

Public Abstract

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Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

The Role of Middle Leaders in Fostering Organizational Learning in a State Cooperative Extension Service

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Researchers have pointed to the importance of organizational learning for higher education in order to deal with globalization, new technologies, the explosion of knowledge, the widening gap between the affluent and the poor, declining public revenues, and the call for engagement and civic participation. Through extensive interviews with top and mid-level leaders, faculty, and extension council members, this study explored the nature of organizational learning and the role of regional directors and program directors fostering organizational learning in one state's cooperative extension service as part of a land grant university.

Organizational learning involved adapting as well as challenging and changing operations and learning across the organization versus up and down the organization. An important part of the knowledge base of the organization was the experiential knowledge of its members. Some of the most important learning cited was the use of the process of involving constituents and faculty in teams to learn together and develop solutions. Mid-level leaders were critical to organizational learning. They fostered a culture of care and created the real and virtual space for learning through nurturing relationships, building trust, communication, and engaging people in dialogue.

The results of this study suggest the importance of creating a vision for organizational learning. Supporting experiential learning and developing ways to tap the hidden knowledge of organization members will be essential to organizational success. Understanding how to nurture organizational learning and act as "knowledge activists" may be one of the most critical skills for leaders of the future.