

An Assessment of Leadership Competencies: A Difference of Opinion

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Introduction/Need for Research

Serving as both an administrative leader and Extension educator, County Extension Directors (CEDs) are considered Extension leaders performing many duties and tasks that require leadership skills (Benge & Harder, 2017). The day-to-day leadership roles, as well as organizational shifts and changes, present major challenges for Extension leaders to overcome (Sanders, 2014), and very few Extension leaders have the leadership competence appropriate for today's Extension organization (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000). However, few Extension leadership development programs exist in the literature with demonstrated evaluation methods and impact (Benge & Harder, 2017; Rudd, 2001; Sanders, 2014). The Agricultural Education National Research Agenda emphasizes the importance for agricultural educators to "determine the most effective means for incorporating and assessing soft skills development in both formal and nonformal settings" (2016, p.30). The findings from this study provide insights to both the assessment of leadership skills and influence of leadership ability on the performance of CEDs.

Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

Understanding leadership development as a life-long process wherein skills and abilities can be developed and enhanced over time (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Goleman, 1998; Katz, 1955), served as the conceptual underpinning of this study. Kouzes and Posner (2002) asserted that leadership is an observable set of skills that can be strengthened if given the motivation and desire. Specific to Extension, leaders must fulfill a number of different roles, and therefore, must possess leadership competency in many skill areas such as emotional intelligence, industry knowledge,

human, conceptual, and communication (Moore & Rudd, 2005). Owen (2004) also identified sub-competencies considered critically important for achieving success in Extension leader roles ranging from oral communication to creativity. Sanders (2014) utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify forty leadership competencies CEDs needed to possess in order to be successful and were grouped in to the following competency areas: (a) communication; (b) coaching; (c) emotional intelligence; (d) organizational knowledge; (e) vision; and (f) environment and culture. Taking into account the findings of Moore and Rudd (2004), Owen (2004) and Sanders (2014), the Leadership Short Course was designed and to build leadership capacity in Florida CEDs. The program offered leadership sessions that explored: (a) role of the leader; (b) leader identity; (c) building strong relationships with others; (d) creating an extraordinary leadership environment (e) best practices in leadership; and (f) continued leadership learning.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to evaluate leadership skills of [State] CEDs participating in the Leadership Short Course. The objectives of the study were (a) to determine the leadership competency levels of CEDs, and (b) to determine if significant differences existed between CEDs' perceptions and their colleagues perceptions of the CEDs' perceived leadership competencies. The 360 assessment consisted of 21 items, and respondents indicated his/her responses on a Likert-type scale of one to five (1 = *Far below expectations*, 2 = *Somewhat meets expectations*, 3 = *Meets expectations*, 4 = *Exceeds expectations*, and 5 = *Far exceeds expectations*). Each CED completed the assessment of themselves and were asked to distribute the same assessment to 15-20 colleagues who work with them. A total of 211 usable responses were received, whereby 8% (n = 17) were completed by CEDs and 92% (n = 194) were completed by the CEDs' colleagues. SPSS 24.0 was utilized to analyze the data using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results/Findings

The results of the study found that trustworthiness ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.76$) and influence ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.87$) were rated the highest and lowest leadership competencies that County Extension Directors possess, respectively. CEDs rated their self-perceived leadership competencies lower than their colleagues did on 20 of the 21 competencies. Significant differences existed between the CEDs' self-perceptions and that of their colleagues on the following 10 leadership competencies: (a) accurate self-assessment; (b) self-confidence; (c) trustworthiness; (d) commitment; (e) initiative; (f) empathy; (g) influence; (h) communication; (i) change catalyst, and; (j) building bonds.

Conclusions & Implications

Florida County Extension Directors are perceived by their colleagues as possessing high amounts of leadership skills and abilities, with trustworthiness being rated the highest. Trustworthiness is an important ability to possess within leadership and Extension as CEDs serve as administrators, Extension educators, and grass roots leaders (Sanders, 2014). In regards to leadership effectiveness, the results of this study reveal CEDs could be lacking self-confidence in their own

leadership abilities when compared to their colleagues' responses. Lower self-confidence may negatively impact their ability to lead and their job performance (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). When addressing measurement of leadership skills and abilities, the differences in perceived leadership ability may indicate the use of self-reporting leads to inaccurate statistical measurement. Schmitt (1994) explained the use of self-reporting measures could lead to inaccuracy and reliability issues when reporting data, and recommended self-reporting instruments be evaluated to ensure instrument reliability.

Recommendations

Leadership development continues to be a need for Florida CEDs, and further training and professional development opportunities are needed to enhance Extension leaders' leadership competence. A gap exists in the literature related to Extension leader and CED leadership training programs and scholarly reporting. Other Extension systems who are implementing leadership-training programs should share their data and information so each state Extension organization can continue to advance and develop its Extension leaders. Further, the 360 assessment needs to be tested for instrument reliability for both its statements and self-reporting measures. Finally, the 360 assessment should be completed again by both the CEDs and their colleagues to measure CEDs' leadership behavior changes due to the Leadership Short Course.

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