

# **Eco-Leadership Among County 4-H Programs: Relationship to Success and Best Practices for Organizations**

## **Introduction**

Our society's understanding of what leadership is, and what a leader should be, has undergone a significant shift in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditional definitions of leadership dating to the 1900s might describe the phenomenon as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2013, p. 3). This understanding of leadership is rooted in what Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz (1998) call an industrial, or mechanistic, paradigm, which focuses on the preeminence of individual positional leaders and the machine-like qualities of organizations. While such a conceptualization of leadership was appropriate — and effective — during the Industrial Revolution, as the Western world entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-driven economy, the industrial paradigm's reliance on individual leaders to provide 'the leadership' for organizations was revealed to be untenable in this increasingly complex, interdependent, and interconnected world. Leadership evolved to meet those challenges.

At the turn of the century, Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz (1998) and others identified an emerging ecological paradigm in leadership studies. The ecological paradigm of leadership focuses on the systemic nature of leadership. Leadership is no longer understood as the actions or properties of an individual leader holding a position of authority, but, rather, a collective process that involves both leaders and followers co-creating leadership. Under this paradigm, there is, of course, still individual positional leaders, but their new role is to "assist in the emergence of leadership, rather than creating change through executive orders and decision" (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005, p. 331). This approach enables organizations to harness the talent, creativity, and energy of all employees and stakeholders, rather than relying on an individual, or select few, leaders to provide leadership (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2010; Western, 2013).

Despite this paradigm shift, a majority of organizational leadership development programs continue to focus on individual positional leaders who function in a top-down, hierarchical manner. This disconnect between the above-mentioned best practices and current leadership development practices is particularly evident in organizations whose very structure lends themselves to ecological forms of leadership.

One quintessential example is Cooperative Extension's county 4-H programs. 4-H represents the interconnected, nested ecosystems described by Allen, Stelzner, and Wielkiewicz (1998), which, in addition to existing at the federal, state, and local levels, also consists of innumerable connections with local communities, organizations, non-profits, businesses, schools, and families — including a collective leadership structure known in [state] as the county 4-H association, which engages volunteers in the leadership of the program.

However, leadership development efforts in [state] are still largely invested in the individual Extension 4-H agent — a position which suffers considerable turnover and, therefore, negatively impacts programmatic success (Strong & Harder, 2009). However, it is possible that county 4-H programs adopting a more ecological approach to leadership would distribute leadership capacity and responsibility throughout the organization to a greater degree, such that the turnover of an

individual positional leader (i.e., agent) would be less disruptive and, therefore, lead to greater programmatic success in the long term.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study explored the relationship between an ecological approach to leadership among county 4-H association members and organizational success in county 4-H programs in an effort empirically examine the efficacy of ecological approaches to leadership. This study had three research questions:

1. To what extent do county 4-H association volunteers perceive their leadership approach as affecting county 4-H programmatic success.
2. How do county 4-H association volunteers' perceptions of leadership help us better understand the variables associated with programmatic success?

### **Methods**

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used to conduct this study. In this design, we first conducted a quantitative strand of research and then followed up with a second, qualitative strand (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The qualitative strand offers the opportunity to investigate in greater depth and explain initial findings.

In the first, quantitative strand, a researcher-created index was designed to evaluate performance and rank county 4-H programs based on mandatorily reported federal ES237 enrollment data, in combination with United States Census Bureau data. [State] counties were evaluated, and, based on these results, six county 4-H programs were selected to participate in the second, qualitative strand — three of the highest scoring counties and three of the lowest scoring counties.

A researcher-created demographic questionnaire was also distributed to county 4-H association members. The questionnaire collected data on association members' age, gender, race, education level, county, years as an association member, and primary role in the county 4-H program. Simple descriptive statistics were used to characterize the association members. Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was then used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between demographic variables and county index scores.

The second, qualitative strand utilized semi-structured, open-ended focus group sessions with county 4-H association volunteer members and their respective 4-H agents in each of the six counties selected based on county index scores (three from the highest scoring, three from the lowest scoring). Questions were guided by a researcher-developed protocol. *A priori* propositions guided the researchers to interpret quantitative results in light of supporting literature, which led to specific questions being developed. The protocol focused the conversation on encouraging participants to share in their own words their experience with leadership in their county 4-H program. It was comprised of three primary questions: (a) What factors do you feel have contributed to the success of this group?; (b) How does this group approach decision-making?; (c) How does this group ensure continued improvement? Following the focus groups ( $n = 6$ ), which included 33 individual participants, we completed whole-text analysis of verbatim transcripts, employing the constant comparative analytic procedures developed by Corbin and Strauss (2008). We used Atlas.ti to excerpt text and code data using a systematic approach (Ary

et al., 2010). We grouped codes into preliminary categories and used the categories to identify broad themes in the data, as they related to the research questions. The results of this qualitative analysis are reported in the form of themes, which are each supported by participant quotes.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Research Question 1: To what extent do county 4-H association volunteers perceive their leadership approach as affecting county 4-H programmatic success.**

From more than five hours of audio recordings and 125 pages of transcripts emerged six themes (two reported here). Often, these themes appear to be internally conflictual, but differences among county groups are to be expected with extreme case selection. In research question three, a mixed methods analysis is provided assessing the quantitative differences between high and low scoring counties on the qualitative themes described below.

#### **Theme 1: Associations Vary on Phenomena to which The Attribute Success or**

**Failure.** Participants identified a variety of factors affecting their county 4-H program's success or failure. Several were quick to praise the county 4-H agent: "We've had other agents who didn't take the program to the level that Rhonda has. Rhonda has made the leadership quality, since she's been here..." Others attributed success to 4-H club leaders, another positional leader within the program. "We really have strong leaders, and that's where you're going to get your strong clubs..." one participant said. There were other, external factors too, such as meeting community needs, support from local county commissioners, and parental and family involvement. One participant described the level of involvement: "It's not just parents. Whenever we have things like county events, grandparents are showing up, too."

This is generally thought to be the product of human cognitive and evolutionary biases, which cause us to perceive these leaders as directing and controlling an organization; and, consequently, we overestimate their effect on organizational events (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005). Other counties cited a greater number and variety of factors relating to their success. This is consistent with an ecological paradigm of leadership, which seeks to see the connections and interdependencies in complex systems (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005).

**Theme 2: Associations Are Often Not Structured for Success.** Emerging during the discussions of decision making, communication, and organizational learning was the theme that associations were incorrectly structured — not used in the way intended by 4-H. Association members are supposed to come from the community. Instead, nearly all participants cited both coming up through the program — "My name is Linda...I've been involved with 4-H probably since my kids were cloverbuds" — and having other current roles within the program, such as a sub-advisory committee spokesperson. One woman typified this situation saying, "I just feel I'm [here] to give my dog report, but I enjoy being part of the discussion and giving my opinion, as well. I'm not really sure what my role is..."

In an organization meant to connect 4-H to the community through strategic recruiting to the association, a majority of its members came instead from within the county 4-H program and currently serve in other roles within the county 4-H program, such as 4-H club leader (only 36.4%,  $n=67$ , report serving on the association as their primary role in 4-H). This is contrary to

the express purpose of the association, but also contrary to the principles of ecological organizations. By promoting only from within, the organization limits new information and resources from entering the organization, and, therefore, making it less adaptable in the face of external change.

**Research Question 3: How do county 4-H association volunteers' perceptions of leadership help us better understand the variables associated with programmatic success?**

Data from the quantitative and qualitative strands were combined in two ways to address this research question. First, the quantitative county 4-H index score was used to evaluate county 4-H programs and separate them into quartiles, with six focus groups from the highest and lowest quartiles then participating in the qualitative strand. Second, themes and categories from the qualitative strand of the study were first organized according to Wielkiewicz and Stelzner's (2005) four factors of ecological leadership. Then, themes' codes were selected based on appearance in at least two of three high or low scoring focus groups' transcripts, and organized in a mixing table to quantitatively show similarities and differences in codes between high and low scoring counties, all organized according to the four factors of ecological leadership. This mixing table is not shown because it is seven pages long. However, I will summarize the key differences and similarities through meta-analysis.

**Low Scoring County 4-H Associations Are More Inwardly Focused and Connected.** Low scoring county 4-H programs' associations differentiated themselves, in part, by exhibiting a greater tendency to be inwardly focused and connected. The composition of low scoring counties' associations was almost entirely from within the program, such as a 4-H dog club leader representing her club on the association. Additionally, low scoring counties tended to spend time exclusively on inward focused procedural matters — scholarship deadlines, camp fees, etc. — rather than focusing outward on meeting new challenges and community needs. High scoring county programs, while also tackling procedural matters, were the only associations to cite vetting program issues, such as which programs to offer and how they may meet community needs.

These findings are consistent with Wielkiewicz and Stelzner's (2005) ecological leadership principle of open systems and feedback loops, which holds that an organization is dependent on inflows of information and other resources. Each organization is itself part of a larger, more complex open system (e.g., economic, political, social). Organizations that squelch feedback loops place the organization at risk by lessening its ability to adapt to the environment (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2010). Low scoring associations that select members from within the 4-H program for the purpose of representing and connecting internal constituencies (e.g., dog advisory group, or individual 4-H clubs), therefore, have a more closed system with fewer feedback loops. This leaves the 4-H program with little inflows of new information, feedback on programming, and resources from the larger community, which may contribute to increasingly less effective county 4-H programming over time as the organization fails to adapt to external changes.

**High Scoring County 4-H Programs Attribute Success to A Greater Number of Factors.** High scoring counties' associations differentiated themselves on the question of, To which factors do you attribute the success or failure of their county 4-H program? Where low scoring

counties attributed success to only one factor, positional leaders, high scoring counties attributed success to a range of factors that did include positional leaders, such as the 4-H agent, but also six other factors, including a “tight-knit” community, parental involvement, and support from local county government.

This is consistent with Wielkiewicz and Stelzner’s (2005) ecological leadership principle of interdependence, which holds that any attempt to understand or direct an organization by focusing on its positional leaders is incomplete and bound to fail. Leadership must be understood in the complex context of the organization and its environment, and success can be attributed, in part, to a group’s ability to see the connectedness of social systems and the way they influence one another. Therefore, the specific factors to which high scoring counties attribute success are not important in and of themselves. Rather, it is the number and variety of factors contributing to success identified by high scoring counties that makes it illustrative of this concept. High scoring counties’ association members are more apt to see the myriad factors affecting their county 4-H program, rather than fixating on individual positional leaders.

### **Conclusions/Recommendations**

This study sought to explore the relationship between ecological approaches to leadership and programmatic success in county 4-H programs. Several mixed methods findings support the relationship between ecological approaches to leadership and programmatic success. First, high scoring county 4-H programs tended to structure their organization to provide greater open systems and feedback loops by selecting association members external to the program with close ties to the community; they also placed greater focus on determining external trends that may impact the organization. Second, high scoring counties demonstrated a greater ability to see the interdependencies and connectedness of their communities by attributing their success to numerous and varied factors, rather than individual positional leaders.

One recommendation for practice is that county 4-H agents should enact a policy of recruiting association members not already serving in another capacity within the county 4-H program. Instead, agents should focus on individuals with knowledge of, or experience in, 4-H, but who also have broad connections in the community. By simply changing the role of the association member to one who represents a part of the community on the 4-H association, rather than a part of 4-H on the 4-H association, the association should become more outwardly connected and oriented — and, therefore, more adaptive to the environment in which it operates.

A second recommendation for practice is that 4-H should offer agents in-service and other learning opportunities that explicitly address new concepts of leadership, as well as strategies for leading, in order to help them be successful in their 21<sup>st</sup> century role. Curriculum should focus on ecological principles, such as distributing leadership broadly among organization volunteers, and structuring the organization for long term adaptability.

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