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Leadership Practices of West Virginia University Extension Agents Working with the 4-H Youth Development Program

William Woodrum

West Virginia State College, woodrumw@mail.wvsc.edu

R Dale Safrit

North Carolina State University, dale_safrit@ncsu.edu



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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE

Leadership Practices of West Virginia University Extension Agents Working with the 4-H Youth Development Program

Abstract

A descriptive study explored leadership practices of West Virginia University Extension Service (WVUES) agents with an appointment in 4-H and Youth programs. The researchers utilized a census and a mailed questionnaire for the study that incorporated both the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire MLQ. Overall, respondents' usage of both transactional and transformational leadership practices was average, with nearly equal usage of both leadership approaches. The authors discuss implications for WVUES that will affect its ability to achieve the visionary goals to which it aspires.

William Woodrum

Extension Specialist

Department of Community Resource and Economic Development

West Virginia State College

Institute, West Virginia

Internet Address: woodrumw@mail.wvsc.edu

R. Dale Safrit

Associate Professor and Extension Specialist

Department of 4-H Youth Development

North Carolina State University

Raleigh, North Carolina

Internet Address: dale_safrit@ncsu.edu

Introduction

West Virginia University (WVU) is the land-grant institution administering the West Virginia University Extension Service (WVUES). The mission of the Center for 4-H and Youth, Family and Adult Development, a component of WVUES, is to:

[enable] families and youths to improve their lives through educational programs and activities in the areas of nutrition and health, literacy, family life, international awareness, career and post-secondary opportunities, and life skills development (WVUES Annual Report, 2000).

During the past 15 years, there have been major changes to Cooperative Extension (Wheeler, 1992). In an April 9, 1997 speech to a statewide meeting of WVU Extension Service faculty and guests at Jackson's Mill State 4-H Conference Center, Larry S. Cote, Associate Provost for Extension and Public Service, outlined four goals for WVUES. These included:

1. Rebuilding an internal environment of trust, inclusivity, innovation, and continuous quality improvement;
2. Embracing and practicing outreach program development (and implementation) that is focused accurately on the most pressing, changing needs of West Virginians;
3. Evolving a set of relationships and responsibilities (an organizational logic, a structure for WVU Extension and outreach) that better supports the development of an exemplary, national-caliber university extension and outreach program; and

4. Deciding upon the program focus, stabilize the financial future, improve the physical facilities, celebrate the proud heritage and chart an important future for the campus at Jackson's Mill.

With these ambitious goals in mind, it is important for WVUES to attract Extension agents who are leaders and can create and share a vision of community based educational programming into the 21st century. Scholars have studied leadership theory for many years and have developed vastly differing interpretations. Burns (1978) described transactional leadership as involving the exchange or bartering of wants and needs between leaders and followers, in contrast to transformational leadership that promotes profound change and appeals to followers' higher ideals of liberty, justice, equality, peace, and humanitarianism.

Bass (1985), expanding upon Burns' earlier work, identified four essential transformational leadership actions:

1. Providing a sense of vision and mission while instilling pride in the group (or, charisma);
2. Expressing purposes in simple ways and communicating high expectations to the group (inspirational motivation);
3. Encouraging intelligence and effective problem-solving (intellectual stimulation); and
4. Treating each person as an individual through coaching and advising (or individualized consideration).

Kotter (1988) asserted that leadership is a process that directs and mobilizes people and their ideas to enhance overall group productivity. Bass and Avolio (1990) developed the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) for studying individual leadership approaches, a 45-item standardized instrument. The MLQ focuses upon 12 constructs:

1. Idealized attributes;
2. Idealized behaviors;
3. Inspirational motivation;
4. Intellectual stimulation;
5. Individualized inspiration;
6. Contingent reward;
7. Management-by-exception (active);
8. Management-by-exception (passive);
9. Laissez-faire;
10. Extra effort;
11. Effectiveness; and
12. Satisfaction.

In 1991, Covey asserted that leadership is based on fundamental principles and processes of personal interactions.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) conducted an extensive study of transactional leadership among individual leaders and developed the Leadership Profile Inventory (LPI). The authors concluded that leaders were at their personal best when they focus upon five major leadership constructs:

1. Challenging the process;
2. Inspiring a shared vision;
3. Enabling others to act;
4. Modeling the way; and
5. Encouraging the heart.

Most recently, Northouse (1997) concluded that the common component among the majority of leadership authors is that "leadership is an influence process that assists groups of individuals toward goal attainment" (p. 10).

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of the study discussed here was to investigate leadership practices of WVU Extension 4-H and Youth agents. The researchers used a census to gather data from the target population of 42 agents. The researchers utilized two standardized instruments to collect data: 1) The Leadership Practices Inventory-Self (LPI-Self, Kouzes & Posner, 1997) and 2) the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ, Bass & Avolio, 1990). The researchers developed a third instrument that collected demographics, including personal and professional characteristics.

According to Bass and Avolio, and Kouzes and Posner, the MLQ and LPI, respectively, have continually produced valid assessments of leadership practice among managerial leaders. Because study participants can be considered administrators of Extension educational programs, the researchers concluded that the instruments were valid for WUVES 4-H and Youth agents. Based upon data collected, the researchers calculated Cronbach's Alpha to measure internal consistency as an indicator of the instruments' reliabilities. The five constructs of the LPI had reliabilities as follows:

1. Challenging the process, .691;
2. Inspiring a shared vision, .545;
3. Enabling others to act, .682;
4. Modeling the way, .522; and
5. Encouraging the heart, .445.

The MLQ transformational constructs resulted in a reliability of .688; the transactional constructs, .543; and the laissez-faire constructs, .433.

The researchers collected data by use of a mailed survey (Dillman, 1978). They mailed the three instruments to study participants on March 30, 2001, with a requested return deadline of April 13, 2001. On April 6, 2001, the researchers e-mailed a reminder to all participants encouraging them to complete and return the instrument. As of April 13, 2001, 24 completed instruments had been returned.

The researchers e-mailed a follow-up message to all non-respondents and discovered that one agent was on leave and would not be returning until May 2001. This made the total accessible population 41 agents. By April 20, 2001, three additional surveys had been returned. On April 23, 2001, the researchers placed telephone calls to remaining non-respondents requesting their participation and established a final response deadline of April 27, 2001. As of that date, 27 completed instrument sets had been returned, resulting in a 66% final response rate. The researchers controlled for non-response error.

All research data was entered and analyzed utilizing the SPSS 10.0.05. The researchers calculated descriptive statistics to meet the research objectives outlined for the study.

Findings

Four of the transactional constructs measured by the LPI (Challenging the Process; Inspiring a Shared Vision; Modeling the Way; and Encouraging the Heart) were practiced "sometimes" (Table 1). Of these, Modeling the Way and Encouraging the Heart were practiced "fairly often." The final construct of Enabling Others to Act was practiced "fairly often."

Table 1.
Leadership Scores of WVUES Agents 4-H and Youth Programs as Measured by the Leadership Practices Inventory-Self*

Leadership Construct	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Median
Challenging the process	3.67 (.89)	4.00
Inspiring a Shared Vision	3.43 (.96)	4.00
Enabling Others to Act	4.48 (.62)	5.00
Modeling the Way	3.86 (.83)	4.00

Encouraging the Heart	3.90 (.91)	4.00
* LPI Constructs: scale utilized = 1) rarely or very seldom; 2) once in a while; 3) sometimes; 4) fairly often; 5) very frequently or almost always.		

As for the transactional constructs measured by the MLQ (Table 2), two were used "once in a while," and one was used "sometimes." Management-by-Exception-Active and Management-by-Exception-Passive measured nearly equally; both were scored low in the "once in a while" range. Contingent Reward was scored in the high "sometimes." Holistically, the three transactional behaviors scored by the MLQ were practiced "once in a while."

Table 2.
Leadership Scores of WVUES Agents 4-H and Youth Programs as Measured by the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire*

Leadership Construct	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Median
Idealized Influence (Attributed)	3.91 (.83)	4.00
Idealized Influence (Behavior)	3.88 (.96)	4.00
Inspirational Motivation	3.93 (.84)	4.00
Intellectual Stimulation	3.93 (.79)	4.00
Individual Consideration	3.29 (.75)	4.00
Contingent Reward	3.95 (.90)	4.00
Management-by-Exception (Active)	2.26 (.92)	2.00
Management-by-Exception (Passive)	2.29 (.96)	2.00
Laissez-faire Leadership	1.88 (.87)	2.00
Extra Effort	3.75 (.62)	4.00
Effectiveness	3.96 (.75)	4.00
Satisfaction	4.06 (.46)	4.00
* MLQ Transformational Constructs: scale utilized = 0) not at all; 1) once in a while; 2) sometimes; 3) fairly often; 4) frequently, if not always.		

Transformational constructs investigated using the MLQ were used more often by respondents than transactional constructs. Four of the five constructs scored high in the "sometimes" category and almost reached "fairly often." These constructs were Idealized Influence-Attributed; Idealized Influence-Behavior; Inspirational Motivation; and Intellectual Stimulation. Each of these constructs had median scores of 3.00 or "fairly often." The highest score among transformational leadership constructs was Individual Consideration. This median of this construct was also 3.00. The sum of the transformational leadership constructs was "fairly often." Laissez-Faire Leadership was practiced "not at all." The mean score was .88.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the Extension agents working with 4-H and Youth exhibited average to slightly above average transactional leadership practices as measured by the LPI. Each construct, however, had a substantial standard deviation that ranged from .62 on Enabling Others to Act to .96 on Inspiring a

Shared Vision.

WVUES may want to concentrate their training on these leadership constructs and ensure that agents are exposed to reliable and valid leadership theories in their professional development activities because of the organizational restructuring that is currently in process. Without agents who can empower others to a shared vision of the future and facilitate their constituency's understanding of the change, organizational change cannot succeed.

Management-by-Exception-Active and Management-by-Exception-Passive were practiced "once in a while"; Contingent Reward was practiced "sometimes" and nearly reached the level of "fairly often." Each had a standard deviation above .90, indicating nearly a level difference in agents' responses, once again indicating a wide margin of difference in agent practices.

This may indicate a lack of uniform training and stated expectations from WVUES. To address this issue, WVUES should institute inservice training de-emphasizing both styles of Management-by-Exception. WVUES should instruct agents to focus on positive aspects of program development to inspire the clientele instead of tracking negatives that discourage program growth.

Individual Consideration was scored as "fairly often." Although this is significant, the researchers had hoped for higher results because of organizational change that has occurred within WVUES in the past 5 years. With only one construct being practiced "fairly often," there is obviously not a large emphasis placed on change leadership with respect to Extension agents working 4-H and Youth programs in this system.

As WVUES continues to look at attracting new and diverse audiences, it will be of paramount importance that agents understand and embrace the transformational process and practices associated therein. Although Extension administration may understand and encourage the changes happening, without grass-roots support, the effort cannot succeed in the long term.

WVUES needs to address leadership as an issue in need of serious attention within the 4-H and Youth program area. As 4-H and Youth administrators attempt to strengthen and expand targeted community-based educational programs, they will need committed staff who demonstrate above-average levels of transformational leadership. An Extension Service system cannot be changed and renewed in this inspirational manner by professionals with only marginal use of leadership practices. Without professionals who utilize the leadership constructs outlined by Bass (1990) and Kouzes and Posner (1995, 1997), such changes will be viewed as fleeting administrative bureaucracy and never internalized by clientele groups,

The current WVUES plan of work (including the organization's vision statement) emphasizes ambitious goals and visionary leadership in Extension administration at WVU. However, these practices do not seem to be embraced at the local level, as exhibited by average leadership scores on the two leadership instruments used in this study. WVUES needs to make a firm effort to help county-based faculty and staff working with 4-H and Youth programs to espouse the values inherent the plan of work and vision statement. These practices cannot be adopted overnight and will take role models to encourage their future success.

Extension administrators must nurture leadership practices of 4-H and Youth agents as they see them being exhibited. This practice is at the core of Bass's (1990) work on transformational leadership. Extension administrators must ensure that they have a framework in place that recognizes and rewards agents for expanded use of leadership practices in their community. Only then will agents begin to understand and embrace these practices and internalize their use of them. After Extension agents have internalized these leadership practices and expanded their use of them, WVUES will be better positioned to achieve the visionary goals to which it aspires.

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