Assessment of Emotional Intelligence in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Agents.

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Introduction/Need for Research

The use of emotional intelligence (EI) for employee selection and training has increased (Argabright et al., 2013; Livingstone & Day, 2005). Research indicates EI development in the workforce strengthens commerce and develops human capital that is inherent to success (Goleman,1995). The Cooperative Extension Service has provided resources and education to families and agriculturalists since the Smith-Lever Act was enacted in 1914 to establish a national system focused on practical, research-based information about agriculture, home economics, and energy to the people (Andrews, 2014). EI is defined as the "ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to guide one's own thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). EI is becoming a prominent and recognizable analysis of intelligence by educators, employers, and the informed public (Livingstone & Day, 2005).

Theoretical /Conceptual Framework

The study was viewed through the lens of Human Capital Theory, which encompasses the investment made in a population and will give back to the local economy (Longley, 2019). In the workplace, employers invest in their employees for the benefit of the company. Feeding into employees' human capital (HC) with opportunities such as family assistance, professional development, and other types of training and education will have a lasting impact on a company's success (Longley, 2019). This study aligns with the American Association of Agricultural Education's (AAAE) National Research Agenda and addresses Research Priority 3, "Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century" (Roberts et al., 2016).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the importance and inclusion of EI in Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Agents. To accomplish the study's purpose, the following objectives were sought:

1. To identify demographic information (i.e. gender, age, years of experience, etc.) of county extension agents in Texas; and
2. To compare the Overall Emotional Intelligence (OEI) between County Extension Agents and School-Based Agricultural Educators (SBAE) in Texas.

Methodology

The population for this study included all county extension agents in Texas during the fall of 2019 ($N = 508$). Data were collected from 200 (39.3%) participants, meeting the sample size requirement for survey research (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). This study used the Qualtrics survey platform and defined the sample through 14 demographic questions (i.e., Gender, Ethnicity, Age, etc.). The Genos™ EI Inventory, an internationally validated assessment tool, assessed the EI of study participants in the following leadership areas: self-awareness, awareness of others, authenticity, emotional reasoning, self- management, and positive influence (Gignac, 2010). The 31-question Genos™ EI Inventory (Gignac, 2010) used a 5-point Likert-Scale for participant responses, with either a direct or inverse relationship (1 = Almost Never; 2 = Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Usually; 5 = Almost Always).

Results/Findings

Research question one sought to determine the demographics of the sample. Of the study's respondents, most were married (61.0%) Caucasian (83.5%) female (57.0%), Ag & Natural Resources agents (42.0%), 22–30 years old (27.5%), held a Master's Degree as highest education (71.5%), and had less than 10 years of experience (59.0%).
Research question two compared the OEI tendencies of Texas Extension Agents (M = 112.33, SD = 35.32) and Texas SBAE (M = 120.11, SD = 19.09) of Frost (2019) to the 3,000 Genos normative values (M = 121.86, SD 13.84) of Palmer et al. (2009). The normative sample put forth by Palmer et al. (2009) consisted of a sample of workplace individuals age 18 and older, varying nationalities, education levels, occupations, industries, and role/employmentlevel.

Conclusions

EI is a growing option to those seeking success to improve upon themselves, those around them, and the companies for which they work (Argabright et al., 2013; Goleman, 1995). Many employers are now focusing on EI as an option to select and improve upon employees in their company, without the sole reliance of cognitive intelligence (Mandell & Pherwani, 2003). In the present study, the total OEI mean of Texas Extension Agents was 112.33, below the normative mean of 121.86 as set by Palmer et al. (2009). Similar literature (Frost, 2019) reported that SBAE showed an OEI mean of 120.11. Although Frost (2019) reported a higher SBAE mean OEI than extension agents, participants from both populations fell below the normative mean set by Palmer et al. (2009).

Implications / Recommendations / Impact on Profession

As EI is defined as social intelligence with self-awareness according to Salovey and Mayer (1990), the OEI speaks to the EI core skills of those surveyed as a level of HC that can be developed (Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008). As such, professional development in Texas extension agents targeting the improvement of EI in current agents and in the onboarding process should be considered. Implications can be made in the development of extension agents through higher education, as a correlation exists in the results of this study with the level of education and EI. As such, courses designed to target EI levels and how they influence others should be considered. Implementing techniques and strategies to improve EI among agents could potentially benefit the preparation and development of extension agents. Analyzing the research of Argabright et al. (2013) with extension shows the success the study saw by implementing a leadership institute. Aspects of this study show techniques such as one-on-one feedback, keeping content available to all participants, coaching sessions on enhancing EI, as well as group discussions on challenges faced and strategies used to improve personal EI. Future research should look at extending professional development into the sub-categories heavily affected by demographics of this study's participants. Focusing time and resources toward the development of the heavily noted sub-categories could possibly increase the EI of extension agents.

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