

Old-Fashioned Bus Trips: New Age Professional Development

Abstract

Two 4-H Camp–related bus tours offered new nontraditional professional development (PD) experiences that better align Extension's PD opportunities with the organization's experiential education pedagogy. Creating quality PD opportunities for employees is important because such experiences can affect overall work performance, community connections, and employee retention. Trip results showed that 100% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they built stronger relationships with Ohio 4-H colleagues and gained programming ideas during the PD experience.

Keywords: [professional development](#), [employee retention](#), [bus trip](#), [open space technology](#)

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Introduction

Extension has a reputation for conveying innovative, challenging topics in formats that allow for comprehension and immediate application by common people. This format not only allows for subject matter expertise to be shared but also fosters connections among local individuals. However, the unique experiential learning style that Extension has built its pedagogy on is rarely applied to its own professional development (PD) opportunities for employees.

Most Extension PD opportunities involve packed administrator-driven agendas that focus on policy changes and organizational announcements. The nature of budget cuts has eliminated overnight stays or regular meetings where more time is spent on informal discussions related to program challenges and practical solutions. Extension's lackluster PD offerings likely diminish organizational attachment and contribute to organizational turnover, which was 29% in a recent 3-year period (T. Archer, personal communication, March 7, 2017).

Current PD Weakness

PD in Extension has been lacking for many years. In 2000, Extension personnel spent a median of 4 days in technical knowledge/skills training at Extension-sponsored in-services and 2 days at similar in-services provided by other sources, whereas less than a day was spent on communication, leadership, teamwork, conflict management, and other types of skill building (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). The majority of Extension PD programs offer PD that is organized by state-level administrators, complete with a preset agenda

with defined learning objectives that do not always address the competency needs of local employees (Worker, Hill, Miller, Go, & Boyes, 2015). For example, Ohio State University (OSU) Extension employees currently attend several daylong, lecture-format in-services annually that lack creativity or solidarity-building components.

Creating quality PD opportunities for employees is important because PD experiences can affect overall work performance, community connections, and employee retention (Garst, Baughman, & Franz, 2014). Research has shown that well-organized PD leads to "social exchange [that is] as important as material exchange" and that it "stimulates the flow of information and speed of innovation," which can lead to a bartering of skills, information, and assets across knowledge areas (Smith & Stewart, 1983, p. 11).

Open Space Technology

One of the latest developments in PD is called open space technology (OST). According to Owen (n.d.), distinguishing aspects of OST are as follows:

- a defined start time, end time, and general theme and a low-key facilitator;
- absence of a traditional agenda, planning committee, or management team;
- initial large-group discussions that generate topics that are then tackled at a naturally flowing pace in small groups with no preplanning;
- intentional structuring of groups that are diverse in makeup, with the best operation occurring when employees have limited experience working with other group members;
- emphasis on distributing leadership and celebrating diversity; and
- displays of respect for others amid conflict (which is expected and anticipated) that thereby promote a high energy.

The OST model inspired Ohio Extension's new take on a conventional idea: PD opportunities by way of bus trips. In 2015, 20 Ohio Extension employees loaded a charter bus to go to a conference and returned 5 days later claiming the bus experience was the best PD initiative they had participated in for years. Due to the trip's success, another trip was planned and executed in 2016 and two more trips are being planned.

Bus Trip Format

The first bus trip carried Ohio 4-H Youth Development employees to a camping conference in Georgia. The second took dozens of Ohio 4-H Youth Development employees involved in camping on a 3-day Ohio 4-H Camps Tour, during which they visited a segment of Ohio 4-H Camp properties. OSU Extension administration demonstrated support of this PD opportunity by partially funding both experiences. On both trips, 4-H professionals were confined on a bus while traveling; full participation in the experience was required. Participants varied in position rank and type of appointment, geographic distribution (eight of nine regions represented), camp facility (seven of 14 camps represented), and years of experience as an Extension employee (5 months to 39 years). The physical bus configuration encouraged collaboration and sharing at six four-seater tables in addition to traditional charter bus seating.

As OST models, the trip's start and end times and daily destinations were the only predetermined components. All other aspects of the trip agenda emphasized unstructured time with minimal structured events. Key discussion topics and priorities were participant-generated during the first leg of the trip. Discussions occurred without the presence of a facilitator, but some did have time parameters, which allowed for topic teasing and opened the door for follow-up conversations. For the majority of the time, individuals were free to interact with one another, naturally sharing programming ideas and conversing about program struggles and successes. Every participant shared the role of both learner and expert. The on-site schedules incorporated both small- and large-group activities for the more or less active in order to accommodate different desires for physicality.

Over the course of the trip, conversation transitioned from public arenas to more private topics. Personal stories about families, values, and internal struggles fostered deeper bonds among participants. The depth of connection was reflected in one participant's evaluation comment: "The opportunity to interact with fellow professionals in a safe and comfortable setting is undoubtedly the best way to increase connectedness to the organization. . . . You quickly learn about the strengths, weaknesses, and passions of your colleagues in a way that can help each participant grow immediately, but also know who to look to for advice in the future." The depth of topics shared generated an increased level of intimacy, trust, and respect within the group that went much further than that which is typical in traditional PD offerings.

Key Findings

Each trip included in-person and postevent processing related to participant takeaways. For example, one trip's participants engaged in a last-stop "keep, start, stop, change" activity related to programmatic and management areas, as well as the trip components. Such results indicate an improvement of Ohio 4-H's organizational culture. Refer to Table 1 for formal evaluation outcomes.

Table 1.
Evaluation Outcomes for Ohio Extension Professional Development Bus Trips

| | 2015 conference trip ^a | 2016 4-H Camps tour ^b |
|--|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Respondents believe their participation in the bus trip helped them . . . | % agree or strongly agree | % agree or strongly agree |
| Build stronger relationships with Ohio 4-H colleagues | 100% | 100% |
| Build stronger relationships with out-of-state colleagues | 85% | not relevant |
| Gain programming ideas | 100% | 100% |
| Gain camping management ideas | 95% | 100% |
| Gain a greater understanding of other states' funding structures | 95% | not relevant |
| Get refreshed through out-of-office time | 90% | 100% |
| Identify practical solutions to existing problems | 90% | 100% |
| Identify new project partnerships | 90% | 88% |
| Provide an opportunity to vent | 80% | 100% |

a18 respondents. b17 respondents

Conclusion and Recommendations

On this basis of outcomes described here, we propose that Extension reexamine the style of PD opportunities offered so that PD experiences nurture employees and reflect the same pedagogy that has gotten the organization where it is today. Extension could improve morale, retention, and employee wellness by modifying PD offerings to more closely reflect the organization's own philosophy toward learning.

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