

Leader Values and Support Needs of Florida Extension Master Gardener Volunteers

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Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Master Gardener Volunteer (MGV) programs are integral to local, state, and national Extension programming. The Marion county MGV program is among the largest in the state (UF/IFAS Extension, n.d.). A program of this scale calls for healthy leadership and strong volunteer management. Volunteers who are satisfied with their leaders are more satisfied with their roles (Prince & Piatak, 2022). While it is important leaders recognize volunteer values and support needs to retain quality volunteers, no evaluations of leader-volunteer relationships or perceived support have been done with Marion County MGV.

To explore the leader-volunteer relationships between the MGV volunteers and their coordinator and board, we used the volunteer life cycle (VLC, Bussell & Forbes, 2003) as our study frame. VLC demonstrates volunteer engagement—with a focus on motivations, activities, commitment, and retention—to help leaders achieve optimum volunteer management. Conceptually, this framework and similar variations of the VLC model (Strauss & Rager, 2017) have been applied within Extension to improve volunteer experiences (Terry et al., 2020). We aimed to explore what Marion County MGVs value in a leader and their perceived support. The following questions guide this study:

- What do Marion County MGVs value in a leader?
- What do Marion County MGVs value in the MGV coordinator and board?
- Do MGVs feel supported by the MGV coordinator and board in their current role?

Methods

This study was part of a broader needs and leadership assessment for the Marion County MGV program, which used an exploratory sequential mixed method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Initial leadership interviews led to the development of a volunteer census survey ($N = 148$). We achieved a 41% response rate ($n = 61$). The focus of this abstract is seven open-ended items that assessed what MGVs value in a leader and from their leaders (MGV coordinator and board), and perceived support in their current role. For leader values, we used an iterative inductive coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify initial codes and categories before computing frequencies to determine prevalence and make comparisons. We used deductive coding (Saldana, 2021) to assign codes (*Yes, Sometimes, No*) for perceived support and unmet needs, and then used basic qualitative analysis on these responses to provide context for the assigned code and deepen our understanding of unmet needs.

Results

We identified 17 general categories volunteers value in a leader. From most to least prevalent, they were communication ($f = 31$), ethical ($f = 20$), encouraging and motivational ($f = 15$), knowledgeable/expertise ($f = 13$), teaching/mentorship ($f = 13$), good character ($f = 11$), empathy and compassion ($f = 11$), organized/strategic ($f = 10$), promotes teamwork and shared governance ($f = 9$), models leadership ($f = 8$), mission-oriented ($f = 7$), accessible/dependable ($f = 6$), inclusive ($f = 6$), relational ($f = 6$), resolves conflict ($f = 3$), and passion/enthusiasm ($f = 3$). For MGV leaders, we identified an additional category, recognition. From most to least

prevalent, they were communication ($f = 27$), knowledgeable/expertise ($f = 19$), ethical ($f = 15$), empathy and compassion ($f = 12$), models leadership ($f = 12$), promotes recognition ($f = 12$), good character ($f = 12$), teaching/mentorship ($f = 11$), accessible/dependable ($f = 10$), relational ($f = 7$), encouraging and motivational ($f = 6$), resolves conflict ($f = 6$), passion/enthusiasm ($f = 5$), promotes teamwork and shared governance ($f = 5$), organized/strategic ($f = 5$), mission-oriented ($f = 4$), and inclusive ($f = 2$). Volunteers often indicated they felt supported ($f = 45$). Most had the training ($f = 40$), information ($f = 37$), and resources ($f = 42$), needed for success (Table 1).

Table 1

Support Needs of MGVs

| | <i>n</i> | Yes | Sometimes | No |
|--|----------|-----|-----------|----|
| Do you have the training to be successful? | 46 | 40 | 5 | 1 |
| Do you have the information needed to be successful? | 45 | 37 | 8 | 0 |
| Do you have the resources needed to be successful? | 46 | 42 | 4 | 0 |

Those who indicated they felt supported mentioned factors like receiving feedback, having a good relationship with the program coordinator, and experiencing positive team dynamics. One said, “Always. I’ve worked with several MGVs during the last six months and all have given me positive feedback.” Those who wavered in support noted a lack of direction, communication, and recognition. Others expressed feeling undervalued or impacted by in-/out-group dynamics. One shared, “I feel supported by my class representative, the program director, and a handful of certified master gardeners...most of the master gardeners ignore or avoid the interns.” Those who indicated they were well-trained referenced the importance of knowledgeable leaders, course and in-field experience, and continuing education to fill gaps. Those with unmet training needs felt they lacked expertise within a specific context (i.e. plant clinic, technology). For information, volunteers referenced intern course materials, UF websites, and being able to find information was critical to their success. Volunteers indicated that limited time and knowledge-sharing sometimes inhibited access to information or resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Marion County MGVs generally have a positive perception of their leadership and support, and their experiences with leaders aligned with the values they indicated were important. MGVs valued knowledgeable leaders and communication, which were also critical to role success. Relational and character traits were highly ranked, which indicates the importance of integrating task- and people-oriented leadership (Blake & Mouton, 1964). In some instances, volunteer hierarchies muddied relationships and role support. Future research should explore peer leader training to increase organizational capacity and improve Extension team dynamics. Volunteers attributed perceived support to intern training but still identified skill gaps. Evaluating their onboarding model could support transferability to other volunteer programs. Additionally, leaders should consider resource handouts to aid in computer literacy and finding horticultural information. Finally, many valued encouragement and recognition. Leaders should continue rewarding achievements and service to retain quality MGVs (Strauss & Rager, 2017).

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