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## The Nature and Extent of Conflict Among Volunteer Leaders in the 4-H Horse Project: Implications for Effective Program Management

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# **The Nature and Extent of Conflict Among Volunteer Leaders in the 4-H Horse Project: Implications for Effective Program Management**

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**Abstract:** The study reported here investigated the extent and nature of interpersonal conflict experienced by volunteer leaders of 4-H horse clubs. Despite anecdotal accounts of high levels of conflict in county 4-H horse programs, conflict does not appear to be universal, and the majority report that horse leaders are mostly to extremely cooperative. If leaders perceive that county agents are engaged in the horse project, by attending horse leaders' meetings, facilitating conflict resolution, and addressing concerns, less conflict among 4-H horse leaders is reported. The results of the study have clear implications for managing county 4-H Horse programs.

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## **Introduction**

In 2008, almost 6 million youth participated in one or more 4-H programs in the United States (Research, Education, & Economics Information System, 2009). One of the most popular programs in 4-H youth development is the horse project, in which young people learn about horses and their proper care and training. By and large, 4-H programs are led by adult volunteer leaders who take on the role primarily because they want to make a difference in the lives of youth (White & Arnold, 2003). Volunteers also sign on to lead 4-H clubs because of the passion they have for a particular content area. 4-H horse leader volunteers are often very passionate about horses and want to share that passion with youth. 4-H volunteer leaders are relied upon to create environments that facilitate positive youth development through

opportunities for youth to develop mastery, a sense of belonging, independence, and generosity to others. These "essential" program elements are known factors for healthy and thriving youth development programs (Kress, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

One of the key ingredients to effective youth development programs is a constructive program atmosphere (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2004) in which youth can experience positive relationships with caring adults as well as emotional safety (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Positive youth development programs play a critical role in building the social capital of youth through ongoing positive social interactions that enhance the public good. These pro-social interactions are marked by qualities such as mutual respect, trust, and reciprocity (Stolle & Hooghe, 2004). The emphasis on building the social capital of youth through positive interactions with adults is the basis of the youth-adult partnership emphasis found in many positive youth development programs (Arnold, Dolenc, & Wells, 2008).

While it is clear that adult volunteers in the 4-H horse program care about youth and want to share their love of horses with young people, there is anecdotal evidence that 4-H horse programs are often marked by conflict among 4-H horse leaders, parents, and even youth more so than other 4-H programs (Arnold & Nott, 2010). While stories of conflict in the 4-H horse program appear to be prevalent when discussing the topic among 4-H educators, there have been no systematic investigations into the nature of this conflict or into its potential impact on youth. Because conflict can inhibit the valued ingredients of positive youth development program, it could be that volunteer conflict is negatively impacting the success of the program.

Conflict, in fact, does affect youth as evidenced by substantial research on how parental conflict within families leads to negative emotions and outcomes for children (Ary, Duncan, Duncan, & Hops, 1999; Bray, Adams, Getz, & Baer, 2001; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben, & von Klitzing, 2010). Similarly, research on adult conflict in youth sports shows that background conflict and anger within youth sports programs has a negative effect on youth who witness such interactions (Omli & LaVoi, 2009; Arthur-Banning, Wells, Baker, & Hegreness, 2009). The high level of youth and parent involvement, adult coaching, and competition in 4-H horse programs is likened to many other youth sports programs where adults interpersonal relations can greatly influence youth. Adults' interactions with conflict elicit negative arousals in youth and in turn, are in direct opposition to the positive adult-youth relationships promoted through positive youth development programs.

Thus, the study reported here was undertaken to investigate the following experiences of volunteer leaders of 4-H horse clubs in Oregon:

1. The extent and nature of conflict in the 4-H horse program
2. 4-H volunteer leadership and conflict resolution styles
3. The role of perceived support of county 4-H agents for its potential effect on mitigating conflict

## Methods

### Participants and Procedure

Five hundred and ninety current 4-H horse volunteer leaders from one state were randomly selected for participation in the study. Leaders were contacted by email with a letter of informed consent containing information about the study and an invitation to participate in an on-line survey. Once a return email was received, the link to the on-line survey was emailed back, or a hard copy of the survey was mailed if the

leader requested it. Letters of informed consent were mailed to leaders who did not have an email account listed, with a postcard for the leader to return. Upon receiving the return postcard, the link to the on-line survey was emailed back, or a hard copy of the survey was mailed if the leader requested it. In all, 243 leaders completed the questionnaire (41% response rate).

## Measurement

Conflict was measured among the 4-H horse leaders in four ways. First, leaders were asked to rate the level of conflict and cooperation among their club's horse leaders on a five-point scale, with a rating of 1 indicating "none" and a rating of 5 indicating "extreme." Second, leaders were asked to rate their personal involvement in the conflict on a five-point scale, with a 1 indicating "no involvement" and a 5 indicating "always involved in the conflict." Third, leaders rated their leadership style on a five-point scale, with a 1 indicating the leader lets others take the lead and a 5 indicating the leader feels he or she is "always right and should be listened to by others." The leadership scale helped capture how open-minded or inflexible the volunteer leader is to others' opinions and actions, which may or may not induce conflict.

Fourth, participants responded to 30 items from the Organizational Communications Conflict Instrument (OCCI) (Wilson & Waltman, 1988) that measures how much a person utilizes each of four conflict resolution styles: 1) non-confrontational; 2) solution-oriented, which includes confronting the concern directly and/or compromising to find a solution; and 3) control, which involves direct communication about the problem, and arguing persistently for one's position in the conflict. Leaders were asked to think of how they have handled disagreements with other 4-H horse volunteers and then rate each item on a one to five scale, with a 1 indicating "very seldom" and a 5 indicating "very often." Leaders were encouraged to rate each item based on how likely they were to have that particular response to conflict, and reminded that there were no right or wrong answers.

In order to identify sources of conflict, leaders were asked to indicate the extent to which different issues contribute to conflict among horse leaders. Each issue was rated on a one to six scale, with a 1 indicating "none" and a 6 indicating "a lot." Participants were also asked about perceptions of their 4-H agents' involvement and support in the horse program because we thought this might have an impact on conflict among the volunteer leaders. We were led to believe this connection existed after conducting focus groups and witnessing higher conflict in clubs that also had less involvement from their 4-H agents (Arnold & Nott, 2010). Horse leaders rated their perceived level of agent involvement and support on a one to five scale for seven different items: 1) How much their county agent provides education and training on 4-H; 2) how much their agent provides education and training on horses and horsemanship; 3) how much their agent provides education on PYD; 4) how much their agent provides support for new leaders; 5) how much their agent listens to horse leaders' concerns; 6) how much their agent provides conflict resolution assistance; and 7) how much their agent attends horse leaders meetings. Each item was rated on a one to six scale with a one indicating "none" and a six indicating "a lot."

## Analysis

The study sought to measure the extent and nature of conflict in the 4-H horse program, examine the relationship between leadership and conflict resolution styles, and the relationship between conflict and volunteers' perception of support from their 4-H agents. Data analysis included descriptive statistics for all variables, including means, standard deviations, tests of normality, and skewness as well as correlational tests. Means, frequencies, and correlations among the variables (e.g., level of personal involvement in conflict, leadership style, conflict, resolution style, sources of conflict, and perceived agent support) are displayed in the following tables and figures. The frequency distribution of the "control" style of conflict was also examined and is presented below.

## Results

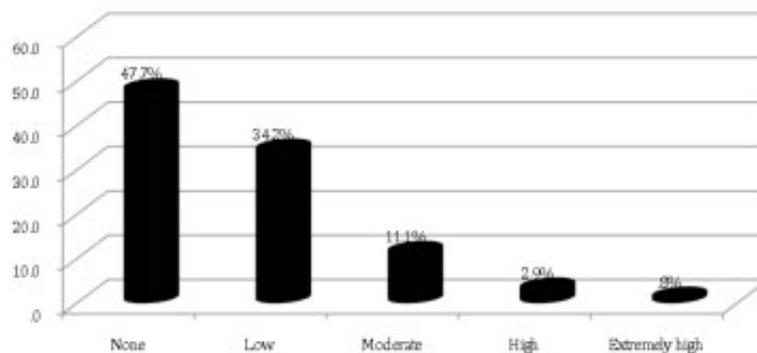
### Extent of Conflict

Sixty-eight percent of respondents reported they perceived 4-H equine leaders as "mostly" or "extremely" cooperative. Conversely, only 14% of leaders reported a "high" or "extremely high" level of conflict among leaders, while 33% reported a moderate level of conflict. A highly significant negative Pearson product-moment correlations was found between these variables ( $r = -.707, p < .01$ ). This inverse relationship between conflict and cooperation was expected, given the nature of these constructs.

When asked about personal involvement in conflict, 47.7% of leaders report having no involvement, while less than 4% report "high" or "extremely high" involvement.

**Figure 1.**

Percentages of Participants' Perceived Level of Personal Involvement in Conflict with 4-H Horse Leaders

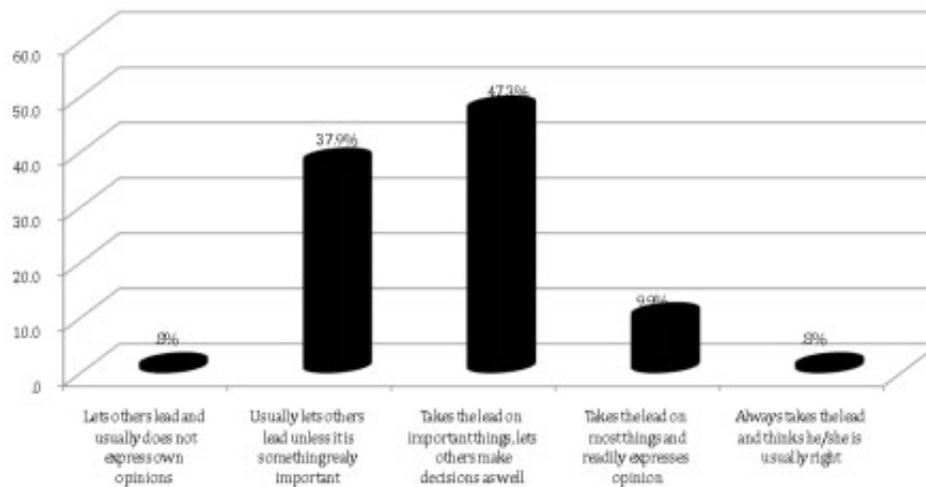


### Leadership Style

Regarding leadership style, 47% of leaders said that they take the lead on important things, but are also willing to let others take the lead in making decisions. Nearly 38% indicated that they usually do not lead, unless it is something they feel is really important. Together, these two scenarios account for almost 85% of horse leaders. Almost 10% of leaders reported taking the lead on most things and readily expressing their opinions. The figure below shows the percentage of leaders who use a particular leadership style.

**Figure 2.**

Percentages of Participants' Perceived Leadership Styles



## Conflict Resolution Style

The first and last columns of the following table show the lowest and highest possible scores for each of the conflict resolution styles on the OCCI. The middle column shows the mean score for the 4-H Horse leaders in the study. The second and fourth columns show the thresholds for infrequent and frequent use of each of the conflict resolution styles. The table as a whole reveals that the horse leaders fell in the middle score range for each of the styles and within the range that indicates neither a frequent or infrequent use of this style. Interpreted, this means that, as a group, the leaders do not possess strong tendencies in either direction for any of the four styles of addressing conflict.

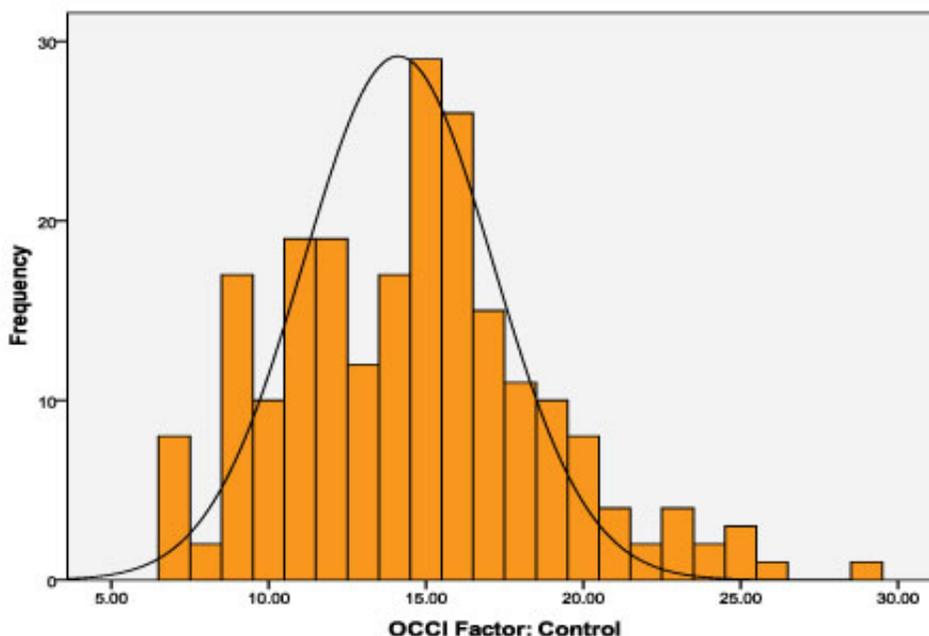
**Table 1.**  
Conflict Resolution Style Range of Scores and Horse Leaders' Mean Score

	<b>Lowest Possible Score</b>	<b>Infrequent Use of Style</b>	<b>Horse Leaders</b>	<b>Frequent Use of Style</b>	<b>Highest Possible Score</b>
<b>Non-Confrontation Style</b>	12	16.2	30.85	52.14	60
<b>Solution-oriented: Confrontation</b>	6	16.2	21.40	27.54	30
<b>Solution-oriented: Compromise</b>	5	15.38	17.17	22.95	25
<b>Control</b>	7	14.00	14.58	28.6	35

Of the four styles, it is important to look more closely at the "control" style. First, it was the only style in which the mean for the horse leaders was not near the middle, but rather tending to the low side, suggesting that leaders tended to report infrequent use of this style. In addition, the figure below shows the

frequency distribution of leader scores for the control style of conflict resolution. Note that the overall distribution is skewed to the low side, with a long "tail" of higher scores out to the right. There are a handful of scores that are considered outliers, that is, scores that are considerably higher than expected. Without these scores, the mean would be even lower than it is. For the purpose of analysis we elected to include the outlying scores. Our primary reason for doing so is because we suspect this distribution may accurately reflect the real nature of the horse leaders. That is, most leaders do not use the control style of conflict resolution, but a few use it frequently.

**Figure 3.**  
Frequency Distribution of the Control Conflict Resolution Style



### Sources of Conflict

Leaders reported personal opinions and personalities of 4-H equine leaders as the primary sources of conflict among leaders, followed by interpretation of the rules and horse knowledge. To a lesser extent, opinions of parents and horse training styles contribute to conflict, as well as risk management and safety concerns. Inter-club competition was rated as the lowest source of conflict. The table below shows the ratings of sources of conflict (ranked from highest mean to lowest mean).

**Table 2.**  
Mean Ratings of Sources of Conflict

	<b>N</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Personal opinions	237	1.00	6.00	4.71	1.36
Personalities	236	1.00	6.00	4.66	1.32
Interpretation of rules	235	1.00	6.00	4.18	1.50
Horse knowledge	235	1.00	6.00	4.09	1.56

Opinions of parents	234	1.00	6.00	4.01	1.48
Horse training styles	235	1.00	6.00	3.77	1.60
Risk management/safety	234	1.00	6.00	3.23	1.48
Inter club competition	230	1.00	6.00	2.84	1.65

## Relationships Between Conflict and Leader Styles

Significant Pearson product-moment correlations were found among the following variables. It is important to note that these correlations are bi-directional, and no causation is implied.

1. The "control" conflict resolution style is significantly correlated with leadership style ( $r = .354, p < .01$ ) and level of leader involvement in the conflict ( $r = .368, p < .01$ ). This indicates that the more a leader uses a "control" conflict resolution style, the stronger the leader is in his or her leadership style and the more he or she reports being personally involved in the conflict and vice versa.
2. Leadership style is significantly correlated with level of leader involvement in the conflict ( $r = .253, p < .01$ ). This indicates that the stronger the leader is in his or her leadership style, the more they report being personally involved in the conflict and vice versa.

## Moderating Effect of Perceived 4-H Agent Support on Leader Conflict

The final question posed in the study was whether volunteer leaders' perception of their 4-H agents' involvement and support is related to conflict among 4-H horse leaders. Overall, the mean ratings for agent involvement were positive. Mean ratings for agent support and involvement are presented in the table below (ranked from highest mean to lowest mean).

**Table 3.**  
Perceived Mean Rating of 4-H Agent Support

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Attends horse leaders meetings	225	1.00	6.00	5.30	1.12
Provides education and training on 4-H	232	1.00	6.00	4.68	1.44
Provides support for new leaders	229	1.00	6.00	4.62	1.48
Provides education on Positive Youth Development	232	1.00	6.00	4.56	1.43
Addresses horse leaders concerns	231	1.00	6.00	4.54	1.50
Facilitates conflict resolution	225	1.00	6.00	4.26	1.63
Provides education about horses & horsemanship	232	1.00	6.00	3.61	1.74

Significant correlations were found among forms of agent support and conflict among leaders.

1. Level of leader conflict is significantly correlated in a *negative* direction with how much the leaders' indicated their agent: 1) provides support for new leaders; 2) addresses their concerns; 3) facilitates

conflict resolution; 4) provides education on Positive Youth Development; and 5) provides education and training on 4-H. The higher the conflict, the less leaders reported agent support/involvement in these areas and vice versa ( $p < .05$ ). This indicates that the leaders who reported conflict also reported lower leader involvement and support in the aforementioned areas.

2. The level of leader cooperation was positively correlated with leaders' ratings of their agent's: 1) ability to provide support for new leaders; 2) address horse leaders' concerns; 3) facilitate conflict resolution; 4) provide education on positive youth development; 5) provide education and training on 4-H; and 6) provide education and training on horses and horsemanship ( $p < .001$ ). This indicates that the leaders who reported cooperation also reported higher leader involvement and support in the aforementioned areas.

No significant correlations were found between leaders' personal involvement in conflict, leadership style or "control" and the agent support variables. The table below shows the correlation matrix for each indicator of conflict among equine leaders with the seven aspects of the agent's involvement ( $*p \leq .05$ ;  $**p \leq .01$ ).

**Table 4.**  
Correlation Matrix: Conflict by Perceived Agent Support/Involvement

	<b>Provides education and training on 4-H</b>	<b>Provides education on horses</b>	<b>Provides education on PYD</b>	<b>Provides support for new leaders</b>	<b>Addresses horse leaders concerns</b>	<b>Facilitates conflict resolution</b>	<b>Attends horse leaders meetings</b>
Level of cooperation	<b>.211**</b>	<b>.219**</b>	<b>.225**</b>	<b>.324**</b>	<b>.314**</b>	<b>.288**</b>	.046
Level of conflict	<b>-.152*</b>	-.119	<b>-.131*</b>	<b>-.213**</b>	<b>-.243**</b>	<b>-.207**</b>	.041
Personal involvement in conflict	-.035	-.094	-.036	.012	-.011	-.014	.127
Leadership style	-.021	-.049	-.035	.013	.055	.011	.036
"Control" leadership style	-.054	-.047	-.042	-.051	-.054	-.047	.095

## Conclusions

The study reported here provides a snapshot of the nature and extent of conflict among adult volunteer leaders in the 4-H horse program in one Western state. The findings of the exploratory study offer two key points that are worth emphasizing for program management and improvement.

1. Leaders fall in the mid range for use of the four conflict resolutions styles measured by the OCCI, which suggests that on average leaders are exhibiting a normal range of conflict resolution styles and

are balancing all of the four styles during various conflicts. A noteworthy observation is the distribution of the use of the "control" conflict resolution style, which indicated that most leaders fall toward the lower end of this style, with a handful of exceptions. Use of the "control" conflict resolution style was correlated with perceived levels of conflict and personal involvement in the conflict. These findings indicate that it may be a relatively small group of leaders who are involved in conflict. Furthermore, these leaders seem to be aware that they are personally involved in the conflict. Program wise, this finding provides an important insight that while conflict among horse leaders may seem pervasive and global, there are not many leaders who report high levels of conflict or their involvement with conflict. It may be advantageous to provide information to leaders, especially those involved in conflict, on how their handling of interpersonal relations can influence youth outcomes.

2. 4-H agent involvement in conflict among horse leaders may be an important factor in managing conflict among equine leaders. Leaders who perceive agents as being willing to address their concerns, facilitate conflict resolution, and attend horse leaders meetings also report less conflict. Though this finding is only correlational, it stands as a strong reminder of the importance of 4-H agents' engagement with leaders by providing support and addressing conflict as it arises.

## Limitations

A primary concern and limitation of the present study is our reliance on self-reported data, which always contain degrees of subjectivity. In particular, there may be social desirability biases embedded within participants' answers about conflict. People who have negative connotations related to conflict may feel less apt to report that conflict exists in their programs; leaders' tolerance and perceptions of what constitutes as conflict likely varies widely. This leads us to conclude that there may actually be more people dealing with conflict than they reported, not vice versus.

Nonetheless, measuring perceived conflict has been used in several studies and is not an unusual way to measure such subject matter (Montgomery & Duck, 1991). Thus, the data should be viewed as participants' perception of conflict, but this limitation should not stop us from thinking harder about conflict and how conflict may impede future goals of programs. The study was also site specific to one state; follow-up studies that focus on horse programs in other states, conflict in other 4-H programs, and the impact of conflict on youth are necessary to further our understanding of how conflict may impede positive youth development.

Overall, we are reminded how the dynamics of adult relationships and how adults navigate conflict, including agents and leaders, can affect program implementation and the positive development of youth. Agents and leaders could benefit from trainings on conflict and reminders of how their personal interactions with other adults act as models for youth. Other 4-H programs that require significant adult and parental involvement may also benefit from reminders on how their interpersonal interactions can impact youth.

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