An Examination of the Impact of Organizational Restructuring on Identification Within Extension

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Abstract: Many Extension organizations enjoy strong Organizational Identification (OI) among personnel. But organizational change may negatively influence identification, and many Extension organizations have been changing the way they serve their publics. To examine the impact of change on OI, we compared Extension personnel's OI scores following a major restructuring to OI scores gathered during a period of relative stability reported in previous research from another Extension organization. Findings indicated that OI scores were slightly lower following restructuring; however, the pattern of scores across four targets (Extension, program area, counties, and centers) remained constant, suggesting personnel will rarely identify with mid-level targets.

The contribution of Extension to the future of our nation was acknowledged in the Kellogg Commission's reports on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities (National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2001).

> The traditional mainstays of Extension on our campuses, agriculture and food, need to be renewed. In the most important way imaginable, our universities need to return to their roots in rural America with new energy for today's new problems. Despite the nation's massive investment in health care, an enormous agenda remains before us. It need hardly be said that we need a new emphasis on urban revitalization and community renewal comparable in its own way to our rural development efforts in the last century. We need to pay attention to the new challenges facing children, youth, and families in the United States. Finally, we need to redouble our efforts to improve and conserve our environment and natural resources (p. 14).

Despite recognition of the important role to be played by Extension, over the last few years Extension organizations across the country have faced serious challenges ranging from budget reductions to a growing

number of alternative sources of similar information to which our audiences may turn for help. These challenges increase the pressures to find new ways to deliver high quality, cutting-edge programming in more cost-effective ways.

More and more frequently, Extension organizations are addressing these pressing needs by combining offices, establishing regional program delivery systems, and/or moving to team/center groupings of individuals (e.g., LeHolm & Vlasin, 2006; Rewarts, 1996).

Such changes certainly expand Extension's ability to provide solutions to a wide range of complex problems while reducing costs and maintaining quality. Changes in organizational structure, however, may trigger stress and role conflict that can undermine an organization's effectiveness. This article discusses the impact of restructuring on personnel's sense of identification within the Extension organization.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification refers to employees' sense of belonging within an organization and the extent to which personnel have internalized the organization's mission and values (Chaney, 1985; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Organizational identification has been associated with positive outcomes for individuals and organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Chaney, 1983b; Cohen, 1993; Mael & Ashforth, 1992, Tett & Meyer, 1993). When personnel identify with their organization, they experience a sense of self worth as members of their organization. Personnel tend to act in the organization's best interest, make decisions that are consistent with the organization's mission, and trust that the organization shares and supports their values (Simon, 1976; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

But organizational change has been found to negatively influence identification with the organization. Morgan, Reynolds, Nelson, Johanningmeier, Griffin and Andrade (2004) argued that as organizations decentralize, there will be pressure on employees to develop identifications with local offices, teams, or projects to the exclusion of more centralized operations. Change can cause uneasiness or even dissention among personnel (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), particularly if personnel feel new ideologies have replaced the mission they originally supported (Bullis & Bach, 1998; Scott, Corman, & Chaney, 1998).

In fact, some changes can result in personnel "disidentifying" with their organizations (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). Sometimes employees hang on to the old identities in the face of philosophical change (Russo, 1998) as their self-concepts lag behind the reality of their situations (Larkey & Morrill, 1995). Poor identification is also associated with lower loyalty and commitment, and may even begin to work against the success of the organization (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

Extension's greatest asset now and always has been its personnel. Particularly during these challenging times, Extension needs its most experienced personnel to develop creative ways to address current challenges. Yet findings from the organizational identification literature suggest that the evolutionary changes that are necessary to support Extension's ability to grow and thrive may also negatively affect personnel's identification with Extension, which can result in destructive outcomes for the organization.

Extension and Organizational Identification

Previous studies indicate that Extension and similarly grounded agribusinesses enjoy strong employee loyalty, commitment, and identification (Morgan et al., 2004; Scott, 1997; Scott et al., 1998). Unlike centralized organizations, however, Extension is a complex and geographically disperse organization that

includes multiple targets with which employees may identify (Scott, 1997). For example, personnel may identify with the overall organization, as well as with their own "local" offices, area offices/centers, and/or with specific professions/program areas. To the extent that personnel's multiple identifications are mutually supporting, positive outcomes for personnel and the organization are greater. When identifications with multiple targets are in conflict, personnel may experience role strain and conflicted loyalties, and organizations may experience reductions in productivity, absenteeism, employee turnover, and even sabotage (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Riketta, 2002; Van Dick, 2004).

In an earlier study of Colorado Cooperative Extension, Scott (1997) reported personnel at all levels of the organization (state, area program offices, and county) enjoyed strong identification with the Extension organization as well as with counties and area program offices. Identification was strongest for the level of the organization in which the employee was located. Scott also found strong identification with personnel's program areas.

Identification was not affected by geographic region (urban or rural), although identification was generally stronger for employees with longer tenure. Stronger identification among personnel with a longer employment history was expected for two reasons. Personnel whose values are not supported by their employing organization typically move on to new positions, and/or implicit pressures toward conformity tend to move personnel toward assimilation (Chaney, 1985). Overall, the pattern of findings indicated fairly consistent and mutually supportive identification across all levels of the organization (state, area, county) regardless of geographic region served (urban or rural) or professional program area. The one area of potential identification conflict was with the area offices, which were the least identified with level within the organization.

An important point about Scott's (1997) findings should be noted. The study of Colorado Cooperative Extension was conducted during a period of stability. At the time Scott conducted his research, Colorado Cooperative Extension had last experienced major structural changes 20 years earlier, when area offices were developed, and had last experienced layoffs 10 years earlier, at which time a number of positions for home economics agents had been eliminated. Scott suggested that future research attempt to discover whether a similar pattern of organizational identification with multiple targets would be found in organizations in which "job security is more of an issue and where new identification targets have only recently emerged" (p. 515).

To replicate and expand the findings Scott (1997) reported, we studied organization identification in an Extension organization in which major restructuring had recently occurred. Studying this organization will allow us to compare our findings to those reported by Scott and answer the following questions.

Research Question 1: Is organizational identification lower during periods of organizational restructuring?

Research Question 2: Is the pattern of organizational identification with multiple targets different in a different Extension organization?

Methods

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, an invitation to participate in the study was sent to all Ohio State University Extension (OSU Extension) personnel via the All-Extension listserve. A preliminary email invited all personnel to take part in the study, explained the procedures to be followed, explained participants' rights, and invited questions to be addressed to the principle investigators. Several days later, a second email was sent containing the URL for the survey. Two reminders were sent to potential participants who had not completed the survey over the next 3 weeks.

Sample

By inviting every member of the population to participate in the study, the need to select a random sample was avoided. The purpose of a random sample is to approximate the views or characteristics of the population in survey findings. Random sampling is used when it is impossible or impractical to survey the population. By inviting all personnel to participate, every member of the population had the ability to directly influence survey findings. This also ensures that subgroups that may or may not be likely to respond or that are or are not favorably disposed to the construct being studied will be appropriately represented. Consistent with expectations, as seen in the description below, respondents represented all regions of the state, all program areas, varying years of service within OSU Extension, and a wide range of positions.

Nearly 300 individuals (n = 281) completed the questionnaire (overall response rate of 27.4%), including 151 county educators, 13 specialists at centers, 11 state specialists, and 14 administrators. Due to error, several possible position labels were omitted from the survey, and 73 respondents did not answer this question. All program areas were represented (ANR = 75, FCS = 67, CD = 15, 4-H = 71, and Other = 37), as were all regions (West = 78, North Central = 95, South East = 71), and 37 people did not answer this question). The average number of years of service with OSU Extension was 13.43 (*sd* = 8.74).

Questionnaire

Organizational identification was measured using selected items from Chaney's (1982) Organization Identification Questionnaire, adapted for use for the study of Colorado Cooperative Extension (Scott, 1997; also see Barker & Tompkins, 1994). Additional instruments not discussed here were included in the questionnaires. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the four targets of identification were comparable with those reported in Scott's study (= .76 for Extension, = .90 for center/area offices, = .80 for county offices, and = .73 for program area). Cronbach's alpha is the standard indicator of scale reliability that is typically used in social science research. It indicates whether or not items within a scale consistently assess the intended construct (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

We asked respondents to rate their views on the Organizational Identification Questionnaire using a seven-point Likert-type scale. We selected a seven-point scale to create the greatest opportunity for response variability as well as to maintain scale consistency across all instruments included in our survey. In his 1997 study of Colorado Extension, Scott employed a five-point Likert-type scale to assess organizational identification. In our findings, we will report both the mean score on a seven-point scale (unadjusted mean) and an adjusted mean score that resulted from converting the mean scores to scores consistent with a five-point scale.

Research Design

Our goals for the study were replication and expansion of Scott's (1997) findings. To do that, we used the same basic research design and the same questionnaire to assess organizational identification for the same four targets that Scott studied, with the major difference across the two studies being that Scott's assessment was made during a period of stability and ours was made during a period of change.

For the purposes of the study, the research design developed would allow us to examine organizational identification across two Extension organizations without compromising either internal validity or construct validity. First, an experimental design would compromise internal validity because it would create an unrealistic environment in which to examine organizational identification. In a true experiment comparing Colorado Extension with OSU Extension, subjects (employees) would have to be randomly assigned to Extension organizations in either Ohio or Colorado, and the Extension organizations themselves would have

to be randomly assigned to conditions of either stability or change. Second, not only would those experimental controls be impossible, they would compromise construct validity. Random assignment to Extension organizations would reduce or even prevent personnel from developing a sense of identification with their Extension organizations, thereby undermining the validity of the construct (organizational identification) that we are studying.

Findings

Our first research question asked whether organizational identification would be reduced during a time of restructuring. Comparing the adjusted scores from our study with the scores reported in Scott's (1997) study, we found that OSE Extension's scores were consistently lower than Colorado Extension's scores, with only one exception. That is, county educators', center specialists,' and state specialists' organizational identification scores were lower for county offices, centers/area offices, Extension, and program area than those for Colorado Extension, with state specialists' organizational identification with county offices being higher for OSU than Colorado Extension.

Because previous studies indicated that change may reduce personnel's organizational identification, this pattern of findings probably indicates there was a small reduction in identification caused by the restructuring. Nonetheless, identification scores overall were still above the scale median, and other than the scores for organizational identification with centers, were well above median.

Our second research question asked whether the pattern of organizational identification with multiple targets would be different in a different Extension organization. Our pattern of findings was quite similar to Scott's (1997) and suggests that the pattern of identification across multiple targets may be attributable to the structure itself, rather than the characteristics of the target for identification. For example, like Colorado Extension, strong organizational identification was seen among all OSU Extension personnel positions for local offices and program areas, with the lowest organizational identification scores being seen for centers (the equivalent of area program offices).

Three of five scores for organizational identification with centers were significantly lower than scores for any other target within the Extension structure. Moreover, as Table 1 indicates, the unadjusted mean scores (which reflect responses based on a seven point scale) ranged from a high of 5.93 (adjusted mean = 5.05) for organizational identification with county offices among personnel other than educators and administrators to a low of 3.62 (adjusted mean = 2.58) for organizational identification with centers among county educators.

Table 1.
Mean Scores for Organizational Identification Scales for Employees in Various Positions

	Personnel Positions:	County Educators	Center Specialists	State Specialists	Admini-strators	Other
Identification with County Offices	OSU unadjusted mean (7-pt)	5.64	5.72	5.66	5.73	5.93
		4.02	4.09	4.04	4.09	4.24
	OSU adjusted mean (5-pt)	4.34	4.40	3.87		

	Colorado mean (5-pt)					
Identification with Centers	OSU unadjusted mean (7-pt)	3.62	4.71*	4.08	4.71*	5.05*
	OSU adjusted mean (5-pt)	2.58	3.36	2.91	3.36	3.61
	Colorado mean (5-pt)	3.87	4.26	4.06		
Identification with Extension	OSU unadjusted mean (7-pt)	5.43	5.39	5.17	5.51	5.44
	OSU adjusted mean (5-pt)	3.88	3.85	3.69	3.94	3.89
	Colorado mean (5-pt)	4.19	4.23	4.06		
Identification with Program Area	OSU unadjusted mean (7-pt)	5.49	5.68	5.20	5.23	5.34
	OSU adjusted mean (5-pt)	3.92	4.06	3.71	3.71	3.81
	Colorado mean (5-pt)	4.23	4.13	4.20		

7 point scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree, 5 point scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree, * Significantly lower than other positions at $p < .05$

Conclusions

Our findings suggest that Extension is an organization with which employees strongly identify, even during periods of restructuring. This finding is reminiscent of previous studies of Extension organizations and other agribusinesses that documented the pride and value employees feel for their organizations and their interrelationships with the traditions and familial standards the organizations represent (Morgan et al., 2004; Scott, 1997; Scott et al., 1998).

The slightly lower overall scores for organizational identification in the study reported here may indicate that identification is negatively affected by the challenges that occur during the adjustment period to restructuring. This finding is consistent with the large number of studies that documented the potential for negative outcomes in organizational identification to result during times of change (Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Bullis & Bach, 1998; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Larkey & Morrill, 1995; Morgan et al., 2004; Russo, 1998; Scott et al., 1998).

It is important to note that although scores for organizational identification were lower than those reported for Colorado Extension during a time of organizational stability, scores were still quite high overall. This may reflect a unique consistency in values and expectations that Extension organizations and their personnel enjoy. As previously noted, Extension and other agribusinesses tend to enjoy strong organizational identification among their employees (Morgan et al., 2004; Scott, 1997; Scott et al., 1998).

Alternatively, it may be that because Extension has always been decentralized and geographically dispersed, restructuring does not create the "push away from identification with the centralized office" that Morgan et al. (2004) predicted would occur. Yet a third explanation for the generally strong identification scores is that, particularly in Extension organizations, multiple factors may operate to sustain identification. For example, the degree of identification with the organization prior to changes, sense of continuity during and after the change, expected utility of the change, communication climate before the change, and communication about change have all been found to reduce the impact of organizational change on identification with organizations (Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, & Pruyn, 2006; van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006). The possibility must be acknowledged, however, that relatively high organizational identification scores were found even during a period of change because only those personnel who strongly identify with Extension completed the survey.

Finally, an intriguing finding surfaced in the study. In both the study of Colorado Extension and OSU Extension, the lowest identification scores were found for centers/area offices. This pattern suggests that lower identification with mid-level targets within the organization may be a function of the structure itself, unrelated to the nature or qualities of the centers/area offices. Of course it may be that characteristics of centers/area offices, in addition to or perhaps independent of organizational structure, influence personnel's identification with them. But because the same pattern of organizational identification across positions was found in two Extension organizations, we know it is likely that the structure itself plays a role in how personnel relate to mid-level organizational structures. Every employee has a vested interest in identifying with the overall organization as well as with his or her program area and local office. The benefits of identification with a mid-level target, however, may be overridden by costs in time and energy.

Implications

As findings from the Kellogg Commission's reports on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities indicated, Extension organizations are more relevant to our nation's future than ever before (National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 2001). Yet Extension organizations are facing new challenges and pressures to deliver high-quality, cutting-edge programming in more cost-effective ways. As a response to these challenges, many Extension organizations have addressed these needs by combining offices, establishing regional program delivery systems, and/or moving to team/center groupings of individuals.

Findings from previous studies of organizational identification raised the concern that such changes in Extension organizations' traditional structure might reduce personnel's strong identification with Extension that was documented in past research. Although identification scores were lower for Ohio State University Extension during a time of restructuring than they were for Colorado Extension during a time of stability,

scores were still high.

Thus, our findings suggest that the organizational identification Extension personnel experience is robust, even during periods of organizational change. In fact, it may be that Extension planning teams and administrators can moderate even in the minor decreases in organizational identification during times of change if they are sensitive to the particular stresses restructuring creates. In particular, by maintaining strong lines of communication and stressing the continuity in mission, values, and vision across all levels of the organization, reductions in organizational identification may be minimized (Bartels, Douwes, de Jong, & Pruyn, 2006; van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006).

It should also be noted that in both studies, lower identification scores were found for mid-level targets of organizational identification in Extension (area offices in Colorado Extension and centers in OSU Extension). This may indicate that some structural changes in Extension organizations will be more and less successful than others. Planning teams and administrators may benefit from knowing that personnel might be slower to accept offices and groupings at mid-levels of the organizations, which can slow or even undermine the positive impacts restructuring solutions are designed to create.

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