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Leadership Training for Transforming the Community: A Participatory Approach

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Leadership Training for Transforming the Community: A Participatory Approach

Abstract

The study described here examined the effects of the leadership training workshops on selected residents in Clayton, a rural Alabama city. Data were obtained from 40 participants by a survey questionnaire administered 6 months after the workshops. The results showed that the workshops were well received and that many participants are using the information gained for community development. The participatory approach to training has sound philosophical and practical implications for effective community development. When participants are involved in identifying their needs and are included in planning of the training process, they are more likely to receive and use information provided.

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Introduction

Research suggests that community leaders can be helped to organize and develop their communities. People must be involved in the decision-making process, strategy setting, procedure development, and problem solving, (The Walk-The-Talk Company, 2003). However, very often, people are elected, appointed, or promoted to leadership positions without any formal leadership training. Moving into leadership positions demands special skills such as working with others; serving as a coach, mentor, motivator, and/or role model; being able to make tough decisions; and understanding how organizational politics work to achieve organizational effectiveness.

To this end, it is important for leaders to develop skills in planning, organizing, communicating, leading, monitoring, and working with others. Community leaders should make an effort to lift up people in order to have successful communities. According to Maxwell (2001) in *The 21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader's Day*, "Every leader is either a lifter or a limiter of people. If you limit people, you limit not only them but also yourself. But if you lift them up, there's no telling how far they--or you--can go" (p. 193).

In a study dealing with the assessment of mobilization and leadership challenges, Affolter and Findlay (2002) concluded that most rural communities are unable to tackle major socio-economic problems unless they have the leadership skills to do so. They also emphasized that community leaders or their representatives need to acquire certain basic skills that help them to convene the community, facilitate meetings, develop strategic plans, and approach outside institutions to solicit support.

Also, the authors concluded that training is needed on resolving conflict within the communities and on jurisprudence and citizen rights. These skills are necessary to transform particularly the social and economic dimensions of the community. Robinson (2000) emphasized that transforming leadership is about recognizing the interconnections and interrelationships among just about everything in the community. It is about creating synergies between people, process, and technology. It is about influence versus control.

According to Burns (1978), "transforming leadership is a process in which one or more people engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (p. 20). He explained that transforming leaders engage in collective purpose linked to social change, with the ultimate objective of achieving goals that enhance the well being of human existence. Rural communities, particularly those in the Black Belt Counties of Alabama, need transforming leaders with the skills and competence to advance their communities.

The term "Black Belt" was originally used to refer to the rich black southern soil. Today, the term refers to counties that have higher than average percentage of Blacks. The Black Belt stretches across 11 states [Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Tennessee] (Wimberley, Morris, & Bachtel, 1994).

In Alabama, the counties are mainly in the South Central section of the state and have persistently abysmal socioeconomic characteristics such as high unemployment rates, low personal incomes, high poverty rates, low educational attainment levels, low business development, and poor health facilities. These counties are the culprits in pulling down the average statistics for the State of Alabama (Governor's Task Force on Economic Development, 2001).

Realizing the importance of developing the community, the Cooperative Extension and Continuing Education Program at Tuskegee University has developed and implemented a leadership for economic development training program for communities. This leadership training is designed to:

1. Encourage rural residents to develop leadership skills as an initial step toward the development of their communities,
2. Demonstrate positive community impact and at the same time extend knowledge to other members of the community,
3. Improve and enhance their personal skills, and
4. Promote volunteerism.

Methodology

Twelve workshops were held on leadership skills development for the Barbour County Improvement Association (BCIA) members and other individuals in Clayton, Barbour County, a rural and Black Belt county of Alabama. This county has a significant number of underserved and hard-to-reach residents. The workshops were held over an 8-month period October 2001 to May 2002. Several topics were covered by a cadre of instructors primarily from Tuskegee University, but also from Auburn University and the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs. The topics included leadership styles, leadership and ethics, leadership for organizational effectiveness, building trust and teamwork, strategic planning, grantsmanship, zoning and land use, and developing 501c organizations.

Leaders among the participants approached Tuskegee University and requested training sessions in leadership. The participants assisted in determining the content of the training, based on perceived needs of their community. This we refer to as the "participatory approach." What is unique about this effort is that these participants were being trained to reach out to the underserved and hard-to-reach audiences in the rural areas. The trainees were not appointed or elected officials, but they were underserved persons who decided that they needed some requisite leadership skills in order to be more effective in carrying out community-based projects. Forty- four individuals took part in the training sessions.

In order to determine if the knowledge gained by the participants was being used and to what extent, 40 participants were interviewed in November 2002, using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to seek demographic and general information on the effects of the training. Four participants were not interviewed because of scheduling difficulties.

Findings

Table 1 shows the demographic information. Fifty percent of the participants interviewed were 54

years or below, and 40.0% were 65 years or older. Forty percent had high school or technical/vocational education, and 50.0% had a college education.

Table 1.
Responses Reflecting Demographic Characteristics

Category	Number	Percent
Age		
20-39 years	8	20.0
40-54 years	12	30.0
55-64 years	4	10.0
65 years or older	16	40.0
Educational Level		
High School	12	30.0
Technical/Vocational	4	10.0
Some College	0	0
College	20	50.0
No Response	4	10.0
Gender		
Male	12	30.0
Female	28	70.0
Race		
Black	36	90.0
Native American	4	10.0

Table 2 reflects assessment of the leadership skills development workshops. When asked reasons for participating in the workshops, 10.0% indicated that they were seeking positive change in the community and 70.0% indicated they wanted to learn how to be effective leaders. In regards to overall rating of the workshops, 60.0% said they were very good or excellent. When participants were asked if the workshops met their expectations, 80.0% rated meeting expectations as very good or excellent.

Sixty percent said they had used the information they received at the workshops, and 40.0% said they had not used the information they received at the workshops. Of those who indicated they had used the information from the workshops, 50.0% said they now work well with people and are

more involved with their organization, at church and home, and 10.0% said they now write to agencies for information.

Of those who said they had not used the information, 10.0% each indicated that monthly organization meetings had almost stopped; they were involved in too many other activities; the opportunity had not presented itself; and they had been indisposed or sick. Twenty percent each indicated that all aspects of the workshops were beneficial: information on sources of grants and how to locate them were most beneficial; sharing information with others was most beneficial to them; and information on leadership styles was most beneficial to them.

When participants were asked to name one thing they were doing differently as a result of the workshop, 20.0% said they were working more with people, and 60.0% said they communicate better. When workshop attendants were asked to provide suggestions for future workshops, 50.0% said they would like for workshops to continue, 10.0% said they would like more information on business management, and 10.0% said they want more information on public speaking.

Table 2.
Responses Reflecting Assessment on Leadership Skills Development Workshops

Category	Number	Percent
Reasons for Participating		
Seeking Change in Community	4	10.0
About Grants	4	10.0
Effective Leader	28	70.0
About Business Skills	4	10.0
Overall Rating		
Poor	0	0
Fair	0	0
Good	16	40.0
Very Good	8	20.0
Excellent	16	40.0
Met Expectations?		
Poor	0	0
Fair	4	10.0
Good	4	10.0
Very Good	20	50.0

Excellent	12	30.0
Used Information?		
Yes	24	60.0
No	16	40.0
How Information Has Been Used		
Work More With People	20	50.0
Write to Agencies	4	10.0
Not Applicable	16	40.0
Information Not Used		
Monthly Meetings Stopped	4	10.0
Involved in too Many Activities	4	10.0
Opportunity Has not Arisen	4	10.0
Have Been Sick	4	10.0
Not Applicable	24	60.0
Most Beneficial Aspect		
All	8	20.0
Sources of Grants	8	20.0
Sharing Information	8	20.0
Leadership Style	8	20.0
Care and Interest Shown	4	10.0
No Response	4	10.0
Least Beneficial Aspect		
None	40	100.0
One Thing Done Differently		

Working More with People	8	20.0
Communication Better	24	60.0
More into Grants	4	10.0
More Donations	4	10.0
Suggestions for the Future		
Workshops Should Continue	20	50.0
More Information on Business Management	4	10.0
Workshop on Public Speaking	4	10.0
No Response	12	30.0

Conclusions and Implications

More participants were middle-aged to elderly than in their twenties or thirties. Most of them had high school or college education. There were more females than males involved in the training, which reflects a national trend where an increased number of women are aspiring for leadership positions. Effective leadership was the key reason for participating in the training for most participants. Also, the results revealed that 80.0% of participants felt that the workshops were well received, and 100.0% rated the information they received as good and above. These findings indicated that the participants considered the information useful in leadership and organization management.

Furthermore, the findings showed that participants are developing a better understanding of the importance of leadership and are realizing that good leadership is about influence, confluence, and synergy. Since Extension educators are leaders in the community, the findings have implications for program development and implementation; involving clientele in planning is a worthwhile thing to do.

Through these training sessions, it is anticipated that participants will continue to use the skills learned, such as grant writing, conflict management, strategic planning, and visioning, to assist in the development of their communities. A unique aspect about this outreach effort is that the actor-participants in the community realized a need and approached an institution of higher learning to help address this need--a participatory approach.

This training method, using a participatory approach, becomes even more critical as institutions of higher education become more entrenched in the concept of an "engaged university," which is based on partnerships and commitment and sharing of knowledge, expertise, and critical resources to facilitate the solution to community problems. This concept goes beyond the conventional outreach protocols, where a university generally emphasizes a one-way communication through its university expertise. The study has implications for the Cooperative Extension Service in the Alabama Black Belt Counties. Extension educators should find this approach useful for efficient program development and implementation.

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