

10-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Bruce, J. A., Boyd, B. L., & Dooley, K. E. (2004). Leadership Life Skills Demonstrated by State 4-H Council Members. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(5), Article 9. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss5/9>

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October 2004 // Volume 42 // Number 5 // Feature Articles // 5FEA6

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Leadership Life Skills Demonstrated by State 4-H Council Members

Abstract

The study discussed here examined the demonstration of leadership life skills by former State 4-H Council members. A purposive and snowball sampling technique was used to identify former council members. Traditional qualitative research methodologies were used to collect and triangulate data. The major finding was that State 4-H Council members demonstrated a command of the seven leadership life skill categories. Recommendations include developing a training method to expand the council members' decision-making abilities and the opportunities for them to develop as a group, implement training in personality types and working with different types, and employ new ways of improving communication.

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Introduction

The 4-H Council is a body of approximately 34 young people elected to fill the highest positions young people can attain in the 4-H organization in a state. Being a State 4-H Council member is often seen as the pinnacle of a young person's 4-H career. Council members plan retreats, conferences, and camps for the 4-H members that they represent and are responsible for industry contacts and public appearances representing the state organization. They receive opportunities that are not available to other 4-H members, such as travel, networking, and leadership training. 4-H members spend many years in preparation to run for one of these coveted positions.

The development of leadership and life skills is one of the stated goals of the 4-H program (National 4-H Council, 2003). Miller (1976) conceptualized leadership life skills developed in the 4-H program into seven categories: decision making, relationships, learning, management, understanding self, group processes, and communications. Seevers, Dormody, and Clason (1995) adopted Miller's conceptualization for purposes of their life skills assessment and expanded the definition to the development of the life skills necessary to perform leadership functions in real life. For purposes of the research discussed here, we will also use the seven categories of the life skills conceptualized by Miller and the broader definition from Seevers, Dormody, and Clason.

The perception exists that participating in a variety of activities enables 4-H members to develop positive life skills. Seevers and Dormody (1995) found that most 4-H members participated in

many different leadership activities. Participation was found to be greatest at the club level; however, researchers also found high participation in activities at the county/district level.

In an assessment of activities where 4-H members ranked the activities they believed allowed them the best opportunity to acquire leadership life skills, four activities tied for the number one spot. Holding an office was the first of those four activities. Cantrell, Heinsohn, and Doebler (1989) found that perceived life skill development was positively related to general participation and leadership roles at the three succeeding levels ("club," "county," and "beyond county") of 4-H programming. We found that leadership life skill development dramatically increased when 4-H members experienced leadership roles beyond the club level, positively affecting development in nine of the 10 clusters surveyed (value development, interpersonal skills, citizenship development, communication skills, career development, agricultural skills, and home economics skills).

It is also important to note that inter-relatedness plays an important role in defining and achieving motivation. Anderman and Midgely (1998) describe inter-relatedness as one of three pieces of the motivational pattern of self-determination. Self-determination theory describes students as needing a sense of competence, relatedness to others, and autonomy. Competence involves understanding how to, and believing one can, achieve various outcomes. Relatedness involves developing satisfactory connections to others in one's social group. Autonomy involves initiating and regulating one's own actions. For young adolescents, with their increased cognitive ability and developing sense of identity, a sense of autonomy may be important. Students at this stage say that they want to be included in decision-making processes and to have some sense of control over their activities.

As Extension professionals, we often assume that leadership is taught, but research has failed to describe what was actually learned as a result of being an officer. For example, we know that they learn communication skills, but what kind of communication skills? We know that council members learn relationship skills, but how does this affect their future relationships?

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of the study discussed here was to assess the leadership life skills that 4-H members learned as a result of serving as a State 4-H Council officer.

Methods/Procedures

The research followed the qualitative paradigm, which embraces the notion that both interviewer and interviewee influence and are influenced by the process of data collection and analysis. Credible qualitative inquiry depends on creating categories of meaning firmly based in the social realities of study participants.

The researchers used purposive sampling, a technique that intentionally seeks out participants/data sources because of certain qualities, to find participants who were willing to discuss their experiences as State 4-H Council members. The initial participants for the study were students in the classes taught by the researchers who self-identified themselves as former council members. The remaining participants were identified using a snowball sampling method (Babbie, 2001). Participants in the first group identified other State 4-H Council members who could be contacted about participating in the study. The study focused on 15 individuals who had participated in the State 4-H Council program from 1988-89 through 2001-2002.

Interviews, participant observation, and document analysis were the methods used to collect data. Participation in semi-structured and unstructured interviews was voluntary, and interviews were coded to retain confidentiality.

Data analysis followed the traditional methods described by Lincoln and Guba in Naturalistic Inquiry (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) adopted the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparative method for use in naturalistic inquiry. The researchers' use of this method followed that adaptation and is outlined below.

- Unitization of Data--Interview transcripts were "unitized" and printed onto 4" x 6" index cards. The researchers coded all index cards to correspond with the appropriate interview code for audit purposes.
- Categorization of Units--During this stage, the researchers sorted the data cards into categories or themes that emerged from constant contact with the data.
- Merging Categories--The researchers reduced remaining categories into salient themes that became the final construct. Some categories were discarded completely or dissolved into other remaining categories during this phase.
- Journaling--This process occurred throughout the research as the researchers kept a methodological journal, chronicling the decisions and situations with the research process itself. The researchers kept a second, reflexive journal as well.

Credibility was established through persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing (working with a panel to confirm findings), member checking (allowing interviewees full editorial control

over their transcripts), and reflexive journaling. The researchers used thick description in the reporting of respondents' thoughts and ideas relative to the research questions and purposive sampling to establish transferability. The researchers used an audit and journaling to establish dependability. Methods to establish confirmability included an audit and reflexive journal. Establishing trustworthiness enables methodological soundness.

Results/Findings

Using Seevers and Dormody's Youth Leadership Life Skills Development Model and Miller's (1976) seven conceptualized categories of leadership skills, the researchers were able to identify some of the skills that the State 4-H officers gained throughout their term. Specific operational definitions for each of the categories, for purposes of this study, were created using the words of the State 4-H Council members. This was done in order to construct a more realistic conceptualization of the skills as the State 4-H Council members perceived them.

The first of the seven categories of leadership life skills is "decision making." Several of the council members interviewed for this study demonstrated an ability to make decisions based on situations they encountered or methods they learned while on State 4-H Council. Ten council members talked about learning to make decisions based on the time requirement of being on State 4-H Council. These individuals discussed learning about priorities and making decisions based on the priorities they had chosen.

"I don't think that I missed out on anything because of 4-H either. I made it a point to manage my time around 4-H and that was how I wanted it" (17.M.<50K.4).

"I had to plan my life around state council. I planned my life around state council. Everything came second to that" (18.F.<50K.6).

Nine council members expressed a desire to take on the State 4-H Council role because they wanted to make decisions that would make a difference in the lives and the 4-H experiences of their peers. One State 4-H Council member in particular discussed a long-standing desire to join State 4-H Council to make some changes that would have far-reaching effects for their district leadership. Another council member discussed wanting to make decisions that would have a positive affect on the 4-H members at home in the counties within their district.

"I wish that they would have let us lead the state instead of calling us leaders and the only thing we did was decide on themes. We never got to build our own schedules or make our own choices. I think that they {advisors} believe that kids, if given the opportunity to lead, will screw things up, and so they don't ever let us do anything. They do everything for us, make all our decisions for us" (16.F.<50K.4).

"Relationships" is the second skill category. Eleven of the council members discussed getting to know and working with a large group of peers they did not know well at the outset.

"Definitely when working with people I would {use what I learned on council}. You know that there are 28 other people on council and so you need those people skills... so you learn how to get along" (15.M.<50K.1).

Greater than their desire to work well with one another was their desire for a close-knit group of friends.

"I know that I walked away with a really core group of friends. And even if they are not 'friends' it's a strong network of people" (14.F.>50K.5).

All of the council members interviewed discussed the friendships that grew out of their council experiences with great fondness, placing it at the top of the list of things that they walked away with from the experience

The third of the seven categories of leadership life skills is "learning." Whether it was a skill or something about themselves or the world around them, many council members walked away with new knowledge. Five council members felt like the greatest lesson learned was a new skill.

"{I feel like I walked away with} huge leadership skills. I think that the most important thing that I learned was that a good leader is not always the one that is in charge, or they don't always have to be in charge" (11.F.R.6).

Tied closely to the last category is the fourth category of "understanding of self." Having an understanding of self encompasses knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, and knowing in what areas of your life learning has occurred. Thirteen council members recognized that their personal growth was the area where their learning occurred.

"I think that the greatest skill you get is confidence. You gain a greater sense of confidence in yourself" (15.M.<50K). "I think that I am much more self confident. I know that I learned to be a lot more open with myself" (12.F.R.5).

"Management" is the fifth skill category. In the case of the State 4-H Council, management was similar to other skill areas and learning methods. Council members demonstrated the ability to

manage their own paths to reach the state council goal by learning all they could from their own experiences and the experiences of others. These young people exhibited management skills through decision-making and priorities on their time.

The sixth skill is group processes. Participants defined group process as understanding how a group works and how an individual can positively, or negatively, influence a group. Each participant interviewed discussed his or her own experiences with the group and his or her understanding of the group processes of the 4-H Council. Eight members of the group perceived that their group worked successfully or had positive group processes.

"We did some outstanding stuff as a group. We knew we had to work together and so we really did it and we helped each other out too" (I13.M.>50K.5).

Five members of the group perceived that their group did not work well together or had ineffective group processes).

"There was never any team. Everyone kind of came up with their own stuff and did their own thing. We never sort of collapsed that to meld into a team" (I6.F.<50K.2).

Seven State 4-H Council members discussed the cliquishness of the group as a whole or the lack of team unity.

"I also think that we were cliquish as a group and so that makes me wonder if they {minority delegates or delegates-at large} got the same experiences that I got" (I4.F.>50K).

"We were cliquish. There were about four girls, then three or four guys depending and we were a group, and then there was the rest of the group. I mean I hate saying that. But it's true, we were really cliquish" (I3.F.R.3).

The last category is communications. On State 4-H Council, communication is key between individual members, members and advisors, and between the council and the people they meet and work with outside the 4-H program. Several council members talked about learning how to communicate differently, depending on which of the three audiences they were addressing. Eight council members talked about learning to communicate with their peer groups.

"We communicated really well together. And we wanted to work hard {at communicating} and we did that together and really supported each other" (I2.F.R.3).

Eleven of the council members discussed learning to communicate with their advisors.

"We would propose things and they would always get shot down, and because of that we learned that if we wanted something we would go to the advisors in a small group and more often than not, we would get what we wanted that way. Things got done faster that way. So if we wanted something done, we would send one or two or even up to four or five to go to the advisors and they would say yes" (I6.F.<50K.5).

Ten council members talked about learning how to properly communicate with the people at their different speaking engagements.

"I always wrote them {thank you notes}, but now I learned the best way to write them. I got a thank you letter for helping at something as a state officer, and it really meant something to me and so I thought that if getting that meant something to me, then I should write really good ones because they might mean something to someone else" (I1.F.R.3).

Conclusions/Recommendations

The study discussed here examined the leadership life skills conceptualized by Miller and how each of the council members demonstrated those leadership life skills. It may be concluded from the findings that 4-H members do gain skills in decision making, communication, and getting along with others as a result of serving as a State 4-H Council officer. In addition, members developed positive, long-lasting relationships with other council participants. Participating on State 4-H Council is also an experience for self-growth and self-discovery. The findings of this study support the findings of Seevers and Dormody (1995) and Boyd, Herring, and Briers (1990) that serving as an officer increases leadership life skills.

However, it is clear that advisors and trainers address some of the areas of leadership life skills more fully than they address others throughout the year. More deliberate efforts in developing leadership life skills should be made. Our recommendations are as follows.

- Develop a training method to continue to expand the council members' decision-making abilities. While they are making decisions about their use of time, experiential training in decision making would help them hone those skills further and could encourage them to make decisions in other areas beyond just choosing the themes of state events. Experiential training activities might include exercises in setting priorities and scheduling because State 4-H Council members must schedule a number of activities within a confined time.

- Expand the opportunities for the State 4-H Council members to get to know each other and develop as a group, using the model of group development suggested by Tuckman and Jenson (1977). This will strengthen the bond between members and allow them to extend those bonds to other council members. Implement greater opportunities for team building utilizing challenge activities, communication builders, and delegation activities.
- In the areas of understanding of self and group processes, we recommend that council facilitators and advisors implement extensive training in personality types and how to positively work with different types.
- Employ new ways of improving communication between members, members and advisors, and members and their external environment. This should include written and oral communication, as well as professional, non-verbal queues that indicate respect, attention, and active listening.

Implications

In a time when we increasingly hear the words, "we need to do more with less," the implications of this study for all Extension are directly tied to answering that call.

- Increasing leadership roles for youth at all levels of 4-H as well as other Extension-related youth programs means that we are utilizing youth in what might be non-traditional roles. This will broaden the larger Extension team, increase the area where leadership skills can be learned and employed, and increase the visibility of both 4-H and Cooperative Extension. Audiences, who may not have been reached before, can now be connected to Extension programming through the use of young people as "ambassadors."
- Increasing the number of deliberate efforts made to teach leadership skills in trainings will increase the leadership base and the number of people who might be utilized in different roles and areas within the organization. Training areas might include:
 - Experiential decision-making training
 - Team building based on the Tuckman & Jenson (1977) model
 - Training in personality types: recognizing differences and working positively with those with differing types
 - Communication training designed to provide innovative ways to communicate positively between members, advisors and others
- Using planned synthesis activities to aid youth and adults in making connections between training and use of leadership life skills will make any leadership activity more meaningful.

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