

Leadership Styles of International Agricultural Extension Agencies

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory research was to discover the dominant styles of leadership international extension agencies use in the development and implementation of effective rural community development programs. Informal semi-structured group interviews were conducted with key leaders and representatives from various international agricultural extension agencies. The focus of the interviews was to determine how leadership is employed in international rural development programs and how it affects program development and implementation. Interview data, observations, and field notes were content analyzed based on raw data and personal interpretation. Results answered the following research questions: 1.) How does leadership affect international agricultural extension and rural community development? 2.) What leadership characteristics or skills are important for extension personnel when working in international rural development programs? 3.) What is the role of community leadership in developing sustainable rural extension programs? Themes regarding agencies' approaches to leadership when working with rural community programs were created and a leadership profile was then developed to describe the styles practiced by agency leaders in their approaches to international extension programming. The two dominant styles of leadership revealed were transformational and servant leadership. According to participants, rural populations and community structures ultimately define how extension must deliver its services. These particular leadership styles have proved successful in developing and implementing sustainable extension programs. Therefore, international extension agencies must continue to seek additional knowledge and training in areas of leadership to serve rural communities effectively in the future.

Keywords: Internationalization, leadership, human empowerment, sustainable projects, rural development

Introduction

Over the years, the word “leadership” has been defined in a number of ways. Wren (1995) describes leadership as a part of the human condition and a process that groups, organizations, and societies use to achieve common goals. Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (1995) define leadership as “the process of influencing an organized group toward accomplishing its goals” (p. 43). Northouse (2004) uses the following definition: “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). These definitions share four common elements: “(a) leadership is a process, (b) leadership involves influence, (c) leadership occurs within a group context, and (d) leadership involves goal attainment” (Northouse, 2004, p. 3).

Leadership cannot be reduced to a generic outline of procedures and outcomes. Scholars have identified numerous leadership approaches such as the trait approach, skills approach, style approach, situational approach, servant leadership, transformational leadership, and team leadership. These leadership approaches or styles can be applied in diverse ways according to the preference of the leader and the needs of the group (Northouse, 2004).

Fehlis (2005) said visionary leaders will influence the future of extension in the type of programs offered and how clientele needs are met. “Leadership is unquestionably the key factor in determining if Extension will be capable of synthesizing future changes in demographics, science, technology, educational models, and human needs, and then developing a very clear and specific vision for our system” (para. 5).

The concept of leadership is evident when studying international extension agencies. These organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, are the leaders in efforts to improve the quality of life for rural residents around the globe. For example, the mission of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) is to lead “international efforts to defeat hunger” (FAO, 2006). The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provides “economic, development and humanitarian assistance around the world in support of the foreign policy goals of the United States” (USAID, 2006). The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) provides national program leadership and federal assistance to advance “knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities” (CSREES, 2006). Other international extension agencies share similar aspects in regard to their vision and mission.

Leadership and rural development

In order for the international extension agencies to achieve their stated missions, they must emphasize the importance of developing community leadership. Extension agencies work to empower rural residents and improve their situations through sharing and working together. For extension programs to remain sustainable, collaborative partnerships must be developed and maintained (Chamala & Shingi, 1997).

Extension agencies utilize multiple methods to transfer knowledge to rural communities. One approach is to cooperate with farmer organizations to link identified needs with practical solutions. The implementation and continued success of farmer organizations relies on the ability to identify and nurture community leaders. Extension has multiple roles to perform in this effort: empowerment, community-organizing, human resource development, and problem solving and education (Chamala & Shingi, 1997). Certainly, these diverse roles all require a focus on leadership ability to make the linkage to farmer organizations effective and provide continued

success. Ignoring the importance of balanced leadership and shared responsibility can damage the future of these farmer organizations (Oerlemans & Assouline, 2004):

A crucial dimension of sustainable development is the governance style. The way farmers' projects and groups are managed or manage themselves is as important as their goal. It determines the involvement of group members in the process and in the decision making. It is part of the social learning process generated by collective dynamics. (p. 477)

In an ethnographic study of an NGO in Senegal, Roberts (2000) found that the leadership skills of NGO staff helped guarantee the success of collaborative programs with rural farmers. "The leadership qualities individual staff members demonstrated in their professional work, whether with village farmers or development specialists, contributed to the formation of the organization's image and reputation as the leader in Senegal for regenerative agriculture" (p. 161).

When leadership is effective, the organization and programs receive positive recognition from key stakeholders. Externally, this can encourage additional financial resources to continue or expand programs. Internally, effective leadership will improve motivation and retention of qualified staff (Roberts, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of this exploratory research was to discover the dominant styles of leadership used by international extension agencies in the development and implementation of effective rural community improvement programs. Specific objectives were: (1) to determine the leadership styles employed by extension agency leaders in global rural communities, and (2) to describe how leadership affects international rural program development and implementation. Focus was placed on recent leadership practices, approaches, and styles that have been utilized in rural development programs. With this knowledge, international extension agencies can then improve rural communities and implement successful approaches to sustainable programs. The three research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does leadership affect international agricultural extension and rural community development?
2. What leadership characteristics or skills are important for extension personnel when working in international rural development programs?
3. What is the role of community leadership in developing sustainable rural extension programs?

Methodology

Researchers traveled to Washington, D.C. for one week to meet with extension agencies and leaders as part of an International Extension graduate course. The agencies included the FAO, Foreign Agricultural Service, CSREES, ACDI/VOCA, USAID, the World Bank, and International Food and Policy Research Institute. Key individuals and program leaders were visited to better understand their educational development and involvement throughout the world as it relates to extension globally. In addition to learning about the extension activities of each organization, the opportunity for students to obtain information relating to structured research topics was arranged.

Prior to the trip, students established research topics to investigate at each agency. The research teams focused on these chosen topics throughout the week at each organizational meeting. Structured research questions were targeted for key representatives and leaders from each international agricultural extension agency. The ability to access these leaders was enhanced by the content and structure of the organized research trip; otherwise, this personal contact would have been difficult.

Qualitative research was chosen because it attempts to make sense of and interpret phenomenon or reality from the participant's perspective (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). This approach was valuable to gain an understanding of participants' feelings, perceptions, and thoughts associated with personal experiences from an insider's viewpoint. Qualitative methodologies, such as naturalistic inquiry and observation, improved the ability to examine and understand the phenomenon in detail using an inductive approach, social interaction, and small samples (Hatch, 2002). All methodologies take a subjective research approach that aims to eliminate researcher bias and focus is placed on understanding and interpreting meaning from the participant's point of view (Crotty, 1998). Common data collection methods include observations, interviews, focus groups, archival data, and case studies (Creswell, 1998). Strengths of these methods are in their abilities to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of human social reality and phenomenon. The holistic context in qualitative research relies on spoken words, behaviors, and actions that occur in natural settings. This is critical to gain a true understanding of people and their perceptions as data is gathered through structured interviews, experiences, and observations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Data collection

Interviews served as the primary data collection method in order to obtain an understanding of agencies' leadership practices and styles. Key to this research was the researchers' abilities to capture data in various environments and served as a critical part of the process to study participants' experiences and situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). At each of the seven international extension agencies, one to four leaders participated in the group interview. The organizational leaders were selected with regards to their direct involvement in international extension programming. Each participant initially presented his or her involvement and experiences with international rural development programs and then answered questions from the researchers.

Informal group interviews were conducted at each agency's office and ranged from one hour to three hours in length. Several topics were discussed during the interview including: leadership; evaluation and monitoring of extension programs; the role of non-governmental organizations and partners of extension; linkages in extension; social, political, environmental, and economic issues of extension systems; funding of extension programs; and issues facing the future of extension. All participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences on the topic of leadership as it directly related to their program responsibilities. Participants were encouraged to discuss their personal experiences and offer suggestions for future improvement.

Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for more freedom in questioning and exploration during the sessions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). This type of interview was chosen because it supported the ability to present initially prepared open-ended questions, but also improvise probing questions based on the participants' responses (Wengraf, 2001). As a result of the group situation, researchers posed significant questions to all participants and listened intently while taking field notes. This overall approach proved

beneficial in acquiring detailed explanations to prepared questions, but also increased the ability to probe for further clarification and thought. The content of the interviews was guided by the following questions:

1. What leadership characteristics do you need in working in international extension?
2. What are the leadership capabilities, skills, and characteristics of local leadership in developing countries?
3. What is the importance of grassroots leadership to international extension program development and implementation?
4. How does leadership (local, state, and national) affect international agricultural and extension education and rural development?
5. Assuming leadership is about relationships, what is done by program leaders to build relationships in local communities?
6. What opportunities are offered for leadership development locally and globally?

Data analysis

During the interview, field notes were taken by the researchers, which included key points, direct quotes, impressions, and observations of each participant. Researchers combined interview data, observations, and field notes to construct the fullest understanding of leadership from the participants' perspectives. All data was triangulated among researchers immediately after the interview in order to increase the trustworthiness and dependability of the collected data (Merriam, 1995). Field notes were content analyzed based on raw data and personal interpretation to discover themes regarding the agencies' approaches to leadership.

Conventional content analysis was the primary data analysis method. This analysis derives coding categories directly from the data that allows for a richer understanding of the information (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Strategies including a data coding process, constant comparisons, and refinement of emerging ideas were applied to form the foundation of the analysis (Charmaz, 2003). Researchers avoided using preconceived categories, but instead allowed the codes to emerge from the field notes. Initial analysis began with open coding of all group interviews using meaning units as separation points. According to Charmaz (2003), "coding helps us gain a new perspective on our material and to focus" (p. 258). The researchers highlighted the codes that were reflective of thoughts from participants. Codes then were sorted into emergent themes based on relations and linkages. Synthesized themes helped to contextualize the data and establish clear concepts which were used as a basis for the leadership profile (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This profile highlighted concepts and leadership styles of international extension agencies' involved in rural community program development.

Results and Conclusions

Researchers delineated key comments from participants at each of the agencies concerning their personal thoughts and perspectives on leadership when working with international rural community development programs. Interpretations of participants' responses collected during the interview sessions were used to answer the research questions.

1. How does leadership affect international agricultural extension and rural community development?

Participants described leadership as building relationships, skill development, capacity building, and human empowerment. Extension agencies must assist rural residents in building partnerships within and beyond their communities. This will encourage local people to engage in and practice leadership skills. In order to make the change sustainable, community leaders must be prepared to assume charge of the program after the agency leaves. Ultimately, extension programs are more effective when power is shifted to local decision makers.

Participants shared the following points about the role of leadership in international agricultural extension and rural community development. These points provide advice on how to utilize leadership to make outreach efforts successful.

- Local partnerships in countries should be established build capacities of local leaders.
- Partnerships can include universities, cooperatives, private farmers, farmers associations, and extension agents of ministry of agriculture.
- Partnerships depend on who the key leaders of influence are in the developing countries.
- Extension programs are more effective when power is shifted (decentralized) to local farmer groups and decision makers.
- Extension staff need to work with local community members to develop relevant programs so they feel involved after Extension leaves.
- It is crucial to get key stakeholders involved in projects for input and to build the communities' capacities.
- Building local leaders helps guarantee ownership and organization of the program after the extension agency leaves.
- Empowerment is central to the mission of many extension programs and local leader involvement helps empower the local people.
- Agencies must make the local leaders feel comfortable and important because their participation is critical for success. Programs are at a loss without them at the table to discuss needs.
- Use local resources to transfer capacity building skills.
- Continuing leadership training is related to the strategic planning process.
- Capacity building training increases resources and technical skills in local leaders.
- Improved capacity in conducting scientific research, promoting collective action, and managing information can help developing countries foster innovations to benefit farmers and leaders and promote sustainable options to reduce hunger and poverty.
- Empower the poor by providing relevant and timely research to give them a voice.

2. What leadership characteristics or skills are important for extension personnel when working in international rural development programs?

Extension personnel must continually build and develop personal relationships with rural communities. They must identify, recruit, and collaborate with local leaders who are representative of and respected by community residents. Building these partnerships requires a concentrated effort to understand community lifestyles and cultures in order to facilitate local participation in the program. Extension personnel must initially take a grassroots approach to planning with a focus on addressing local needs and inspiring communities to take ownership in the program for the future.

Participants shared specific advice to improve leadership characteristics and skills:

- Develop relationships with local leaders, foster partnerships to work together, and build the capacities of local residents.
- Extension programs need to be designed around the needs of the clientele. This may mean forming farmer associations or advisory committees comprised of local opinion leaders.
- Be visionary about projects and inspire clients to help develop that vision and make it a reality.
- Identify key leaders, nurture them, and discuss ideas, interests, needs, roles, and limitations.
- Work with local leaders to identify someone in the ranks to represent them. Make stakeholder groups a part of the program planning process.
- Cooperation with local leaders is critical to identify needs of the community.
- You must not take things for granted when working with leaders and their culture. You must understand their lifestyle and culture to facilitate their participation in the project.
- Use a “Socratic process” to begin learning about the people and practices – offer ideas and lead people to conclusions.
- Become a “culture broker”. Use local resources, contacts, and leaders from within the country who possess language and culture knowledge to gain access and respect and understand communities.
- Extension workers must spend time with local leaders socially, earn their respect, and be honest.

3. What is the role of community leadership in developing sustainable rural extension programs?

Local leader buy-in to extension programming is a crucial part of program sustainability. The involvement of key leaders builds trust and respect for the program. Local leaders are instrumental in carrying out program functions and transferring capacity building skills to community residents. Utilizing local knowledge lends a participatory approach and shows value, through words and actions, for that knowledge. Obtaining stakeholder commitment ultimately influences residents to become active program participants.

Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing and nurturing leadership at the local level.

- The use of local leaders is an important part of the sustainability strategy – field people are instrumental in carrying out organizational functions and transferring capacity building skills.
- It is crucial to get key stakeholders involved in projects to utilize local knowledge.
- Leaders must be representative of communities.
- Key stakeholders must be actively involved in the process – this is essential.
- Local people must learn to build their own future and maintain dignity by gaining marketing and technical skills.
- Engage local communities to learn collegially and work together.
- Identify key leaders and credible leaders with a world view who agree to utilize a participatory approach to programming.

- Establish and build everything on local knowledge and understand and add value to this knowledge.
- Put power in the local hands of the people.
- Characteristics of effective local leaders: ability to communicate, good farmers, willingness and time to participate in project, and respected by the community.

Leadership profile

Through additional analysis of the data, researchers constructed a leadership profile to identify the overarching leadership styles of international agricultural extension agencies (see Table 1). All agencies placed strong emphasis on transformational and servant leadership styles with specific goals of human empowerment and capacity building. Transformational leadership is exhibited when leaders inspire, understand the needs and motives of the followers, and create a clear vision for empowerment (Northouse, 2004). Identified themes related to transformational leadership were: Extension programs need to be designed around the needs of clients; agency leaders must be visionary and inspiring; programs need to help clients maintain dignity and gain technical skills; local leaders must be involved to guarantee program sustainability; and a participatory approach to programming must utilize local knowledge.

The second identified theme of servant leadership is exhibited when leaders value community building, cooperation, trust, and respect and help followers become more knowledgeable and self-reliant (Northouse, 2004). Identified themes of servant leadership included: Extension is more effective when power is decentralized to local groups and decision makers; local leaders must have ownership in the project to garner respect; empowerment and capacity building of leaders are central to the mission of Extension; and leaders must empower the community through building capacities. Through the use of transformational and servant leadership approaches, international agricultural extension agencies work with local leaders and residents to implement programs and create sustainable communities.

Table 1

A Leadership Profile of International Agricultural Extension Agencies

Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership
Needs-based programs	Community building
Visionary	Cooperation
Inspiring	Trust and respect
Gain skills and dignity	Build knowledge
Local leader involvement	Self-reliance
Sustainable projects	Decentralization of power
Participatory approaches	Local buy-in
Utilize local knowledge	Empowerment and capacity building

Educational Importance, Implications, and Application

Leadership is a critical component of effective extension programming, yet remains a deficient research area. Quality leadership not only improves the organization and its personnel, but also directly affects the communities it serves. Effective leadership reflects the reputation of the organization. When leadership is effective, the organization and programs receive positive

recognition from key stakeholders. Externally, this can encourage additional financial resources to continue or expand programs. Internally, effective leadership will improve motivation and retention of qualified staff (Roberts, 2000).

Although developing leadership abilities is often not the main focus of programs, it must be a priority to guarantee that the served rural communities take ownership after the extension agency leaves. Leadership must be intertwined into all phases of programs and become a critical aspect of extension and agricultural development. In order to effectively empower clientele, extension staff should receive training in leadership development, conflict resolution, and group dynamics (Sulaiman & van de Ban, 2003). The extension staff should then transfer the knowledge and skills learned to rural communities and ensure leadership is practiced successfully.

Halim and Ali (1997) recommend that leadership ability should be discussed in the foundation training portion of in-service for extension agents. In addition to instruction about governmental rules and regulations, communication skills, and administrative capability, leadership training helps improve the agents' ability to be successful in their service career. Professional development opportunities should also encourage transformational and servant approaches to leadership. Using the themes identified in the leadership profile, specific courses and workshops could be created such as organizational communication, leadership foundations, group dynamics, grassroots programming, and capacity building and empowerment of communities. This training would not only benefit agents, but also extension students and lay professionals.

Extension agencies must make leadership a priority in programming. When working in global rural communities, emphasis needs to be placed on human capacity building and empowerment of those being served to ensure sustainable projects. There is a need to further investigate agencies' effectiveness to improve programs through the use of these leadership approaches.

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