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Indicators of Success for Teamwork: What Extension Professionals Need to Excel as Team Members

Beverly M. Kelbaugh

Ohio State University Extension, kelbaugh.1@cfaes.osu.edu

Garee W. Earnest

Ohio State University, earnest.1@cfaes.osu.edu



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Abstract

The study reported here identified Extension team behaviors, outcomes, and impacts that are appropriate to use as indicators of team success. A Modified Delphi technique was used with a purposeful sample of Extension professionals identified as experts. Twenty-five indicators of success were identified for Extension program teams. Ten indicators of success related to team outcomes and impacts, external team deliverables. The remaining items related to team member behaviors, interactions, and processes, which affect how team members work together. Implications and recommendations for the Extension System are based on organizational readiness and support of teams, organizational expectations of teams, and teamwork practices.

Beverly M. Kelbaugh

Associate Professor and Regional Director
Caldwell, Ohio
kelbaugh.1@cfaes.osu.edu

Garee W. Earnest

Associate Professor & Leader, Human Resources
Columbus, Ohio
earnest.1@cfaes.osu.edu

Ohio State University Extension

Introduction

Successful Extension program teams are important in carrying out the land-grant university mission, which pledges universities to provide outreach and engagement to benefit the public. Almost two decades ago, Boone (1990), in referring to Extension stated, "Make no mistake, I'm stating that now--and into the 21st Century--our continued recognition among the American populace as the most respected and valued force for people-oriented change will depend on our ability to function in teams with significant others." Many researchers have identified team behaviors as a contributor to the effectiveness of teams (Cohen & Ledford, 1996; Levy & Steelman, 1996; Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990).

Measuring the performance of knowledge-work teams is difficult. Businesses, including educational institutions, must seek ways to increase the performance of knowledge-teams with measurement as the first step in this process.

Purpose

The purpose of the study reported here was to identify team behaviors, outcomes, and impacts that are appropriate to use as indicators of team success in the Extension system. The study sets the baseline for teams to begin incorporating indicators of success into their performance appraisals, promotion and tenure process, and reports to administrators and stakeholders.

Methodology

A multiphase Modified Delphi technique was used in the exploratory study. A purposeful panel of experts on Extension program teams was surveyed within the Extension system. An effort was

made to identify experts who had knowledge of program teams in the four program areas common to most Extension organizations. State directors of Extension identified 25 individuals as experts on teamwork; all agreed to participate in the study. The objective was to identify indicators of team success perceived by a panel of experts as fulfilling the goals of the team.

Data Collection

An instrument of open-ended statements with a Likert-type scale of six-points (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) was used. The steps for the Modified Delphi study taken were: (a) selection of the participants; (b) development of the instrument; (c) data collection over three rounds; and (d) analysis and interpretation.

The indicators of team success used by business and industry and those identified by Baertsche and Kelbaugh (2001) were used in the development of statements for the 29 items on the first instrument. Three rounds provided panel members the ability to come to consensus on the issues or problems (Altschuld, Thomas, McClosky, Smith, Wiseman, & Lower, 1992; Cyphert & Gant, 1971; Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975). Instruments II and III were each developed based on responses to the preceding instrument.

The questionnaires for the three rounds of the Delphi study were posted on Zoomerang (2002). Participants responded anonymously to the survey instruments using the six-point Likert-type scale and were provided space to include written feedback on each individual item.

Measures of central tendency for the previous round were reported to related questions in Rounds II and III. In addition, all comments by the Delphi panel for each statement in Rounds I and II were reported. The individual's own response to each statement was included in the personal e-mail to participate in Rounds II and III. In Round III, members of the Delphi panel were asked to review each statement, evaluate their position on those statements where consensus was not reached, and re-rate using the same six-point Likert-type scale. On items where a person's rating varied two or more points from the rest of the panel, he or she was asked to provide rationale for the rating.

Data Analysis

For analytical purposes, the responses on the Likert-type scale were converted to numerical values (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree) and treated as interval data. Measures of variance and central tendency were computed using SPSS (2003) for each statement. Consensus was determined when items achieved an 80% agreement of survey respondents between two response categories on the six-point Likert type scale. Indicators of team success receiving a mean score of 4.5 or greater were considered vital behaviors to team effectiveness. Items at the lower end of the scale--1.5 or below--were examined to determine if they might be considered barriers to team effectiveness and success.

For interpretation and reporting, the items were grouped into four levels based on the median response. Ratings of *strongly disagree* or *disagree* were grouped into the *strong disagreement range*. Items that received a *mildly disagree* response were considered to be in the *moderate disagreement range*. Items that received a *moderately agree* response were considered to be in the *moderate agreement range*. Responses of *agree* or *strongly agree* were grouped into the *strong agreement range*.

The variance for responses to each item was interpreted based on the middle range of responses. Consensus on a statement was agreed upon when 80% of the ratings fell within two categories on a six-point Likert scale. Frequency counts and percentages, along with the modes, medians, means, and standard deviations, were reviewed in determining consensus. Items not meeting consensus criteria were included in the following round, and new items were generated from suggestions. All written responses for support or disagreement with items on each round were reprinted in the next round. The Round III data were analyzed descriptively, and consensus items were identified. The mean for each consensus item was calculated, and variability was reported using the standard deviation. The mean was used to indicate the level of importance of the item as an indicator of team success in Extension program teams.

Findings

The study identified 25 indicators of success for Extension program teams. Of those, four statements were rated as having critical importance, with a mean of 5.5 to 6.0 on a six-point Likert-type scale. Those indicators were:

- Evidence that team members are committed to the work of the team and follow through with their agreed-upon roles and responsibilities;
- A clear vision of where the team is going and agreed-upon and understood goals;
- The impact of programs delivered to clientele; and
- An established process for communication among team members that allows for efficient and open information sharing in a timely manner.

Twenty items were rated as having high importance as a result of achieving a consensus rating between 4.5 and 5.4. These items were:

- Team members are engaged in ongoing learning opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge related to the work of the team.
- Evidence indicates that team members have a clear understanding of their role and the roles of other team members.
- Team members exhibit mutual respect in working together.
- Team members report personal and professional satisfaction with the team.
- Subject matter publications (fact sheets, bulletins, newsletters, web sites, and databases) are of high quality.
- Processes are established for conducting the business of the team that assure follow through and good communication before, during, and following team meetings.
- Team members have the ability to utilize team contributions in the promotion and tenure process or for yearly performance reviews.
- Team members regularly review goals and measure attainment of those goals.
- Team members report team accomplishments in an appropriate and timely manner to immediate supervisors and administration.
- There is an established method of reporting outcomes to the team's stakeholders.
- Team members generate and utilize evaluation data on in-services, workshops, and seminars.
- Team members are recognized for their contribution to the body of knowledge that is related to the team's area of expertise (examples: awards, recognition, publication of refereed journal articles).
- Team members utilize a team coach or organizational leader as an advocate of the team's accomplishments and organizational importance.
- Team members document and analyze participants' level of satisfaction with information provided on the team's web site and in newsletters or other publications.
- The team secures external funding when it is needed and considered appropriate.
- The team develops quality publications in response to identified needs.
- The team agrees upon decision-making methods.
- The team uses technology to share the team's research and scholarly activity and to enhance timely communication in a cost-effective manner (examples, having a web site; providing an ongoing interactive site for accessing information; having a newsletter on-line).
- The team documents the environmental and ecological impact of its work and scholarly activity when appropriate and meaningful.
- The team should have an agreed-upon method for resolving conflict.

One item achieved a rating of moderately high importance, with a consensus rating between 4.0 and 4.5.

- Team and/or individual team members should share their expertise at national meetings.

Conclusions

The critical indicators of success for Extension program teams as identified in the study reported here appear to be applicable to all program teams. A team that does not focus on these fundamental elements of teamwork would have a difficult time succeeding based on the results of this study.

Three major areas surfaced from the findings for discussion. They are:

- Organizational readiness and support for teams,
- Organizational expectations of teams, and
- Behaviors and teamwork practices.

Many of the indicators are related to the internal functions of the team and the effect of the work on the individuals serving on those teams. Panel members referred to items affecting the workings of a team, or behaviors and attitudes of team members, as ingredients or team processes needed or desired by teams to achieve high levels of success. The items related to implementation of team action plans could be viewed as external functions that have an impact on programs and clientele. Indicators of success that achieved consensus included items that many respondents identified as impacts and outcomes that should be used to evaluate or assess the success of a team.

A major concern voiced by the panel of experts related to evaluating all teams using the entire list of potential indicators rather than selecting indicators most appropriate to a specific team. Teams might begin to plan and conduct their work based on how they would be evaluated rather than on the program focus they were established to address.

Organizational Readiness and Support for Teams

It is hard to oppose teamwork within an Extension organization; however, the missing component is often an organization's readiness to support the infrastructure of teams. Two indicators of success requiring organizational support include:

- Team members are engaged in ongoing learning opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge related to the work of the team.
- The team uses technology to share the team's research and scholarly activity and enhance timely communication in a cost-effective manner.

The training and technology needs of teams present a significant expense to an organization. Some needs can be met easily with existing resources. However, some needs are specific to teamwork and often have been supplied with specialized funding.

Organizational Expectations of Teams

The work of the team and its goals need to be in alignment with the mission, vision, and values of the organization. "A clear vision of where the team is going and agreed upon and understood goals" was one of the identified indicators of success in this study.

Several indicators relating to an organization's expectations, such as securing resources, training of Extension professionals, and reporting of economic and social impact, numbers of persons reached, and programs conducted, did not achieve consensus. The panel members discussed the importance of indicators being linked to the team's goals and objectives and did not seem willing to agree because the indicators did not appear appropriate to all teams. Numbers of programs and persons reached was not viewed as a true measure of success unless combined with programmatic impact.

Behaviors and Teamwork Practices

The indicator of success receiving the highest degree of consensus was "Evidence that team members are committed to the work of the team and follow through with their agreed-upon roles and responsibilities." This supports the need to clearly define roles and responsibilities to be clearly defined for team members. Team members must have clearly written job descriptions and a team-developed strategic plan that outlines the action steps for the team and identifies who is responsible for each of the tasks and by what date they have agreed to complete their contribution.

Another critically important indicator of success was "An established process for communication among team members that allows for efficient and open information sharing in a timely manner." Several responses to statements question the inclusion of team processes or behaviors as indicators of success to be used by a team or supervisors to measure success of the team. Comments suggested that although these processes or behaviors might make teamwork more enjoyable, they were not prerequisites of success and would not be something that an evaluator could easily measure. These include:

- Established processes for conducting the business of the team that assure follow through and good communication before, during, and following team meetings,
- Team agreement on decision-making methods, and
- Team agreement on a method for resolving conflict.

The following items were considered to be related to individual behavior and attitudes of team members:

- The personal and professional satisfaction of team members with the team, and
- Team members practice a respectful and caring way of working together.

Program teams are often times comprised of team members with training in multi-disciplines who

have the goal of blending their expertise into an interdisciplinary approach to a problem or issue. The different perspectives and biases in the way team members view the issue result in challenges to a team's ability to work together. If team members can learn to practice mutual respect, then members will understand and appreciate the expertise of other team members.

Processes or behaviors that did not achieve consensus as indicators of success were:

- Team members enjoy working together,
- Team members established ground rules for conducting their work,
- Selection or appointment of an effective team leader, and
- Written guidelines for selection or appointment of team members.

Based on written comments from the panel of experts, the major reason for not coming to consensus on the previous items as indicators of success was a polarization of attitudes toward the need for formal structures and policies that guide teams. Some comments indicated a more formal structure was needed during the start up of teams but that the structure could become less formal as teams matured.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest implications in the areas of:

- Organizational support of teams,
- Performance appraisal of teams and team members,
- Team member behaviors, and
- Team programming.

Organizational Support of Teams

Three indicators of success support the need for an organization to help maintain the momentum of program teams.

- Team members are recognized for their contribution to the body of knowledge that is related to the team's area of expertise (awards, recognition, publication of referred journal articles).
- Team members utilize a team coach or organizational leader as an advocate of the team's accomplishments and organizational importance.
- Team members are engaged in ongoing learning opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge related to the work of the team.

In order to provide the needed support for teams, those who supervise other Extension program educators should take part in experiential learning about the demands of teamwork. Ongoing seminars will allow them to share their experiences with other managers and will help them develop strategies to perform in their new roles (Manz, Keating, & Donnellon, 1986; Donnellon, 1996). Managers can lead, empower, and remove the roadblocks for individual members and teams, and act as coaches to help teams mature in their job (Kelly, 1991).

At the same time, Extension must be sure its mission, management philosophy, goals and objectives, and strategies are in alignment with the concept of teams. Because Extension team members can be geographically dispersed, issues of technological support and how people are organized formally and informally can be roadblocks to effective teamwork. Extension must be able to answer several questions positively, and these questions may need to be answered differently in each state.

- Are the technical systems, including tasks, technologies, and facilities, in place to support teamwork?
- Do structural systems, including how people are organized both formally and informally, support teamwork?
- Do procedures for training, evaluating, promoting, and rewarding employees reflect team concepts?

Performance Appraisal of Teams and Team Members

One indicator of success received a rating of high importance related to performance appraisal: "Team members have the ability to utilize team contributions in the promotion and tenure process or for yearly performance reviews." A person's team contribution must be incorporated into

performance appraisals and the promotion and tenure criteria. Disharmony will occur if the performance appraisal and the organizational culture of teamwork are incongruent. It is critical that county directors, department chairs, etc., appreciate the importance of teamwork, understand the indicators of success of teams, and learn to factor an individual's contributions to teams into an overall performance appraisal.

Team Member Behaviors

Communications was a theme running through the indicators of success. Without effective communications, team success is diminished. Indicators related to communications include decision making, resolving conflict, sharing of information, and team member interactions. These indicators contribute to a team member's personal and professional satisfaction with the team. Thus, they should lead to Extension focusing training on these areas of teamwork.

Team Programming

Three indicators of success addressed programming, including "the impact of programs delivered to clientele," "the quality of subject matter publications," and "documenting and analyzing participant's level of satisfaction." Extension professionals need to learn if there are changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations of program participants. Developing an evaluation instrument to answer the "so what?" question should be incorporated into the program-planning phase of a team's work. Extension must provide training and support in developing effective teaching strategies, program evaluation techniques, and cutting-edge technology for program development and dissemination.

Recommendations for the Extension System

Based on the previously discussed implications, several recommendations to the Extension system can be made:

- Create a vision and a culture conducive to developing teams.
- Implement organizational policies and guidelines that support teamwork.
- Provide team development or team-building activities for team leaders and team members.
- Integrate the indicators of success for team performance measurements into the criteria for performance appraisal and promotion and tenure guidelines.
- Require training for assistant directors, specialists, regional directors, department chairs, and county directors acting as supervisors of other Extension program professionals to help them understand, foster, and assess team efforts.
- Peruse the state's indicators not gaining consensus, and determine if any are essential to their individual states based upon their unique needs or circumstances.

Recommendations for Further Research

Additional research based on the indicators of success presented here would be beneficial. These research efforts should include:

- A follow-up study to explore program team members' reactions to the indicators of success identified in the study reported here,
- A study to examine the correlation between team behaviors and processes and the indicators of success identified by this research, and
- Select current program teams interested in focusing on the Indicators of Success identified in this study. Use the case study methodology to observe and capture changes in behavior, outcomes, and reported impacts of teams and their members.

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