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Removing Barriers to Create Sustainable Leaders in Extension: The Odyssey of Leadership Development

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Abstract. Leadership development programs are an exploratory journey that develop Extension faculty to better themselves in service to the organization. In an effort to mitigate potential barriers for participants, it is imperative that organizations work to create conditions conducive for success. We posit barriers for extension professionals include, participants having a fixed-mindset (Dweck, 2016), time constraints (Lindle, 2015; McAlearney, 2006), and the employee burnout epidemic (Fisher, 2018; Seppala & Moeller, 2021). Proactively working against common negative influences, sets up leadership program participants to become more fully immersed in learning and subsequently have a better chance for a positive behavior change.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership development is estimated to be a $366 billion industry globally (Westfall, 2019). The cost of resources invested into leadership development programs highlights the importance of bridging the gap between current leadership and next-generation leadership. Statistics show that baby boomers are rapidly retiring from the workforce; this diminishing leadership capital is affecting higher education institutions (Bennett, 2015). This change poses a challenge; organizations are increasingly faced with higher retirement rates and fewer qualified individuals to fill the vacancies (Cavanaugh, 2017; Smith, 2016). To exacerbate this challenge, employee burnout and turnover have further contributed to the leadership gap and the lack of individuals with necessary leadership skills (The Wharton School, 2023).

While leadership development programming has proven benefits (Risser, 2022), studies show that participants can encounter barriers to participation (Gurdjian et al., 2014); oftentimes, they return to their previous habits after the completion of the program (Beer et al., 2016). Leadership development programs are novel, exploratory processes. They are odysseys: long and sometimes strenuous journeys that allow Extension faculty to better themselves in service to the organization. Extension must mitigate potential barriers for participants to create conditions conducive to the success of leadership development programs.

Creating sustainable behavior change via leadership development programs is difficult; the nature of Extension work can provide additional challenges. When Extension can identify and plan for barriers in advance, these same factors can aid in the formation of successful behavioral changes. Based on our literature review and evaluations of our existing Extension leadership programs, we posit barriers for Extension professionals that include, but are not limited to: participants' fixed mindsets (Dweck, 2016), participants' time constraints (Lindle, 2015; McAlearney, 2006), and the epidemic of employee burnout (Fisher, 2018; Seppälä & Moeller, 2018).

OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN EXTENSION LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

When participating in leadership development I feel that I am taken out of my normal environment and placed into a setting that fosters leadership through training and hands-on scenarios meant to make me a stronger leader.

However, once I have returned to my normal environment, it is difficult and frustrating to try and implement these new principles or techniques. (F. B. Jackson, Extension agent, personal communication, April 26, 2023)

A culture that embraces leadership development must mitigate barriers that may negatively impact the implementation of new skills learned via development programs. Phenomena such as the great resignation after the COVID-19 pandemic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) have caused organizations to search for answers to an important question: what can they do to better serve employees and maximize employee retention? Participating in leadership development programs can serve as an incentive for many employees who appreciate opportunities for continued growth and learning.

Cohort-based leadership development program models advance employees through a sequence of events based on the needs of the organization and the specific employees (Griffeth et al., 2018). Cohort programs offer support for members, facilitate friendships, and foster professional collaboration (Barnett et al., 2000; Milstein, 1993; Twale & Kochan, 2000). These benefits ultimately lead to the formation of professional learning communities that can serve as support networks for participants (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Milstein, 1993; Hill, 1995). Barriers to successful participation in and outcomes of cohort-based models in an Extension population are both identifiable and addressable.

KEY BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN EXTENSION LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The following paragraphs discuss three common themes, mentioned in the existing academic literature, that could prevent Extension professionals from successful participation in and behavior change outcomes due to their participation in leadership development programs. We recognize that there are other potential barriers to the success of these programs; however, these specific themes were prevalent in our literature review and resonated with the Extension professionals in the leadership cohorts led by the authors. Therefore, we choose to feature and focus on these particular themes.

Fixed Mindsets

Based in Carol Dweck's research, a growth mindset refers to "people believing that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point." She continues: "this view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment." (2016, p. 7). Those with fixed mindsets see skills as inherent: you have them, or you don't. The contrast between these mindsets makes it clear that participants in leadership programs need to believe that leadership is not an innate trait, but an ability or skill that they can develop over time. By adopting a growth mindset, participants are more likely to embrace leadership competencies and minimize apprehension about a failure to meet their goals (Heslin & Keating, 2017).

When participants apply for leadership programs, organizers can ask questions to understand their mindsets and how they view their potential for learning and behavior change as a result of the program. Leadership development programs should focus on teaching and reinforcing a growth mindset so that participants build proficiency and confidence in applying new skills. If participants can successfully adopt a growth mindset, the organization can create a culture that supports future leaders who believe in continued growth.

Time Constraints

Another barrier for participants in leadership development programs are time constraints and competing commitments (Oberg et al., 2019). On average, American workers spend almost 19 hours per day completing work-related activities, errands, and home-based work tasks (U.S. Department of Labor Bureau Statistics, 2007). This leaves less than 6 hours a day for rest and leisure. Extension employees often find themselves working outside of standard office hours to meet the needs of their target audiences on nights and weekends. Extension employees entering a leadership program can struggle to understand how they can meet the requirements of the program while fulfilling the responsibilities of their roles at work and home.

Organizations can support participants by providing options for backup—other employees or volunteers, for example—who can minimize the participants' workload during their participation in the leadership program. Extension administration can prioritize participant's participation by working with them in advance to plan for conflicting job duties or temporarily decrease their work responsibilities. Leadership programs should address the issue of time by incorporating time management strategies into the program itself. Giving participants the adequate training to self-reflect and prioritize their time is proven to be a successful strategy (Morgan & Bates, 2018).

Job-Related Burnout

Burnout is an increasingly relevant workplace concern (World Health Organization, 2019); the term refers to a depletion of oneself by exhausting one's physical and mental resources (Igodan & Newcomb, 1986). Symptoms of burnout can include exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Russell & Liggans, 2020). In Extension, many employees who love their work can still experience burnout due to the high demands of the job. This is especially true for 4-H and community educators, who are at the greatest risk of displaying burnout symptoms (Russell & Liggans, 2020). Limited funding, layers of reporting systems, and extensive paperwork are just some of the issues faced by Extension professionals. Addressing issues at the local level, managing budgets, engaging stakeholders, and providing continuity between Extension agents and Extension's upper administration can seem like a daily marathon (Jayaratne et al., 2010; Sanders, 2014 as cited in Sowcik et al., 2018). As Ensle (2005) writes, "Agents often are teachers, counselors, information referral agents, and researchers. The agent recognizes the job requires multitasking with government, farmers, homemakers, business and industry, local agencies, schools, and youth organizations."

Extension administration may be able to reduce the rate of burnout by helping educators set realistic expectations and better manage job demands while providing the necessary resources to maintain manageable workloads for the duration of the leadership development program. Examples of relevant strategies include:

- Providing opportunities for educators to work from home if they will be out of town more frequently,
- Offering compressed work schedules, and
- Incentivizing educators to take time off from work to rest and reset.

Additionally, Extension leaders and administrators should consider implementing mindfulness programs, which are shown to help educators reduce stress (Simmons, 2019) and burnout (Virgili, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Extension should nurture systems that foster continued leadership development among their personnel to create sustainable future leadership. Members of leadership cohorts can cultivate relationships that serve them well beyond the completion of the program (Barnett el al., 2000; Hill, 1995; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). These networks allow past participants to build their leadership capacity within the organization through continued learning and providing them with time to share, reflect, and create solutions for the barriers they encountered during their own program.

The conclusions shared here have applications in broader groups, such as community leadership development programs run by Extension. However, we do not feel that it is appropriate to make such a generalized leap based on our research, as we only reviewed literature and data from Extension-based cohorts.

Recognizing that potential barriers—such as fixed mindset, time constraints, and employee burnout—can negatively impact participant engagement allows Extension to utilize research-based suggestions to provide solutions and support success. Strategies such as working with participants to establish a growth mindset, providing tools to manage time, and reducing job demands or realigning duties while a participant is engaged in a leadership program can create pathways for successful behavioral outcomes due to the program. Proactively working to combat common limitations supports participants' full immersion in learning and maximizes the potential for positive behavior change as a result of the program.

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