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The Future of Extension Leadership Is Soft Leadership

Abstract

Over the next decade, if Extension can attract and retain young professionals, the current leadership will have the opportunity to select the most creative and bright among them to serve in leadership positions across the country. Extension needs a paradigm shift—the most influential leaders beat to a different drum. We must collectively adopt the leadership practices that work and stop doing things that do not add value. Future leaders must possess soft skills, be adept communicators, be proactive while quick to respond, and be willing to create a flattened organizational structure that encourages creativity and innovation from the bottom up.

Jamie Seger
Program Director,
Educational
Technology
Ohio State University
Extension
Columbus, Ohio
seger.23@osu.edu

Paul Hill
Extension Assistant
Professor
Utah State University
Extension
Saint George, Utah
paul.hill@usu.edu

Introduction

A young professional begins her career in Extension. After 3 months, what has she learned? In many Extension organizations around the country, this new hire may have had to learn many things on her own, as she may never have been assigned a mentor or introduced to someone who could serve as a source of guidance and support. After experiencing family-life balance issues, she may have mentioned to more than one coworker that she is overworked and tired, only to hear in reply "welcome to Extension." She may have learned that you are not a leader unless "PhD" appears after your name. She even may have decided that Extension is not the organization or the career for her and already left for another opportunity, taking her creative thinking, stellar teamwork skills, and possibility of contributing to a bright future for Extension with her. This is not a fictional scenario. It is occurring right now, all across the country. Bright, young professionals who are vital to our system are walking out the door, or in some cases, are not even stepping foot inside it (Harder, Gouldthorpe, & Goodwin, 2014).

Millennials, the last generation born in the 20th century, are beginning their careers in Extension. Over the next decade, if we can attract and retain them, the current leadership in Extension will have the opportunity to select the most creative and bright millennials to serve in leadership positions across the country.

Millennials grew up with the Internet, making them the most technologically savvy generation in history. In

addition, many other factors set them apart from previous generations; they are less motivated by money, have a higher sense of community, and are more transparent and teamwork oriented, with a greater collaborative spirit. The current leadership in Extension not only must adapt in order to attract and retain millennials but also must know how to identify the abilities and qualities future Extension leaders will need to guide Extension's future millennial workforce into the next century.

It is time we look outside Extension for the solutions we need (Burrus, 2014).

Engagement

The November 2015 Gallup Daily U.S. Employee Engagement report indicated that 70% of the world's working population is not meaningfully engaged in or otherwise enthusiastic about their jobs (Adkins, 2015). Although it is unlikely that this statistic exactly correlates within Extension, it still should be alarming for any leader; our system is not immune.

In the article "Worldwide, 13% of Employees Are Engaged at Work" (2013), Steve Crabtree pointed out that few people in leadership roles are actually suited for engaging 21st-century professionals. He explained that distinct generational differences exist between boomers and millennials and that the traditional ways of motivating people no longer apply.

Extension needs a paradigm shift—the most powerful and influential leaders beat to a different drum. We must collectively adopt the practices that work, stop doing things that do not add value, and begin now to groom leaders for the future who have the desire and inclination to implement change.

Leaders can affect employee engagement by reexamining these best practices:

- making sure employees know what is expected of them,
- providing employees with the best tools to be successful at their jobs,
- ensuring that employees feel that their opinions matter, and
- recognizing employees frequently for a job well done.

Listening to employees and gathering their feedback sounds like a simple solution. But if it were, engagement would not be such a concerning issue. A new way to streamline this process would be through instituting an internal social network. Such would allow for real-time communication and increased opportunities for recognition (Lapowsky, 2014).

Leadership

In her groundbreaking TED talk "What It Takes to Be a Great Leader," Roselinde Torres reported on the effectiveness of corporate leadership development programs from a study she conducted in over 4,000 companies (2013). She explained that leadership in the 21st century is defined and evidenced by these questions:

1. Where are you looking to anticipate the next change to your business model or your life? (The answer to this question is on your calendar.)

2. Who are you spending time with? On what topics? Where are you traveling? What are you reading?
3. How are you distilling this into understanding potential discontinuities and then making a decision to do something right now so that you are prepared and ready?

From Torres's study we learn the qualifications for 21st-century leaders. The future leaders in Extension must be able to act in ways that result in great leadership:

- They must collect trends that will impact their organizations in the future. They must share these trends and make decisions to course-correct a strategy or anticipate a new move.
- They must see around corners. A head-down approach is no way to shape the future. They must expect disruption by embracing change rather than reacting to it.
- They must network. They must understand that a diverse network is a source of pattern identification at greater levels and a source of solutions because of contact with people who are thinking differently than they are.
- They must dare to be different. They must not just talk about risk taking; they must actually take risks. They must have the emotional stamina to withstand hearing from others that a new idea of theirs is naïve or reckless.
- They must stand out. They must prepare themselves not for the comfortable predictability of yesterday but for the realities of today and all unknown possibilities of tomorrow.
- They must care. They must possess a natural inclination to care about the well-being of people and to want to make a difference in their lives.

In addition, a report published by the Institute for the Future (IFTF) identified key skills and capabilities needed for future workers and leaders. Included in this list were sensemaking ability, social intelligence, cross-cultural competency, new media literacy, transdisciplinary attitude, and possession of a design mind-set (Gorsht, 2014). "Educated" was not among the qualities identified in the IFTF report. This notable omission is a nod to the concept that those serving in leadership positions in the future should possess certain skills and abilities, rather than a specified degree.

Change and Recommendations for the Future

The recommendations that follow have the potential to strengthen the retention of young professionals, attract the most creative and bright to serve in leadership positions, and create a systemwide leadership culture that embraces change and innovation (Hibberd, 2013).

- Implement new hiring practices that stress skills and abilities rather than educational background and time served.
 - How to make it happen: Work more closely with human resources to prioritize applicants and candidates.

- Flatten bureaucratic and hierarchical structure in Extension organizations, allowing motivated professionals, as well as innovative ideas, to more easily bubble to the surface.
 - How to make it happen: Increase transparency; request employee input more often; encourage openness.
- Encourage an increase in cross-county and cross-state collaboration among motivated professionals.
 - How to make it happen: Encourage collaboration by incentivizing it; offer mini-grant opportunities and performance review incentives; promote national eXtension collaborative learning networks.
- Provide more opportunities in state to motivate professionals in Extension (no matter what their titles are).
 - How to make it happen: Offer grants for attending leadership and professional development opportunities to young leaders; provide opportunities for recognition for creative and innovative work; dutifully implement mentorship programs.

Conclusion

The future leaders of Extension cannot be disengaged from their workforce or from the rapid change occurring around them. They must be adept at communicating, proactive while quick to respond, and willing to create a flattened organizational structure that encourages creativity and innovation from the bottom up.

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