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Building Regional Networking Capacity Through Leadership Development: The Case of Leadership Northwest Missouri

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Abstract: *Through a case study analysis of a regional leadership development program, this article describes the impact on individual and group leadership skills and how the skills are employed to benefit individual communities and the region as a whole. Data were obtained through surveys. Through cooperation and collaboration between and among leadership program graduates, leadership alumni, and other regional leaders, graduates grew personally and professionally, and built new networks that help them advance their communities and the region. The most significant implication for Extension from this study is the need to expand partnerships in order to better utilize resources.*

Introduction

Northwest Missouri is a strong agricultural region consisting of many small rural communities with populations of less than 3,000. Because of the 1980 farm crisis, many rural families in this region were forced out of business and left the area in search of better economic opportunities. This exodus of young people and families created a leadership void in the entire region.

Gripped by these challenges, communities went into survival mode and built silos of isolation as they battled with internal as well as outside competition for business investments. The region was divided in many ways and for a variety of reasons. Fragmentation caused local communities to compete against one another for resources. Citizens were robbed of their sense of community thereby negatively affecting their ability and willingness to network and engage in community/regional development processes.

The remaining leadership base in northwest Missouri recognized a need to foster a new sense of community with a shared vision for the entire region. A task group was formed to develop and implement strategies to achieve this goal. This resulted in the development of a leadership program, Leadership Northwest Missouri (LNWMO), in 1999

with its first class graduating in 2001.

This case study explores LNWMO's impact on the development of personal and group leadership skills and how these skills are being utilized to benefit communities and the region as a whole. The study stemmed from three factors: no such evaluation has been done since the inception of the program; the continued need for leaders in rural communities; and the significant amounts of money and volunteer hours invested in running the program. In their study, Walker and Gray (2009) raised the issue of whether positive change in leaders' behavior led to improved communities. Along the same vein, our study addresses: how LNWMO closes the demand and supply gap for community and regional leadership; how LNWMO graduates work to break down community silos; how regional networks are being built to improve communities. Our findings will be important in informing sponsors and professionals conducting leadership programs. The study will also focus recruitment efforts targeting future program participants.

Literature Review

There are many important cultural, economic, and social differences between and among rural and urban communities, regions, and counties and cities within a region. As Flora and Flora (2008) point out, rural areas are diverse, "changing with shifts in population demographics, or as a result of changes in geographic boundaries" (p. 7). Some rural areas are persistently poor; some are rural and remote, dealing with the loss of population; and still others are exurban, experiencing rapid growth as a result of urban sprawl (Flora & Flora, 2008). The majority of rural residents face many unique challenges: declining jobs, eroding income, old and insufficient infrastructure, and limited recreational facilities. Youth, businesses, and government services are deserting rural America, resulting in dwindling tax bases (Miller, Gibbens, Lennon, & Wakefield, 2008). Reversing such trends calls for increased community and regional leadership development as regions which fall behind in economic development may be indicative of a lack in leadership or regional thinking (Leiken & Kempner, 2010).

The phenomenon of leadership has been extensively explored and its characteristics and virtues well documented in the literature on building leadership (Earnest, 1996; Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Langone, 1992; Langone & Rohs, 1995; Mills, 2005; Pigg, 1999; Tackie, Findley, Barharany, & Pierce, 2004). At all levels tremendous resources are being invested in improving the vitality and wealth of individuals and communities through the development of leadership capacities. Millions of public and private dollars are channeled toward leadership development. Everywhere, community leadership programs (CLPs) are increasingly becoming the most prevalent form of leadership development (Kirk & Shutte, 2004; Langone & Rohs, 1995; Mills, 2005; Pigg, 1999). Educational leadership development programs offer the greatest potential for sustainable development in these areas.

However, little is known about regional leadership development. Regional cooperation is still evolving. Most of what is known about leadership revolves around organizational leadership. A few studies (Leiken & Kempner; Pelleter, 2007) have explored regional leadership and cited examples of successful regional leadership and development initiatives. Our case study of LNWMO is a practical attempt to complement the efforts in filling the literature gap in regional leadership development.

Methods

This case study focuses on LNWMO, a rural 15 county regional leadership program in northwest Missouri. County populations ranged from 2,171 to 89, 201 (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Modeled after the University of Missouri Extension EXCEL (Experience in Community Enterprise and Leadership) program, LNWMO program combines site visits, presentations, and experiential learning activities. Similar to traditional CLPs, LNWMO class curriculum includes: community history, strengths, problems, and needs; specific community issues (e.g., healthcare and social services, education, and workforce development); and networking opportunities. Specific

leadership skills emphasized in the program include: communication; negotiation and conflict resolution; collaboration and coalition building; strategic planning; and creating a shared vision (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). A total of 207 people, including ordinary citizens, business managers, directors in businesses and non-profit organizations, and local government officials have graduated from the program.

Data was collected using online survey and document analysis. 162 graduates were invited to participate in an online survey. The remaining 45 graduates did not have working emails available. The survey was gender balanced, with 55% being women. Survey questions were constructed by the researchers and experts in survey research at local universities. Questions sought demographic information (age, gender, race), assessment of leadership skills gained, networking opportunities accessed, community involvement capabilities, and personal growth. During the survey period two reminders were sent to participants, resulting in a response rate of 47%.

LNWMO bylaws and newsletters, newspapers, and end-of-session program evaluations were reviewed. Data collected from documents included program history, graduate's social and demographic information, and documented program benefits.

The triangulation of research participants and methods was intentionally designed to enhance both the credibility and completeness of our findings.

Data was cleaned, coded, and analyzed. Unclear responses to questions were considered missing data or clarified by contacting the respondent. Qualitative data analysis included reading all comments and explanations to responses and categorizing them into five themes that addressed the purpose and key questions of our study. The following themes, personal growth, personal leadership growth, regional understanding/networking, and community involvement emerged as significant categories. Coding of quantitative data focused on responses that could be given numerical values. We used descriptive analyses such as percentages, proportions, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulation to generate insights (Israel, 2009). Data collected through document review supplemented survey data.

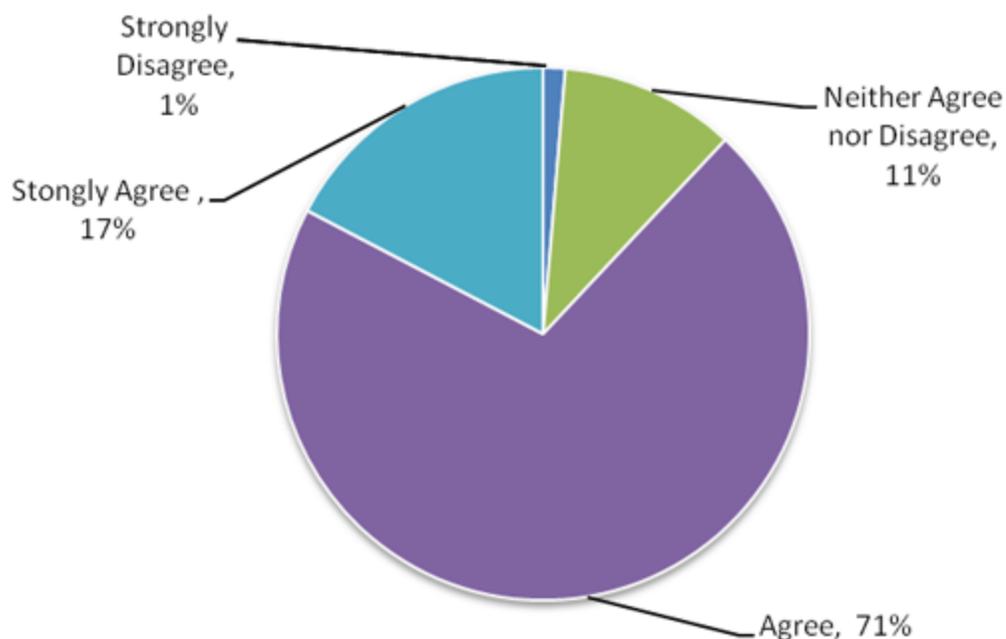
Findings

Personal Growth

Evidence from survey data suggests that 62% of LNWMO program participants increased their self-confidence as leaders, while 53% increased their volunteer hours. Eighty-eight percent believed that the program had helped them to be more effective in their work environment, 11% were undecided, and only 1% indicated the program had not made them more effective (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Participation in Leadership Northwest Missouri Helped Me to Be More Effective in My Work Environment.



Commenting on how LNWMO had benefited her, one graduate stated:

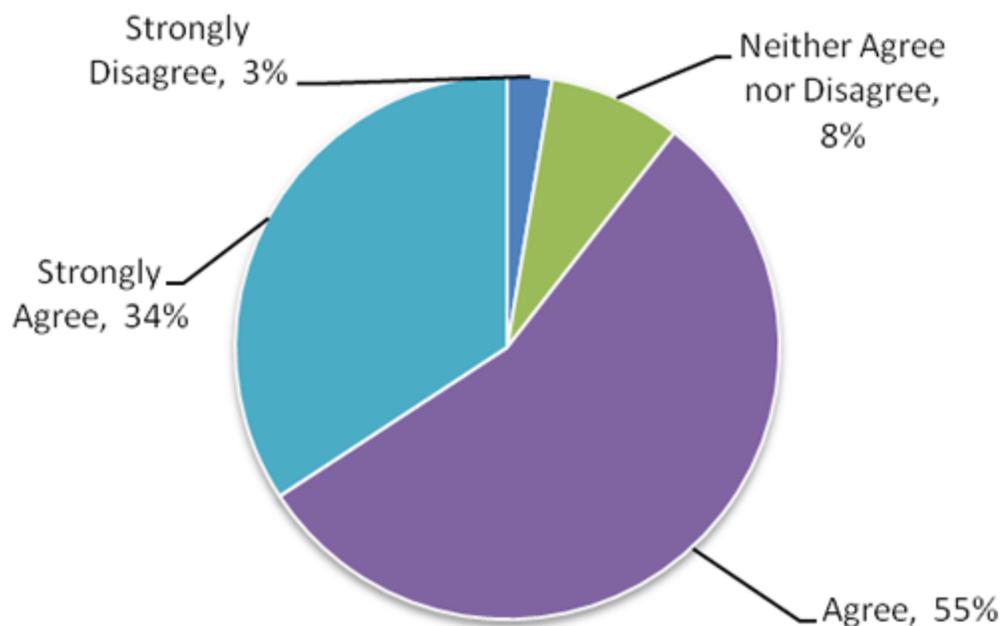
Before participating in the program I didn't have faith in my leadership abilities. I would wait for others to take the lead and then I'd just follow along. LNWMO showed me that my ideas and thoughts made a difference. The program gave me a voice and the self-confidence I needed to become involved in my community and region. I realized that I am a good leader.

Personal Leadership Growth

In response to a statement "participation in LNWMO led me to look more closely at my personal leadership skills," 89% of graduates responded in the affirmative (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Participation in Leadership Northwest Missouri Led Me to Look More Closely at My Personal Leadership Skills.



Although a similar percentage of people agreed to the statement in 2007 and 2010, there is a significant increase in the percentage of those strongly agreeing, from 25% in 2007 to 34% in 2010 (LNWMO Progress Analysis Report, 2007). About 88% agreed to

the statement that LNWMO "led me to look more closely at my leadership style," 9% were unsure, and 3% disagreed. Describing changes the program had caused in his/her leadership skills, one graduate acknowledged,

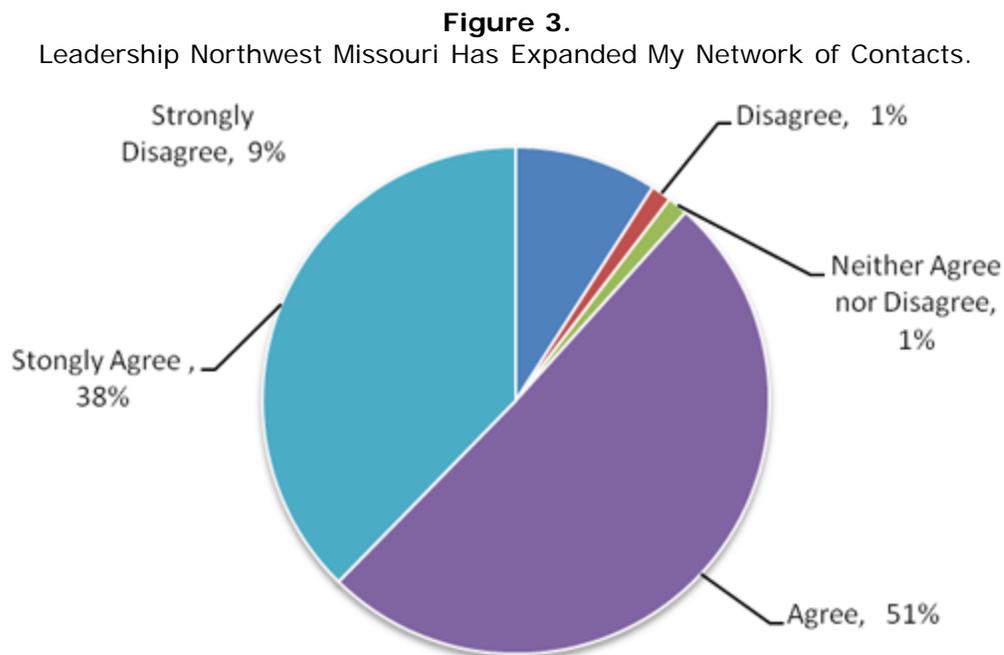
I feel I am a better leader[now], I communicate more effectively, I think my co-workers are happier and respect me more from some of the changes I have implemented. Some of these have been ways I conduct meetings, how I interact with others, ways I celebrate [success], and just the way I live my [personal and professional] life - daily walking the talk.

Reflecting on the impact of LNWMO on leadership development, another graduate echoed,

I have been more focused on group involvement. In the past [pre-LNWMO] when others in a group were less engaged I let them be. Now [post-LNWMO] I reach out to those less engaged and try to find ways to give them ownership of the project or task.

Regional Understanding and Networking

When participants were asked if "LNWMO is designed to introduce leaders to a network of acquaintances and to establish communication with other community leaders," 89% of respondents agreed with this statement, while 10% disagreed (Figure 3).



All graduates indicated they do use their network of contacts with 47% using it frequently and 53% using it some. When asked to describe a successful regional collaboration among LNWMO graduates several programs were mentioned. Topping the list was Great Northwest Day at the Missouri State Capitol (GNDC). In appreciation of the impact GNDC has had, one graduate wrote,

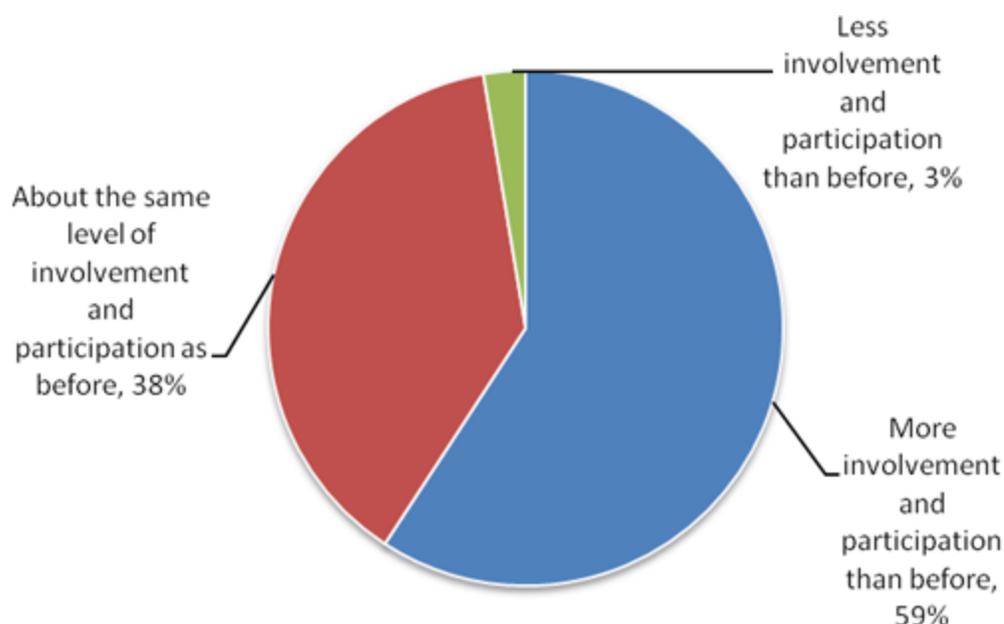
The greatest example of collaborative efforts from Leadership graduates is Great Northwest Day held in Jefferson City each February. That is where I see LNWMO participants all working together on a regional basis to promote northwest Missouri to legislators and spotlight needs. It was most exciting the year the listed "need" was the completion of four lanes on Highway 36 in the eastern part of the state. This proved that not only have we learned to look at ourselves as a region but we also look beyond our region for the overall good of north Missouri [and the state].

Community Involvement

LNWMO encourages individuals to become active in their own communities and in the region as a whole. This involvement can be seen through participants' service on volunteer boards and as elected community officials. Many participants were already involved in their communities prior to participating in LNWMO, yet many increased their involvement after graduating from the program. Responses assessing levels of involvement in community activities after graduating from LNWMO showed that 59% of participants increased their level of community involvement. Only 3% had decreased their involvement. 38 % had maintained participation at the same levels (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Since completing Leadership Northwest Missouri, How Would You Assess Your Level of Involvement in Your Community?



People with a high level of civic responsibility tend to be more involved in their community and see the value of regional approach. Eighty-two percent of respondents believed they developed a greater sense of civic responsibility after having participated in LNWMO. Regarding civic responsibility, one graduate commented, "[Because of LNWMO] I have come to realize that John F. Kennedy's statement 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country' applies directly to me and my life in northwest Missouri". Another graduate stated,

Although I have always been very civic minded, both my husband and I have made building on community a big part of our lives, Leadership Northwest gives opportunities to learn what others are doing and important information that can be most helpful with some of our own community and county affairs. But most importantly, it gives us a reason to work on a more Regional Level to assist in making all of northwest Missouri a better place to live, grow and prosper.

It appears that LNWMO has affected and continues to positively affect participants by increasing their personal growth, personal leadership skills, understanding of regional issues, and cooperation at the regional level. This has led to a deeper and expanded involvement in community activities as participants assume leadership positions/roles at their workplaces, community and region. It is evident that LNWMO graduates are putting into practice skills learned through the program. Appendix 1 provides a detailed list of the percentage responses to most of the questions asked in the survey.

Discussion

Leadership is "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes" (Rost, 1993, p. 102). We view effective

regional leadership as that in which citizens are proactive in their regional community economic development strategies. Being proactive encompasses establishing a shared vision for regional growth, assessing progress in regional development and growth, and revising strategies to adapt those that better meet the needs of the region (Leiken & Kempner, 2010). Thus a successful regional leadership development program produces leaders who inspire, persuade, and engage community development stakeholders in shaping the socioeconomic future of the region.

The study suggests that LNWMO attracts and engages people who have vested interests in the socioeconomic future of their region and are knowledgeable about their community and/or region. LNWMO provides a platform through which participants grow personal, interpersonal, and leadership skills. These changes were exhibited through increased self-confidence and self-esteem; stronger teams; greater understanding of, participation in, and mastery of one's everyday environment; better interpersonal skills; and/or greater resilience to life challenges (Geise, 2008). These personal growth traits facilitated the building of trust among program participants, which in turn provides fertile soil for collaboration—as graduates work together to create strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the region. As acknowledged by one of the graduates, "[LNWMO] allowed me the opportunity to work with people across the 18 county region . . . and understand how we might collaborate together for [the] common good of all."

Just as successful regional development takes root in regional consensus, Extension needs to find ways to better leverage resources at regional levels. For Extension, as financial and personnel resources become more competitive, there is an implied need to move to regionalization. Through promotion of regional leadership programming, Extension can play a central role in promoting regional conversations in order to achieve higher levels of public value.

Participant understanding and commitment to community is one of the pillars of LNWMO. Figure 4 indicates that when exposed to opportunities for serving in both elected and volunteer leadership positions at the community level, LNWMO graduates are stepping up and accepting that responsibility. This confirms that LNWMO is successful in developing leaders and those leaders are finding ways to serve their communities.

Even more impressive is the enthusiasm generated on the regional level. Graduates have actually developed more of a regional mindset and understand the need for a regional approach in order to be successful. An impressive 94% indicated that they now think more on a regional level. Graduates have established and use their alumni network on a regular basis. Alumni activities are scheduled periodically by the Alumni Committee to provide a forum for networking. Also, alumni participate in each year's graduation celebration (LNWMO Board minutes, 2001-2010).

LNWMO classes are encouraged to develop a regional class project. There are several examples of networking and cooperation among the follow-up class projects. Two projects have reached a high level of collaboration. They "accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks" and "build interdependent systems to address issues and opportunities" (Hogue, 1994, as quoted in *Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center Organizer Workbook*, p. 50).

The emergency warning siren project and Great Northwest Day at the Capitol are examples most often identified by graduates. The emergency siren project established a partnership with USDA Rural Development resulting in installation of over 25 emergency warning sirens and over \$179,000 in grant money coming into the region. Great Northwest Day at the Capitol has grown to become a major legislative event that takes 400 regional residents to the legislators in Jefferson City to present priority concerns of the region as a whole, and requests support for specific solutions. This high level of participation is due in part to the convenience of online information and registration provided through the LNWMO website. Over three-fourths of all elected legislators statewide, as well as representatives from state agencies participate in the evening

reception and community fair (Great Northwest Days Registration List, 2010). Other regions of the state find this regional effort to be very unique.

The uniqueness of LNWMO and these two activities in particular is due to the fact that both require a very high level of networking and collaboration in order to be successful. The programs have evolved over time to develop trust and lasting relationships among participants. They are highly productive and require a great deal of cooperation and communication among the leaders who plan and conduct the projects.

Success begins in the community and expands throughout the entire region as a result of the LNWMO network. This implies that for a region to develop, its individual communities must be willing to look beyond themselves and learn to collaborate. Through collaboration in addressing regional issues, "citizens can and do develop a different kind of civic culture that makes their communities and regions stronger and more effective" (*Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center Organizer Workbook*, p. 48). In a similar way, Extension must build on its current resource base and learn to pursue new partnerships and program delivery methods. Extension has a well-established older population of service users. In order to reach out to new younger populations, Extension must utilize Facebook, Twitter, online surveys, webinars, and other emerging technologies.

Conclusions

This article assesses the impact of a regional based leadership program, LNWMO. Since its inception, the program has graduated 207 individual leaders who now are shaping the future of their communities and region. Strong networks developed during the program among participants, with alumni, and other regional development stakeholders make the program stand out locally, statewide, and nationally. Though the program curriculum plays an important role in the success of the program, the synergies/relationships and excitement for the program are the glue that holds everything together. Graduates of LNWMO are establishing and growing a regional network of leaders who work together on projects that are important to local communities as well as to the entire region.

LNWMO has had a positive impact on northwest Missouri. It has expanded participants' individual leadership skills, increased community and regional participation, improved participants' effectiveness in their work place, and developed networks for leaders who participated in the program. Participants now embrace the regional approach of shared leadership and networking. This regional experience has helped them understand the need to break down community silos of isolation and build inclusive regional networks. Graduates are more confident in their own abilities and in the regional support structure they have built through the program.

The fact that LNWMO graduates have followed through and provided leadership to specific regional projects confirms their commitment to apply the skills they learned as they utilize their network of regional leaders. This has elevated their desire to survive as a region over the previous tendency to be isolated and concerned only about their local community. Graduates now understand that by taking a regional approach, local communities also benefit from expanded economic development opportunity. Community leaders are now experiencing positive outcomes for their communities resulting from their support of and participation in regional decision making efforts.

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Appendix 1.

Survey Results Summary by %

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
LNWMO has expanded my					

network of contacts	9.2	1.3	1.3	51.3	38.2
LNWMO led me to look more closely at my personal leadership skills	2.6	0	7.9	55.3	34.2
LNWMO led me to look more closely at my leadership style	2.7	0	9.3	62.7	25.3
LNWMO helped to be more effective in my work environment	1.3	0	10.7	70.7	17.3
LNWMO helped to develop a greater sense of civic responsibility	2.6	2.6	13.2	48.7	32.9
LNWMO has increased my self confidence as a leader	2.6	1.3	23.7	55.3	17.1
LNWMO has positively changed the way I approach volunteer work in my community	2.6	1.3	32.9	51.3	11.8
As a result of LNWMO, I have increased my volunteer hours	1.3	2.6	43.4	36.8	15.8
As a result of LNWMO, my board Participation has increased	2.7	6.7	32.0	41.3	17.3
LNWMO helped to think more on a regional level	1.3	1.3	3.9	47.4	46.1
LNWMO fulfills its mission	9.2	0	2.6	51.3	36.8
I would recommend LNWMO to others	5.3	0	2.6	39.5	52.6

I use my LNWMO networks of contacts	Frequently (47.4)	Seldom (52.6)	Never (0)		
Since completing LNWMO my level involvement in my community has been	More (59.2)	About the same (38.2)	Less (2.6)		
Number of hours participants volunteer their services per month	1-5hrs (27.6)	6-10 hrs(34.2)	11-15hrs (22.4)	15+ (15.8)	
Participants' overall experience with LNWMO	Excellent (46.1)	Very Good (43.4)	Good (10.5)	Fair (0)	Poor (0)

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