

4-1-2012

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Alexa Lamm

University of Florida, alamm@uga.edu

Debbie Nistler

University of Florida, nistlerd@ufl.edu

Nicole Stedman

University of Florida, nstedman@ufl.edu



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Recommended Citation

Lamm, A., Nistler, D., & Stedman, N. (2012). Identifying the Factors Influencing Professional Volunteer Leadership in the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents. *The Journal of Extension*, 50(2), Article 59. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol50/iss2/59>

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April 2012
Volume 50 Number 2
Article Number 2FEA3

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Identifying the Factors Influencing Professional Volunteer Leadership in the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents

Alexa Lamm

Post Doctoral Assistant

alamm@ufl.edu

Debbie Nistler

Doctoral Candidate

nistlerd@ufl.edu

Nicole Stedman

Associate Professor

nstedman@ufl.edu

University of Florida

Gainesville, Florida

Abstract: Many Extension professional associations have had trouble getting members to participate in national leadership opportunities. The study reported here examined the perception of members of a national Extension professional organization (NAE4-HA) regarding specific leadership actions. It found the single act of taking on a leadership position alters individuals' perceptions of leadership, directly driving their desires to be involved or not. Creating a sense of belonging and inclusiveness with the general membership can greatly improve the quality of the leadership experiences these individuals have, reinforcing their desire to affiliate and identify with being part of an association at the national level.

Introduction

Professional development opportunities have been emphasized by the National Institute of Food and

Agriculture (NIFA) and Cooperative Extension, as the umbrella organization overseeing Extension professional development associations, in an effort to build competencies within Extension professionals across the national system (Stone & Bieber, 1997). Developing new organizational leaders aids in the performance of an association by establishing and creating opportunities for members to enhance their decision-making skills (Barnes, Haynes, & Woods, 2006). In most professional Extension associations, members serve as the governing body in a volunteer capacity. To sustain an association long-term, leadership teams must be proactive about engaging and training new visionary leaders (Collins, 2001; Fehlis, 2005).

While it is imperative for organizational operations to have a board in place that is charged with fiscal and managerial responsibilities, it is difficult to recruit and retain leaders from the general membership (Davis, personal communication, October 23, 2008). Without new members motivated to step into leadership positions, national professional Extension associations, which serve pivotal roles in Extension professional development efforts, will cease to exist in their current capacity. While there are many reasons driving personal motivation, there is little research done on why Extension professionals choose not to take on volunteer leadership roles at the national level.

Hesselbein (1997) outlined barriers to leadership as personal and related more to perception than reality. These barriers were divided into self-imposed and institutional. Self-imposed included lack of understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses, playing "chicken little" instead of the "little engine that could," and not taking charge of one's own personal learning. Institutional barriers include a culture that does not reward leadership, fuzzy lines of accountability, and no established mentoring plan for leadership.

Nistler, Lamm, and Stedman (2010) found that current leadership within the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) chose to lead because of a strong need for affiliation and a strong need to achieve. Affiliation need focused on a need to give back to the association, to give back to the profession, and a strong belief in the association mission. Achievement need focused on personal growth and fulfillment as well as a need to make a difference. The need for power was also indicated within leadership and was expressed as a vested interest in the association and a belief they had something to contribute to the association.

When the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (ANREP) surveyed their membership on why they chose to maintain membership in the association, they found a strong need to belong, working with others who have similar interests, and networking were their main motivators (Jackson et al., 2004). Zinn (1997) found that teachers' expressed a variety of barriers to leadership based on their setting and perceptions of the individual. Zinn (1997) found that teachers cited a strong network of friends and administrators as a primary source of support. However, when support from areas, networks, and administrators was not present, barriers to leadership were perceived by teachers.

In the case of NAE4-HA, the board is made up of volunteer Extension agents representing all regions of the United States. The vision of NAE4-HA is to be the national professional development association of 4-H Youth Development professionals. These professionals make up the 4-H program team, which operates the youth development arm of the United States Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension system (NIFA, 2010). The governing board of NAE4-HA is responsible for

establishing, managing, and communicating professional development opportunities for 4-H professionals nationwide and is currently experiencing difficulty in recruiting members into leadership roles. Roles that have been difficult to recruit for include President, President-Elect, Treasurer, Secretary, Regional Directors, and national committee chairs and co-chairs. The study reported here examined the differences between Extension professionals who choose to take on leadership positions within NAE4-HA and those who do not to develop an understanding of why an individual would choose to lead.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study was based on Ajzen's (2002) theory of planned behavior. According to Ajzen, human behavior is guided by three beliefs: behavioral, normative, and control. A person's behavior can be modified, increasing the chance the person will perform a desired action, through the manipulation of any or all of these components (Francis et al., 2004). The study reported here focused on the identification of an individual's beliefs as they related to volunteer participation in leadership positions within a professional organization.

Behavioral Beliefs

Behavioral beliefs represent likely outcomes of the targeted behavior and the associated evaluations of these outcomes (Ajzen, 2002). An individual's behavioral beliefs correspond to a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the targeted behavior. It is expected that if an individual believes the potential favorable outcomes of a behavior outweigh the potential negative outcomes, they will engage in the behavior. In general, most Extension agents will have a positive view of leadership, because they are placed in the role of change agent on a regular basis within their own communities and expected to lead change efforts (Rogers, 2003). 4-H Extension agents in particular are charged with the task of enhancing leadership skills within the volunteers and youth they serve and therefore should exhibit a positive attitude towards leadership (Boyd, 2001; Langone, 1992; Seevers & Dormody, 1995).

Normative Beliefs

Normative beliefs represent what the individual believes other important individuals or groups expect in regards to the targeted behavior. Normative beliefs are linked with how an individual develops his or her perception of the subjective norm of the targeted behavior (Ajzen, 2002). If a behavior is established as a norm for those who align themselves with a specific group, it is expected those individuals will pursue engaging in the behavior. While conducting a Delphi study to determine why extension agents take on leadership roles, Nistler, Lamm, and Stedman (2010) found the need for affiliation was the strongest motivator in running for office. Extension agents in leadership roles wanted to give back to the organization and pursued their leadership role because they enjoyed being a part of a team. This suggests the belief that serving in a leadership capacity within a professional extension organization, such as NAE4-HA, is an established social norm.

Control Beliefs

Control beliefs represent the potential presence of factors that may aid or impede an individual's performance of a specific behavior (Ajzen, 2002). If individuals believe there are factors in place keeping them from being able to carry out a specific behavior, they will be less likely to engage. If individuals feel they have enough power to address and circumvent that impeding factor, they are more likely to engage in a behavior. Within Extension there are many factors Extension agents have reported as impeding their engagement in activities such as leadership roles. When examining why Extension agents did not engage in in-service education, Mincemoyer and Kelsey (1999) found time was the largest barrier. Franz, Peterson, and Dailey (2002) found "county [agents] most often mentioned a lack of material and human resources such as internal staff capabilities, relationships between campus and county units, lack of time, and financial resources as important limiters of Extension engagement" (P12).

Through a review of the theory of planned behavior, it has been established that an understanding of behavioral, normative, and control beliefs must be reached in order to make research-based recommendations on how to modify an individual's attitude towards a specific behavior (Francis et al., 2004). The purpose of the research reported here was to identify the motivators influencing Extension agents decisions regarding volunteering for leadership positions within the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents. The research was guided by the following objectives:

- Describe the differences in personal characteristics of members who have taken and those who have not taken leadership positions.
- Determine how Extension agents perceive organizational items associated with being a leader.
- Determine if members who have taken a leadership position vary in how they perceive organizational items associated with being a leader from those who have not.

Methods

In order to identify what influenced Extension agents decisions regarding volunteering for national leadership positions, a survey of the members present during an annual NAE4-HA business meeting was conducted. 4-H agents were selected as the population of interest due to the fact that they represent not only youth development, but are typically assigned to work in another aspect of Extension as well (agriculture, family and consumer science, natural resources, etc.) and are most likely to have membership in other Extension-related professional organizations, offering them multiple opportunities to run for office.

A limitation of the study was that participants were limited to those members in attendance at the annual meeting. Limited resources for travel, state government-imposed out-of-state travel bans, limited staffing in some counties, and lack of support from administrators can all influence who attends the annual meeting. In addition, Extension agents attend annual meetings for a variety of reasons that may or may not be related to leadership.

The survey instrument for the study used 12 of the 30 items making up the motivation sources inventory developed by Barbuto and Scholl (1998). This instrument was designed to identify the

organizational items that motivate individuals' choices towards participation and leadership. A LISREL analysis was conducted on the original 30-question inventory and resulted in a reliability score of .92 (Barbuto & Scholl). The revised, 12-item instrument was reviewed by an expert panel from the University of Florida for content and face validity.

The instrument was distributed to 406 participants, with 376 returned containing usable data, for a 92.9% response rate. Because the survey was completed during a general administration to a purposive sample, no follow-up procedures were employed. The survey results were evaluated for reliability, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78 (Huck, 2008).

On the instrument itself, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale with specific items related to participating in and taking on leadership roles within an organization (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). In addition, participants were asked to identify their age, gender, marital status, whether or not they have children, the number of hours they spend per month on professional development activities, years of service to Extension, years of membership in NAE4-HA, the number of national NAE4-HA meetings they have attended, and whether or not they have held a national leadership position.

The general demographics collected in the survey are displayed in Table 1. The frequency distributions of the members who have not served in a national leadership capacity show these individuals are female (83.0%), are married (66.5%), and have children (59.8%). Most spend fewer than 10 hours a month on professional development (86.2%). Their ages are equally distributed over all categories. The amount of time they have worked for Extension varies and represents all categories. The amount of time they have been members of the association also varies a great deal, ranging from less than five years (35.7%) to 21 years or more (27.2%).

Table 1.
Demographics of Respondents

	Non-leaders (n = 224)	Leaders (n = 152)
Characteristics	%	%
Age:		
≥ 60 years	11.2	8.6
51-60 years	32.1	39.5
41-50 years	20.5	25.7
31-40 years	21.4	22.4
≤ 30 years	12.5	2.0
Female	83.0	70.4
Married	66.5	67.8

Have children	59.8	56.6
Hours spent on professional development/month:		
1-5	50.0	40.1
6-10	36.2	43.4
≥ 11	10.7	13.2
Tenure in Extension:		
≥ 21 years	27.2	50.7
11-20 years	25.4	26.3
6-10 years	19.2	17.8
≤ 5 years	27.2	4.6
Years of NAE4-HA Membership:		
≥ 21 years	17.0	46.7
11-20 years	22.3	27.6
6-10 years	24.1	17.1
≤ 5 years	35.7	7.2
# of national NAE4-HA meetings attended:		
≥ 21	2.2	21.7
11-20	13.4	33.6
6-10	25.4	28.3
2-5	38.4	13.2
1	19.6	1.3
Belongs to another professional organization	69.6	72.4
Served in a leadership role in another organization	35.3	34.9

The members who have served in leadership positions are female (69.7%), are over the age of 40 (73.8%), are married (67.8%), and have children (56.6%). They have also been employed by Extension for at least 6 years (95.4%), have been members of NAE4-HA for 6 or more years (92.8%), and have attended a minimum of six national NAE4-HA meetings (85.5%).

Data were statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics, including Chi-square and frequency distributions. A level of significance of .05 was established *a priori*.

Findings

Comparison of Personal Characteristics

Significant differences in personal characteristics existed between members who had served in a national leadership position and those who had not. The individual's age ($X^2 = 135.76, p = .02$), marital status ($X^2 = 62.87, p = .00$), if they had children ($X^2 = 96.22, p = .00$), number of national meetings attended ($X^2 = 108.67, p = .00$), years of service to Extension ($X^2 = 51.94, p = .00$), and years of membership in NAE4-HA ($X^2 = 69.73, p = .00$) were all significantly different. The individuals' gender, amount of time they spent on professional development each month, whether or not they belonged to another professional organization, and whether or not they served in a leadership role in another organization were not significantly different.

Perceptions of Items Associated with Leadership

Survey participants were asked to rate their level of agreement as it related to their perceptions of 12 leadership items identified as essential to leadership within an association (Table 2). The members choosing to lead expressed a higher level of agreement with seeking out alternative solutions, working effectively with individuals and groups, and level of comfort speaking to individuals and groups. The leaders also expressed more agreement than non-leaders that they were willing to recruit more members, felt it was important to attend organizational functions, had a strong understanding of politics, and had a desire to be more involved. The members choosing not to lead expressed less agreement that leadership was a social obligation and enjoyment with the recognition of being a board member.

Table 2.
Frequency of Responses to Perception of Leadership Items by Leadership Classification

Items		1	2	3	4	5
Able to seek out alternative solutions to problems	Leaders	.7	0	5.9	53.3	39.5
	Non-Leaders	.9	.4	8.5	57.6	32.6
Comfortable with technology	Leaders	.7	4.6	5.3	49.3	39.5
	Non-Leaders	.4	3.1	8.0	46.8	41.5
Work effectively with individuals and groups	Leaders	0	.7	2.6	59.2	36.8
	Non-Leaders	.4	1.3	7.1	64.3	26.7
Comfortable speaking to individuals and groups	Leaders	.7	0	9.2	44.7	44.7
	Non-Leaders	.9	.9	12.9	56.3	29.0

Willing to help recruit more members	Leaders	0	2.0	13.8	44.1	38.8
	Non-Leaders	1.3	7.1	21.9	50.9	18.8
Importance of attending all organizational functions	Leaders	3.3	18.4	.7	43.4	32.9
	Non-Leaders	.4	8.0	25.4	46.0	19.6
Believe the leadership board is active in accomplishing its goals	Leaders	.7	0	17.1	66.4	13.8
	Non-Leaders	.9	2.2	27.2	51.3	17.0
Satisfied with the goals of the organization	Leaders	.7	1.3	20.4	65.1	11.8
	Non-Leaders	.9	3.6	25.4	54.9	15.2
Understand politics and the policy development process	Leaders	0	6.6	25.7	46.1	21.1
	Non-Leaders	1.3	12.1	32.6	43.8	10.3
Desire to be more involved in the organization	Leaders	2.6	6.6	40.2	31.6	17.8
	Non-Leaders	5.4	13.4	40.6	32.1	8.0
Enjoy the recognition of being a board member	Leaders	6.6	17.1	36.2	27.6	9.3
	Non-Leaders	17.0	23.7	34.4	21.0	4.0
Leadership is a social obligation	Leaders	7.2	19.7	30.9	27.0	8.6
	Non-Leaders	16.1	31.3	36.2	12.9	3.6
Note: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 – Strongly Agree.						

Comparison of Perceptions of Items Associated with Leadership

Significant differences existed on how tasks associated with leadership were perceived by those who have chosen to serve in a leadership role and those who have not (Table 3). Those who had chosen to take on leadership roles felt more comfortable speaking to individuals and groups ($X^2 = 137.58, p = .00$), felt attending all organizational functions was more important than those who did not take on leadership roles ($X^2 = 34.37, p = .00$), had a stronger sense that leadership was a social obligation ($X^2 = 28.89, p = .00$), and were more willing to help recruit more members ($X^2 = 26.47, p = .01$) than those who had chosen not to take on leadership roles. They also placed more enjoyment in the recognition of being a board member ($X^2 = -18.40, p = .05$) than their counterparts. Both groups were equally satisfied with the goals of the association and felt a desire to become more involved with the association.

Table 3.
Comparison of Perceptions of Leadership Items

Items	X^2	p
Comfortable speaking to individuals and groups	137.58	.00*
Importance of attending all organizational functions	34.37	.00*
Leadership is a social obligation	28.89	.00*
Willing to help recruit more members	26.47	.01*
Enjoy the recognition of being a board member	18.40	.05*
Understand politics and the policy development process	17.55	.06
Work effectively with individuals and groups	17.21	.31
Able to seek out alternative solutions to problems	16.68	.16
Desire to be more involved in the organization	16.59	.34
Believe the leadership board is active in accomplishing its goals	13.65	.19
Satisfied with the goals of the organization	9.76	.64
Comfortable with technology	3.93	.99
<i>Note.</i> * $p < .05$.		

Conclusions

As indicated through the theoretical framework selected for the study, understanding why Extension agents believe what they do about participating in voluntary leadership opportunities helps illuminate strategies for addressing a decreasing number of people electing to take on leadership positions. By characterizing beliefs as either behavioral, normative, or control, practitioners will be able to systematically address these concerns. However, the researchers recommend the findings of the study be generalized only to the population for which it was designed, because NAE4-HA is a unique single employer professional association.

The first objective sought to establish the homogeneity of the study respondents. What researchers found were differences existed among respondents by their age, marital status, whether or not they had children, the number of national meetings attended, years of membership, and length of service to Extension. This further establishes that fundamental differences in the respondents could alter subsequent findings.

The second and third objectives specifically addressed members' beliefs about leadership within an association. Of those items included, Extension agents expressed the most agreement with the

concepts related to advancing the association versus those associated with personal fulfillment, either achievement or affiliation, which is similar to the Nistler, Lamm, Stedman findings (2010). Extension agents who chose not to lead reflected lower levels of agreement with items associated with functions of motivation including "leadership is a social obligation," and "enjoy the recognition of being a board member." This indicates there is some dissonance between the motivations of Extension agents who have chosen to lead and those who have not in regards to their perceptions of social gratification associated with leadership opportunities.

Further comparison of these items indicated that the act of taking on a leadership position alters one's perceptions about leadership (social construction). Leadership roles often provide members with a better understanding of the organization ("greater understanding of politics and policy development process") and thus elicit a stronger feeling of membership ("stronger feeling that leadership was a social obligation," "enjoyed the recognition of being a board member") and alliance ("recruit members to the organization"). Additionally, Extension agents who chose to take on leadership roles wanted to "attend all organizational functions" and felt more comfortable "speaking to individuals or groups."

The greatest conclusion identified is that those who take on leadership opportunities perceive leadership differently than those who do not. The findings revealed in the study reinforce feelings of affiliation associated with leadership roles, which also supports the idea of normative beliefs identified by Ajzen (2002). According to Ajzen (2002), intention to act can be altered by changes to an individual's behavioral, normative, and control beliefs. By altering an individual's normative beliefs, intention to act and therefore specific behavior can be altered (Ajzen, 2002). In this case, social norms can be influenced to alter an Extension agent's normative beliefs towards leadership by creating a sense of belonging and involvement. Extension agents must feel their membership with NAE4-HA is more than paying dues and receiving professional development, but rather a social network they belong to and can rely on for support.

Recommendations

Recommendations from the study are categorized into two distinct areas: practice and research.

Practice Recommendations

- NAE4-HA leaders need to actively recruit new individuals into leadership roles by giving them a sense of belonging. Many times, the same individuals are invited (or volunteer) to participate in leadership positions, resulting in a sense of the leadership team being an elite group. All members should feel encouraged to participate through a sense of belonging.
- Current board members should more actively share their positive experiences with members to enhance a general sense of positive norm around leadership participation.
- A board member should be highlighted each month, including his or her responsibilities and backgrounds (who they are, what they do, and how they feel motivated to contribute). Members should be able to relate their personal experiences with those on the board to form a

feeling of personal connection.

- Members should be invited to sit in on board meetings to view or observe the process to eliminate perceptions of "them versus us" and emphasize inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

Research Recommendations

- Conduct qualitative interviews or focus groups with members to further elicit information regarding their election to participate in leadership opportunities.
- Identify further the relationship between the specific leadership experiences and beliefs or perceptions developed from those leadership experiences. Evaluate specific experiences for their outcomes/impacts.
- Conduct an analysis of the culture within the Extension organization as it relates to leadership. What is it about the culture of the organization that drives these varied perceptions?
- Study more specifically the relationship between specific demographic factors (other leadership positions/experiences, etc.) and perceptions about leadership.
- Examine the differences between participation in leadership roles within single employer professional organizations and professional organizations that attract participation based on common professional interests such as the American Evaluation Association or the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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