

[Innovative Idea]

Framing Up: Contextualizing Organizational Leadership in Agricultural and Natural Resources

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Introduction

Leadership is generally accepted as a valuable skill in the workplace; it currently ranks fourth on the National Association of Colleges and Employers' list of key attributes employers seek in students (2021). However, it is not being taught across all departments in higher education institutions. When employers assess candidates' competencies for a position, they are looking for both technical and soft skills. While technical skills often refer to the candidate's knowledge of their area of expertise (major), Crawford et al. (2011) have identified that soft skills focus on their social skills. Technical skills are generally the focus of higher education and often not found lacking in potential employees, whereas soft skills are. In particular, the National Research Council has challenged higher education to integrate education on leadership into their various departments (2009).

A multi-institutional project focused on global education sought to identify a solution to this challenge, through the development of a multi-level experiential leadership education program. Their aim was to educate faculty on how to incorporate leadership education into their technical coursework using case studies they developed. The project consisted of 40 faculty members from different agricultural disciplines, external to leadership, engaging in a 14-week online course. The course focused on creating case studies that could be used to teach leadership concepts from real natural disasters in an agricultural context.

Each faculty member had to apply their new knowledge of case studies and leadership to build a case that would be used in an undergraduate agricultural discipline course. This resulted in many different perspectives trying to incorporate leadership into a teaching tool that could be used in their particular discipline. The aim of this poster proposal is to take a closer look at how these faculty members incorporated the four frames of leadership into their case studies.

Methodology

Faculty participants for the project were recruited from colleges of agriculture across the southeastern United States from various disciplines. They spent 14 weeks of a semester completing online academy modules. Faculty were taught Bolman and Deal's Organizational Frames (2017), how to create case studies, and about the impacts of natural disasters. Then, they were separated into three groups and traveled to areas impacted by natural disasters. At their locations, participants were introduced to real organizations that had faced crises through natural disasters. They used these trips to collect real, relevant data on how the organizations responded to crises. Finally, using that data, they built case studies to be used as teaching tools to educate students in their discipline on basic principles of leadership.

Each case studied was reviewed three times, by peers, leadership specialists, and education specialists, digitized, and published online. The eight case studies currently published on the larger program's website were reviewed for this poster proposal to identify how faculty used each of Bolman and Deal's four frames. This was accomplished by identifying how often case questions were related to each frame.

Results and Implications

Of the eight case studies published, a total of 138 questions were asked that were organized into four categories based on the four frames of leadership. The structural frame contributed 26.8% ($n = 37$) of the total questions asked. It included questions such as, “How does the inclusion of partner organizations manipulate the structure of the organization?,” “How does this change the reporting structure (formalized roles) of the organization?,” and “How do the differing roles of differing county leaders potentially impact the needed response to agriculturalists and extensionists, and how did these play out in this case study?”

Out of all the questions, 25.4% ($n = 35$) were categorized in the human resource frame. Some examples of the questions included are “Do you believe that the EOC had adequate training for a hurricane response?,” “How have the needs/skills of the local team changed due to the hurricane?,” and “How do you go about establishing a volunteer network that is a win-win scenario for everyone involved?”

The political frame was the least used, with only 21% ($n = 29$) of the total questions being categorized in it. Questions such as, “How much power and influence does the county judge have in his role as EOC chair?,” “If one of the values was to educate the public about agriculture, how can this value remain if there is a single crop (soil)?,” and “What organizations and/or government agencies at the local, state and federal levels could be considered for future requests for assistance and/or resources?” were used to stimulate thinking about the political frame.

Finally, 26.8% ($n = 37$) of the questions were on the symbolic frame. It included questions such as “Is it possible to continue with the same values and organizational mission if the organization moves from small-scale to large-scale biochar production?,” “How can the park be managed in a way that seemingly aligns more effectively to the state park slogan?,” and “Should the aftermath of Hurricane Irma be an opportunity for Sundance Orchids and Bromeliads to develop a mission statement for the organization?”

Across all eight case studies, by the almost equal distribution of questions, it is clear faculty worked hard to use all four frames to maximize student learning in these cases. It is interesting to note that the lowest used frame was the political frame. Further investigation would be required to determine if this was due to the nature of the cases, the understanding of the frames by the faculty or another unknown factor.

Advice

Further investigation is required to have a thorough understanding of how external faculty understand leadership and Bolman and Deal’s (2017) Organizational Frames. Future research to discover this could include evaluating how well students taught using these case studies can identify and apply the four frames, given no prior knowledge of the frames.

Resources

For purposes of review this information is left out but will be provided if the proposal is accepted for presentation.

References

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2017). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
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