



April 2010
Volume 48 Number 2
Article Number 2IAW1

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Stewardship as a Means to Create Organizational Reform: A View into Minnesota 4-H Youth Development

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Abstract: Minnesota 4-H Youth Development (MN 4-H) used stewardship as a means to create organizational reform to address the public use of the 4-H name and emblem in terms of risk management, real estate and equipment, and finances. A task force implemented a participatory process with colleagues and stakeholders to build and implement the reform effort. In result, MN 4-H strengthened its public value by identifying and creating policies and practices to better steward its resources. The operating principles identified in this article will guide future stewardship agendas in Minnesota and may be replicated by other states interested in similar improvements.

Introduction

Minnesota 4-H Youth Development (MN 4-H) used an organizational construct labeled "stewardship" as a means to reform systematic policies and practices that govern major parts of the organization. In 2004, a task force framed a reform agenda with goals to strengthen this organization's public value by managing the use of its name and emblem, and steward its risk management, real estate and equipment, and financial resources. The task force implemented a participatory process with stakeholders for building, reinforcing, and sometimes creating new policies and practices. The timing for this reform was optimal as MN 4-H's organizational structure had recently changed in 2003, unearthing a variety of issues that called for different accountability structures.

At that time, MN 4-H was operating 87 different county 4-H programs in a style similar to 87 different entrepreneurship, each with its own policies and management style. Consequently, MN 4-H needed an organizational model to guide the reform effort. "Stewardship" was selected because it could also serve as a mindset to help stakeholders proactively care for our organization. In our approach to stewardship, we question the belief that accountability and control go hand in hand. Because our approach exercises accountability but centers on service rather than control, it positively affects the level of ownership and responsibility each person feels for the success of the organization (Block, 1993; Covey, 2004). This reform is a transformative process that results in reflective action from changes encountered throughout the reform effort, similar to impacts found in transformative adult learning theory (Franz, 2007; Mezirow, 2000).

Block (1993) proposed a set of principles intended to make dramatic changes in an organization by framing reform from a position of stewardship that asks individuals to be deeply accountable for the outcomes of an organization, without acting to define the purpose for others. We combined these principles with a generative mode of leadership that suggests that leaders should rely on cues of the current organization and honor its past, as they work with stakeholders to build and implement the reform effort (Chait, Ryan, & Taylor, 2005). This article presents the operating principles used to guide, build, and implement our stewardship agenda.

Operating Principles

Step 1: Align Policies and Future Directions to Empower Application

Block (1993) and Covey (2004) indicate that the first requirement of an organization seeking reform is to honor the mandates of the larger institutions governing it. To do so we met with institutional partners at executive levels to clarify mandates and align reform with the current policies and future directions of each

partner.

A national search of 4-H Youth Development resources in the stewardship area informed our understanding of possibilities. We initiated dialogue with representatives of the National 4-H Headquarters, the University of Minnesota's administrative departments, and Extension administration. The University's Office of General Counsel provided the legal perspective needed to guide our process in developing new practices. Ultimately, the task force proactively aligned the stewardship reform effort with mandated policies and practices of its federal and state institutional partners while honoring its local stakeholder partnerships.

Step 2: Engage and Model Generative Thinking Without Demanding It

Chait, Ryan, and Taylor (2005) note "Good leaders do not just contribute generative insights to their organization; they also engage others in generative thinking" (p. 91). Generative thinking acknowledges that multiple perspectives will generate a context, create better solutions, cultivate ownership, and enable broad participation in which reform efforts can be built. Surveys, dialogues, and focus groups were used to engage community-based stakeholders throughout the reform process. By naming issues, identifying solutions, and testing the soundness of recommended solutions, stakeholders helped shape our stewardship agenda.

As we engaged with each stakeholder group, we modeled generative thinking by acknowledging how various perspectives had framed the agenda and informed the process for carrying out stewardship changes. Modeling generative thinking enables leadership to inspire trust without demanding it because sustained efforts are most effective when stakeholders have a voice in creating them (Covey, 2004). This engagement was important to the reform effort because our stakeholder base was very broad. In 2004, it included over 126,000 youth, 9,000 adult volunteers, 87 county boards of commissioners, 87 county Extension advisory committees, and 87 4-H programming committees known as "federations." To bring about desired results with each stakeholder, we recognized that this process would require a consistent, long-term effort; it took 3 years.

Step 3: Foster a Learning Organization to Build Ownership

By welcoming dialogue and critique at several stages of the development process, task force members grew in our commitment to create a learning organization that allows its personnel to own the reform effort. Learner empowerment through critical dialogue and reflection fosters a more participatory learning organization (Cranton, 1994; Franz, 2007). According to Senge (2006), learning organizations occur when "people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p. 3). The development of a learning organization helped empower our colleagues to act on behalf of MN 4-H without external motivation. This commitment to accountability also supports an organization to better communicate its public value (Franz, 2003).

Throughout the reform process, faculty and staff members educated local stakeholders on the importance of being a public organization and the accountability that comes with this role. To support our learning organization, we developed an on-line resource manual, Stewardship of Minnesota 4-H Youth Development: Risk Management, Real Estate and Equipment, and Finances, which is now regularly revised, and developed a training series for faculty, staff, volunteer leaders, and other key stakeholders to be delivered in person or on-line.

Figure 1.
Task Force Responsibilities for Organizational Reform

<p>Frame</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine task force purpose: to lead a reform that strengthens MN 4-H's public value through the appropriate use of the 4-H name and emblem and improved stewardship of resources 2. Identify organizational issues, barriers, and assets 3. Clarify mandated policies and practices of federal and state partners <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. National 4-H Headquarters 2. University's Office of General Counsel, Office of Risk Management, and Fleet Services 3. Extension administration, and finance and planning departments 4. Minnesota Department of Revenue 4. Establish goals and benchmarks allowing ample time for processing
<p>Learn</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Select stewardship as a means to create organizational reform 2. Review stewardship-related documents from other state 4-H programs 3. Dialogue with regional and county staff to set the stage and gather feedback 4. Conduct a needs and assets assessment in counties 5. Identify areas of focus for our stewardship agenda: public organization, risk management, real estate and equipment, and finances
<p>Develop</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research and identify best practices and tools related to focus areas 2. Develop on-line resource guide for faculty and staff 3. Gather feedback on the guide from faculty and key stakeholders 4. Refine and edit the guide based on feedback 5. Develop a series of training modules for faculty, staff, volunteer leaders, and other key stakeholders 6. Create a stewardship roll-out plan
<p>Train and Implement</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Facilitate a 2-day training workshop for University 4-H faculty and staff 2. Provide 2-hour on-line trainings to administrators, support staff, and youth and adult volunteer leaders 3. Coordinate presentations delivered by regional and local staff and volunteers to county-based stakeholders 4. Coach faculty and staff during local implementation of stewardship agenda
<p>Sustain</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revise and maintain the on-line resource guide and communicate changes 2. Ensure all new faculty and staff receive thorough and timely on-line training 3. Lead the ongoing stewardship agenda by resolving emerging issues and providing guidance to faculty and staff

Implications

We now operate as *one* MN 4-H program in regard to stewardship and management of name and emblem. We have strengthened our public value by managing the use of the 4-H name and emblem and related resources in terms of risk management, real estate and equipment, and finances. MN 4-H is a stronger organization because it now exercises accountability through the level of ownership and responsibility each person feels for the success of the organization. By focusing reform efforts around the concept of stewardship, we were able to create organizational reform and bring our stakeholders along with us. Our use of stewardship as a means to reform systematic policies and practices that govern major parts of the MN 4-H could serve as a model for other state 4-H programs to consider as they pursue similar goals.

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