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Local Government Leadership Education: Measuring the Impact of Leadership Skill Development on Public Officials

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Abstract: Many Extension leadership development programs have been evaluated for effectiveness. Little literature exists focusing on the evaluation of leadership development programs involving elected and appointed local officials. This article describes an annual program involving elected and appointed local officials and shares quantitative and qualitative evaluation data collected over the past 10 years. Findings indicate participants have increased their understanding of key local government leadership dimensions. Increased levels of confidence, broadened perspectives, and an increased sense of empathy were common themes present in the qualitative analysis.

Informal community leadership development programming has been a part of Extension since its inception. More recent efforts to provide formal community leadership development programming can be traced back to 1982, when the Kellogg Foundation funded a pilot project (known as the "Family Community Leadership Program") to involve women in local public policy decision-making (Schauber & Kirk, 2001).

As a result of the increasing complexity of local government, another audience that could benefit from leadership development programming has been recently identified. A community's elected and

appointed officials serve on the "front lines" of local public policy decision-making every day. While these elected and appointed officials may hold positions of leadership, they may not always fully understand the importance of their role in the community or the leadership skills needed to effectively and efficiently carry out the responsibilities of their position.

To begin to address the need for formal community leadership development programming for Ohio's elected and appointed officials, Extension met with representatives of the respective statewide associations for county commissioners, municipal administrators, and township trustees in 1999. A year later, an academy designed to help local elected and appointed officials better understand leadership styles, interpersonal skills, and their role in community leadership was developed and began enrolling its first class of participants.

The program was designed to provide participants with a basic orientation to public office covering such topics as:

- Duties and responsibilities of public officials
- Codes of ethics
- Standards of conduct
- Conflict of interest
- Open meeting laws

Through classroom instruction and individual and group activities, the following topics were incorporated into the program to strengthen participants' leadership and interpersonal skills:

- Decision-making
- Conducting meetings
- Leadership ethics
- Communicating and working with the media and community residents
- Team building
- Leadership skills
- Leadership styles
- Conflict management and dispute resolution
- Challenges and opportunities for improving intergovernmental relations

The program has been conducted in partnership with six Ohio communities since its inception. It has been conducted in Lucas County, Ohio, for the past 10 years, involving more than 170 participants from Lucas County and surrounding areas. While the program has been targeted to existing elected and appointed officials in Lucas County, private citizens with political aspirations have been drawn to the program as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the program has been helpful to participants. Participants have won elections. New relationships among political entities have been created. Participation in public meetings has increased. But with the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and continued tightening of Extension budgets, it is critically important that we can demonstrate more than mere anecdotal evidence of program impact (Diem, 2003; Shepard, 2002).

A variety of literature exists on the topic of evaluating the impact of Extension-based, youth leadership education (Arnold, 2003; Kleon & Rinehart, 1998; McDaniel, 1998; Smith, Genry, & Ketring, 2005), and there is information focusing on the effectiveness of adult leadership development programs (Diem & Nikola, 2005; Earnest, 1996; Hughes, 1998; Schauber & Kirk, 2001; VanWinkle, Busler, Bowman, & Manoogian, 2002). However, upon review of literature focusing on Extension-based adult leadership education targeted to community officials, we realized the need to share more in this area.

Purpose and Objectives

Local leadership academy participants attended 10 2-hour workshops over a 10-week period. Our goal was to evaluate the impact of these workshops on participants' behavior. While all 10 workshops were evaluated, our focus for this article was the five leadership and interpersonal skill development workshops. Specifically, we evaluated the workshops centered around:

Leadership Styles and Leadership Skills

Objectives were to:

- Identify and understand preferred leadership style
- Understand leadership styles and types of leadership
- Understand concept of situational leadership

Building Teams

Objectives were to:

- Understand elements of team building
- Learn basic components of team
- Understand components of team retreats

- Understand elements of effective communication

Communicating with Residents

Objectives were to:

- Learn various methods available for sharing public information
- Learn methods for listening to citizen concerns
- Explore various options for partnering with the community

Managing Conflict and Resolving Disputes

Objectives were to:

- Learn the basic principles and practices for managing conflict and dispute
- Understand how to recognize potential for public conflict and dispute
- Learn methods to better manage conflict

Cooperating Across Political Boundaries and Jurisdictions

Objectives were to:

- Understand various practices for initiating regional cooperation
- Understand various type of agreements to support regional cooperation among political agencies

Methodology

To determine the extent to which the objectives noted for each of the workshops above were met, a retrospective pre-test/post-test evaluation was used. The retrospective pre-test/post-test instrument enabled us to describe the change in knowledge for each participant in each of the workshops held since the program's inception.

Retrospective pre-test/post-test evaluations enable simple and efficient documentation of changes in knowledge and behavior (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989; Stevens & Lodl, 1999). Schauber and Kirk (2001) used this methodology to determine change in behavior of adult volunteers that participated in a community leadership development program "because it was fairly easy to develop, use, and analyze, and this method has been found to give credible results."

The retrospective pre-test/post-test design, unlike the typical pre-test/post-test, is administered only once. Because of time limitations, this characteristic makes using the method more appealing to the

audience and the educators as administrators of the instrument. Because respondents are questioned only once, after the program or treatment, the retrospective pre-test/post-test methodology affords respondents an opportunity to learn how much they know about a subject prior to responding to a pretest questionnaire.

The evaluation instrument was designed with instructions at the top, an example, and a number of statements relating to the learning objectives for each workshop. At the conclusion of each workshop, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a set of statements before and after the workshop using a four-point, Likert-type scale; (1 - strongly disagree and 4 - strongly agree). They were also provided an opportunity to record narrative comments pertaining to the workshops in an open-ended format.

Results and Findings

Table 1 displays retrospective pre-test/post-test mean scores for each of the leadership and interpersonal skill development workshops. T-tests for dependent groups were used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between retrospective pre-test/post-test mean scores. Results indicate that following each of the workshops there was a statistically significant gain in understanding among session participants ($p < .01$).

Table 1.
Paired t-Tests for Leadership Styles Workshop (n = 130)

Variable	Mean	sd.	p
Establishing Your Preferred Style			
Pre-Test	2.58	.78	<.01
Post Test	3.52	.63	
Understanding Leadership Styles			
Pre-Test	2.62	.80	<.01
Post Test	3.55	.59	
Understanding Leadership Roles			
Pre-Test	2.47	.85	<.01
Post Test	3.50	.64	
Paired t-Tests for Building Teams Workshop (n = 118)			
Variable	Mean	sd.	p
Understanding Vision & Goals			
Pre-Test	2.71	.69	<.01

Post Test	3.58	.53	
Communicating for Team Development			
Pre-Test	2.69	.78	<.01
Post Test	3.58	.53	
Understanding Team Building Strategies			
Pre-Test	2.39	.73	<.01
Post Test	3.46	.53	
Paired t-Tests for Communicating with Residents Workshop (n = 141)			
Variable	Mean	sd.	p
Sharing Public Information			
Pre-Test	2.43	.88	<.01
Post Test	3.42	.63	
Listening to Citizens			
Pre-Test	2.38	.77	<.01
Post Test	3.44	.63	
Engaging in Community Partnerships			
Pre-Test	2.38	.75	<.01
Post Test	3.33	.69	
Paired t-Tests for Conflict Management Workshop (n = 137)			
Variable	Mean	sd.	p
Minimizing Potential Conflicts			
Pre-Test	2.25	.75	<.01
Post Test	3.43	.55	
Resolving Community Conflicts			
Pre-Test	2.03	.72	<.01
Post Test	3.34	.69	
Paired t-Tests for Intergovernmental Cooperation Workshop (n = 146)			
Variable	Mean	sd.	p
Pursuing Regional Cooperation			

Pre-Test	2.10	.80	<.01
Post Test	3.30	.69	
Understanding Cooperative Agreements			
Pre-Test	2.07	.80	<.01
Post Test	3.36	.67	

Increased levels of confidence, broadened perspectives, and an increased sense of empathy were common themes present in the qualitative analysis. Participants indicated they gained a more informed opinion of issues faced by local government. Moreover, participants gained a better appreciation for how smaller communities are responding to such issues. Participants also indicated the program enhanced their communication and critical thinking skills as well as their ability to understand other viewpoints, positions, and opinions. One participant said, "I have been able to better understand other community leaders." Another indicated, "I now better understand the aspirations of smaller communities."

Conclusions and Implications

One of the primary goals of the leadership academy was to help community officials better understand the leadership skills needed to effectively and efficiently carry out the responsibilities of their position. Workshops focused on enhancing their knowledge of key aspects of interpersonal dynamics and working with others in the context of elected and appointed local government leadership. Retrospective pre-test/post-test differences indicated that participants gained an improved understanding of the topics. Qualitative evaluation data indicated that participants strengthened skills and became more aware of other perspectives and practices necessary to more effectively lead.

Evaluation data suggest that participants began the leadership program with a better understanding for such things as leadership styles, visioning, and goal setting than the understanding they had for communicating with citizens and relating effectively with other jurisdictions. Not surprisingly, participants indicated the greatest gains in knowledge in these workshop topics. This is supported by the qualitative evaluation comments as well.

Since the program's inception, participants have been recently and long-tenured elected and appointed officials representing jurisdictions in Lucas County and surrounding areas. Private citizens with political aspirations have participated over the years, too. These program participants have learned a great deal about working in partnership with area residents, agencies, organizations, and other political jurisdictions in pursuit of better communities and more efficient local government. Including educational components focused on intergovernmental cooperation and communication awareness into future educational programming targeted to local government audiences is strongly encouraged.

Furthermore, while participants possessed a basic understanding of leadership styles, visioning, and

goal setting necessary for building an effective team relative to other dimensions of the leadership program prior to their involvement in those workshops, replacing these workshop topics for others is not recommended. An understanding of these topics provides the foundation for discussing the opportunities for collaborating beyond the existing networks with which participants find most comfortable.

Finally, evaluation of the program has provided meaningful data useful for guiding future directions of the leadership program, communicating impact with our collaborators, and marketing the program in Lucas County and throughout Ohio. With the ongoing changes in funding schemes to support educational programming such as this, the importance of being able to gauge economic value of such programming becomes critical. Measures to begin to evaluate such programming at an economic level should be considered.

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