

Florida Extension Agents' Perceived Level of Trust with Their County Extension Director

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Introduction/Need for Research

The Cooperative Extension Service provides practical education, to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future (NIFA, 2019). The County Extension Director (CED) role is critical to the Florida Extension mission as they are responsible for their individual Extension programming, leadership for the local county Extension program, and have administrative responsibilities (UF/IFAS Extension). It is imperative for CEDs to have the appropriate leadership skillset in order to be successful in their role as a leader (Sanders, 2014), and trust has been specifically identified as one of the most necessary leadership competencies needed (Cooper & Graham, 2001; Moore & Rudd, 2004; Sanders, 2014). A climate in which employees feel trusted by their leader significantly influences follower work engagement (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2010). Trust between CEDs and agents has not been studied in the specific context of Cooperative Extension.

Conceptual Framework

Because trust is essential between leaders and followers, understanding the levels of perceived trust between CEDs and agents drove this study. Adams et al. (2008) distinguished between person-based and category-based trust, with person-based trust involving attributions about the skills, integrity and genuine concern of other people. For the purpose of this study, and considering the nature of an Extension agent's work, trust was defined as "the willingness of a party (the trustor) to be vulnerable to the actions of another party (the trustee) based on the expectation that the trustee will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor and control the other party" (Mayer et al., 1995). The Trust in Leaders Scale (TLS) (Adams et al., 2008), which measures for trust between leaders and followers through four constructs: (a) competence, (b) integrity, (c) benevolence, and (d) predictability. This scale was designed to tap person-based trust that accrues as the direct result of personal experience and shared history.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of trust antecedents between Florida extension agents and CEDs. The research objectives were: (a) describe the level of trust between Florida Extension agents and CEDs, (b) determine if significant differences existed between trust antecedents and participant characteristics, and (c) determine if significant relationships existed between trust antecedents and participant characteristics. This study aligned with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda - Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

Methodology

The study was quantitative in nature and used survey methodology to examine the perceptions of trust antecedents between Florida Extension agents and CEDs. The population of interest for the study was county Extension agents who were not CEDs, Regional Specialized Agents (RSAs), or State Specialized Agents (SSAs) ($n = 246$). Our instrument, which was reviewed by a five-member panel for face validity (Ary et al., 2006), consisted of the 20 items from the TLS (Adams et al., 2008) and six demographic questions, including year of extension experience, number of years worked with their CED, gender, their CED's gender, extension district, and if

their county was rural or urban. The TLS uses a 7 point Likert scale reports high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .97 (Cronbach, 1951). After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the instrument was sent to our population following the Tailored Design Method procedures (Dillman et al., 2009), which included a pre-notice, invitation, and three reminder emails. A response rate of 44% was yielded. Non-response was addressed because our response rate was below 50% (Linder et al., 2001), with no significant differences found.

Results/Findings

Participants tended to feel moderately trusted by their CED across all four trust antecedents. Benevolence was the trust antecedent with the highest reported mean ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.55$), followed by integrity ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.52$), competence ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.47$), and predictability ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.21$). The three individual trust items with the highest means were "I believe my CD is honest" ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 1.65$), "my CED is genuinely concerned about my well-being" ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.73$), and "my CED has my best interests in mind" ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.62$). The three individual items with the lowest means were "I know exactly what my CED will do in difficult situations" ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.36$), "I can anticipate what my CED will do" ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.22$), and "my CED puts their words into action" ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.67$). There were no statistically significant differences or correlations between the trust antecedents and participant demographic characteristics.

Conclusions and Implications

Florida Extension agents reporting moderately high levels of trust could be attributed to three reasons: First, previous studies on leader/follower trust relationships are generally framed from the perspective of the leader. Followers might have a different perception of the existence of trust in this relationship than leaders. Secondly, there might be Florida Extension agents that simply do not feel trusted by their CED. Finally, CEDs may not be trusting their Extension agents to do their job without much oversight. Considering Katz' (1974) three-category typology of skills, CEDs (top managers) should focus on human and conceptual skills when interacting with their agents and trust the agents' technical skill. This is a concept that may not be understood by Extension leadership and can be taught through leadership education.

Recommendations

Working towards an environment where agents and CEDs experience trust should be a top priority for Florida Extension, as such environments supports follower's organizational vision and engagement, and ability to accomplish goals (Engelbrecht et al.; 2017, Winston, 2003; Wong et al., 2010). Florida and national Extension administrators should include a trust measure to help ensure potential hires have the appropriate leadership skillset upon entering the job. In addition, leadership development specialists should be encouraged to provide leadership training to both new and seasoned CEDs to ensure the trust competency is being developed within the Extension organization. Additionally, a qualitative research study would benefit the Extension and leadership literature by identifying how both strong and weak trust relationships cultivate over time.

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