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Catalytic Leadership: Reconsidering the Nature of Extension's Leadership Role

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Catalytic Leadership: Reconsidering the Nature of Extension's Leadership Role

Abstract

Extension's role in leading change in communities must shift from traditional notions of leadership to one of catalytic leadership. The expertise, programming-driven leadership model of Extension's past must be replaced with one of activating and convening stakeholders and facilitating problem-solving processes that address public issues collaboratively. This article introduces the basic skills of catalytic leadership, offers two illustrative examples from Extension in Iowa, and connects this leadership model with Public Issues Education. It concludes with some suggestions for how Extension units can move toward the catalytic model.

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Introduction

Extension has always been about educational leadership and change. However, just as the social, economic, and political environments have matured, the role of Extension educator as change agent continues to evolve to address the complex issues of our time. When Extension and the land-grant college system were established, our nation was dominated by small-scale agriculture.

At that time, the leadership or change agent role of Extension educators involved breaking through the barriers of rural isolation to engage farm families in learning and discovery (Schwieder, 1993). There was no incentive in the private sector for developing and delivering information on agricultural technologies or rural living practices. The Cooperative Extension Service provided farmers and farm families with knowledge about modern agricultural technologies and practices in an affordable manner. Improving the well-being of individual farmers also advanced social welfare and the developing economy.

As change agents, Extension educators delivered (and continue to deliver) programs and services that advance the public good. Traditionally, programs and services have provided a general benefit to society as a whole or to broad cross-sections of society. This was apparent in the early Extension focus on farm practices. These activities were instrumental in maintaining food security in a rapidly growing nation by supporting the adoption and diffusion of efficient production practices within an increasingly industrial but largely agrarian nation.

As the nation, agriculture, and Extension have evolved in significant ways over the last century, Extension programming has likewise evolved. Extension still provides agricultural production services, but has added substantial resources to community development, youth, family, and business and industry programs, as well as educational services. The delivery of these programs provides a general public benefit by enhancing the social and physical environment in which we all live. This is the heart of Extension.

For much of Extension's history, the role of change agent meant that Extension educators affected change through improved practices--on the farm, in the home, and in the community. Extension provided leadership by providing solutions. Extension educators applied expert knowledge and affected change by providing knowledge. As the social, economic, and political environments have evolved, they have also become more complex and interconnected. In this environment, a "programming" approach for Extension is not sufficient. What is needed is a different mindset, a different way of thinking about leadership or what it means to be an agent of change. Rather than simply providing content, Extension must also facilitate process, processes where citizens work together, create a vision, and make a difference.

Extension Educators as Catalysts

Leadership denotes "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2004, p. 3). Extension's leadership in communities has followed this traditional notion of leadership. However, this traditional view of leadership seems inadequate for dealing with complex public problems. The kinds of problems Extension professionals face in their communities--such as economic decline, water quality, or childhood poverty--are terribly complex (Patton & Blaine, 2001). They cross jurisdictional, functional, and temporal boundaries. They are interconnected with one another. There are usually multiple definitions of what the problem is, with a range of accompanying "solutions," none of which completely "solve" the problem (Luke, 1998).

These intractable, interconnected problems highlight the fact that we live in a "shared power world" where "no one" is in charge (Crosby & Bryson, 2005). Traditional models of organizational leadership--with clear "leaders" and "followers" with clear goals--"do not work well for leaders attempting to address persistent public problems in an interconnected context." What is needed, therefore, is "public leadership, not public sector leadership" (Luke, 1998, p. 5).

Public sector leadership rightfully is the domain of elected and appointed public officials. However, public leadership is exercised by many people in and out of government. In fact, the role of Extension seems to be particularly well suited for public leadership, the kind of leadership that facilitates "concerted action by multiple and diverse groups." Extension professionals are in an ideal position to help "communities, states, and regions . . . work across traditional boundaries, creating partnerships and alliances among historically separate business, government, and education sectors" (Luke, 1998, p. 21).

Public leadership provides a quiet, "catalytic" effect different from traditional "great man" images of leadership. Jeffrey Luke defines public leadership this way:

Public leadership is essentially a transorganizational leadership process of focusing attention and mobilizing or catalyzing a diverse set of individuals and agencies to address a public problem. It is a type of leadership that evokes collaboration and concerted action among diverse and often competing groups toward a shared outcome. (1998, p. 33)

Public leaders lead from the middle in a facilitative manner. They act as catalysts in their communities. It is worth noting the dictionary definition of catalyst. The American Heritage Dictionary (4th ed) defines catalyst as "a substance, usually used in small amounts relative to the reactants, that modifies and increases the rate of a reaction without being consumed in the process." Few Extension educators would feel comfortable or accept as appropriate a role "out in front" in a public policy issue, leading as an advocate of some sort. But the image here of a catalyst is different, much more in harmony with the educational mission of Extension.

The Catalytic Tasks of Public Leadership

Jeffrey Luke's *Catalytic Leadership* (1998) identifies the primary tasks of public or "catalytic" leadership. They include the following.

Raising Awareness: Effective public leaders focus the public's attention on an issue. They don't promote solutions; they promote problems. They are "advocates for issue emergence, not necessarily strong advocates for a particular solution or policy position" (1998, p. 41). An important aspect of this task is framing issues in ways that raise attention and urgency and invite a diverse group of stakeholders to join efforts to address the issue.

Forming Working Groups: Public leaders are also conveners. They bring people together to address a common problem. They "use their knowledge of the particular issue, knowledge of stakeholders' interests, personal contacts and networks, and personal credibility to convince key stakeholders that participation in the effort is worthy of their involvement" (1998, p. 67).

Creating Strategies: After bringing people together around an issue, public leaders facilitate a process of "stimulating multiple strategies and options for action." While they may not be at the head of a working group, they do build and nurture the group process so that the group can be effective. They focus the group on deliberation and mutual learning and maintain a fair and open process. They also focus the group on identifying outcomes and options and making commitments (1998, p. 121).

Sustaining Action: Public leaders also help implement strategies and maintain the momentum of the working group. Effective working groups need people willing and able to "keep the fire burning." This is the most difficult task of catalytic leadership and requires more than one "leader." Catalytic leaders identify the sparkplugs necessary for sustaining action and help "institutionalize cooperative behavior." They become "network facilitators" who help groups maintain focus on outcomes, build trust, continuously learn, and otherwise strengthen the joint effort (1998, p. 146).

Examples

We offer two examples from Iowa State University Extension (ISUE) to illustrate this model of catalytic leadership. The first is an example from Families and Youth Extension, and the second is from Agriculture Extension. Both illustrate the powerful results of Extension educators as catalysts; bringing about change not through leadership "on top" or having all the answers, but leadership from the middle, bringing together the right people and nurturing a collaborative process.

Reaching an Underserved Population

Perry is a small rural community in Iowa. It was experiencing significant demographic changes due to a rapid increase in the Hispanic population. Parents with divergent ethnic backgrounds, many non-fluent in English, were not familiar with community services. They wanted to ensure the success of their children in school. Community members wanted to better understand this new cultural group moving into their community.

With grant funding in hand, Extension field staff initially viewed this as an opportunity for Families and Youth programming. After offering a series of programs staff noted that the target audience, Hispanics, were underrepresented. They began questioning whether these programs were meeting the needs of the Hispanic community.

ISU Extension staff decided to offer a series of focus groups to learn more about what the Hispanics really wanted and needed. Extension provided the leadership for this process and discovered that the Hispanic's top three goals were to increase citizen participation of Hispanics, continue to involve parents with their children, and decrease language barriers. An outgrowth of the focus groups and further community discussions with Spanish interpreters was the creation of the Hispanics United for Perry (HUP), 501c3 status, which empowers Hispanics to better serve their families and their community. ISUE continues to support this group and their activities.

HUP requested and ISUE helped them organize a leadership training series to support emerging Hispanic leaders in the community, to address their identified needs. HUP has planned several events celebrating and sharing their heritage, traditions, and culture with the broader community. ISU project staff, including a Hispanic coordinator, present informational fairs, offer educational programming for youth and parents as requested, make home visits, recruit families for events, and communicate the needs of the families to the community.

Interestingly, a Diversity Committee, organized and active within Perry for approximately 10 years prior to the creation of HUP, began to wonder how their mission might be different than or similar to HUP. ISU Extension was invited to facilitate discussions with this committee to clarify their mission. The Diversity Committee determined through these discussions that HUP was now more suited to meet the emerging community needs created by Hispanic immigration. The Diversity Committee dissolved and provided HUP with leftover funds to help support the new work.

Extension's role in this community evolved from a more traditional role of offering programming to serving as catalyst, assisting with the process of positive community change. This project is now an interdisciplinary, community-wide effort. Staff maintains that flexibility and adaptability are critical.

Rural Economic Development

Dairy is a major economic force in Northeast Iowa, with 72% of Iowa's dairy cattle owned by nearly 3,000 family farm businesses in this region. The dairy industry and its supporting infrastructure have a significant economic impact on the people, agriculture, and communities.

Similar to other agricultural industries, the dairy industry is undergoing a major transition. Farm operator retirements, a free market pricing system, regional competition, new technologies, and increased family living demands are challenging the way producers operate. Surveys indicate a growing concern over the future direction, with dairy farm families asking: (1) How do we take what is happening and make profitable and competitive changes? (2) How can we continue in the dairy industry and maintain an acceptable quality of life, manage stress, and take time off?

The future growth and development of the Northeast Iowa economy was seen to be at risk if a

proactive approach was not initiated to help the next generation adapt to dairy industry changes and adopt modern technologies. With local Extension educators providing catalytic leadership, conversations with local stakeholders began to identify specific regional needs, such as:

- Seeking local solutions to problems in the dairy industry.
- Improving the place-competitiveness of communities in Northeast Iowa.
- Demonstrating best practices and modernization of private dairies.
- Meeting the educational needs of individuals in all sectors of the dairy industry.

Based on initial discussions, ISU Extension and Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC) personnel formed a coordinating committee to develop strategies for addressing these needs. Before a broad-range program could be implemented, ISU Extension and NICC explored the possibilities of creating a functional partnership with the citizens of Northeast Iowa.

In February 1999, over 200 regional leaders, including dairy producers, dairy processors, dairy industry service providers, and community development personnel attended a public forum on the NICC campus. Participants discussed issues and identified opportunities to influence their future. A steering committee was established to explore the possibility of creating a Northeast Iowa regional foundation. After three meetings, a grassroots foundation emerged and the citizens of Northeast Iowa became partners with ISU Extension and NICC in shaping the future of region's dairy industry in May 1999.

Dairy producers, processors, citizens, and agribusiness leaders formed the Northeast Iowa Community-Based Dairy Foundation, a 501c3 status nonprofit foundation, currently with 700 members. The Foundation is collaborating with Iowa State University (ISU)--Colleges of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Experiment Station, and Extension--and Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC). The initial goal was creation of a Dairy Education and Applied Research Center that is now benefiting the entire multi-state region and nation. Current goals focus on implementation of a strategic plan for the region designed to strengthen the dairy industry and its supporting infrastructure, which have a significant economic impact on people, agriculture, and rural communities.

Relating Catalytic Leadership to Public Issues Education

There are many skills relevant to exercising catalytic leadership. Luke emphasizes strategic thinking and group facilitation and networking as central skills. He also notes that leaders must have a "strong character" as opposed to a strong personality, as a foundation to skills (1998). Many of these skills are germane to Extension. For example, effective Extension educators, no matter their specialty, have developed skills in forming working groups and nurturing collaborative efforts. Other skills, however, such as facilitating deliberative group processes, are probably not widespread across Extension.

Boyle and Mulcahy (1993) state that a vital role for Extension educators is to help people develop broadened perspectives and reasoned judgments on the critical public issues we face today. In Extension, we know this process as Public Issues Education (PIE). PIE is the educational process of informing and assisting people to improve group decisions about pressing and emerging issues that affect their communities. The PIE model corresponds with the notion of catalytic leadership we describe here. The PIE document titled *Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence, Enabling Communities* (Public Issues Education Task Force, 2002) outlines core competencies and is an excellent place to begin for those who realize a need to play a catalytic role in their communities.

The following quote from the PIE document demonstrates the "fit" between the PIE approach and the leadership approach we have been discussing here.

Extension professionals must deal with the complex interrelationship among science, technology, life experience, values, and beliefs. Public issues involve many people, often with conflicting interests and values. Extension professionals must create learning opportunities that respect all participants' values and that encourage people to learn from one another and to become sufficiently informed to make sound decisions. While it is never appropriate for Extension professionals to advocate a particular solution, it is appropriate to promote and apply educational processes that encourage collaborative learning, consensus building, and problem solving. (2002)

Extension has offered training in Public Issues Education throughout its recent history. We must continue to help staff from all disciplines explore what it means to be a catalytic leader and serve in the role of partnership broker as Michael Patton suggested almost 20 years ago.

Extension's future may lie increasingly in creating, facilitating, and mediating partnerships rather than in actually being a partner. . . . As a partnership broker, Extension will need to be perceived by potential partners as operating in the interests of those partners and not in the interests of Extension. This neutrality may reduce Extension's direct participation in partnerships and increase the importance of facilitating the partnership process among others. . . . Some entity must sit at the center of this network sorting out common interests, identifying shared problems, and facilitating collective problem solving and action. For such facilitation and coordination to work, that entity at the center of the action and information must be trusted by all concerned, must

be highly skilled at facilitating collective action, and must be able to create working partnerships as needed. Extension can be, and increasingly will be, that partnership creating entity. (1986)

Indeed, we find Extension to be in a primary position to play the role of catalytic leader. "With its university base and its roots in local communities, Extension is uniquely poised to play the role of partnership creator, mediator, broker, and facilitator" (Patton, 1986).

Recommendations

So what is to be done? How can Extension units move from a leader-as-expert model to leader-as-catalyst? Certainly there are many examples similar to the ones briefly highlighted here that demonstrate how Extension professionals can and do exhibit this kind of leadership. But it seems that this approach is still not widespread. It seems that Patton's prescient commentary 20 years ago has not been realized as fully as it ought to be. A culture of programming, of remaining in the realm of content expertise (rather than process expertise as well), continues. We offer the following ideas as suggested starting points for conversations about this issue.

- Extension administration/program directors must lend their support for catalytic leadership by discussing the importance of this role when communicating with staff.
- State organizations can review and rewrite job descriptions for county Extension field staff to encourage this notion of leadership. In other words, encourage the hiring of staff with skills needed for catalytic leadership.
- Offer professional development opportunities to encourage staff involvement in public issues education and/or involvement in special community initiatives where county and field staff utilize catalytic leadership skills. Singletary, Smith, Hill, and Corcoran (2004) identify training needs. For example, Iowa State has trained 100 staff, across all disciplines, at the county, area, and state level to emphasize the catalytic role. We plan to conduct a follow-up training to focus on developing skills for managing conflict in controversial public issues.
- Redirect funding and provide incentives for staff to be involved in special community initiatives that use catalytic leadership skills.

We hope this is the start of a renewed conversation initiated by Patton 20 years ago (1986). This conversation deals directly with Public Issues Education, but also would benefit from the catalytic leadership framework. Extension provides leadership, but the model of leadership needs to be adapted.

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