

Leading the Future: An Assessment of County Extension Agents' Perceived Leadership Skills and Leadership Proficiency

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Introduction/Conceptual Framework

The foundational goal of Extension is to deliver education that changes lives (*About Extension*, 2021). The role of an Extension agent is to disseminate research-based information to individuals within a community. For Extension to continue positively impacting the lives of so many individuals, it is important to know which leadership skills agents feel are important and proficient in. Especially, when evaluating current staff and hiring new agents (Moore & Rudd, 2005). This study examined Extension agents' perceived level of importance of leadership skills and their proficiency in those skills. The following objectives guided this study:

1. Assess Extension agents' level of importance of leadership skills
2. Assess Extension agents' self-perceived proficiency in leadership skills
3. Compare Extension agents' perceived importance with proficiency in leadership skills.

Building off of Katz (2009) administrator skills, and literature examining leadership skills and competencies, the conceptual framework was guided by Moore & Rudd's (2004) competency models. This competency model indicates that leadership competencies can be divided into five skill sets: human skills, conceptual skills, technical skills, emotional intelligence skills, and industry knowledge skills. Each of the competencies listed above has proven to be crucial in the overall success of leaders and organizations (Moore & Rudd, 2004). Identifying and understanding leadership competencies and skills allows organizations to find gaps and form an organizational hierarchy (Moore & Rudd, 2004).

Methods

The population for this quantitative study consisted of approximately 184 Extension agents ($N = 184$) agents throughout Mississippi. The survey instrument, adapted from Jones (2006), measured the importance of the leadership skills each Extension agent perceives as essential for success in their positions. The questionnaire consisted of twelve demographic questions which gathered personal data from each of the respondents including their previous major of study, past job positions held, and information regarding previous leadership training. Forty-four statements measured agents' self-perceived proficiency in leadership skills and were divided into six skill sets: human skills, conceptual skills, technical skills, communication skills, emotional intelligence skills, and industry knowledge skills. An email was sent to Mississippi Extension agents via a listserv on September 21, 2021, and a follow-up email was sent one week later on September 27, 2021 (Bickman & Rog, 2008; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). Data collection concluded on October 11, 2021. A paired *t*-test was used to compare agents' perceived importance with their perceived proficiency in each of the five leadership skill areas.

Results and Findings

Of the 184 Extension agents ($N = 184$), 53 responses were recorded ($n = 53$, 29%). Of the respondents, 69.77% ($n = 30$) were female, 30.23% ($n = 13$) were male, and ten respondents chose not to answer this question. Overall, 88.1% ($n = 37$) of respondents were white, 9.52% (n

= 4) were African American and 2.38% ($n = 1$) were Asian. Respondents' age ranged from 24 to 70, while their years of employment ranged from two months to 32 years. Human skills were ranked as the most important of the leadership skills ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.40$), while industry knowledge skills received the lowest ranking in terms of importance ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.44$). Respondents were most proficient in human skills ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.62$), and least proficient in industry knowledge skills ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.74$). The perceived importance of all leadership skill areas to respondents' success, was significantly ($p < .05$) greater than their perceived proficiency in each area, except for technical and communication skills. However, the ranking of perceived importance mirrored how the respondents ranked their proficiency in each skill area. Human, conceptual, communication, and emotional intelligence were all interpreted as a medium effect size, while technical and industry knowledge demonstrated a large effect size (Cohen, 1988).

Table 1

Comparison of perceived importance and perceived proficiency of leadership skills ($n = 22$).

Leadership Skill Areas	Importance		Proficiency		t	df	d	p
	M	SD	M	SD				
Human Skills	4.53	0.40	4.25	0.62	2.76	21	0.49	.010
Conceptual Skills	4.40	0.40	3.82	0.66	4.02	21	0.65	<.001
Technical Skills	4.28	0.56	3.80	0.74	1.52	21	0.83	.143
Communication Skills	4.14	0.57	3.72	0.73	1.85	21	0.68	.079
Emotional Intelligence Skills	4.10	0.49	3.63	0.70	4.59	21	0.69	<.001
Industry Knowledge Skills	4.01	0.44	3.46	0.74	3.53	21	0.85	.002

Note. Importance based on two 5-point rating scale with 1= Not Important; 5= Very Important; Proficiency based on two 5-point rating scale with 1= No Proficiency; 5= Very Proficient; $p < .05$ indicates statistical significance.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Extension agents have a variety of jobs such as interacting with research scientists and disseminating their findings to farmers and other individuals (NRC, 1995). Based on the results of this study, respondents' perceptions of importance may be linked to their perceived level of proficiency since they ranked similar skills as their most proficient and most important. Interestingly, industry knowledge appeared to be intermediate in terms of importance, however; agents felt as though they were the least proficient in that skill area. In a profession where community engagement and education are paramount, knowledge of local industry sectors is equally important, especially when hiring new agents (Moore & Rudd, 2005). It is also important to note that overall, agents recognized the value of all leadership skill areas included in Moore's and Rudd's (2004) model. As a result of this study, we recommend future research explore the relationship between why respondents believe some skills are of high importance, but do not believe they are proficient in those areas. These gaps could be due to the lack of training; therefore, it is also recommended that an emphasis be placed on identifying leadership skill gaps in agents and providing professional development opportunities where needed. Research should also investigate how often Extension agents use certain skills because proficiency may be linked to the implementation of those skills.

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