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A Look Inside: Self-Leadership Perceptions of Extension Educators

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Abstract: *Extension educators are often considered influential community leaders. Still the question remains—how do educators motivate themselves to success? Does this contribute towards their self-leadership perceptions? Specialists from three universities administered a survey to look at the "self-leadership" of Extension*

educators. Results indicated Extension educators use a variety of motivation strategies; however, there was a lack of awareness of how their thought processes contributed towards leadership success. Ultimately, future Extension professional development curriculum and trainings should be focused on developing motivational strategies such as how to successfully "self-talk," evaluation of one's beliefs and assumptions, and how to visualize successful performance.

Introduction

It can be said that leadership is all around us. However, we all should take a look inside; sometimes leadership from a personal standpoint (termed "intrapersonal leadership") can be considered one of the most overlooked aspects in leadership development. Personal development in leadership is important; according to Janet Ayers (1987) it is the first and most fundamental step in leadership development. This can include aspects such as understanding the essence of leadership, assessing personal strengths and weaknesses, and developing a personal philosophy of leadership (Ayers, 1987). Other researchers contend that aspects such as personal growth and self-efficacy are considered to be instrumental to the success of community leaders (Pigg, 2001; Rasmussen, 2006). Individuals who possess attributes such as autonomy and self-efficacy are more likely to practice self-leadership strategies (Norris, 2008). It is important to understand how each of these aspects illustrates the importance of understanding oneself as a leader.

While research has been conducted on leadership and leadership styles in regards to Extension administration (Ladewig & Rohs, 2000; Moore & Rudd, 2004; Moore & Rudd, 2006; Rudd, 2000) and with Extension educators who work with volunteers and the 4-H program (Boyd, 2004; Woodrum & Safrit, 2003), there is little knowledge about how Extension educators perceive and understand their own personal leadership development. An important development from the area of management psychology is the theory of self-leadership—how individuals "see themselves as leaders."

Self-leadership (Manz, 1986, 1992; Manz & Neck, 2004; Manz & Sims, 2001) "is a process through which people influence themselves to achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to behave and perform in desirable ways" (Houghton & Neck, 2002, p. 672). Organizations, including Extension, are changing from a traditional "top down" model of management and leadership, to a more shared model of leadership across the organization. To meet the demands of this change, Extension needs educators who are willing to take on more responsibility, participate in

decision-making, and provide leadership to their programmatic areas, communities, and Extension as a whole (Norris, 2008). These changing conditions require individuals who are self-leaders. The study reported here sought to explore how Extension educators see themselves as leaders, and how they self-direct and motivate themselves towards success.

Theoretical Framework

Self-leadership, as outlined by Houghton and Neck (2002), is a process whereby individuals utilize self-direction and self-motivation to behave in ways considered necessary for successful outcomes. Operationally, the theory focuses on specific sets of behavioral and cognitive strategies intended to influence individual performance results. Technically, this theory is founded from a variety of theories associated with self-influence, including: self-regulation, self-control, self-management, intrinsic motivation, social cognition, and cognitive psychology. Self-leadership strategies can be categorized into three general dimensions: *behavior-focused strategies*, *natural reward strategies*, and *constructive thought pattern strategies* (Manz & Neck, 2004; Neck & Houghton, 2006; & Prussia et al., 1998).

Behavior-focused strategies are designed to improve self-awareness, which leads to managing one's behavior. Often this dimension involves necessary, but disagreeable tasks. There are five strategies (or sub-scales) included within this dimension—self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, and self-cueing.

- **Self-observation:** observing one's own behavior that may lead to understanding of when and why one does specific behaviors, can lead to being able to change or eliminate certain behaviors;
- **Self-goal setting:** setting and implementing challenging personal goals has been shown to have a strong motivating effect on individual performance;
- **Self-reward:** using something tangible or abstract to effectively reinforce desirable behaviors and goal attainments;
- **Self-punishment:** can be used to shape desirable behaviors effectively (opposite strategy to self-reward); constructive criticism has been found much more effective than excessive self-punishment;
- **Self-cueing:** practicing desired behaviors before actual performance, can help avoid costly setbacks (Houghton & Neck, 2002).

Natural reward strategies center on the more enjoyable aspects of an activity. This dimension is applied by focusing individual thoughts on the intrinsic rewards of the activity, or the incentives built into a specific task (Norris, 2008). There is only one sub-scale associated with this dimension:

- **Focusing thoughts on natural rewards:** intrinsic rewards built into the task or an individual being rewarded by the task itself.

Activities that are naturally rewarding can increase competence and give individuals a feeling of self-control and purpose. Through activities such as creating a more enjoyable work environment or appreciating a more pleasurable job feature, an individual can increase his or her performance levels (Houghton & Neck, 2002).

Constructive thought pattern strategies make up the third and final dimension. These strategies can be described as the construction and maintenance of functional thinking patterns—or how one thinks about motivation and creates positive ways of thinking (Norris, 2008). Strategies specific to this category include visualizing successful performance, self-talk and evaluating beliefs and assumptions.

- **Visualizing successful performance:** developing mental images of successful future performance;
- **Self-talk:** conversing with oneself in the mind, can be positive or negative;
- **Evaluating beliefs and assumptions:** evaluating (and challenging, if necessary) personal beliefs, values, and assumptions. Often dysfunctional thought processes result from underlying dysfunctional beliefs and assumptions.

Through a process of self-analysis, one can identify and replace negative beliefs or assumptions with more sensible ones; similarly, negative self-talk should be replaced by more positive self-talk, i.e., utilizing an "I think I can" mentality. Again, having positive thought patterns regarding motivation can have a significantly positive effect on individual performance outcomes.

Each of the dimensions and strategies (subscales) outlined above provide a rationale as to how individuals perceive themselves in the leadership domain. These strategies can be used to create a picture about how one sees oneself intrapersonally—and successful application of these strategies can assist in laying the foundation for success.

Purpose & Objectives

For those in the field of Extension, it is evident that every Extension educator plays a role in the realm of community leadership. The purpose of the study reported here was to identify how Extension educators perceive themselves as leaders, with specific focus on how they self-direct and motivate themselves to success. To achieve this purpose, the following objectives were established:

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents;
2. Ascertain self-perceptions of Extension educators within the three self-leadership dimensions; and
3. Determine the level of relationship between age, gender, and length of career (in Extension) with the nine self-leadership subscales that makeup the three-self leadership dimensions.

Methodology

This was a quantitative, exploratory study. The target population for the study was Extension faculty from three states within the Northeast, South, and Deep South regions. Study participants were chosen through random sample from the university's personnel directory, with "Extension faculty" being defined as those individuals in field (administrators were not included within the sample). Within the groups from two of the states, sample numbers were chosen according to the group's total population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). In the third state, due to the small number of faculty across the state, the entire population was considered the sample. Overall, 508 Extension faculty were selected for potential participation, and 249 individuals responded, for a final response rate of 49%.

The instrument used was the revised Self-leadership Questionnaire (Houghton & Neck, 2002) modified for the desired audience. The content and face validity of the instrument was established by having a panel of experts review the instrument. The calculated reliability for each of the strategies listed is between 0.74 and 0.93, indicating an acceptable reliability for the instrument. Internet surveys were sent out and collected through Instant Survey, according to Dillman's (2004) Tailored Design method. Data was downloaded, entered and analyzed in SPSS.

Results

Participant Demographics

A predominant 69% of study participants were female (some individuals chose to

leave this blank, which explains the discrepancy between response and reported numbers). Taking into account respondent's ages, educators tended to fall into the middle groups, with the largest number of individuals (45%) being between the ages of 30-49. A close second fell within the ages 50-64, with 89 (39%) individuals reporting being a part of this group. However, age didn't seem to have any influence on participants' length of career in Extension, with a majority (66%) reporting either less than 5 years experience (35%) or more than 15 years experience (71/226 = 31%). Diversity was very limited among respondents, with around 2% being Hispanic and 3% reporting African American ethnicity. Finally, a majority (58%) of participants have earned Masters' degrees, and there was a relatively even split in respondents' primary program area —37% Youth Development (4-H), 26% Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS), and 21% Agriculture & Natural Resources. Sixteen percent reported working primarily in other Extension program areas.

Participant Perceptions of Self-Leadership Dimensions

The theory of Self-Leadership has three dimensions—behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies. These strategies are what individuals use to motivate themselves towards success.

Table 1.

Central Tendency Statistical Illustration of Respondents' Self-Perceptions Regarding Self-Leadership Dimensions (n = 249)

Dimensions	Sub-scales	Ma, b	SD
Behavior-focused strategies	Self-goal setting	3.91	.90
	Self-reward	2.51	1.20
	Self-punishment	3.50	1.17
	Self-observation	3.88	.82
	Self-cueing	4.40	.80
Natural reward strategies	Focusing thoughts on natural rewards	3.92	.88
Constructive thought	Visualizing successful performance	3.49	1.11

pattern strategies	Self-talk	3.25	1.21
	Evaluating beliefs and assumptions	3.82	.90

Scale: 1 = Not at all accurate, 2 = A little accurate, 3 = Moderately accurate, 4 = Mostly accurate, 5 = Completely accurate.

NOTE: The scale (referenced above) associated with the revised Self-leadership Questionnaire asked individuals to react to the questions according to how accurate they were in describing personal behaviors. The more closely the statements aligned with perceived personal behaviors, the higher the number reported.

When considering the three different dimensions in general, participants were moderately motivated by sub-scales found within each of all three dimensions (Table 1). The subscale that was perceived to be the strongest (or "mostly accurate") by participants was using "self-cuing" for motivation, with a mean of 4.40. In other words, most participants claimed to practice desired behaviors before actually undertaking them. A close second and third were "focusing thoughts on natural rewards" ($x = 3.92$) and "self-goal setting" ($x = 3.91$). Therefore, these Extension educators not only value the intrinsic rewards built into their tasks but also try to set challenging personal goals to work towards. Interestingly, study participants don't use things (either tangible or abstract) to motivate themselves to success—the lowest perceived motivator was "self-reward" and was only found to be *a little accurate* ($x = 2.51$) by participants. The two other sub-scales found to be weaker motivators by participants were "self-talk" ($x = 3.25$) and "visualizing successful performance" ($x = 3.49$).

Other than the "self-reward" strategy, Extension educators perceive themselves as using all of these strategies some of the time—to pave the road to their success. They do not appear to be strongly motivated by abstract or tangible aspects (i.e., money) outside of the rewards associated with their work tasks. This supports previous research conducted by Arnolds and Place (2010) on why educators enter into Extension positions; they do so because of their desire to serve agricultural, rural, and underserved communities; the nature of Extension work; the fit of the position; and the flexibility of their jobs. Educators are motivated to excel within their job not because of money or tangible rewards but because they love what they do within their position with Extension (Arnold & Place, 2010).

Personal goal-setting and self-cueing are both regularly used by participants to move them towards success. Another positive outcome is that it appears Extension educators are relatively aware of themselves, their beliefs, and assumptions and where these come from ("self-observation" and "evaluating beliefs and assumptions"). Overall, other than the high and low outliers, most of the means reported in Table 1 are not different enough for strong disparities to be noted. Operationally it appears that motivation can come from many sources—behavior, natural rewards or thought patterns.

Relationship between Age, Length of Career, and Gender, and Self-Leadership Dimensions

Significant correlations were discovered between self-leadership subscales and the three variables of interest within the study. Focusing in the dimension of constructive thought pattern strategies, significant correlations were found with both age and length of career (Table 2). Regarding age, there is a low negative association between this variable and "self-talk" as well as "evaluating beliefs and assumptions." Similarly, a low negative association was found to exist between length of career in Extension and the same two sub-scales—"self-talk" and "evaluating beliefs and assumptions." Clearly, while these associations were considered low, they still suggest that some constructive thought pattern strategies are used less as participants grow older and move through their Extension career.

Table 2.

Correlations between Self-leadership Subscales and Age, Gender, and Career Length in Extension (n = 249)

		Constructive Thought Pattern Strategies ^a			Behavior-focused Strategies ^a					Natural Reward Strategies ^a
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Gender	r	.112	.113	.113	.251**	.126	.106	.230**	-.017	.171*
	Sig	.103	.093	.094	.000	.060	.114	.001	.804	.011
Age	r	.059	-.204**	-.226**	-.102	.057	.033	-.090	.004	-.094
	Sig	.391	.002	.001	.135	.392	.622	.185	.947	.161

Length of Ext. Career	r	- .025	-.164*	- .176**	-.102	-.033	-.089	-.077	-.099	-.092
	Sig	.720	.015	.009	.133	.622	.182	.260	.141	.170

Each of the subscales within the self-leadership model falls within three general dimensions. These dimensions are denoted with an a.

Subscales = 1 - Visualizing Successful Performance; 2 - Self-talk; 3 - Evaluating Beliefs & Assumptions; 4 - Self-goal Setting; 5 - Self-reward; 6 - Self-punishment; 7 - Self-observation; 8 - Self-cueing; 9 - Focusing Thoughts on Natural Rewards

** - Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* - Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Within behavior-focused strategies, even though this dimension encompasses the most subscales, there were few significant correlations. Both correlations discovered were associated with the gender variable; "self-goal setting" and "self-observation" were both found to have a low positive association with gender. It seems that when we are discussing personal goal-setting and individual observation, females appear to identify more strongly with these strategies than men.

The third dimension, natural reward strategies, which consists of only one subscale (focusing thoughts on natural rewards), showed one significant correlation. Similar to the other correlations found in the study, there was a low positive association found between gender and "focusing thoughts on natural rewards." Again, it appears women are more strongly motivated and rewarded by the task itself (or rewards built into the task) than are men.

Conclusions, Recommendations, & Implications

Overall, Extension educators use a variety of strategies to motivate themselves to succeed. It appears that Extension educators are pretty strongly aware of how to successfully reward themselves and plan their behavior to make successful leadership choices. However, the lack of awareness of how their thought processes contribute to leadership success is troubling; a noted implication of the study reported here is to incorporate more literature regarding motivation and leadership success into core trainings and in-services. Specifically, aspects such as how to successfully "self-talk," evaluate one's beliefs and assumptions, and visualize successful performance should be incorporated into future Extension professional development curriculum.

For those who work in Extension professional development, it is important to be

aware of the motivation strategies educators identify with; each of the strategies included within the dimensions of self-leadership serves an important role. In addition, this knowledge is a perfect segue into fundamental motivation theory and can be useful when determining what type of motivation successfully encourages different individuals. Employing the Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ) within agent professional development would provide a good appraisal of what aspects should be included within future professional development opportunities.

Taking this one step further, it is important to note that Extension organizations are always looking for ways to advance the level of leadership of our employees. In many cases, we are searching for ways to not only advance leadership competencies, but to advance the leadership capacity of our organization. For example, how can we get more people to step up and take advantage of leadership opportunities?

Understanding motivation and how educators motivate themselves to succeed can provide a piece to this puzzle; once we understand what motivates individuals, then we can develop ways to empower them into moving into leadership roles—in essence, building leadership capacity for the organization. This knowledge must transcend all organizational levels, however; it is just as important for Extension administrators to understand motivation strategies as it is for Extension educators.

In addition, professional development in the area of self-leadership should be available to educators throughout their Extension careers. Strong and Harder (2009) suggested that "the benefits gained by investing in Extension's current employees may ultimately enhance Extension's ability to fulfill its mission as the educational outreach branch of the land-grant university" (para. 30). Ultimately, in-service trainings should focus on defining self-leadership and describing the different dimensions and sub-scales, but should also inform educators on how to use these strategies positively and to their advantage. And this is just as salient for educators beginning their Extension career as those with extensive Extension experience.

While there were correlations found between self-leadership sub-scales and age, gender, and length of Extension career, these numbers were at best low associations. Still, there are practical implications to consider. It is reasonable to assume that one would look at one's leadership style and motivations differently depending on how old or what stage they were at in their career. Both "self-talk" and "evaluating beliefs and assumptions" showed a negative low association with age. In other words, as individuals get older, they use these strategies less. Similarly, these two strategies are used less the longer the individual's career in Extension (obviously connected to the age variable).

What does this mean? Perhaps more experienced Extension educators think they know themselves and don't think they need to consider evaluating their beliefs and assumptions. Or maybe they feel their self-efficacy is so strong that "self-talk" is unnecessary. Whatever the reasons may be, it is important for educators to understand these personal motivators so they are better able to make the best use of their strengths. In addition, an individual who realizes some motivators are not as personally effective as others could benefit from additional emphasis and development in those areas.

A final implication of improved leadership knowledge for educators is improved leadership out within our communities. As relationship-builders, purveyors of information, and opinion leaders, Extension educators serve in a community leadership role. With a thorough knowledge of how motivation works personally, educators would be more likely to apply this when working with community stakeholders. This could translate into a wide variety of benefits, possibly even leading to aspects such as increased community activity or more community members being motivated to seek community leadership positions.

It is noted that the reported here study should not be generalized beyond the sample population. To make future results more generalizable, future replication with a larger population is recommended. In addition, the study should also be replicated with Extension administration to see what motivation strategies are used most frequently by those in administrative positions. This would allow us to compare strategies used and perhaps differences in perceptions from an educator and administrator viewpoint. As mentioned earlier in the conclusions, the bottom line is to expand the leadership skills of educators, with the ultimate goal of expanding Extension leadership capacity throughout the organization. By encouraging Extension administrators to become more familiar with the motivation strategies they use to motivate themselves, this could help give them an appropriate paradigm on how these strategies are used by their employees and how to translate all of this knowledge into empowering more individuals to step into leadership roles within the organization—successfully.

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