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Defining Key Sub-Competencies for Administrative County Leaders

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Defining Key Sub-Competencies for Administrative County Leaders

Abstract

The study reported here sought to identify those sub-competencies that are key indicators of future success for individuals who serve as the Administrative Leader for County Extension in North Carolina. A significant number of County Extension Directors surveyed indicated that eight sub-competencies are considered critically important in achieving success in the role of an administrative leader. While eight of the sub-competencies evaluated were deemed critical early in the tenure of a new leader, findings also suggest that Administrative County Leaders need to master all 38 sub-competencies to insure long-term success.

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Overview

North Carolina Cooperative Extension (NCCE) defined seven core competencies, 39 sub-competencies, and accompanying multi-level proficiencies important to the effectiveness of administrative leaders of Extension programs in 1999. The Core Competencies, sub-competencies, and proficiency level development effort began with the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) on Staff Development and Training in August 1998.

Charged with five challenges, the BRC began with a study of the organization's staff development system and culminated in a set of recommendations for transformational change to personal and organizational development (1999). Since its creation in 2001, the Personal and Organizational Development group has continued the work of the BRC through literature and stakeholder analysis including the use of task forces such as the County Extension Director Competency Task Force. The result of these efforts is the current description of seven competencies, 39 sub-competencies, and proficiency levels for Extension Administrative Leaders. Each sub-competency defined in the model includes three levels of proficiency describing specific learning outcomes for the learner.

Several in the literature have also promoted the approach of orientating personal development around a framework of core competencies (Stone & Bieber, 1997; Ritter, 2000; & Cooper & Graham, D., 2001). The North Carolina competency model has been widely accepted internally as well as externally, among groups sharing similar organizational missions as NCCE. While earlier NCCE studies have identified that all the sub-competencies are important for success, an examination of which sub-competencies were most important to insuring success was needed. Administrative leaders also wished to clearly understand the "felt" needs of existing administrative leaders.

Methods

County Extension Directors, the recognized administrative extension leader at the local level in North Carolina, were sampled by randomly selecting four of the seven Extension Districts organized in North Carolina Cooperative Extension. Fifty County Extension Directors, representing approximately 50% of the population, were surveyed using an internally developed survey instrument administered during four face-to-face meetings.

Participants in the study were asked to select which 20 sub-competencies from the total number of 39 were most critical in their personal development goals of becoming an effective County Extension Director. Participants were asked to think about which areas, if not mastered, would derail someone early in their tenure as a County Extension Director. Participants were also asked to select five sub-competencies that newly hired County Extension Directors were most likely to be proficient in.

Responses were accumulated using methods consistent with accepted quality improvement. Continuous quality improvement methods are an outgrowth of the quality control movement and statistical process control methods in management. Using these proven methods, percentages were calculated denoting three groupings of importance.

Findings

Results show eight sub-competencies were considered critically important in achieving success in the role of an administrative leader. More than 70% of all County Extension Directors surveyed felt the following eight sub-competencies were critical:

- Understanding the NCCE and County Government Partnership
- Team Building
- Politics and Relationship Building
- Budget Management
- Effective Use of Volunteers and the Advisory Leadership System
- Oral Communication
- Active Listening
- Creativity, Innovation, and Visionary Thinking

The majority of County Extension Directors surveyed considered an overwhelming number of the sub-competencies important. The following 11 sub-competencies, in addition to the eight listed above, were considered important by a majority of County Extension Directors.

- Vision, Programs, and Goals
- Funding Process
- Training, Coaching, and Delegating
- Appraising People and Performance
- Program Planning
- Evaluation and Accountability
- Managing Change
- Ethical Behavior
- Networking, Partnerships, and Collaborations
- Customer Service
- Model the Way

Sub-competencies receiving less than a majority ranking should also be considered important from the viewpoint of "unfelt" needs. The findings in this study are a result of using a forced choice method, thus intensifying the deviation of the importance levels of the sub-competencies. Only two sub-competencies received few responses. In addition, huge disparity in perceived needs is apparent across districts. Thirty-one of the 38 sub-competencies were considered critical by at least a majority of County Extension Directors from one district.

These findings build on the foundational research that resulted in the 38 sub-competencies and suggests that, while some sub-competencies may be considered critical developmental needs early in a County Extension Director's tenure, all (39) sub-competencies should be considered important to fully develop as an administrative leader. The remaining important sub-competencies include:

- History, Philosophy, and Mission
- Knowledge of Organizational Structure, Function, and Relationships
- National Perspectives for CES
- Policies and Procedures
- Resource Development
- Staffing, Recruitment, and Hiring
- Risk Mgmt., Decision Making, and Project Mgmt.
- Design of Programs
- Implementation of Programs
- Adult Education and Instruction
- Personal Organization Skills
- Professional and Personal Development
- Written Communication
- Information and Communication Technology
- Interpersonal Relationships and Emotional Intelligence
- Negotiation and Conflict Management
- Understanding Self and Others
- Systems Thinking
- Working with Groups

County Extension Directors were also surveyed concerning which sub-competencies were most likely to be mastered prior to entering the role of County Extension Director. Results of this survey show five sub-competencies as significantly more likely to have been learned. They include:

- History, Philosophy, and Mission
- Program Planning
- Implementation of Programs
- Ethical Behavior
- Oral Communication

County Extension Directors were also asked to respond to the survey with any additions, deletions, or modifications of the sub-competencies or proficiencies. With the exception of very few recommendations made to enhance readability and understanding, no changes were made to the sub-competencies or proficiencies. County Extension Directors express confidence in the accuracy of the sub-competencies and proficiencies.

Conclusions and Implications

The following implications can be drawn from the findings.

1. Themes drawn from those sub-competencies considered most critical suggest that County Extension Directors must master the political and budgetary landscape early in their tenure. The development of a strong advisory leadership system, a clear understanding of the political environment, skills in building a strong NCCE and County Government partnership, and early building of relationships with key leaders are essential to success as a County Extension Director.
2. County Extension Directors need to master all 39 sub-competencies to ensure long-term success. Findings indicate a majority of the County Extension Directors felt most of the sub-competencies were important to their effectiveness and success.
3. County Extension Directors may wish to participate in some method of self-assessment early in their tenure so that they can develop a long-range personal improvement plan toward mastery of the sub-competencies. Supervisors and professional development leaders should anticipate and prepare development opportunities that vary depending on the individual needs of each County Extension Director.
4. There was consensus across the districts that new County Extension Directors come to the job with: knowledge of the history, philosophy, and mission of Extension; strong oral communication skills; a sound ethical foundation; and ability to plan and implement educational programs. Addressing the needs of the small number of County Extension Directors who do not show mastery of these sub-competency areas may be best done through mentorship and self-directed study.

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