

Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century

Developing Leadership Skills in Volunteers

Landry Lockett,
Assistant Professor and
Extension Specialist

Courtney Dodd,
Extension Program
Specialist-4-H

The Texas A&M System

Helping Extension volunteers develop leadership skills is very important. In fact, building leadership ability is a component of all major volunteer management models and is considered an essential component of successful volunteer programs (Boyce, 1971; Penrod, 1991; Culp et al., 1998; Safrit and Schmiesing, 2004; Boyd, 2004; Safrit et. al. 2005; Lockett, 2007).

Extension has always focused on leadership development. Developing leaders at the local level to lead change and solve local problems is an integral part of Extension's program development process and one of the unique contributions Extension makes in most counties. With steady population growth and tightening budgets, Extension today needs even more volunteers with effective leadership skills to help meet the demand for Extension educational programming. When volunteers become leaders and share the ownership of and responsibility for volunteer programs, everyone benefits.

Leadership Defined

Many research studies have focused on leadership and the characteristics of a leader. Some of these characteristics are:

- Attracting people and making things happen (Maxwell, 1999)
- Creating a vision and translating that vision into action (Useem, 1998)
- Communicating effectively (Witherspoon, 2004)
- Collaborating and encouraging the pursuit of mutually beneficial purposes (Hackman and Johnson, 2000)
- Influencing individual and group behavior (Hersey, 1984)
- Managing change (Kotter, 2001)
- Motivating others to achieve goals (DuBrin, 2004)
- Solving problems (Luke, 1998)
- Transactional event or process between a leader and follower (volunteer) (Nort-house, 2010)



Many more aspects of leadership could be added to this list. With so many theories and insights to consider and so much advice available, it is helpful to focus on one definition of leadership that is very fitting for Extension work: “Leadership is a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (Komives et al., 1998).

Extension volunteer administrators and Extension volunteers are a team. Leadership is not only about a position, a title, or a specific function within a volunteer program. People display leadership when they take action for the “common good”—internally within the volunteer program and externally when interacting with the public through advocacy or educational programming. Komives et al. (1998) note that this kind of leadership includes elements of inclusiveness, empowerment, ethics, purposefulness, and process orientation. As Extension educators, we should take stock of how well we ourselves are developing these characteristics and how well we are helping volunteers do so. These skills will be improved throughout one’s career or volunteer tenure if one is intentional about developing them.

Helping Volunteers Improve Their Skills

As volunteer administrators, we want to build leadership competencies among our volunteers. The question is: How do we do that? Do we offer a workshop or a short course on leadership? Do we have strategic one-on-one talks with volunteers when we want them to step up to new leadership roles? It could be all of these things and more. In fact, our volunteer programs are likely already improving the leadership skills of our volunteers whether we realize it or not. But we can add more purpose to activities that are already taking place within our volunteer programs and offer volunteers intentional leadership development with minimal extra effort.

Komives et al. (2005) conducted a study to understand the process people go through in acquiring leadership attributes. They called the compilation of these skills a person’s “leadership identity,” or capacity or tendency to lead others. The researchers studied how leadership identity develops and changes over time and how it is influenced by other people. They described three primary categories of influence that interact in the development of a person’s leadership identity. These categories are Developing Self, Developmental Influences, and Group Influences. The components of each category are as follows:

Developing Self	Developmental Influences	Group Influences
Deepening self-awareness	Adult influences	Engaging in groups
Building self-confidence	Peer influences	Learning from membership continuity
Establishing interpersonal efficacy	Meaningful involvement	Changing perceptions of groups
Applying new skills	Reflective learning	
Expanding motivations		

Volunteer administrators and Extension volunteer programs contribute to both the Developmental Influences and Group Influences a volunteer encounters. It is in these two areas that we should focus our efforts in affecting the leadership identity of Extension volunteers. Improvement within the context of these two categories will positively affect the Developing Self.

Developmental Influences

Komives et al. (2005) noted four essential developmental influences that foster the development of leadership identity: adult influences, peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning. Participants in all Extension volunteer programs experience these essential influences.

Adult influences. Adult influences on volunteers happen primarily within Extension's 4-H and Youth Development program area. Adults play different roles in helping young people become leaders. Adults can support young people and help them build self-confidence. They can encourage young people to serve in leadership roles (county Youth Board, task force, committee, teen leader) and then guide them in those roles. Verbal and written communication that affirms the child's leadership aptitude makes a lasting impression and may inspire a child to accept more leadership responsibility.

Peer influences. The camaraderie and mutual learning that come from associating with like-minded volunteers are a major benefit of participation and can keep volunteers engaged in Extension programs over time. Active volunteer members can be a great influence on new volunteers as they help them learn what they need to know and orient them to their position. (See D-1460, Volunteer

Administration in the 21st Century: Orientation of Volunteers.) Formal mentorship programs are a great way to promote leadership skills in volunteers. Observing seasoned volunteers fulfilling their roles, conducting Extension educational programs, and answering questions gives newer volunteers insight and knowledge to draw upon in similar situations. As time goes by, those in mentor relationships become collaborators and friends.

Meaningful involvement. Volunteer experiences often offer hands-on experiential learning opportunities where leadership identities evolve. As volunteers work with other volunteers and with program participants, they learn about themselves and develop new skills. They come to understand that they are part of something bigger than themselves and that their individual achievement helps the whole volunteer program.

When we involve advisory groups such as Leadership Advisory Boards or Program Area Committees in identifying issues and developing and delivering educational programs, we allow them to engage in worthwhile projects rather than "meeting just to meet." This meaningful involvement builds their leadership identities.

A key word in this section is "meaningful" involvement. It is important that we do not waste the time of our volunteers, which makes them feel that they do not matter. When we use volunteers to their capacity, they benefit personally by gaining new skills and Extension benefits from their perspective, creativity, knowledge and hard work.

Reflective learning. Structured opportunities for critical reflection can be important in developing one's leadership identity. Processing experiences

takes learning deeper, promotes self-assessment, and generates insight for improving programs. Examples include meaningful conversations, completing a survey, writing an outcome interpretation piece, or even journaling. Having committee chairs or project leaders complete a summary that lists accomplishments, lessons learned, and ideas for future projects allows them to realize that they have grown and gained valuable insight along the way.

Group Influences

Group influences include engaging in groups, learning from membership continuity, and changing perceptions of groups (Komives et al., 2005).

Engaging in groups. Research shows that group involvement has a tremendous impact on the development of individuals' leadership skills. There is a strong relationship between a group's culture and individuals' views of themselves and how that culture influenced their leadership identity. People naturally seek a sense of belonging in groups and will find in our volunteer programs a "sense of place" as our mission and core values reflect their own.

Group interaction builds many fundamental competencies essential in a good leader, including relationship building, trust, valuing diversity, conflict resolution, and facilitation skills. Group interaction is not limited to the effect of the entire volunteer program on a volunteer; the same benefits are derived from subgroups such as committees and project teams.

Serving within the context of a group often brings the security and empowerment that many volunteers need in order to be fully engaged and productive, as opposed to feeling timid, or alone, or

afraid of messing up. A group will also provide "checks and balances" for volunteers whose leadership style is too directive—which is sometimes a problem in Extension. Groups have a way of pulling those volunteers back and encouraging them to practice shared leadership. Therefore, volunteer administrators should make it a priority to determine, at least annually, the projects and/or committees on which each volunteer will serve. Every volunteer should know his or her role and understand which other volunteers they will be working with, and for what purpose.

Part of our job as volunteer administrators, as well as one function of the volunteer group as a whole, is to gently remind individual volunteers that they are to serve the group and Extension's mission, not stand out as leaders themselves. This will help to create a volunteer program culture that is team-oriented, encouraging, accepting and relaxed.

Learning from membership continuity. Membership continuity refers to individuals being involved consistently over time instead of volunteering sporadically or for only one event. Committed, long-term volunteers will be exposed to many learning opportunities that can help them develop leadership competencies such as organizational and management skills. Seasoned volunteers will increasingly become aware of their responsibility for the development of newer volunteers. They will assume responsibility and take on leadership positions.

Group interaction influences volunteers' own self-awareness and shapes the way they view groups and their roles within groups. Volunteers learn that they must depend on others in the group to accomplish mutual goals, and they learn that working with others is more productive than working alone. This is a founda-

tional truth and the basis for most, if not all, Extension volunteer groups.

To build membership continuity, volunteer administrators should try to create an experience that makes volunteers want to continue volunteering within our programs. All of the top volunteer management models help us understand how to engage and sustain volunteers. Take time to familiarize yourself with a volunteer management model, such as ISOTURE (Boyce, 1971). (See E-457, *Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century: ISOTURE: A Model for Volunteer Management*.) We should strive to make our volunteer groups safe places for volunteers to try on roles and practice processes. This will happen when there is continuity, organized structure, and policies that promote volunteer retention.

Changing perceptions of groups.

Being an active volunteer tends to change an individual's perception of our groups. At first, volunteers may view the volunteer program as just a collection of friends or like-minded people. As they better understand the purposes and objectives of the program, they understand that they are serving in an organization with structure and roles. Eventually, volunteers will see that volunteer programs are entities to develop and that they have a responsibility to be part of that group development.

Extension volunteer administrators should actively facilitate this positive change in perception by offering orientation and training activities and by involving volunteers in strategic planning and advocacy/interpretation events. When volunteers gain an insider's view of the volunteer program, they are prepared and motivated to be advocates for the volunteer program specifically and for Texas AgriLife Extension as a whole.

As with all developmental processes, the individual volunteers in a program will be at various points in the process of becoming leaders and finding their leadership identity. This can cause conflict when they don't understand other people's thoughts, actions and perspectives. The volunteer administrator's words and actions will "set the tone" for creating an environment of security, trust and acceptance.

Other Helpful Resources

Other resources are helpful for leadership training within an Extension context. One is Texas AgriLife Extension's "Building Connections: Community Leadership Program," located at <http://buildingconnections.tamu.edu/>. Another is "The Community Tool Box" created by educators at the University of Kansas (<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/index.aspx>). These sites contain impressive leadership training activities and curricula.

If you have a volunteer or other person in your county who is in the early stages of a career associated with agriculture, you may want to nominate him or her for Extension's Texas Agricultural Lifetime Leadership (TALL) program. The goal of this program is to "create a cadre of Texas leaders to help ensure effective understanding and encourage positive action on key issues, theories, policy and economics that will advance the agricultural industry." More information on the TALL program can be found at <http://tall.tamu.edu/>.

Summary

Applying these concepts in Extension is a way to develop the leadership capacity of individual volunteers and make our volunteer groups environments for

shared leadership. Volunteer administrators cannot make volunteers change, but we can create environments that promote learning and encourage volunteers to try new things in a supportive climate.

These concepts may also help volunteer administrators understand why some individuals are frustrated in particular volunteer group experiences. For example, it may be that a particular volunteer has progressed in developing many leadership skills and understands the value of shared leadership, but serves on a project committee whose chairperson has a very directive leadership style. Being aware of such situations makes a volunteer administrator better able to handle them.

Our goal is to design volunteer programs that are full of learning experiences and that foster the development of leadership skills. As the confidence of individual volunteers builds over time, they will be willing to become more involved and to take more active group roles. Leadership development keeps experienced volunteers challenged, interested and committed to the organization's future (Connors, 1995). Volunteers benefit personally and professionally when we help them build their leadership skills, and Extension benefits from the enhanced performance of these individuals in planning and conducting Extension educational programs.

References

- Boyce, M.V. 1971. A systematic approach to leadership development. Paper presented at the County and Area 4-H Youth Agents Conference in Pennsylvania and Missouri.
- Culp, K., C.A. Deppe, J.X. Castillo and B.J. Wells. 1998. The GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 16 (4).
- DuBrin, A.W. 2004. *Leadership*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hackman, M.Z. and C.E. Johnson. 2000. *Leadership*. 3rd ed. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland.
- Hersey, P. 1984. *The Situational Leader*. Escondido, CA: Center for Leadership Studies.
- Komives, S.R., N. Lucas and T.R. McMahon. 1998. *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Komives, S.R., J.E. Owen, S.D. Longenecker, F.C. Mainella and L. Osteen. 2005. Developing a Leadership Identity: A Grounded Theory. *Journal of College Student Development* 46 (6).
- Kotter, J.P. 1999. *What Leaders Really Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Lockett, L.L. 2007. Competencies, Benefits and Limitations for Master Gardener Coordinators: A Delphi Technique Involving County Extension Agents in Texas. PhD Dissertation, Texas A&M University.
- Luke, J.S. 1998. *Catalytic Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Maxwell, J.C. 1999. *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.
- Northouse, P.G. 2010. *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Penrod, K.M. 1991. Leadership Involving Volunteers: The L-O-O-P Model. *Journal of Extension* 29 (4) Article 4FEA2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1991winter/a2.php>.
- Safrit, R.D. and R.J. Schmiesing. 2004. A suggested model for contemporary volunteer management: Qualitative

research bridging the professional literature with best practices. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* 22 (4):34–41.

Safrit, R.D., R.J. Schmiesing, J.A. Gliem and R.R. Gliem. 2005. Competencies for contemporary volunteer administration: An empirical model bridging theory with professional best practice. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 23 (3):5–15.

Useem, M. 1998. *The Leadership Moment*. New York: Random House.

Witherspoon, P.D. 2004. Communication at the Center of Leadership Education: Looking to the Future. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Communication Association, Chicago.

Produced by Texas A&M AgriLife Communications
Extension publications can be found on the Web at: <http://AgriLifeBookstore.org>
Visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at <http://AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu>

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System.

New