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The Wolfpack Leadership Academy: Providing Leadership Development for the Newest Members of the Extension Family

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Abstract: The need for leadership is evident in today's society. More and more, educational responsibilities are being turned over to local governments and community organizations like Extension. This increased responsibility equates to a need for all Extension educators to assume positions of leadership, if indeed they are to succeed in this increasingly competitive environment. The Wolfpack Leadership Academy will provide the opportunity for early career agents to attend a targeted, purposeful, intense leadership development academy designed to engage them in learning and applying the skills needed for future job success.

Need For the Program

Society is facing inevitable change as social and economic landscapes evolve to accommodate new needs of the population. Educational responsibilities are being turned over to local governments and community organizations like Extension as the changing landscapes demand. This increased responsibility equates to a need for all Extension agents to assume positions of leadership, if indeed they are to succeed in this increasingly competitive environment. Agents must develop the skills and capacity to work in collaborative groups to address complex problems and improve the quality of life within their communities.

Because of the significant changes to society, the leadership philosophies taught in the programs of the past no longer address the complex problems found in the communities and organizations of today (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995). The management and leadership skills formerly found at the top of the most wanted list no longer apply, and new leadership skills are needed for success (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000). It will take a savvy organization, composed of a staff that is competent in these new leadership areas, to meet the needs of society's changing demographic (Cooper & Graham, 2001).

These researchers would suggest that Extension agents who have mastered various leadership practices are more likely to have a greater impact on citizens in their communities. With the knowledge of how many people our agents reach each year, it is essential that those individuals possess the kinds of leadership skills that will make them successful at positively impacting those lives. Currently, no system exists in North Carolina that addresses the issue of targeted, long-term leadership staff development for new agents.

Extension needs to do a better job of preparing and developing individuals to be future leaders within the organization (ECOP LAC, 2005). This could be accomplished through targeted professional development opportunities in leadership development. Strong and Harder (2009) recommended the development of leadership academies for the development of future Extension leaders.

Programmatic Strategy

Due to the changes occurring in society today, professional development is becoming more and more important. Tarcher (1991) states that the amount of available information doubles every 5 years and that more new information has been produced in the past 30 years than in the previous 5,000. Businesses, including public organizations, must learn to see employee training as an investment rather than expense. The new generation of workers cannot simply be hired and ignored. They must be nurtured, paid well, and made to feel appreciated.

Training is crucial. Without the opportunity to learn new skills, they will quickly find a job that will help them to prepare for the rest of their career (Cetron & Davies, 2003). Employee turnover has a tremendous impact on the organization. A public or private organization may spend as much as 150% of the employee's salary to hire another individual (Friedman, Galinsky, & Plowden, 1992). Kutilek (2000) states there is a net cost of \$80,000 per year to Extension due to employee turnover. Another study estimated it could cost Extension from \$7,185 to \$30,000 to replace an agent who had an annual salary of \$30,000 (Chandler, 2005). Therefore, professional development affects the organization on many levels.

Successful training programs will clarify roles and expectations so that all parties involved can achieve the planned outcomes successfully (Boyle, 1981). To ensure that maximum information transfer occurs, a very specific learning environment must be created. The key to a successful training program is to clarify in advance the roles and expectations of the trainer and trainee so that they know how to achieve successful outcomes. The development and implementation of a training plan that allows Extension agents to address their weaknesses and build upon their strengths best accomplishes this.

The faculty within the Department of Agricultural & Extension Education at NC State is uniquely positioned to be the driving force in meeting this professional development need. With the subject matter experts (including leadership theory, volunteer management, and extension education methods) positioned in this department, this group has the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes to make a staff development effort of this type both meaningful and effective.

Capitalizing on faculty capacity and in conjunction with leadership educators in the surrounding area, those agents across North Carolina with less than 5 years experience will be invited to participate in a targeted, purposeful, intense leadership experience. This 3-day experience will cover topics essential to the staff development of the agent, and address issues of challenge to greater organizational leadership capacity. By the end of the training, 80% of the participants will demonstrate a greater understanding of, and ability to apply, the kinds of skills needed for success in their positions (including but not limited to goal setting, collaborative leadership strategies, the motivation and management of volunteers, positive group dynamics to make advisory committees more effective).

The materials from the training and appropriate follow-up educational materials will be provided to the participants via a closed website so that they can continue their development. Participants will also have the opportunity to continue to develop their skills by working with faculty on special interest projects should they choose to do so. There is no cost to the agents to attend beyond the transportation to and from the meeting facility. The initial group will provide the data and experience necessary to leverage future extramural funds that will allow for the program to continue.

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