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Program Leadership: Do Teams Work?

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Program Leadership: Do Teams Work?

Abstract

Research was done into the effectiveness of team program leadership models in eight states, with concentration on the new team structure in Wyoming. A survey, evaluation grid, and team chair comments were used to gather data. Teams can add strength and diversity to programming, and all states should examine the possibility of using teams in program leadership. The transition from traditional structures is not simple, and requires strong administrative and personnel support. Financial and resource commitment of state resources, as well as appropriate incentives, are necessary for success. Teams cannot be so numerous as to over-extend already busy educators.

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Introduction

Program leadership is a national issue in Cooperative Extension. A number of state program leadership models are used across the national system and each has its strength(s). With increased scrutiny of Extension programs and with many state budgets tending downward, states are looking for ways to improve their efficiency in developing and delivering programming to their clientele. A number of states have gone to peer or multi-level team-led program leadership as opposed to top-down administrative leadership.

In February of 2001, in response to internal strategic planning, Wyoming instituted five initiative leadership teams, each with its own elected chair. Each team consists of eight field agents appointed by their respective districts, two departmental specialists appointed by department heads, all department heads concerned with the initiative, and an administrative liaison. The five initiative teams are:

- Profitable and Sustainable Agricultural Systems (PSAS)
- 4-H and Youth (4-H)
- Enhancing Wyoming Communities and Households (EWCH)
- Nutrition and Food Safety (NFS)
- Sustainable Management of Range Resources (SMRR).

This article discusses the effectiveness of the new leadership structure.

The concept of leadership, development, and expected product outcomes for program teams is new in many states, with a steep learning curve. Literature tells us there are six stages in group development (Cooperative Extension Service, 1987; Pickles, 1996):

- Forming (getting the group organized and started).
- Storming (working through personalities, leadership and control issues, alliances and factions).
- Norming (coming together and starting to pull in the same direction).
- Performing (developing synergy and accomplishing goals).
- Adoring (synergy, room to trip over each other's baggage, celebrating successes and accomplishments).
- Transforming (ending, goodbyes, transitions, what's next?).

These stages may be brief or long, and sometimes two or more may be present concurrently. But each is present within the group dynamic, and each is revisited periodically as team membership or task assignments change. Teams do not all progress through this process at the same speed, nor have the Wyoming Initiative Teams done so.

Teams tend to choose fewer issues and address them with more depth and expertise than possible by individuals, working to produce meaningful impacts statewide. This is in contrast to the traditional Extension mode of each educator trying to be all things to all persons and doing whatever he/she has the interest and skill to address.

Project Construction

The project was developed in three parts.

1. CES directors were surveyed concerning the success of team programming within their state.

Ten states were identified as having some form of team leadership in programming, and the Director of Extension in each of those states was sent a seven-question open-ended survey in June 2001. Directors, or their designated representatives, from seven states returned the surveys (Georgia, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, and Wisconsin).

2. A Likert scale survey of various group process traits was administered to Wyoming initiative team members at the beginning of the project and again at the end.

A "Team Effectiveness Grid" was adapted from an instrument illustrated in *Team Power* (Temme, 1996). Participants were asked to rank 15 group process traits on a Likert scale from 1 to 10. All team chairs were asked to administer the grid to the members of their team in June of 2001 and again in the spring of 2002, in order to show perceived change in effectiveness by the teams.

3. Initiative team chairs were asked for an evaluation and comments on the progress and success of their teams.

A subjective report was requested from all of the team chairs on how successful their teams were in functioning and achieving the goals, objectives, and action items charged to them in the state strategic plan.

State Director Survey

Below is a summary of the data returned from state directors, with selected comments.

1. Response to a request to briefly describe their state, regional, and county program leadership model:

Georgia

"We have a Program Development Team... [consisting of] four committees:

- Accountability
- Program development
- Professional development...
- Communications/Marketing..."

Iowa

"We have state 'plan of work' teams - made up of citizens, area representation, state staff...[which are] "self-directed"...[and] responsible for detailing action plans and implementing..."

Minnesota

"...We have four major program teams at the state level and a team in each of our eight regional districts.... We call these teams "Capacity Areas".... [The] structure evolved since 1999 and is an attempt to develop a program development system that is more flexible and responsive to emerging issues and cross-disciplinary needs, as well as more integrative of campus-based faculty and Extension educators..."

Nebraska

"...[We have] eleven action teams that are statewide in scope [with] both county-based Educators and Specialists as members...[led by] co-leaders, one of whom is a Specialist with the other being an Educator. Some teams have evolved into a management team representing three, four, or more working groups..."

North Dakota

"Each [of eight] program team[s] has a chair or co-chairs. Usually state specialists. All extension

staff are a member of at least one program team..."

Oregon

"...The faculty join working groups [which] reflect major programmatic efforts by commodity and/or specific topic."

Wisconsin

"Within the 4 content program areas [there are 28] teams...co-led by an agent and specialist..."

2. The leadership format is driven by:

The team -- 5 states

Administration -- 1 state

The final decision is made on program issues and delivery by:

The team -- 4 states

State administration -- 2 states

"...These teams have proved to be a significant improvement over individuals implementing their own plan of work..."

3. State directors judged their team program leadership model as:

Quite effective -- 2 states

Effective -- 3 states

Somewhat effective -- 1 state

Not very effective -- 0 states

"The team is more task oriented than it should be. It needs to be more vision oriented..."

"Each team varies...when they work -- it is wonderful!"

"...The team success is often directly related to the team's leadership.... Engaging the Department Heads and District Directors in the process has been important..."

"All faculty are somewhat independent and geographic and industry diversity in the State coupled with a lack of depth of faculty in any one area leads to difficulty in tight coordination..."

"...The team system brings special challenges...but overall, we are very happy with the team structure..."

4. Do program teams receive resource/budget allocations to provide program development/incentives?

Yes -- 4 states

No -- 3 states

If so, do such teams have the power to make budgetary decisions for the funds allocated to them?

Yes -- 4 states

No -- 1 state

Do teams provide input into state budget/resource/hiring decisions?

Yes -- 2 states

No -- 3 states

"Team decisions receive "priority" on resource allocations within the state.... Teams make resource decisions -- but do not have actual \$'s allocated to them."

"Action teams each receive \$2000 annually for day-to-day operations.... In 2000, an additional \$24,000 was made available internally for small competitive grants...teams also write grants.... Specialists/Researchers use dollars from their grant accounts [and] fees [are] charged for educational programs..."

"...No funds are currently allocated for programs..."

5. What incentives are there to encourage field educators and specialists to follow programming plans and directions developed through the program leadership model?

"...There are no incentives for this effort."

"Personnel performance reviews..."

"The money follows innovative, cutting-edge programs..."

"...Helping to insure programs are grass roots driven & that they do result in...impact."

"...They follow it and implement it. If administration develops it for them, it is considered a waste of time by all."

"Budget; Peer pressure; Commodity group or other partner investment"

6. Are there any incentives that encourage educators to drop programs that are determined by the program planning team to be outdated or of a lower priority?

Yes -- 1 state

No -- 2 states

If so, what are they?

"...Will be rewarded for following [priorities]."

"...[State and district priorities] encourage focusing on these efforts and therefore "sunsetting" outdated/lower priority programs..."

"Public recognition and awards to teams only will take you so far. [Administrators] recognize the quality work of their faculty who are members of...action teams.... We are implementing 'Invest in Your Future'..."

"[Faculty participate in an] annual review process [and]... some programs may be identified for termination...in conjunction with input from advisory groups."

"Informal only"

7. Other selected comments:

"...State directors with teams involved in program leadership indicate general success of varying degrees and support for the concept."

"...The strengths of our programming system are:

- co-led by Specialists and Educators
- volunteer sign up for team participation with individuals able to easily move from team to team as their program priorities change."

"A strength we see in what you have planned is that Department Heads are members of the teams. This is an idea that we should explore..."

Team Effectiveness Grid and Chair Comments

The Team Effectiveness Grid was administered to each of the Wyoming initiative teams as a survey instrument, with approximately 9 months elapsing between the first and second administration. It would have been desirable for a longer time period between the surveys, but project constraints did not allow for more time.

The data collected by each of the teams that administered the survey is represented in the four charts shown below. The initial average score given to the characteristic is represented by the blue portion of the column. Change in score from the first to second administration of the survey is represented by the purple portion of the column. If the change was positive, it appears on the top of the column; if the change was negative, it appears at the bottom of the column, below the zero mark.

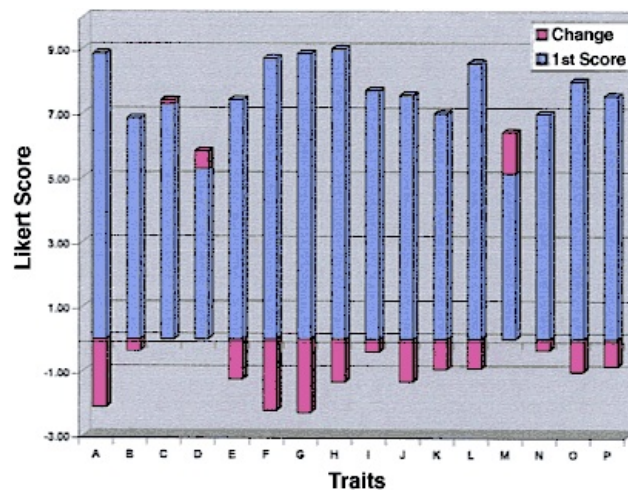
The team effectiveness characteristics developed from *Team Power* (Temme, 1996) measured in the survey, and their corresponding chart identifiers, are as follows:

- A = Trust level
- B = Empowerment
- C = Level of participation
- D = Planning and organizing

- E = Managing team conflict
- F = Communication skills
- G = Delegation skills
- H = Innovation, creativity, risk taking
- I = Leadership
- J = Decision-making skills, judgment
- K = Goal centeredness
- L = Atmosphere
- M = Focus
- N = Listening skills
- O = Consensus
- P = Team average for all scores

As shown in Figure 1, according to member assessment, the 4-H and Youth Team improved in their effectiveness in "Level of participation" and "Planning and organizing" from the summer of 2001 until spring of 2002. The group felt they dropped in all other areas during that time, with "Trust level," "Communication skills," and "Delegation skills" declining the most.

Figure 1.
4-H Team Effectiveness Grid Scores

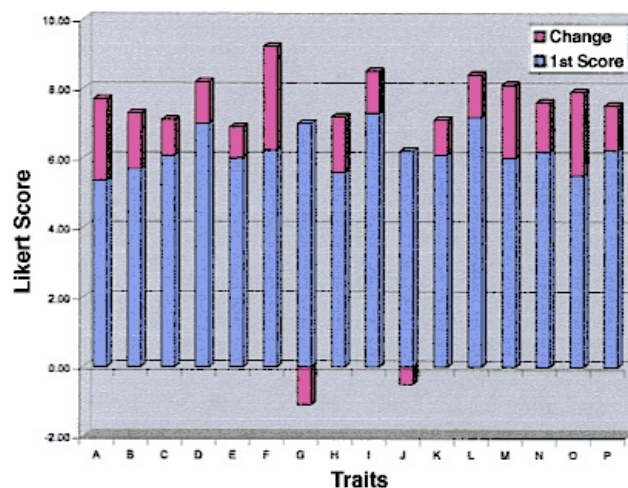


This team has had trouble moving out of the "storming" stage, which shows on the grid scores.

As shown in Figure 2, the EWCH (Enhancing Wyoming Communities & Households) team felt they decreased in "Delegation skills" and "Decision-making skills, judgment." All other team skills made significant improvement. The team chair made the following comments:

The level of frustration overall has been high the past year. It will continue to take more time and patience to move to a new mode of operation and thinking.... Over the past year, I've seen tremendous progress. For every step forward, we take steps back but...I am positive about the future...specialists...concerns had to do with the Extension definition of 'bottom up'.... The...idea is easier for newer educators who don't have obligations and clientele expectations from past years.... For those who have been around awhile, it has taken time to reeducate...

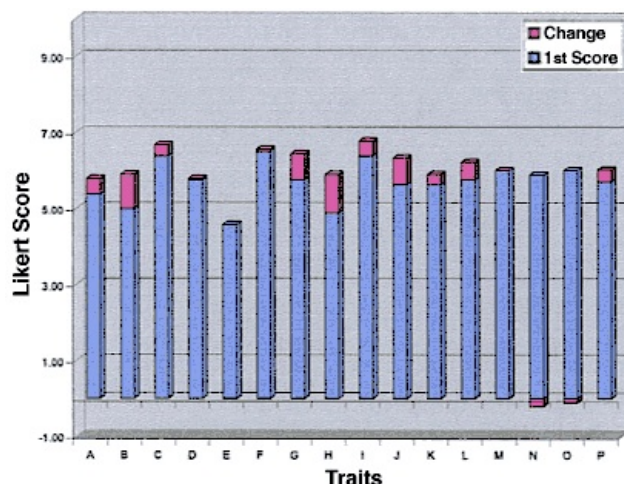
Figure 2.
Enhancing Wyoming Communities & Households Team



As shown in Figure 3, the NFS (Nutrition & Food Safety) team felt they had a slight decrease in two team skill areas, "Listening skills" and "Consensus," and held steady, or nearly so, in "Planning and organizing," "Managing team conflict," and "Communication skills." The largest improvement in

team skills was in the area of "Innovation, creativity, risk taking."

Figure 3.
Nutrition & Food Safety Team

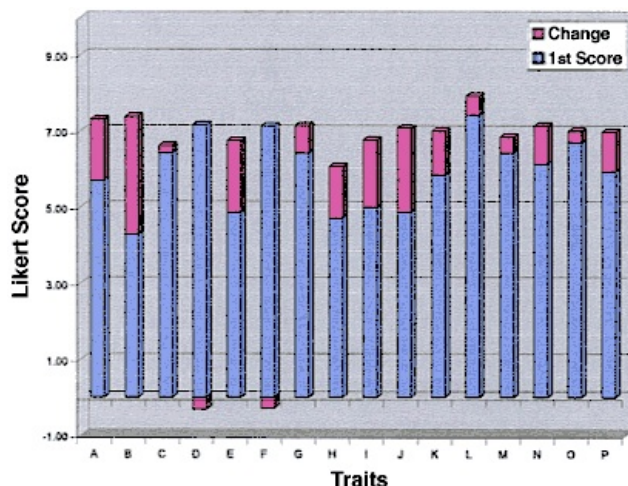


The comments of the team chair seem to echo the sense of lack of progress in some areas that was felt by team members:

We have-brainstormed a number of great issues...Some of us see them as essential parts of existing programs. Others want to create a whole new program...I think we're stuck in neutral as far as our Initiative Team goes!!! [Our administrative liaison] has suggested the need for a facilitator to help us identify direction. I'm going to suggest team building, I think, as well...some of our Initiative Team think we need a "new" program that they can build, doing research for their promotion packet...Another group of us feel that...we would be better off focusing on and enhancing those existing programs...

As shown in Figure 4, the PSAS (Profitable and Sustainable Agricultural Systems) team felt there was a slight decrease in "Planning and organizing" and "Communication skills" (Figure 4 -- Profitable & Sustainable Agricultural Systems Team). All other areas were positive, The score of "Empowerment" approximately doubled.

Figure 4.
Profitable & Sustainable Agricultural Systems Team



Chair comments on the progress of this team were:

Probably my biggest challenge, and at times frustration, has been finding a way to get the team together in such a way that most, or all, could participate.... Most faculty and department heads often do not have time to travel to a central off-campus location for a 2-day meeting....

The members of this team have exhibited more enthusiasm and synergy about Extension programming than I have seen in many years in Wyoming.... One team member that has been in Wyoming CES well over 20 years stated excitedly that this is the first time he has ever seen department heads, faculty, field agents and administrators sit down together to discuss the development of coordinated programs....

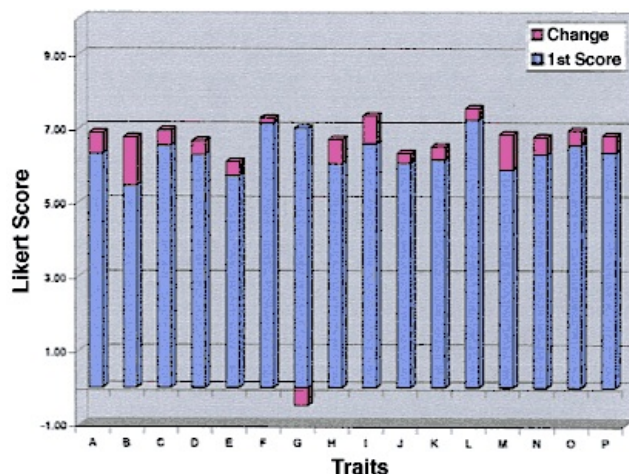
With the limited number of personnel in Wyoming CES, the human resources available to address all of the objectives in all of the initiative areas is extremely challenging.... Nearly all field agents in the state are on at least one initiative or issue team, and sometimes more. Some department heads are on several initiative teams. We are finding

some of the same persons on all of the PSAS issue teams. This stretches personnel and time extremely thin.

Secondly, financial resources are limited, with team budgets only being large enough to provide for meeting expenses and some seed money for issue teams.... It takes patience and strong and knowledgeable leadership to keep the process moving toward the strategic goals set before us. I think the biggest obstacles to overcome are the traditional resistance of field agents to being told they need to conform to guidelines developed by a team...and the strain induced on field personnel to transition to doing more state-coordinated programs while still trying to keep up with their traditional clientele that expect all the services and programs they have been getting in the past.

The average scores of all the teams were tabulated and are shown in Figure 5, where the area of "Delegation skills" declined slightly. All other team characteristics showed some degree of improvement in the mind of participants.

Figure 5.
Average of All Teams



Conclusions and Recommendations

This study shows that teams can add strength and diversity in developing premier Extension programming. It is evident at this point that the developing synergy, collaboration, and cooperation are having a positive effect within Wyoming. The high score for "Atmosphere" in the Team Effectiveness Grid indicates that team members are comfortable with the team process and enjoy the interaction they afford. On a national level, all state directors surveyed indicated that team program leadership was worth the effort and provided generally positive results. Consequently, it is recommended that some form of team program leadership be considered by state Extension systems, examining whether the concept could fit within their philosophy and structure.

The transition from traditional structures and programming methods is not simple. The process takes time and may present significant hurdles. It is this author's observation that the process takes strong administrative leadership, with knowledge of group process and a vision for the future.

However, without significant buy-in and support from all levels of the state Extension team, the process is probably doomed to failure. Without a core of enthusiastic field educators who can spread the news about changing to a "better" way, introduction of a team system will probably be met with strong resistance, and this often means passive rebellion. Buy-in and/or involvement of faculty department heads is also important to enhance department-wide coordination of the vision, educational efforts, and resource support needed by the programming teams.

Team leadership moves more slowly and takes a commitment of resources to support the process. Unless those involved, especially administration, understand this, it will be "business as usual." Administration must commit financial support for team expenses and program seed money, personnel time and training, and leadership to support the process. This should go as far as providing appropriate incentives for participation in, and penalties for resistance to, the process. Administration must be involved so they understand the discussions, thoughts, and actions of the teams and can share administrative direction in the process and can support the final product.

The data shows that teams must have the opportunity to make real impacts in such areas as programming, resource allocation, and hiring configuration and, accordingly, receive incentives and rewards for their work, to be truly effective. Alternatively, teams that do not feel they are making an impact will be an exercise in frustration for all involved.

Team chairs need training, experience, and support in group processes and team leadership. Several of the new Wyoming initiative teams have had significant conflict issues to deal with, and

not all are headed down a smooth road yet. Administration should be prepared to provide strong mentoring for new team chairs or provide chairs with in-service training in group process, team leadership, and conflict management.

The number and size of teams become factors in states that have relatively few Extension personnel. If the number of personnel available are limited and too many teams are appointed, team members will be on multiple teams and will not have the time to accomplish significant impacts.

Wyoming Cooperative State Director Glen Whipple made the following statement in January 2004:

The team-based leadership model has taken the initiative for programming away from administration and given it to the educators and specialists, where the bulk of the organization's creativity and expertise resides. It has energized and empowered the whole organization to reach for something better, for something more. After just two years of life, our State Initiative Teams are developing new programming that simply would not have been possible under a hierarchical program leader approach.

Such a stimulation of energy, empowerment, and creativity certainly deserves national attention.

Finally, this study certainly to the need for continued research and study into the use of teams in Cooperative Extension, nationwide. Further research is needed to examine the most successful models of Extension program leadership, what role teams could best play in the process, and how those teams can best be instituted and supported.

For an electronic copy of the complete report on this project, send a request to the author at weston@uwyo.edu.

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