

Online Leadership Short Course for County Extension Directors

Abstract

Engaging the Extension workforce in professional development is critical for learning, behavior change, and continued development. However, county Extension directors find it difficult to juggle the various demands on their time, including the need to develop the leadership competencies required to be successful in their roles. Online leadership training is one option that can be used to address this time demand faced by Extension leaders and provide an avenue for developing leadership capacity. We discuss the design and implementation of the 10-week online Leadership Short Course for county Extension directors and the reactions of participants.

Keywords: [professional development](#), [training](#), [leadership](#), [online delivery](#), [Extension](#)

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Introduction

County Extension directors (CEDs) serve as the administrative leaders of county Extension offices in Florida and have split appointments that involve both educational programming and administrative duties (Benge & Harder, 2017). Personnel who serve as Extension leaders, such as CEDs, must perform many duties and tasks that require leadership skills, yet few Extension leadership development programs exist (Benge & Harder, 2017; Rudd, 2000; Sanders, 2014). Accordingly, day-to-day leadership responsibilities, along with organizational shifts and changes, present major challenges for Extension leaders to overcome (Sanders, 2014), and very few have the leadership competencies appropriate for today's Extension organization (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000). In general, leadership and professional development skills are essential in any organization, big or small, and those with an outstanding grasp of technical, human, and conceptual skills have an advantage in any workplace.

A changing landscape prescribes a change in the approach to delivering professional development programs for the Extension workforce. Shrinking budgets, travel restrictions, and busy schedules make it difficult for Extension professionals to participate in high-quality professional development opportunities. Extension already has seen a major shift in the delivery of professional development trainings and programs from traditional face-to-face delivery to online delivery involving tools such as webinars, blogs, and "'flipped' learning environments, in which content is introduced through online modules and topics are later discussed in person" (Sondgerath, 2016, para 2). Continued use and examination of online leadership professional development programs is necessary for Extension to be progressive in an ever-changing landscape.

Description, Design, and Implementation of the Leadership Short Course

To address the lack of available leadership training for Florida CEDs, we developed an online course to enhance their leadership abilities. The Leadership Short Course is a 10-week online course for CEDs that was designed to enable participants to achieve the following objectives:

1. Learn best practices for developing leadership skills to become high performing in current and future positions.
2. Increase the number of teamwork and collaborative experiences with their employees.
3. Establish a foundation for the competencies associated with effective leadership.
4. Understand different learning styles.
5. Learn how to increase their employees' job satisfaction.

Course instructors apply the same delivery format used for traditional for-credit courses by using the University of Florida online learning platform (Canvas). The platform provides instructors the ability to schedule sessions or modules in advance and deliver content through the use of various tools, including videos, PowerPoint presentations, YouTube clips, and discussion boards.

The course consists of six sessions (Table 1), with the first five sessions delivered biweekly over 10 weeks. During each 2-week period, each participant works at his or her own pace. Each session consists of videos, readings, and assignments that are due by the end of the 2-week period. Instructors engage the participants by providing feedback on assignments and sending weekly emails that serve as both reminders and encouragement. Cohort members are asked to engage each other via email and the platform's discussion forum in response to prompts and questions created by the instructors. Prior to the final session, participants complete a 360-degree evaluation we developed. The final session is delivered in person, and participants receive the results of the 360-degree evaluation and create individual development plans to continue their leadership journeys.

Table 1.

Titles and Descriptions of the Leadership Short Course Sessions

Session title	Topics addressed
Roles of a Leader	Understanding the power of perception; establishing purpose; defining leadership priorities
Leader Identity	Developing humility, optimism, and a continued learning mind-set; appreciating differences (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory); understanding the power of emotions
Building Strong Relationships with Others	Authentic communication; conflict resolution and stress management
Creating an Extraordinary Leadership	Reframing leadership; accountability and discipline; creating a culture of change

Environment

Leadership Best Practices Cultivating creativity; teamwork and psychological safety; providing feedback and recognition

Developing a Leadership Development Plan 360-degree feedback

Description of a Program Cohort

As of this writing, the course had been delivered one time. Program participants were selected via nomination by their district Extension directors. The 22 participants selected were characterized as being emerging leaders and risk takers and having enthusiasm for advancing themselves and University of Florida Institute of Food and Agriculture Extension. Participants were expected to stay engaged in the course and complete the sessions and corresponding assignments or they would be removed from the course. Instructors were able to see how long each participant was engaged in the online platform. After the first two sessions, five program participants were removed from the course, leading to a program cohort completion rate of 77% ($n = 17$). Table 2 provides data about the program cohort.

Table 2.
Characteristics of Participants in the Inaugural Leadership Short Course Cohort

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Years working in Extension		
1–5 years	8	47%
6–10 years	3	18%
11–15 years	2	12%
16 years or more	4	23%
Years serving as a county Extension director		
1–5 years	14	82%
6–10 years	2	12%
11–15 years	1	6%
Held a leadership position prior to joining Extension		
Yes	13	77%
No	4	23%

By the Numbers: Course Participants' Satisfaction

Course participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the course (Table 3). Participants' highest levels of satisfaction related to communication from the instructor ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.44$) and engagement of the instructor ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.47$).

Table 3.

Participants' Satisfaction with the Leadership Short Course

Aspect of course	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall course	4.41	.62
Organization of online modules	4.41	.71
Navigation of online modules	4.29	.85
Engagement of online modules	4.47	.51
Content of online modules	4.35	.49
Flexibility of the course	4.41	.80
Course deadlines	4.13	.81
Course work (assignments)	4.00	.71
Engagement of the instructor	4.71	.47
Communication from the instructor	4.76	.44

Note. Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the course on a Likert-type scale (1 = *very dissatisfied*, 2 = *dissatisfied*, 3 = *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*, 4 = *satisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*).

The participants believed that they would both participate in a similar type of training program in the future ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .87$) and recommend the program to a colleague ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .59$) (Table 4).

Table 4.

Participation in Future Online Programs and Recommendation to Colleagues

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I would participate in training programs like this one in the future	4.53	.87
I would recommend this program to my colleagues	4.71	.59

Note. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the above statements on a Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Implications for Extension Professional Development Programs and Models

Engaging the Extension workforce in professional development is critical for learning, behavior change, and continued development. The Leadership Short Course provides high-quality leadership development to CEDs, and course participants indicated that they were satisfied with the overall course and the various components of the online delivery format. Perhaps more telling is the finding that they would recommend the program to others. Reichheld (2003) explained that one of the most significant ways in which satisfaction and growth can be measured is through a "would recommend" question. Program participants indicated that they would recommend the Leadership Short Course to colleagues, further indicating a high measure of satisfaction with the course. We recognize that participant satisfaction is a first-level outcome demonstrating early success with the program's first cohort. Further research endeavors regarding participant skill acquisition and behavior change and various effects on additional cohorts are needed to demonstrate long-term outcomes and impacts of the program on CEDs. However, the initial success of the program demonstrates a need to reexamine the delivery format of professional development programs to ensure that Extension professionals' development and training needs are being met. Online delivery of professional development programs is pertinent and timely as program and travel budgets shrink across the Extension system. The Leadership Short Course can serve as a model for other Extension professional development programs needing to be reformatted to fit the changing landscape of the Extension system.

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