses ranged from 4.17 to 18.33 as summarized in Table 1. The lowest mean reported was for *'Involved, respected, and connected to the community'* indicating that it was perceived as the most important characteristic for effective advisory leaders, followed by *'Committed, dependable, and dedicated.'* The highest mean reported was for *'Charitable'* indicating that it was perceived as the least important characteristic for effective advisory leaders in Extension of the 20 items rated.

Table 1. Round Three - County Extension Directors' Rating Order of the Characteristics of Effective Advisory Leaders

Characteristics for Effective Advisory Leaders	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Involved, respected, and connected to the community	4.17	3.11
Committed, dependable, and dedicated	5.39	3.84
Honest and trustworthy	5.67	3.61
Community oriented	7.22	3.83
Good communication and willing to speak up	7.44	4.54
Passionate about Cooperative Extension	7.67	6.13
Knowledgeable about Cooperative Extension	7.72	5.20
Understands advisory role	8.28	3.32
Leader	9.28	5.97
Actively involved in Cooperative Extension	9.44	6.03
Respectful and open minded	9.50	5.22
Motivated	10.78	4.35
Extension participant	12.39	5.35
Visionary	12.67	4.64
Collaborative	13.33	4.10
Outgoing	14.61	3.99
Embraces diversity	15.00	4.17
Creative	15.50	2.48
Compassionate and understanding	15.61	3.22
Charitable	18.33	1.81

Note: Rating scale: 1 = *the most important*, 2 = *the second most important*, 3 = *the third most important*, and 20 = *the least important*

The County Extension Directors were asked to rate the importance of the identified nine motivational factors for effective advisory leaders in Extension using a nine-point scale ranging from 1 = *most important* to 9 = *least important*. The mean of their responses ranged from 2.67 to 8.33 as summarized in Table 2. The lowest mean reported was for *'Positive attitudes and interests about Extension'* indicating that it was perceived as the most important motivational factor for effective advisory leaders, followed by *'Desire to serve others and improve the community.'* The highest mean reported was for *'Recognition and benefits'* indicating that it was

perceived as the least important motivational factor for effective advisory leaders in Extension of the nine items rated.

Table 2. Round Three - County Extension Directors' Rating Order of the Motivational Factors for Effective Advisory Leaders

Motivational Factors for Effective Advisory Leaders	M	SD
Positive attitudes and interests about Cooperative Extension	2.67	1.85
Desire to serve others and improve the community	3.11	1.75
Prior positive experience with Cooperative Extension	3.61	1.79
Interested in self and others benefiting from Cooperative Extension	4.17	2.46
Desire for meaningful service	4.44	2.01
Desire to meet and work with people	5.94	2.39
Opportunities to learn	6.11	2.11
Give back to society	6.61	1.46
Recognition and benefits	8.33	1.46

Note: Rating scale: 1 = the most important, 2 = the second most important, 3 = the third most important, and 9 = the least important

The State Advisory Council members were asked to rate the importance of the identified nine reasons for volunteering in Extension using a nine-point scale ranging from 1 = *most important* to 9 = *least important*. The mean of their responses ranged from 3.21 to 7.16 as summarized in Table 3. The lowest mean reported was for '*Desire to serve others and improve the community*' indicating that it was perceived as the most important reason for someone to volunteer in Extension, followed by '*Give back to society through Cooperative Extension volunteerism.*' The highest mean reported was for '*Maximizing volunteer talents and skills*' indicating that it was perceived as the least important reason for someone to volunteer in Extension out of the nine items rated.

Table 3. Round Three - State Advisory Council Members' Rating Order of Reasons for Volunteering

Reasons for Volunteering	M	SD
Desire to serve others and improve the community	3.21	2.42
Give back to society through Cooperative Extension volunteerism	3.68	2.33
Positive attitudes and interests about Cooperative Extension	3.74	2.47
Desire for and value of meaningful service	3.79	1.87
Prior positive experience with Cooperative Extension	4.42	2.55
Opportunities to learn	5.32	2.14
Desire to meet and work with people	6.58	1.89
Positive working environment for volunteers	7.11	2.08
Maximizing volunteer talents and skills	7.16	1.54

Note: Rating scale: 1 = the most important, 2 = the second most important, 3 = the third most important, and 9 = the least important

Conclusions

Research Objective 1: Determining the characteristics of effective Extension Advisory Leaders

This objective was limited to County Extension Directors. Based on the rating of these County Extension Directors, it can be concluded that *'Involved, respected, and connected to the community;'* *'Committed, dependable, and dedicated;'* *'Honest and trustworthy;'* *'Community oriented;'* *'Good communication and willing to speak up;'* *'Passionate about Cooperative Extension;'* *'Knowledgeable about Cooperative Extension;'* *'Understands advisory role;'* *'Leadership in the community;'* and *'Actively involved in Cooperative Extension'* are the 10 most important characteristics for someone to become an effective Extension advisory leader. Culp, McKee, and Nestor (2005) also indicated a desirable characteristic as a person who was already involved and active in the community. Bolton (1992) asserted that effective Extension advisory leaders believe in the mission of Cooperative Extension and are willing to serve the organization.

Research Objective 2: Determining the motivational factors that cause individuals to be effective volunteers for Cooperative Extension

This question was asked from both State Advisory Council members and County Extension Directors. These County Extension Directors identified *'Positive attitudes and interests about Cooperative Extension;'* *'Desire to serve others and improve the community;'* *'Prior positive experience with Cooperative Extension;'* *'Interested in self and others benefiting from Cooperative Extension;'* *'Desire for meaningful service;'* *'Desire to meet and work with people;'* and *'Opportunities to learn'* as the most important factors motivating volunteers to serve as advisory leaders in Extension. These State Advisory Council Members identified *'Desire to serve others and improve the community;'* *'Give back to society through Cooperative Extension volunteerism;'* *'Positive attitudes and interests about Cooperative Extension;'* *'Desire for and value of meaningful service;'* *'Prior positive experience with Cooperative Extension;'* *'Opportunities to learn;'* and *'Desire to meet and work with people'* as the most important reasons for them to volunteer as advisory leaders in Extension.

By comparing and combining the ratings of these County Extension Directors and State Advisory Council Members, it can be concluded that *'Desire to serve others and improve the community;'* *'Positive attitudes and interests about Cooperative Extension;'* *'Prior positive experience with Cooperative Extension;'* *'Desire for and value of meaningful service;'* *'Desire to meet and work with people;'* *'Opportunities to learn;'* *'Give back to society through Cooperative Extension;'* and *'Interested in self and others benefiting from Cooperative Extension'* are the eight most important factors motivating individuals to volunteer as effective advisory leaders in Extension. Available literature (Bolton, 1992; Fisher & Cole, 1993; MacLeod, 1993; Nelson,

2007; Scheier, 2009; White & Arnold, 2003) supported the notion that the desire to serve others and improve the community and the desire for and value of meaningful service were prime motivational factors for volunteering. Additionally, Wolford, Cox, and Culp (2001) examined reasons people volunteer for Extension programs in Ohio and found that people volunteer from a desire to be in an environment where they can learn and help others.

Recommendations

Place (2007) indicated that advisory leaders are a necessary part of Cooperative Extension. Effective advisory leaders are helpful in needs identification, program marketing, building resources, and advocating for Extension. They are valuable resources for Extension only if we identify prospective volunteers for effective advisory leadership roles. The findings of this research can be used to identify effective advisory leaders. When selecting volunteers as advisory leaders, it is important to consider whether they have the characteristics of effective volunteer leaders. The effective advisory leaders are involved, respected, and connected to the community. They are committed, dependable, dedicated, honest, trustworthy, and community-oriented. They are also good communicators, are willing to speak up for Extension, and are passionate about Extension. They are knowledgeable about Extension and understand the advisory role. They are leaders in the community and actively involved in Extension.

Some of these characteristics of effective advisory leaders are explicit and easy to observe, while others are implicit and difficult to directly observe. If any community leader is actively involved in Extension, a good communicator and willing to speak up for Extension, community-oriented, committed, dependable, dedicated, respected, and connected to the community, one can directly observe these characteristics. However, it is not easy to directly observe whether a community member is knowledgeable and passionate about Extension, understands an advisory leadership role, or is honest and trustworthy. These are implicit characteristics of effective Extension leaders. Due to this reason, it is practical to use directly observable characteristics of effective advisory leaders when selecting volunteers for Extension advisory leadership roles. Once potential volunteers are spotted in the community, it is important to ascertain whether they also have the implicit characteristics of effective advisory leaders before they are assigned for advisory roles. By following these two steps, one will be able to identify potential volunteers for effective advisory leadership roles in Extension.

Understanding the motivational factors of effective advisory leaders is helpful for creating an environment for attracting and retaining effective volunteers. A volunteer manager needs to understand that individuals have their own reasons for volunteering (Ellis, 1994). This study identified eight factors motivating individuals to volunteer for Extension. Community members' desire to serve others and improve the community, positive attitudes, and interests about Extension, prior positive experience with Extension, desire for and value of meaningful service,

desire to meet and work with people, opportunities to learn, give back to the society through Extension, and interest in self and others benefiting from Extension should be considered as motivating factors for volunteering in Extension. Therefore, when advertising volunteer leadership positions, it is important to describe how the prospective candidates will be able to meet and work with people and provide a meaningful service to others in their community, as well as identify opportunities available for them to learn and give back to the society through Extension. Also, it is important to build the public image that Extension is providing a meaningful service to society, so Extension will be able to attract effective volunteer leaders.

Once effective volunteer leaders are identified and recruited, it is important to retain them. Understanding their motivation for volunteer work and creating an environment for them to meet the motivating factors for volunteering in their Extension work will lead to their satisfaction and retention in the organization. When working with volunteer leaders, Extension should carefully match assignments that fit the volunteer's abilities and reason(s) for volunteering. By having the correct match, the Extension educators will be able to make the volunteer experience more meaningful for the volunteer, as well as more effective for the organization.

Available literature also supports the notion that volunteers need to be matched to a satisfying and meaningful role (Lynch, 2009). Therefore, it is important to create an environment that will further their positive experience, attitudes and interests about Extension for retention. Also, it is important to make sure they will have opportunities to learn, work with people, serve, and improve their community through Extension to satisfy their motivational thrusts. By creating these conditions, the volunteer leaders will be impressed with Extension and satisfied with the opportunity to serve their community through Extension, and they will extend their commitment to Extension. The available literature also stresses that volunteer managers seek to understand the motivations of individual volunteers to develop a strong volunteer base (Schultinik, Riley, & Schott, n.d.; Starnes, 2007). Cooperative Extension has the opportunity to benefit from advisory leaders while providing these leaders opportunities for personal satisfaction (Seaman, 1981).

To implement these recommendations, it is necessary to incorporate these findings into in-service programs designed for teaching Extension educators to build their Extension advisory leadership systems. With this knowledge, they will be able to identify appropriate people with desirable characteristics for Extension advisory leadership roles and create conditions to attract, train, and retain volunteers committed to Extension.

Implications for Extension Leadership Development

The findings of this study have implications for building effective Extension advisory leadership systems in other states' Extension systems as well. The characteristics of effective Extension advisory leaders identified in this study are useful for Extension professionals to determine

prospective volunteers for effective advisory leadership roles. For example, if a community member is a committed leader who is involved, respected, and connected to the community that individual is a potential candidate for an effective Extension advisory leadership role because of his/her established leadership role in the community.

If an Extension system has this type of individuals serving as advisory leaders, that Extension system will be in a better position to get things done through their established leadership roles in the community. This is especially useful when planning, marketing, and delivering programs and developing resources for Extension. Effective advisory leaders are helpful for guiding Extension systems to provide relevant educational programs to citizens, marketing Extension programs, and advocating for Extension. The major implication of this study is that it guides Extension professionals in determining prospective volunteers for Extension advisory leadership roles when building responsive and strong Extension systems. This study was conducted with a selected group of Extension advisory leaders and County Extension Directors in North Carolina, which may be a limitation of this study. It would be important to conduct a similar study with a group of Extension advisory leaders and County Extension directors selected from different states to overcome this limitation.

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