Community Voices—A Leadership Program Making a Difference in Rural Underserved Counties in North Carolina

Jane T. Walker
Associate Professor
walkerj@ncat.edu

Benjamin Gray
Assistant Professor
grayb@ncat.edu

North Carolina A&T State University
Greensboro, North Carolina

Abstract: Leadership is critically important to rural communities. The study reported here compared the leadership practices of leaders who are graduates of Community Voices Leadership Development for Community Decision Making (CV), a leadership program, to leaders who did not participate in the program. A telephone survey, which included questions from a modified version of the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 1993), was used to collect the data. The study provides evidence that the CV program implemented in rural underserved counties in North Carolina is making a difference in the practices of rural leaders who have undergone the training.

Introduction

Rural communities rely on Cooperative Extension to provide information and training that will enhance the quality of life for individuals and communities. Efforts to enhance the leadership capacity for development of rural communities are especially important to the viability of limited resource rural communities. These communities often have barriers to formal, traditional leadership development because they may lack the mechanisms most commonly used to provide training in leadership, such as advanced education followed by mentoring and training through business and public service organizations. However, Cooperative Extension has sought to level the playing field in many rural communities by providing the training necessary for leadership development and community involvement, and at the national level, has emphasized the importance of such training.

In an effort to address the deficits in leadership in rural underserved areas and to foster leadership development and community decision making that may enhance opportunities for community development, the Community Voices Leadership Development Program (CV) was developed by the Cooperative Extension Program at North Carolina A & T State University and other collaborators with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (Cooperative Extension Program North Carolina A&T State University, 1993). In North

Carolina, this program has been implemented in 12 rural counties (Warren, Halifax, Nash, Edgecombe, Columbus, Brunswick, Bertie, Beauford, Washington, Tyrell, Chatham, and Harnett). The goal of the CV program is to increase the number of leaders in various rural, limited resource areas, including North Carolina, and to increase the leadership skills of those leaders to the extent that they become involved in community decision-making. Although the program has been ongoing since 1993, a follow-up study of recent graduates has not been reported.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

In response to the need for a follow-up study of CV graduates, the primary purpose of the research reported here was to compare graduates of the CV program to leaders within rural communities who had not gone through the CV training. The specific objective of the study was to assess the leadership behaviors of the CV graduates and non-CV graduates to determine whether a significant difference existed between the leadership practices of these two groups of leaders.

Review of Literature

Community leadership development programs have been implemented in many parts of the United States. Many programs were implemented in the 1980s and 1990s and continue to be offered to community leaders, while others have been developed and implemented more recently. Leadership programs are built on the assumption that leadership development is closely linked to personal development (McCauley, Moxley, & Van Velsor, 1998) and that leadership development can be enhanced though formal and informal training (Bolton, 1991). Many community leadership development programs, initially funded through the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, have demonstrated increased involvement of graduates in organizations; increased personal skills, such as problem solving or fact gathering; and increased feelings of self worth for program participants. Educational institutions that were the recipients of the funding have expanded programs in leadership and other programming that relate to community development (Earnest, Ellsworth, Nieto, McCaslin, & Lackman, 1995).

The underlying goal of many community leadership programs is to increase the leadership skills of community citizens such that those citizens are better equipped to address issues and concerns within their communities. Examples of such programs are:

- The Kellogg Colorado Rural Revitalization Project (Kincaid & Knop, 1992);

- Community Leadership: A County Perspective (Langone & Rohs, 1992) that was developed and implemented by the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service with help from many local organizations;

- The University/Community Team Leadership Program (Seeley, 1981) developed and implemented by the University of Akron;

- The Montana Cooperative Extension Service leadership training program (Williams, 1981);

- Project Excel, a community leadership development project developed by Ohio State University

Cooperative Extension (Earnest et al., 1995);

- The Cooperative Extension and Continuing Education Program at Tuskegee University (Tackie, Findley, Baharanyi, & Pierce, 2004);

- The Family and Community Leadership Program developed by Oregon State University Extension (Schauber & Kirk, 2001); and

- Community Voices, developed by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Program with collaborators (Callaway, North Carolina A&T State University Cooperative Extension Program, personnel communication, August, 2004).

Although the underlying goal of many of the leadership programs is leadership development, follow-up studies report broad benefits rather than specific changes in leadership practices or behaviors of participants.

Generally, many leadership studies revealed three broad benefits of the programs including personal benefits (Grimshaw, 1982; Kimball, Andrews, & Quiroz, 1987; Langone & Rohs, 1992), benefits to the community (Kincaid & Knop, 1992; Langone & Rohs, 1992), and organizational benefits (Kincaid & Knop, 1992; Langone & Rohs, 1992). Similar results were found by Walker and Gray (2007) in their study of Community Voices.

Earnest et al. (1995) examined leadership practices and found that participants in Project Excel increased their leadership practices/behaviors as a result of participation in the project. Moreover, follow-up interviews of participants provided evidence that the leadership program had resulted in improved leadership practices in the form of greater willingness to take risks, greater awareness of the community, increased collaboration, improved networking, and greater communication skills.

Methods

The descriptive exploratory study reported here involved two different groups of leaders in North Carolina, graduates of the Community Voices (CV) program and non-graduates of the program. The survey instrument developed to collect the data contained a Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) that was modified from the original LPI developed by Kouzes and Posner (1993). The LPI was chosen because the five overarching leadership behaviors fit well with the type of leadership needed in rural communities, it is a widely recognized and used instrument, and it is succinct and easy to administer.

To determine whether the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) originally developed by Kouzes and Posner (1993) reflected leadership behaviors of rural community leaders, focus groups were conducted in the CV program counties of Tyrell and Harnett. The researchers determined that the LPI would reflect the experiences of rural community leaders better if questions were modified. After obtaining permission from the original developers of the LPI, the focus group data were used to inform changes in the LPI resulting in a modified version of the LPI.

The modified LPI was evaluated by two focus groups of community leaders and pilot tested with a group of rural leaders. Both the modified and original LPI have five subscales, each containing 6 items for a total of 30 variables. Each of the inventory questions represented one of the following five subscales of the modified LPI: (1) Challenging the Process, (2) Encouraging the Heart, (3) Enabling Others to Act, (4) Inspiring a

Shared Vision, and (5) Modeling the Way

A telephone survey instrument that included the modified LPI questions and additional questions was developed. This instrument was administered to rural leaders in the 12-county study area via telephone interviews conducted over a 3-month period in early summer of 2007. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. Rural leaders were identified by Cooperative Extension personnel in the 12-county study area. In total, 117 eligible persons were identified as leaders. Sixty-three were participants of the CV program, and 54 were non-CV graduates. A total of 70 people participated in the study. Of this total, 39 respondents were graduates of the CV program (55.7%), while 31 respondents had not participated in the CV program (44.3%). Therefore, the overall response rate was 60%.

Results and Findings

The results and findings of the study were produced from the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for Windows 11.5. The focus group interviews were analyzed using Text Analysis 2.0, a qualitative software computer program by SPSS.

Of the 70 leaders who were interviewed for the study, 75% were non-white, compared to 25% who were white. Nearly 59% of the respondents were female, and 41% were male. The average age of the respondents ranged from 46 to 55 years of age. At least 80% of the respondents had a high school education, were married, and had a total family income over $20,000 per year.

T-tests were used to compare the means between Community Voices (CV) graduates and non-CV graduates to determine whether the differences were significant. The results and findings of the T-tests for each of these two groups are discussed in relationship to the five sub-scales in Tables 1-5. The respondents were asked to evaluate themselves using a five-point scale, where 1=never and 5=always.

Challenging the Process

This subscale assessed the extent to which leaders challenge people to think creatively and to examine alternative ways of doing things. Selected items were used to describe various aspects of leaders "challenging the process." Table 1 shows that the CV graduates were significantly more likely to provide opportunities for people to try new ways of doing things and to seek ways to test their skills and abilities.

Table 1.
Challenging the Process

Question	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig (2-tail)
Reward people for their good work.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.23 1.51	0.425 1.889	0.108
Rarely try new ways of doing things.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.29 1.59	0.529 1.093	0.166
Look for ways to improve what we do				0.444

	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig(2-tail)
	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.39 1.55	1.060 1.551	
Ask what was learned from this experience	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.39 3.38	0.558 .782	0.989
Test my skills and abilities	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.35 1.87	0.723 1.572	0.018**
Provide opportunities to try new ways of doing things	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.03 3.51	0.558 .721	0.007*
* = p<.01, ** = p<.05, *** = p<.10				

Encouraging the Heart

This subscale assessed the extent to which leaders provide encouragement and recognize the compassionate side of leadership. Selected items were used to describe various aspects of leaders "encouraging the heart." Table 2 shows that the CV graduates were significantly more likely to reward people for their good work, give people credit for their accomplishments, and give team members appreciation and support.

Table 2.
Encouraging the Heart

Question	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig(2-tail)
Reward people for their good work.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.29 3.72	0.588 0.51	0.002*
Tell people that I believe in their abilities.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.48 1.55	0.890 1.65	0.787
Praise people for a job well done.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	2.71 2.73	0.506 1.999	0.951
Give people credit for their accomplishments	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.42 3.89	0.624 .873	0.000*
Recognize the commitment of people	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	2.55 2.58	1.032 2.299	0.918

Give team members appreciation and support	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.29 3.82	1.186 .389	0.000*
* = p<.01, ** = p<.05, *** = p<.10				

Enabling Others to Act

This subscale assesses whether leaders of the community help others to work effectively and to have a better understanding of the decision making process. Table 3 shows that CV graduates were significantly more likely to find ways for people to work well together, to help people grow and learn from their community work, and to treat people with dignity and respect.

Table 3.
Enabling Others to Act

Question	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig (2-tail)
Accept other people's ideas.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.26 1.36	0.514 1.013	0.615
Tell people how to do their community work	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.87 1.54	0.670 0.790	0.066***
Support other people's decisions that I disagree with.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.71 1.75	0.755 2.117	0.818
Find ways for people to work well together	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.03 3.66	1.080 1.005	0.000*
Treat people with dignity and respect	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.84 3.97	1.160 .821	0.049**
Help people grow and learn from their community work	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.32 3.84	0.735 .903	0.000*
* = p<.01, ** = p<.05, *** = p<.10				

Inspiring a Shared Vision

This subscale addresses the idea that a group arrives at a vision together for the future of their community. Table 4 shows that CV graduates were significantly more likely to include as many opinions as possible in

the communities' vision for the future, to encourage others to be open minded about the future for their community, and to use past experiences to create a better vision for the future of their communities.

Table 4.
Inspiring a Shared Vision

Question	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig(2-tail)
Describe a view of the future that people agree with.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	2.87 2.82	0.763 .721	0.778
Include as many opinions as possible in the community's vision	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.16 3.64	0.638 .668	0.003*
Believe the community work is worthwhile.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.65 3.82	0.608 .451	0.171
Excited about the future for our community	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.52 1.58	0.626 1.404	0.721
Encourage others to be open-minded about the future	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.13 3.76	0.657 1.046	0.000*
Use past experiences to create a better vision of the future.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.45 2.76	1.154 1.911	0.000*
* = p<.01, ** = p<.05, *** = p<.10				

Modeling the Way

This subscale addresses whether leaders model actions and behaviors such as good communication skills or creating an atmosphere where creative ideas can be exchanged. Table 5 shows that CV graduates were significantly more likely to make progress towards goals one step at a time, to clearly state their views of leadership, and to work with others to achieve what the community needs.

Table 5.
Modeling the Way

Question	Group	Mean	Std. Dev	Sig(2-tail)
				0.044**

Work with others to achieve what our community needs.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.48 3.77	0.626 .536	
Set community group goals.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	3.23 3.54	0.762 .756	0.091***
Do what I say I will do.	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.52 1.28	0.570 .510	0.060***
Lead by example	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	1.48 1.38	0.950 .847	0.578
State my view of leadership	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	2.87 3.31	0.643 .863	0.034**
Make progress towards goals one step at a time	Non-CV Grad CV Grad	2.94 3.62	0.638 .590	0.000*
* = p<.01, ** = p<.05, *** = p<.10				

Conclusions

The primary purpose of the research reported here was to compare graduates of the Community Voices (CV) Program to leaders within rural communities who had not gone through the CV training. The results of the survey revealed that the Community Voices Program (CV) had a significant impact on the behaviors or practices of CV graduates. CV graduates were more likely to challenge the process by providing new ways of doing things and seeking challenges. They were more likely to encourage others by finding ways of rewarding people for doing good work, looking for ways to provide credit for what is accomplished, and routinely giving team members appreciation and support. CV graduates, as compared to other leaders, were significantly more likely to inspire a shared vision by finding ways for people to work well together, helping people grow and learn from their community work, and treating people with dignity and respect. Likewise, CV graduates were more likely to seek a shared vision for their community by including as many opinions as possible in the communities' vision for the future, encouraging others to be open-minded about the future for their community, and using past experiences to create a better vision for the future of their communities. CV graduates served as role models for people in the community by demonstrating how to make progress towards goals one step at a time, clearly stating their views of leadership, and working with others to achieve what the community needs.

This question remains, however: did the positive change in the leaders' behavior lead to improved communities? Although this was not the focus of the study, it is a question that could be answered by future research because the ultimate goal of leadership training is to positively affect the communities in which the leaders live.

Focus group interviews provided insight into the themes and language of community leadership. The five subscales making up the original LPI were confirmed through discussions with community leaders.

Although the underlying goal of many leadership programs is leadership development, previous follow-up studies have reported broad benefits rather than specific changes in leadership practices or behaviors of participants. The study reported here provides evidence that the CV program implemented in rural underserved counties in North Carolina is making a difference in the practices of rural leaders who have undergone the training. Moreover, the results of the study indicate that the CV program is effective at producing leaders with behaviors that are highly desirable.

Recommendations

Leadership effectiveness is important to the success of many types of organizations. As a result, various leadership programs exist in areas such as industry and education to train participants in best practices. However, what are lacking are specific measurements that can accurately measure the extent to which leaders use best practices. The LPI was modified because no instrument could be found that measured the types of variables associated with rural community leadership practices. This scale can be used by various community organizations to evaluate leadership behaviors.

The Community Voices (CV) program and other leadership development programs assist communities interested in rural development and community leadership. Using the modified LPI can help program participants understand, improve, and evaluate their behaviors and practices while providing Extension with data about the behaviors of leaders participating in leadership programs. As organizations such as Extension must demonstrate the impact of their programming, instruments such as the modified LPI can provide data to evaluate the usefulness and relevance of leadership programming.

For example, different leadership practices are addressed in the CV program; however, based on the study reported here, more emphasis should be placed on some practices, such as modeling leadership behaviors and challenging the process. Incorporating specific information about practices that foster leadership growth for participants would make leaders more aware of behaviors that build their personal capacity and the capacity of the communities in which they work. Also, application of those behaviors both during the leadership training and on projects that coincide with the training would serve as reinforcement for using proven leadership practices. Leadership training is only as effective as the extent to which participants implement the training principles and positively impact the organizations they serve.

Additionally, the modified LPI can be used as a tool to identify potential leaders who can further develop their leadership abilities by focusing on best practices as measured by this instrument. The tool can be used also by experienced and future leaders to assess their performance and use the results to enhance behavior. The development of leaders in rural communities will more likely ensure that the goals of these communities will be identified and accomplished.

Employing the modified LPI as pre- and post-tests, or as retrospective post-tests, would enable community leaders to understand areas of strength and weakness as well as areas in which they are improving. The modified LPI can be used in either way to provide feedback. However, the modified LPI is not in its final form. The researchers are currently testing and revising the modified LPI in order to make it a more psychometrically sound instrument. Use of sound assessment instruments can improve leadership development programming as a whole.

Finally, participants of the study voiced a desire for more in-depth study of leadership. A broader survey of the needs of rural leaders could help determine both the specific needs of selected communities and the overarching needs for leadership training in rural areas.

References

Bolton, E. B. (1991). Developing local leaders: Results of a structured learning experience. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 21(1), 119-143.

Community Voices Leadership Development for Community Decision-Making. (1993). North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro, NC.

Earnest, G. W., Ellsworth, D., Nieto, R. D., McCaslin, N. L., & Lackman, L. (1993-1995). Developing community leaders: An impact assessment of Ohio's community leadership program. Ohio State University Extension. EDRS MF01/PC03.

Grimshaw, W. F. (1982, December). Grassroots leadership training: A case study of a model in action. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Community Education Association, Atlanta, GA.

Kimball, W., Andrews, M., & Quiroz, C. (1987). Impacts on the participants of five expanding horizons leadership development programs in Michigan. Lansing: Michigan State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Kincaid, J. M., Jr., & Knop, E. C. (1992). Insights and implications from the Colorado rural revitalization project, 1988-1991: A final evaluation report. Colorado State Department of Local Affairs, Denver; Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Center for Rural Assistance; Colorado University, Denver; Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Michigan.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1993). Psychometric properties of the leadership practices inventory—updated. *Educational and Psychological Measurement,* 53, 191-199.

Langone, C. A., & Rohs, F. R. (1992). Community leadership a force for future change: An impact assessment of Georgia's community leadership a county perspective program. Athens: University of Georgia, Cooperative Extension Service.

McCauley, C., Moxley, R., & VanVelsor, E. (1998). *The center for creative leadership handbook of leadership development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers.

Seeley, J. A. (1981). Development of a model network of university/community team leadership final report. Akron, OH: Akron University.

Schauber, A.C. & Kirk, A. R. (2001). Impact of a community leadership program on the volunteer leader. *Journal of Extension*, [On-line] 39(3) Article 3RIB2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2001june/rb2.php

Tackie, N.O., Findley, H. J., Barharanyi, N., & Pierce, A. (2004). Leadership training for transforming the community: A participatory approach. *Journal of Extension*, [On-line] 42(6) Article 6RIB3. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2004december/rb3.php

Walker, J., & Gray, B. (2007). Developing and testing a rural practice leadership inventory. Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education. 23rd Annual Conference, Polson, MT, May 20-24.

Williams, A. S. (1981). Training rural citizens: An evaluation of a leadership training program. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 12(1), 63-82.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact *JOE* Technical Support.