

6-1-2013

Leadership and Engagement for Natural Resource Organizations: A Case Study in Mississippi

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Recommended Citation

Gordon, J. S., Carter, R., & Bland, R. (2013). Leadership and Engagement for Natural Resource Organizations: A Case Study in Mississippi. *The Journal of Extension*, 51(3), Article 24.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol51/iss3/24>

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Leadership and Engagement for Natural Resource Organizations: A Case Study in Mississippi

Abstract

This article describes five workshops that addressed leadership development in Mississippi natural resource organizations. Natural resources organizations were defined as any group that provided educational opportunities or interacted in some way with nature, including forestry associations, master urban foresters, and wildlife organizations. Discussions and a post-workshop evaluation gathered information on satisfaction with the program as well as strengths, needs, and opportunities for the organizations. Overall, participants were very satisfied with the program, and follow-up inquiries revealed behavioral changes. This workshop can serve as a model for addressing leadership and organizational issues in natural resource resident groups and in communities.

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Introduction

For over two decades, Mississippi's broad network of county forestry associations (CFAs) has been an important target audience of Extension forestry educational programming (Londo & Monaghan, 2002). CFA members are critical in the recruitment of family members and peers in their communities to Extension programming and in the adoption of new technologies and ideas. As well, they act as the "voice of forestry" in local communities, advocating stakeholders' positions on local natural resource issues and promoting responsible resource management among the general public.

Many CFAs have strong leadership and participation. However, like volunteer groups across the nation, other CFAs struggle to remain viable and are in need of assistance in organizational development. Encouraging participation is often a challenge regardless of the factors involved.

In response, the authors provided leadership training to CFA members and other groups with natural resource missions to enable them to better address issues and concerns within their organizations. Specific goals of the programming included:

- Help organization leaders prioritize issues and problems.
- Provide leaders a systematic process by which to address the issues.
- Encourage the sharing of experiences and ideas among participants.

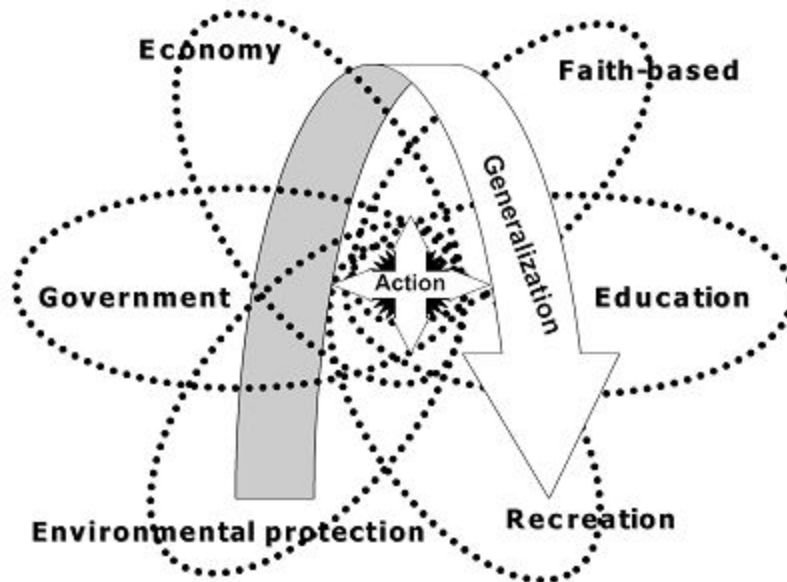
This article addresses participants' attitudes towards a leadership development model grounded in community development- and action-based value learning. We describe the methods and tools to implement the model as well as evaluation responses. The research provides understanding about stakeholders' needs, opinions, opportunities, and challenges towards improving leadership in grassroots natural resource organizations. Results are useful to natural resource managers and community leaders who would like to adapt this leadership model to specific local contexts.

Framework

Prior leadership workshops in Mississippi have been limited to teaching the "nuts and bolts" of collaborating with a statewide forestry lobbying association. By contrast, the program and study presented in this article applied a community development perspective and action-based values approach (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995; Wilkinson, 1991).

Leadership development is based on the perspective of "bottom-up transformation fueled by shared power and community building" (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). This perspective emphasizes leadership in community whereby individuals are empowered to take leadership roles by thinking about local assets, building partnerships, and taking actions towards addressing issues not only affecting a particular interest group, but that affect local society (Theodori, 2009; Wilkinson, 1991). This process is known as "generalization" (Figure 1). According to Theodori, (2006, p. 665), "Generalization gives structure to the whole of community as an interactional field by linking and organizing the common interests of the various social fields." Specific to the study reported here, the community social fields were represented by groups that shared a common interest in natural resources and could potentially improve natural resource management by improving the community generally.

Figure 1.
An Example of a Community Field



Source: Theodori 2006, p. 665

In turn, six action-based values anchored in the community development literature shaped the framework and methods used to implement the program. Based on Sandmann & Vandenberg (1995), action-based values include: (1) developing a shared vision that builds on the group's strengths and gives purpose to the group; (2) creating a sense of trust, honesty, and open communication in the group; (3) sharing local knowledge; (4) appreciating diversity when dealing with conflict; (5) promoting a collective ownership in decision-making; and (6) encouraging a willingness to distribute power.

These values were incorporated into an action-oriented focus on the issues that the groups faced (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). As described in Workshop Format, action-based value learning occurred through experiential processes and group reflection. The following sections describe the community action-oriented focus in detail.

Workshop Format

In 2011, workshops were designed and conducted by Mississippi State University faculty and staff to target organizations in 20 counties of northwest Mississippi. A flier describing the workshops was sent to county Extension directors to notify the officers of potential participating organizations. The same flier was posted to the Extension forestry website and emailed to natural resource management agencies in the area, including the Natural Resource Conservation Service; Soil and Water Districts; U.S. Fish and Wildlife; Mississippi Department of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Parks; and the Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, the president of each county forestry association was contacted with a phone invitation. The president was asked to bring other officers of his or her organization. Two and a half continuing education credits were extended to professional foresters (Mississippi Board of Registered Foresters) and loggers (Mississippi Logger Education). There was no fee to participate.

Each workshop lasted approximately 3 hours and occurred during weekday evenings. The program format consisted of the following topics and presenters:

- Welcome and introductions.
- Identifying and prioritizing the issues: Issue-based community development is an important tool when seeking to encourage stakeholder engagement. This is important because, in order for community development to become sustainable, it must foster the building of relationships and the strengthening of community. Participants were asked to describe situations they would most want to improve or change and rank issues in their discussion (Garkovich, 2009; Theodori, 2009).
- Asset and resource identification: Participants learned to look at the resources that are available in their local community or region. The asset identification process lets participants know where to look for resources and how to gain a different perspective on local human, natural, and built capitals. Participants performed exercises to determine skills and resources found in the locality (Beaulieu, 2002).
- Building capacity through partnerships: This is a tool that can be used to strengthen communities and organizations through the building of relationships. Participants were given examples of the benefits of building relationships and partnerships with stakeholders in order to gain support (Garkovich, 2009).
- Engaging local leaders: This section taught participants how to use issue-based leadership, determine stakeholders, and develop a communication strategy to engage local leaders. Participants identified possible partners, resources, and strategies for building these relationships (Theodori, 2009).
- Conflict resolution: The participants were taught the importance of having conflict resolution strategies in place, such as ground rules and consensus building, or weighted voting processes. A critical part of this session was that conflict is not necessarily bad and is vital to the functioning of a group. However, the means for handling conflict are often where group relations are either strengthened or weakened (Hustedde, 1995).
- Creating an action plan: The groups were asked to take the material covered during the workshops, identify an issue to address, and determine the assets, partners, and strategies that they could use to address the issue. A final component of the action plan was educational program planning. Within their groups, participants chose topics for scheduling four quarterly meetings, a 6-hour short course, and a 4-hour workshop to be conducted during 2012 (Londo & Monaghan, 2002).

Each topic was interactive; that is, one of three facilitators delivered a brief introduction to the topic, which was followed by breakout sessions with activity worksheets. Because a community approach to leadership development promotes social interactions among individuals and groups, facilitators engaged participants in class-wide discussion so they could share experiences and ideas. Each segment lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Workshop attendance was purposefully limited to small groups to encourage interaction among participants and between participants and instructors.

Course materials were distributed to each individual at registration. Materials consisted of a spiral bound notebook containing five sections: (1) lecture handouts and activity worksheets; (2) literature on leadership qualities and development; (3) literature on how to manage an organization; (4) project and activity ideas; and (5) information on state legislative and economic issues in natural resources management. The literature on leadership qualities and development consisted primarily of Extension bulletins (in particular, several "Engaging Your Community" articles [NRLI, 2011]); articles from The Leaderful Institute (The Boston Consortium, 2010); and chapters from the *Community Forestry Guidebook* (Gunter, 2004).

Evaluation

Evaluations are a "tried and true" method for gathering baseline data on programming preferences and needs assessment (Hughes et al., 2005; Londo & Monaghan, 2002). Like mail surveys, evaluations can employ a number of measures testing the effectiveness of a community development- and action-based value learning approach to leadership development (Taylor, 2008). Additional benefits of evaluations include high response rates and the ability to capture the opinions of participants immediately following the workshop. Despite this, West (2007) noted "the paper evaluation sheets all too often reside on a shelf or in a briefcase without being compiled or analyzed. Frequently, evaluation results are not communicated to interested parties."

In response, this article describes evaluation results addressing participants' attitudes towards (1) the usefulness of the program and topics using a 5-point Likert scale; (2) usefulness of the material using a 5-point Likert scale; (3) perceived value of the program in dollars using 6 possible responses; (4) important issues for their organization using open-ended response; (5) needed topics for future leadership workshops using a list of topics and a 5-point Likert scale; (6) open-ended comments; and (7) individual background information. The evaluation data serves as the basis for the results presented in the following section.

Results

In total, five workshops were conducted for 43 stakeholders and 12 agency personnel. CFAs were a primary target audience, and leaders from seven of nine CFAs attended four different workshops in northwest Mississippi. A fifth workshop was requested by the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks. The agency is involved with numerous stakeholder groups (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Quality Deer Management Association branches, and prescribed burn associations) and requested the workshop so employees could better facilitate stakeholder group organization and help leaders direct group activities.

Table 1 contains the workshop attendance information. Participants included CFA officers, urban foresters, officers of "Friends" groups, officers of natural resource professional organizations, and leaders of wildlife management organizations. Participation was nearly evenly distributed across workshops. Consistent with leadership roles in many natural resource organizations in Mississippi, 35 white males, 11 white females, 5 African American males, and 3 African American females attended the workshops.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

	Total
Number of workshops	5
Attendance	55
White male	35
White female	11
African American male	5
African American female	3

A total of 46 evaluations (84%) were obtained from participants. Participants indicated they owned or managed 15,332 acres (including managed acres by forestry consultants and agency personnel). Conversations with participants revealed that, although regional leadership workshops had been conducted in the past, they were unfamiliar with the content and structure of the current curriculum. In particular, they enjoyed the worksheet activities and peer discussions, which were not a component of the lecture-based leadership programs previously conducted. Table 2 contains data from an evaluation question asking participants if they found the workshop useful. Overall, 41 of 46 respondents (89%) found the workshop very useful overall. Participants added written comments such as:

- Very Helpful. Participant friendly, tolerant instructors.
- Excellent ways to make us think and make us stay focused and on target.
- One of the best programs I've been to.
- Workshop was logical and well organized. Very helpful.

Table 2.
Usefulness of Topics and Materials (n=46)

Topics	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Useful
Overall	41	5	
Asset and resource identification	46	0	
Engaging local leaders	46	0	
Forming strategic partnerships	45	1	
Identifying and prioritizing the issues	44	2	

Conflict resolution	40	6	
Action plan	39	7	
Materials	38	8	

Participants were most likely to consider useful the topics "asset and resource identification" and "engaging local leaders" (46 each). Other topics were considered only slightly less useful. Participants' comments suggested the need for more detail on some topics, particularly conflict resolution. The course materials received the most responses in the "useful" category, suggesting a lower level of satisfaction than with the other aspects of the course. This may be because, other than the activity worksheets, the program did not directly use the materials. They were designed as supplementary to the overall program. As a result, we indicated that participants could read through the materials at their own pace following the workshop.

In addition to assessing the program's usefulness, MSU Extension Forestry program evaluations traditionally contain a question addressing the perceived value of the information provided (Londo & Monaghan, 2002). The question asks participants to "please indicate the value you place on this course with a general estimate that will help us in justifying programs such as this. (You might consider the value as the cost of attending a similar, privately sponsored program of this type)." Most (20 off 46 respondents) were willing to pay at least \$25, nine were willing to pay up to \$50, eight indicated \$75, seven would pay up to \$100, and two would have paid \$200 (Table 3). Unsurprisingly, agency personnel were willing to pay less than landowners. The perceived value of the program totaled \$2,650.

Table 3.
Value of Program (n=46)

Number of Responses	Value	Number of Responses	Value
20	\$85	7	\$100
9	\$50	2	\$200
8	\$75	0	Other

The workshop was designed around a community-based, issue- and goal-oriented approach. To this end, participants discussed important issues to their organizations during the workshop and were asked to list these issues in the evaluation. In this way, program organizers had an idea about what to focus on for future programming development. The question was open-ended: "What is the most important current issue or project for your organization?"

The most common responses addressed communication and interactions with the membership (17 responses) and the broader community (16 responses). Participants explained that their organizations were in need of better communicating and engaging members, including delegating

responsibility and involving members in group activities. They also indicated a need to be more active in community affairs rather than programming educational lectures only for members. Many of the CFAs suggested they should more actively sponsor local students and teachers in statewide natural resource educational events. Finally, participants indicated the need to better publicize the organization in the community.

Unsurprisingly, an additional issue was membership recruitment. This was especially important for CFAs that tended to be composed of members above the age of 60. An environmentalist organization said recruitment was important to diversify its membership in addition to promoting organizational growth. Other important issues included inter-agency communication (mentioned by the state agency), focused and accountable partnerships, and a need to identify clear goals. As well, the state agency requested more information on conflict resolution. Several of the other needs addressed natural resources and were unrelated to organizational issues.

Table 4.
Important Issues (n=46)

	Response Frequency
Better communication with members	17
Better communication with local community	16
Membership recruitment	8
Economy/markets	4
Communicate better with other agencies	1
Conflict resolution	1
CRP management	1
Habitat management delivery	1
Focused and accountable partnerships	1
Need to identify clear goals	1
Sustainability	1
Wildlife protection	1

Action plans were a further result of the workshops. After discussions on each of the substantive topics, each organization developed an action plan containing a vision and mission statement, important issues and goals, and a timeline. Facilitators worked individually with each group on their action plan in breakout sessions. Following the breakout session, the particular action plan component was shared with the entire workshop group, and facilitators encouraged participants to comment and make suggestions. Organizations took the action plan with them at the conclusion of the workshop. All action plans included details regarding individual responsibilities and accountability

procedures to increase the rate of implementation.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the program, participants indicated a newfound enthusiasm for addressing challenges and opportunities regarding their organizations. The action-based, community-oriented framework allowed us to communicate ways of initiating projects such as fundraising and membership recruitment within the broad context of the places where participants lived. Future programming will focus on improving communication with membership, conflict management, and improving the organization's involvement in the community.

In agreement with the framework's focus on actions, a major benefit of the program was the action plan designed by each participant group. The exercise provided opportunities for group interaction and the application of lecture concepts to the specific needs and cultures of the organizations. In addition, action plans provided tangible products for participants to show their memberships.

Follow-up evaluation regarding behavioral change is needed for future leadership programs (as it is needed in much Extension programming). This includes assessment on implementation of goals in the action plan in addition to continuing assistance and support. Although the authors informally discussed the organizations' progress on their action plans several months following the workshops, measurable indicators of advancement are needed as well. One easy strategy is to collect copies of the organizations' lists of issues and goals during the workshop, then return the lists by mail several months later. Accompanied by a letter, the copied lists may help advance a faltering project by reminding leaders of their goals. Follow-up workshops are another option; however, difficulties in maintaining continuity of information between workshops and changing participants would have to be addressed.

It is worthwhile noting that the study reported here described a program that provided a generalized "overview" of leadership development. However, leadership development is an ongoing process of community building and, as indicated by these findings, specific aspects of leadership (e.g., conflict management) should be continuously addressed following the initial workshops. Two important outcomes of the overview program are (1) an improved understanding of stakeholders' leadership development needs and (2) application of evaluation data towards subsequent programming.

The model for this leadership workshop has implications across the South and nationally. While leadership development receives widespread attention in the political and economic spheres of Extension activities, leadership in natural resource organizations has tended to be overlooked (for an exception, see NRLI, 2011). This is unfortunate given the importance of natural resources to community well-being (Wilkinson, 1991). Evaluation data underscore the need for such programming in natural resource Extension and decision-makers' need to improve their leadership skills with a focus on action-based values of community development (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). Successful natural resource and environmental initiatives at multiple levels of society require stakeholders skilled in managing local organizations. Further, community-based leadership Extension programming increases the likelihood of widespread adoption of sustainable resource management tools when local groups work towards the betterment of the community at large.

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