A Leadership Reality Check Involving County Extension Leaders and Their Stakeholders

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Abstract

The perceptions of stakeholders as well as leaders' self-perceptions are critical in maximizing leadership and outreach capacity within higher education and extension organizations. This study demonstrates a leadership style assessment that includes perspectives of both leaders and stakeholders. West Virginia University Extension Service county program coordinators and local extension service committee members completed surveys scoring perceptions for four types of leadership frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Among coordinators, 39 percent reported using none of the four leadership frames frequently; 33 percent reported a single frame style, 15 percent a paired frame style, and 12 percent a multiple frame style. In contrast, committee members reported 21 percent of coordinators used no frame style, 18 percent a single frame style, 6 percent a paired frame style, and 55 percent a multiple frame style. Results suggest that committee members perceive more frequent use of leadership styles than is reflected in coordinators' self-perceptions.

Introduction

"Wise leaders understand their own strengths, work to expand them, and build teams that can provide leadership in all four modes—structural, political, human resource, and symbolic" *(Bolman and Deal 1997, 317)*. The contemporary leadership frame model created by researchers Bolman and Deal provides four lenses or frames as tools that leaders use to understand the behavior of the organization and define their roles. The structural frame emphasizes organizational goals, roles, policies, and hierarchies. The human resource frame views an organization in terms of its people. Leaders using this frame are attuned to the relationships, needs, and motivation of employees, clients, and stakeholders. The political frame concentrates on the issues of power and resources. Using this frame, leaders can see power, coalition building, and networking as tools to accomplish tasks and goals. The symbolic frame focuses on culture and meaning to shape the culture and bring meaning, clarity, and predictability to

an organization. The leadership frame concept provides a tool that university extension administrators and faculty can apply to perform a "reality check" on personal and organizational leadership.

The future success of higher education organizations such as extension services depends on strong and effective leadership at state and local levels. Yet little is known about leadership behaviors, skills, and leadership frame use of extension leaders who serve at the local level. Even less is known about how stakeholders may perceive the leadership of local leaders. The literature gap concerning extension leadership reflects a need to expand the body of knowledge. In addition to bridging the gap in research, studies may provide guidance for improved management, leadership practices, and engagement of local advisory groups.

Purpose

This study explored the leadership styles of West Virginia University Extension Service's (WVU-ES) leaders at the local level. (See table 1 for leadership style descriptors.) Leadership styles were examined to identify and understand the specific frame patterns of the WVU-ES leadership core—county program coordinators. Additionally, the study investigated the relationship and congruence of leadership styles from the perspectives of the county extension service committee members who interact with the county program coordinators.

Methodology

Participants in the study included full-time extension faculty members in county extension offices throughout West Virginia. County program coordinators are required to spend approximately 20 percent of their time in county extension program coordination, internal and external communication, and resource development. At the time of the study, there were fifty-one coordinators, of which thirty-five were selected for the study based on having at least one year's experience and no conflict of interest with the study.

Notification letters were sent to coordinators by the director of extension to endorse the study and encourage participation. The Leadership Orientations (Self) survey was e-mailed as an attachment to each coordinator. The e-mail message explained the purpose of the study, requested participation, and assured each recipient of confidentiality. A response rate of 94 percent from the sample yielded thirty-three completed surveys. This represented 62 percent of the total coordinator population.

Table 1
Leadership Frames and Descriptors

Leadership Frame	Descriptors
Structural Leader in a *directive* role	1. Efficiency and organization 2. Clear, well-developed control systems and policies 3. Managing systems, structures 4. Budgeting 5. Planning, goal setting, and accomplishment
Human Resource Leader in a *facilitative* role	1. Evaluation, reports, records 2. Developing a motivated staff, empowerment efforts 3. Involving staff—task forces, teams, committees 4. Assisting and advocating for others 5. Recognizing and rewarding achievement 6. Communicating 7. Training, recruiting
Political Leader in a *collaboration building* role	1. Managing conflict among different groups 2. Building organizational alliances, networking 3. Obtaining needed resources through negotiation, bargaining 4. Communicating the organizational image externally
Symbolic Leader in a *visionary* role	1. Communicating the organizational image internally 2. Building a vision and commitment to the vision 3. Creating or revitalizing ceremonies, culture, and symbols 4. Using personal effort to set example of "best practices"

Source: Adapted from *Bolman and Deal 1992*; *Neumann and Bensimon 1990*; and *Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum 1989*.

The second population included WVU-ES county extension service committee members. The county extension service committee is mandated by West Virginia state law to serve in an advisory capacity to the respective county extension program. Each committee includes eight representatives of specified constituent groups. Coordinators work closely with the committee to secure local support and advice on budgeting, staffing, and programming.

There were approximately four hundred committee members statewide at the time of the study. Representing the same thirty-five counties as the county program coordinator sample were 260 committee members. A total of 240 committee members met the eligibility criterion of one year of committee experience and were invited to participate. They were informed of the study by the director of extension via a mailed communication. Of those 240 invited members, 180 agreed to participate by completing a survey about the leadership of the county program coordinator in their county. Participants received follow-up cover letters and the Leadership Orientations (Other) survey. The 180 respondents represented a response rate of 75 percent. A final total of 152 acceptable surveys from committee members represented 63 percent of the committee population.

The Leadership Orientations (Self) and Leadership Orientations (Other) surveys by Bolman and Deal *(Bolman 2001)* measured perceived use of leadership frame styles. The survey included eight items on each of the four leadership frames (structural, human resource, political, symbolic) for a total of thirty-two items. For example, on the question "Think very clearly and logically," participants used a five-point Likert scale of 1 (Never), 2 (Occasionally), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), and 5 (Always) to rate how often each item was true.

The Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software was used for descriptive and statistical procedures. Descriptive procedures and Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients were used to analyze each independent variable. These variables were gender, years of extension experience, program center assignment, and office staffing pattern. An alpha of .05 was used to establish significance level. Leadership Orientations (Self) survey scores and mean scores were computed for the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic leadership frames. Survey scores were categorized into four leadership styles: no frame style, single frame style, paired frame style, and multiple frame style. Frame choice(s) and resulting predominant leadership style(s) were identified.

Cronbach's alpha on each of the four leadership frames was calculated for both coordinator ($n = 33$) and committee member responses ($n = 152$). For coordinators, the coefficient alpha on the survey items ranged from 0.9141 to 0.9211, with a total alpha of 0.9236. Coefficient alpha for committee member responses ranged from 0.9768 to 0.9780. The total alpha for this group of
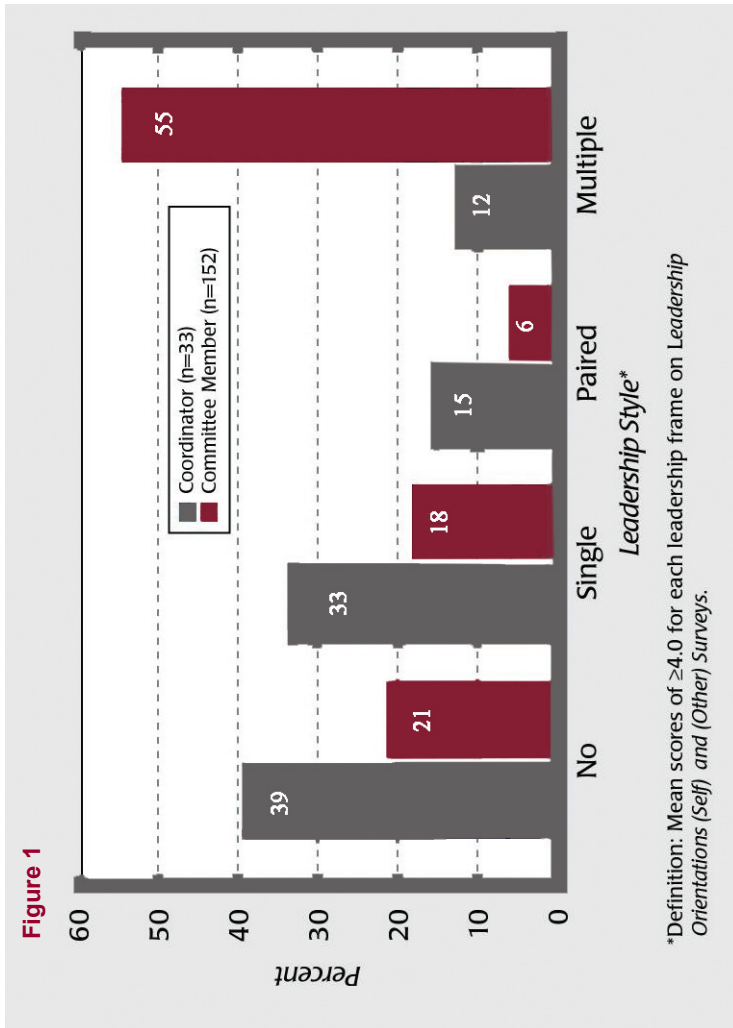
survey responses was 0.9786. This compares with Bolman and Deal's reliability analysis of 0.920 from their survey research.

Results

County program coordinator demographic data from thirty-three respondents showed that 72.7 percent were male ($n = 24$) and 27.3 percent were female ($n = 9$). There were 30.3 percent with less than 10 years of extension experience ($n = 10$), 36.4 percent with 10 to 20 years experience ($n = 12$), and 33.3 percent with more than 20 years experience ($n = 11$). There was a range of 1 to 33 years of experience and an average of 16 years. By program center assignment, 69.7 percent were in the Program Center for Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Community Development ($n = 23$), and 30.3 percent were in the Program Center for 4-H and Youth, Family, and Adult Development ($n = 10$). Coordinators were also categorized by the number of professional office staff in their county. There were 33.3 percent with one staff in their county ($n = 11$), 36.4 percent with two ($n = 12$), and 30.3 percent with three ($n = 10$). Analysis of demographic variables indicated that a significant negative relationship existed between program center assignment and frame style ($r = -.404$). Coordinators in the Program Center for Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Community Development endorsed the paired and multiple frame styles more frequently than did the others. The correlations of leadership frame style with gender, years of experience, and number of office staff were not significant.

Regarding coordinators' leadership frame scores, the human resource frame had the highest rate of endorsement. On a scale of 0 to 5, the human resource mean score for all coordinators was 3.9; the structural frame mean score was 3.7; the political frame mean score was 3.5; and the symbolic frame mean score was 3.3. Coordinators rated their use of the human resource frame higher than that of the other frames. In contrast, they perceived that they used the symbolic frame less often than any other frame. The mean scores for all leadership frames were below 4.0, which was the defined score for frequent frame use.

Coordinators' self-rated leadership frame scores were categorized into four leadership styles: no frame style, single frame style, paired frame style, and multiple frame style. Figure 1 graphically presents the leadership styles of coordinator self-ratings. The majority of coordinators (39%) reported none of the four leadership frames were used frequently. The single frame style was the

Figure 1

Definition: Mean scores of ≥4.0 for each leadership frame on Leadership Orientations (Self) and (Other) Surveys.

next most frequently used (33%), followed by paired frame style (15%) and multiple frame style (12%). Nearly three-fourths of the coordinators had a no frame style or a single frame style.

Human resource and structural frames were a common theme. For example, among the single frame style coordinators, half used the structural frame frequently and half used the human resource frame frequently. The most common paired frame style was the structural and human resource approach. Those who rated 4.0 or higher for three or four frames had a pattern of structural–human resource–political or a pattern of structural–human resource–

symbolic. Because the human resource frame had the highest scores, it was often used as a single pattern, paired with the structural frame, and used in multiple frame combinations as well.

Results from the committee member surveys provided a different perspective on coordinators' leadership frames and styles. Each coordinator was rated by committee members (average 4.6; range 2–8). Mean scores indicated that committee members perceived coordinators to use the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames frequently. The structural and human resource frames were each scored by 66.7 percent of committee members as frequently used. The next highest scoring was the political frame, with 54.5 percent, then the symbolic frame style, with 51.5 percent. Committee member mean scores were much higher than coordinator scores on all four leadership frames.

How did coordinators' self-rated leadership styles compare with mean ratings from their county extension service committee members? Figure 1 shows the scores from coordinator self-ratings and committee member other-ratings. Committee members perceived coordinators to use multiple frame styles more frequently than coordinators perceived that they used them. The majority of committee members reported a multiple frame style (55%); other results included no frame style (21%), single frame style (18%), and paired frame style (6%). Eight of the thirty-three (24%) coordinator–committee member matched scores agreed on the leadership style; twenty-five (76%) of the matched scores did not agree. Coordinators with self-rated multiple frame styles were significantly more likely to also be perceived by committee members as multiple frame style leaders ($r = .361$).

Discussion

The effectiveness of university extension organizations is dependent to a large degree on county-level coordinators fulfilling their leadership roles. Coordinators are a link between the administration and the faculty, staff, and volunteers who deliver educational programs and services. They develop relationships with local decision makers and external bodies for financial and programmatic collaboration. They are at the hub of educational programs and services and are known as "the face of the university" within their communities. Coordinator skills and behaviors must reflect the growing multiplicity of situations and problems that occur at the county level. However, the extent to which county-level leaders use multiple leadership frames has not been clear.

Contemporary leadership studies endorse the concept of multiple leadership frames. Research demonstrates that effective leaders and managers rely on multiple perspectives or frames, and those who use multiple frames of leadership are perceived by others as more effective *(Bensimon 1989, 1990; Bolman and Deal 1991, 1992; Heimovics, Herman, and Jurkiewicz Coughlin 1993)*. This research constitutes a first step in uncovering new and significant information relevant to the perceptions of leadership among local extension leaders and a key constituent group, county extension service committees.

The study's major findings included a consistent pattern of leadership frame choice from the perceptions of county program coordinators and county extension service committee members. Human resource and structural frame skills were clearly seen as strengths by both groups. This is not surprising, because personnel (human resource frame) and budgets (structural frame) are the most demanding and visible tasks carried out by the coordinators.

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In contrast to the leadership frame pattern, there were vastly different perceptions about the frequency of leadership frame use. Leadership frame scores by committee members were consistently higher than self-rated coordinator scores, indicating that committee members definitely see coordinators as more skillful than the coordinators see themselves. While the overall trend was a wide difference between coordinators' and committee members' ratings, self-identified multiple frame coordinators were significantly likely to be rated as using a multiple frame leadership style by their respective committee members. This finding may mean that the coordinators with high skill levels in all four leadership frames are more self-confident and, consequently, these skills are also recognized by others.

There were no significant relationships between coordinator leadership frame styles and the background characteristics gender, years of experience, and office staffing levels. Other research

projects related to these or similar variables have not produced consistent results. However, several studies have shown that more years of leadership experience resulted in greater leadership skill, particularly in the political and symbolic frames. More experienced leaders may also be more likely to approach decisions and situations with multiple leadership frames. Program center assignment was the only characteristic found to have a significant relationship to leadership style. Coordinators assigned to the Program Center for Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Community Development were significantly more likely to report frequent use of the paired and multiple frame styles than those from the Program Center for 4-H and Youth, Family, and Adult Development. There are several possible reasons for this, including inherent differences among faculty in each center, their backgrounds, expectations, and skills sets. Additional research with a larger sample would be necessary to further explore this finding.

The predominance of a self-rated no frame style is much higher in this study than has been found in other recent studies of academic leaders. The percentage of leaders seen as using each style varies greatly among studies. In fact, most studies using the Leadership Orientations (Self) survey found that the multiple frame style was used most frequently *(Borden 2000; McClellan-Holt 2000)*. One study was found in the literature using the Leadership Orientations (Self) survey and county extension employees. Mean survey scores of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service home economists were 4.15 human resource, 3.75 structural, 3.58 symbolic, and 3.35 political *(Hollingsworth 1995)*. Compared to other studies, county program coordinators rated themselves much lower in each of the four frames, which resulted in a no frame style. There are several possible reasons for this contrast in findings. The coordinator role is relatively new to the organization and it may lack role definition. There appears to be greater emphasis on managerial responsibilities than on leadership. It is also possible that this finding is related to a lack of leadership training for coordinators. Further research is needed to determine why coordinators in this study had comparatively low self-ratings.

Certain limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Because of the complexity of leadership behaviors and skills, the survey measures only a small number of the potential aspects of leadership. The instrument used in this study, like any tool, will not provide a comprehensive measurement of leadership. The

validity and reliability of the instrument have been tested with credible results. However, there are always some limitations to the accuracy of each item in measuring what it is intended to measure. The Leadership Orientations (Other) version of the survey instrument has been used with peers and subordinates; however, it has not been tested with stakeholders. Furthermore, since the subjects for this study were drawn from a single organization, the potential for application to other organizations may be limited by the results' reflection of traits unique to WVU-ES. Leadership is a context-dependent concept in that different situations require different styles and frames of leadership. To validate the results, research is needed involving large samples of county leaders and committee members from different state extension systems.

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Conclusions

This study measured leadership frame patterns from two different perspectives. Results showed that leadership perceptions of local extension leaders and committee members were distinctly dissimilar. These results point to the need for extension organizations to recognize how different leadership perspectives may impact their organizational effectiveness in carrying out local programming. For example, coordinators who exhibit low self-ratings may compromise their own confidence and capability of meeting the constant challenges of university public service. Additionally, stakeholder perceptions may shape the public image of county leaders, ultimately affecting the local extension programs. When key stakeholders, such as committee members, perceive that local leaders are competent and skilled, they may contribute to maintaining the viability of the extension organization at the community level.

This study has implications for higher education and extension systems:

• the Leadership Orientations surveys may assist in gathering valuable input on leadership from two perspectives;

- the survey results may add insight into leaders' strengths and weaknesses and thereby identify a need for organizational strategies such as skill development in the four leadership frames;
- training focused on political and symbolic leadership skills may help local leaders achieve a balanced, multiple frame style;
- local extension leaders may benefit from a multiple frame approach to leadership development training; and
- stakeholders may become involved in more open and continuous dialogue about coordinator responsibilities to further develop a shared understanding of how leaders work to fulfill local needs and expectations.

As organizations strive to improve leadership strategies, leadership effectiveness, and stakeholder perceptions, research is needed that engages stakeholders in the process. This essential step must not be overlooked. Indeed, to be truly successful in engaging the public, higher education organization leaders must know how they are perceived by others.

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