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Creating the Capacity for Organizational Change: Personnel Participation and Receptivity to Change

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Abstract: In a climate of continuous change, Extension organizations must find ways to navigate immediate challenges while developing capacity to thrive as future challenges and opportunities arise. To find ways, personnel's participation in planning was encouraged to increase openness to change as OSU Extension created and implemented its new Strategic Plan. Findings indicate that personnel from all levels of the organization who participated in the planning process were more receptive and less pessimistic about the plan and more motivated to make the plan a success. These findings suggest participation may help personnel cope with current changes as well as build capacity for future changes.

Introduction

Like all organizations, Extension organizations are being impacted by economic declines, rapid technological innovations, and the shift to a knowledge-based workforce. Sometimes Extension organizations are affected in positive ways. These challenges create wonderful opportunities for innovative programs, expansion of existing programs, and the introduction of new audiences to Extension programs. But sometimes Extension organizations are also affected in less desirable ways. Economic declines and funding reductions can limit any public sector or greater good organization's unencumbered focus on its mission (Lyons, O'Neill, Polanin, Mickel, & Hlubik, 2008).

Increasing pressures from these challenges have led to changes in the ways that Extension organizations operate and conduct programming. Whether the impacts of change are positive or negative, continuous change can cause Extension personnel to suffer from fatigue, apathy, and/or resistance to change, and these reactions can prohibit strategies for successful programming from being accepted and implemented

successfully (Amenakis, Harris, & Feild, 1999). Even in Extension organizations that are committed to becoming "learning organizations" that embrace continuous change (Senge, 1990), personnel can suffer from change fatigue (Amenakis et al., 1999; MacIntosh, Beech, McQueen, & Reid, 2007; Schawrz & Shulman, 2007) and become cynical about the outcomes of organizational change attempts (Wanous, Reichers, & Austin, 2000). Knowing that current pressures are only going to increase, these findings beg the question: What can Extension organizations do to flourish during continuous change?

Creating Support for Current Changes and Growing Capacity for Future Changes

To flourish in a climate of continuous change, Extension organizations must successfully navigate immediate changes, while simultaneously helping personnel develop the capacity to thrive as ongoing and future challenges and opportunities arise (Frahm & Brown, 2002). Many researchers have noted a primary task of organizational leaders is to manage and guide change (Graetz, 2000; Stace & Dunphy, 1996; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Limerick & Cunnington, 1993; Ulrich & Wiersema, 1989). Others have argued that organizational leaders must also create a climate "that welcomes, utilizes, and exploits uncertainty" (Clampitt & Williams, 2005; p. 212) in order to be flexible enough to address unceasing internal and external volatilities. Research findings show that employees tend to prefer organizations that embrace uncertainty, and employees who work for uncertainty-embracing organizations, that is, organizations that monitor and proactively address trends and challenges, tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, more committed to their organizations, less cynical about organizational life, and more likely to identify with their organizations (Clampitt, Williams, & DeKock, 2002).

Perhaps the most important action Extension organizations can take to help personnel adapt to current changes while growing the capacity to thrive during ongoing and future changes is to encourage personnel to take an active role in organizational planning processes. To be effective, participation must involve "a conscious and intended effort by individuals at a higher level in an organization to provide visible extra-role or role-expanding opportunities for individuals or groups at a lower level in the organization to have a greater voice in one or more areas of organizational performance" (Glew, O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Van Fleet, 1995). A large body of literature and research has linked personnel's participation in organizational decision-making to benefits for both individual workers and organizations.

First, several theories within the field of organization development support personnel's participation in decision-making. In particular, human relations theories argue that both workers' and management's interests are served when workers influence decisions, human resources theories promote participation as professional development, workplace democracy theories promote participation as a means of redistributing organizational power, and instrumental management theories view personnel's participation as a means of reaching management goals (Leana & Florkowski, 1992).

Second, research has linked employees' participation in decision-making with job satisfaction and performance (Glew, O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Van Fleet, 1995). Participation in decision-making has been demonstrated to change thinking and actions (*cf.* Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990; Passmore & Fagans, 1992), help personnel experience a sense of control (Parnell & Menefee, 1995) and ownership of the decisions being made (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001; Pierce, O'Driscoll, & Coghlan, 2004), provide relief from feelings of job insecurity (Probst, 2005), and create willingness to work toward making the plan a success (Guth & MacMillian, 1986).

Together, the emphasis on role-expanding opportunities, theoretical benefits, and findings linking participation to positive outcomes suggest including Extension personnel from all levels of the organization

in strategic planning would contribute to personnel's openness to the plan. Participation should simultaneously grow personnel's capacity for dealing with future changes.

Despite the link between participatory decision-making and beneficial outcomes for personnel and organizations, two important areas for further investigation should be noted. First, many studies have examined participation in decision-making in new product development (NPD) or research and development (R & D) companies. Change in these organizations is assumed to be a vitalizing process that is valued and expected by personnel. Extension organizations are like NPD and R & D companies in that we constantly update and improve our programming as cutting-edge research findings become available.

This type of decision-making is fairly limited in scope, however. Decisions in NPD and R & D center around changes regarding which products or programs to create. Extension organizations are also like public sector and greater good organizations that are more and more frequently being forced to become continuous change organizations as a result of budget restrictions (Frahm & Brown, 2004; Lyons, O'Neill, Polanin, Mickel, & Hlubik, 2008). In organizations like Extension, in which changes resulting from economic declines and funding reductions coincide with vitalizing changes in programming and products, change fatigue may be created by encouraging participation in decision-making processes even when those decision-making processes proactively involve personnel in strategic planning.

Second, questions about potential negative side effects of involving personnel in decision-making have been raised recently (Ashmos, Duchon, McDaniel, Jr., & Huonker, 2002; Jian, 2007). Participatory decision-making can be costly in personnel time and other organizational resources, can extend the time frame in which decisions are made, and add new levels of complexity to organizations. Moreover, encouraging uninvolved or disinterested personnel to participate in strategic decision-making may create change fatigue. Perhaps for that reason, most studies of strategic decision-making have examined either managerial personnel's participation in strategic decisions or foundation-level personnel's participation in decision-making about aspects of their individual jobs. Based on existing leadership literature and studies, it is not known whether involving personnel from all positions within an organization in strategic planning would be beneficial for workers or the organization.

The findings described above highlight several research questions about participation in strategic planning in Extension organizations. First, will OSU Extension personnel's participation in creating a new 5-year strategic plan be associated with greater receptivity to the plan? Second, will OSU Extension personnel's participation in creating a new 5-year strategic plan be associated with lower pessimism about the potential success of the plan? Third, will OSU Extension's personnel's participation in creating a new 5-year strategic plan be associated with greater motivation to make the plan successful? Finally, will the relationship between participation and receptivity, pessimism, and motivation be different for personnel on the foundational levels of the organization than for personnel in the managerial levels of the organization?

Methods

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, an invitation to participate in the study was sent to the All-Extension listserve at the authors' university. 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 over the next 3 weeks to potential participants who had not completed survey.

Sample

Every member of the population of personnel at Ohio State University Extension was invited to participate in the study. Census, rather than random sampling, was used. Random sampling is used when it is impossible or impractical to survey the population. The purpose of a random sample is to approximate the views or characteristics of the population in survey findings. By inviting all personnel to participate, every member of the population had the ability to directly influence survey findings. 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.

During the 3-week period the on-line survey was active, 325 individuals completed the questionnaire (response rate = 31%). Of those, 77 (26%) were support staffers, 42 (14%) were program assistants, 123 (41%) were county educators, 35 (11%) were Extension specialists, and 20 (7%) were administrators. All program areas were represented (Agriculture and Natural Resources = 84, 26%; Family and Consumer Sciences = 83, 26%; Community Development = 20, 6%; 4-H = 66, 21%) as were all Regions (West = 69, 21%, North Central = 92, 28%; South = 75, 23%, and main campus 67, 21%). The average number of years of service with OSU Extension was 13.47 ($sd = 10.11$).

Questionnaire

Participation in the planning process was measured by averaging responses to 10 items about opportunities that had been made available to all personnel. Respondents rated their agreement on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) with statements such as "I contributed to the Strategic Plan roundtable discussions at one of the Regional Spring Conferences," "I was active on a Strategic Plan Issues Committee," "I read articles about the Strategic Plan in the *Communique*," and "I reviewed information on the Strategic Plan webpage." We did not assign weights to the 10 items for several reasons. First, multiple types of activities were created for personnel to overcome differences in schedules, commitments, and local expectations that would not permit everyone to take part in every possible method of participation. Second, we allowed personnel to report their self-weighted contributions using the Likert scale ratings. Finally, and most important, we were interested in personnel's general sense of participation, rather than the depth of their participation.

Receptivity to change was measured using the Change in Organizational Culture instrument (Dunham, Grube, Gardner, Cummings, & Pierce, 1989) as adapted by Frahm and Brown (2007). Pessimism about the likelihood of change success was measured using the pessimism subscale of the Cynicism About Organization Change Scale created by Wanous, Reichers, and Austin (2000), and motivation to keep trying to make the organization successful was measured using the four-item scale developed by Wanous et al. (2000). In addition, respondents reported their position titles, regions, program areas, and length of tenure with OSU Extension. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for the four scales ranged from .87 to .96. 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 same construct (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

Findings

Participation & Receptivity to the Strategic Plan

Our first research question asked whether participation in creating the new 5-year strategic plan would be associated with greater receptivity to the plan. A significant positive correlation ($r = .36, p < .01$, two-tailed)

indicated that the more personnel participated in the planning process, the more likely they were to be open to the changes in the plan. Correlation coefficients of .30 to .50 are considered to indicate an association of moderate strength. Next, a linear regression was computed in order to further explore the association. Using receptivity to change as the dependent variable and average participation score as the independent variable, a significant association was found [$F(1, 322) = 49.26, p < .000; R^2 = .13$]. This finding indicated that 13% of the variance in receptivity to change could be explained by personnel's participation in the planning process. This means that participating in the planning process had a significant, substantial, and positive impact on personnel's willingness to accept the plan.

Participation & Lower Pessimism

Our second research question asked whether participation in creating the new 5-year strategic plan would be associated with lower pessimism about the potential success of the plan. A significant negative correlation ($r = -.27, p < .000$, two-tailed) indicated that the more personnel participated in the planning process, the less likely they were to be pessimistic that the changes in the plan would be successful. Correlation coefficients of .10 to .30 are considered to indicate an association of small strength. Next, a linear regression was computed in order to further explore the association. Using receptivity to change as the dependent variable and average participation score as the independent variable, a significant association was found [$F(1, 308) = 23.13, p < .000; R^2 = .07$]. This finding indicated that 7% of the variance in pessimism about the plan could be explained by personnel's participation in the planning process. This means that participating in the planning process significantly and substantially reduced personnel's concerns that the plan might not work.

Participation & Higher Motivation

Our third research question asked whether participation in creating the new 5-year strategic plan would be associated with higher motivation to keep trying to make changes successful. A significant positive correlation ($r = .44, p < .000$, two-tailed) indicated that the more personnel participated in the planning process, the more likely they were to be motivated to keep trying to make changes successful. Correlation coefficients of .30 to .50 are considered to indicate an association of moderate strength. Next, a linear regression was computed in order to further explore the association. Using motivation to keep trying as the dependent variable and average participation score as the independent variable, a significant association was found [$F(1, 312) = 76.36, p < .000; R^2 = .20$]. This finding indicated that 20% of the variance in motivation could be explained by personnel's participation in the planning process. This indicates that participating in the planning process had a significant, substantial, and positive impact on personnel's motivation to make the plan a success.

Participation & Benefits for Personnel

Our final research question asked whether participation in strategic decision-making would have greater or lesser benefits for personnel in all positions within the Extension organization. As can be seen in Table 1, the correlations for personnel at all positions showed that participation in the strategic planning process was associated with greater receptivity, lower pessimism, and greater motivation. Twelve out of 15 of those correlations were significant.

Although participation was associated with positive outcomes for personnel in all positions, there were some variations in scores. Looking first at receptivity to change, personnel who participated in the planning processes were more receptive to the plan than personnel who did not participate; however, the strength of the relationship between participation and receptivity was lower for county educators' and higher for administrators than for personnel in other positions. Looking at pessimism, all personnel who participated were less likely to feel pessimistic about the plan's success, but this effect was strongest for specialists.

Finally, looking at motivation to make the changes successful, again, all personnel who participated in the planning process were more motivated, but this effect was strongest for specialists.

Table 1.
Correlations between Average Participation Scores and Outcome Variables Sorted by Position within Extension

Position	Receptivity by Participation	Pessimism by Participation	Motivation by Participation
Support Staff	.48 p < .000	-.28 p < .015	.42 p < .000
Program Assistants	.44 p < .003	-.26 .094 (ns)	.49 p < .001
County Educators	.25 p < .006	-.30 p < .001	.42 p < .000
Extension Specialists	.55 p < .001	-.43 p < .014	.72 p < .000
Administrators	.69 p < .001	-.22 p < .35 (ns)	.43 p < .061 (ns)

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that Extension personnel in all positions benefited from participation in the strategic planning process. For personnel in all positions at all levels of the Extension organization, the greater their participation in the strategic planning process, the more receptive to the changes in the new strategic plan they were, the less pessimistic about the plan's likelihood of success they were, and the more motivated to make the plan a success they were. Moreover, the benefits of participating in the strategic planning process were typically as great or greater for support personnel and program assistants as for county educators, specialists, and administrators in nearly all cases.

As suggestive as these findings are, we must offer them with caution because our survey received only a 31% response rate. One explanation for the low response rate may be that some personnel did not trust the confidentiality of the survey. There are two reasons that might account for a lack of trust.

First, during the months prior to the start of the new strategic plan, it was falsely rumored that the plan would include reductions in OSU Extension's work force. Second, the survey was conducted using an online survey process. Many personnel within the organization have used Internet survey processes and know that the email addresses of respondents are available to the survey administrator. Because we feared that personnel might be concerned about issues of confidentiality and anonymity, personnel were guaranteed that only the survey administrator would be able to determine which employees responded to the survey, that he would hold that information in confidence, and that he would ensure that researchers received only anonymous responses from personnel.

While we hoped these protections would increase the response rate (see Miller & Smith, 1983), they also prevented us from following up with and comparing our findings to those from late responders and non-responders (Lindner & Wingerbach, 2002). Future research on the effects of Extension personnel's

participation in organizational decision-making should be conducted to replicate or refute our findings.

Implications

About 2,500 years ago, Heraclitus said the only constant in the world is change. Today, the pressures of globalization, rapid technological innovations, the demands of the knowledge economy, and economic declines make this statement as true as ever. The turbulent social and organizational conditions that contemporary organizational leaders face make guiding change like navigating in "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996).

Previous studies suggested that if not properly guided, unceasing pressures to adapt can lead to change fatigue, apathy, or resistance. Many studies reported that including personnel in the planning and decision-making can help to maximize the benefits of change while reducing negative impacts. Other studies suggested, however, that participation can exacerbate change fatigue, apathy, or resistance. Moreover, it was unclear whether all personnel or only managerial level personnel would benefit from participation in strategic decision-making.

Our findings suggest that leaders in Extension organizations may want to invite personnel in all positions to participate in strategic decision-making processes. Personnel in all positions at all levels of OSU Extension benefited from participating. Concerns that participation could create change fatigue, apathy, and resistance were not supported.

Finally, we realize that creating opportunities for personnel in all positions at all levels of the organization to participate in strategic planning may add complexity to already complex organizations. However, the benefits of the added complexity are likely to outweigh disadvantages. Participation in decision-making enhances organizational connectivity, which in turn, helps with internal self-organization and cooperative evolution into more effective ways of operating (Ashmos, Duchon, McDaniel, Jr., & Huonker, 2002). In these ways, participation may not only help personnel cope with current changes but build capacity for on-going changes.

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