

Strengthening the Voice: A Program for Local Farm Bureau Leaders

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Introduction

Agricultural leadership is needed today more than ever before. With the agricultural field becoming more specialized and increasingly challenged by outside groups, the future success of the industry is dependent upon local leaders to guide efforts for advocacy and change (Diem & Nikola, 2005; Horner, 1984; Howell, Weir, & Cook, 1982; W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2001).

The Florida Farm Bureau Federation (FFBF) is committed to the development of local leadership and a strong local leadership structure. To ensure that local leaders have the tools they need to be successful, the FFBF desires leadership training for local leaders, officers, committee chairs, and committee members. Grassroots leadership is a hallmark of Farm Bureau. Local leaders have been, and continue to be, instrumental in identifying, promoting, and accomplishing goals in the agricultural industry for many years.

FFBF is part of a larger, national organization known as the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). In part, the mission of the AFBF is “to implement policies that are developed by members” (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2006). Although the problem of maintaining “grassroots” efforts is a challenge for the entire national organization, FFBF has been proactive with statewide efforts to improve the flow of ideas from individual members to the larger organization. This goal is made clear in FFBF’s vision of being “the most effective, influential and respected Farm Bureau in the nation” and to “be recognized as Florida’s ‘Voice of Agriculture’” (Florida Farm Bureau, 2005). FFBF has identified the leadership role of local officers in county Farm Bureau groups as pivotal to organizational success (Carter, 2004).

Background

A needs assessment conducted in 2003 revealed that FFBF state leaders believe four local organizational aspects are important for an effective grassroots process: leadership, political process, effective boards, and knowledge of Farm Bureau. When evaluating these areas with local members, Carter (2004) applied a modified Borich (1980) needs assessment and found significant differences between perceived importance and proficiency in the areas of leadership, political process, and knowledge of Farm Bureau. Carter concluded that the findings indicate areas for leadership training with local FFBF board members. In addition, Carter concluded, “this study could be the starting point for additional leadership research within the FFBF” (p. 167).

In 2004, a qualitative study was conducted to further determine the leadership expectations, needs, and interests of local FFBF board members. Local board members throughout the state were interviewed, focusing on identification of common leadership-

related challenges and perceived development needs of the local Farm Bureau board. Four significant theme areas emerged: organizational appreciation, grassroots involvement, board member training, and board member succession. Many of the statements made by county board members matched up with the expectations for board effectiveness previously identified by FFBF state leaders (Carter, 2004). The theme areas described by Carter (2004) were well-represented in the interviews with local board members. In addition, the findings from the interviews with local board members seemed to further support the need for and interest in professional development programming for FFBF's local leaders. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended that the FFBF invest in the development of an educational program focused on FFBF's local leaders (Kaufman & Rudd, 2006).

How it Works

In 2005, FFBF contracted with the University of Florida Department of Agricultural Education and Communication (UF-AEC) to develop curricula for half-day workshops focused on developing local Farm Bureau leaders. The specific focus was with local board members. Later titled "Strengthening the Voice" (STV), the program was to include five topic area components: (1) effective meetings; (2) political advocacy and public relations; (3) member recruitment, development, and involvement; (4) enhancing organizational interactions; and (5) Farm Bureau foundations. The finished curriculum was presented in a train-the-trainer format, which prepared FFBF staff to deliver the workshops locally throughout the state.

The program materials were based on general adult education principles, including the "Cone of Experience," which suggests that people generally remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they see and hear, 70% of what they discuss with others, 80% of what they experience personally, and 95% of what they teach someone else (Dale, 1969). Although the workshops may allow little opportunity for participants to "teach" concepts of the program, the activities do provide some opportunity to "experience" the concepts being learned and certainly opportunities to "discuss" what is being learned. This program approach is consistent with previous research findings that suggest "rural leaders learn best by a process of action and reflection" (Dhanakumar, Rossing, & Campbell, 1996).

The entire *Strengthening the Voice* program, makes use of the concept of Best Management Practices (BMPs) that many farmers and ranchers are familiar with in the context of environmental impact. The best practices identified in the *Strengthening the Voice* program are focused on activities related to local Farm Bureau involvement. Just as is the case with most environmental BMPs, the tasks can be done without following the guidelines. However, the guidelines are proven practices for maximizing benefits, while minimizing unnecessary costs. It is important that participants consider all of the best practices identified in this workshop and make a commitment to follow up the workshop by implementing at least a few of the best practices.

At the conclusion of each workshop in the program, participants are asked to set a goal for implementing or improving best practices promoted in the program. They submit their “best practices goal sheet” to the workshop presenters, and the sheet is mailed back to them as a reminder one month later. In addition, two months after the workshop, participants receive a newsletter reminding them of the topics and best practices promoted in the first half of the workshop. Three months after the workshop, participants receive another workshop reminding them of the topics and best practice promoted in the second half of the workshop.

Results to Date

The first STV program component delivered around the state was *Farm Bureau Foundations*. The objectives of the workshop were:

1. Explain the relationship between Florida Farm Bureau Federation and Farm Bureau Insurance;
2. Establish a local strategy for active pursuit of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation Vision;
3. Describe the influence and limitation of the Farm Bureau on political issues; and
4. Prepare a plan for grassroots Farm Bureau policy development and implementation.

FFBF staff implemented the *Farm Bureau Foundations* program component with twelve different four-hour workshops throughout the state of Florida during April and May of 2006. The program focused on local board members in FFBF geographic districts across Florida and drew 156 participants from 45 different Florida counties.

Farm Bureau Foundations provides the first workshop evaluation data for the STV Program. Using a scale of 1-5, with 1 being poor and 5 being good, participants rated their overall mean ability across program objectives before the program as a 2.84 with a standard deviation of 0.98. Participants rated their overall mean ability after the program as a 4.39 with a standard deviation of 0.58. A more detailed summary of the participants’ ratings on program objectives is displayed in Table 1. Significant differences between before and after ability ratings were found for all four objectives ($p < .001$).

After workshop evaluation sheets indicate that over 98 percent of participants were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the workshop. When asked to what extent they could use the ideas and skills learned in the workshop, 59 percent answered “to a great extent” and 37 percent answered “to a moderate extent.” One participant wrote, “I’ve been wanting/needing this info for years.”

Table 1. Participants’ Post-Then Ratings of Ability with Farm Bureau Foundations
Session Objectives

Ability Before	Objective	Ability After
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Mean	S.D.		Mean	S.D.
2.90	1.19	Explaining the relationship between Florida Farm Bureau Federation and Insurance.	4.46	0.66
2.64	1.09	Establishing a local strategy for active pursuit of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation Vision.	4.26	0.78
3.08	1.13	Describing the influence and limitation of the Farm Bureau on political issues.	4.46	0.68
2.73	1.08	Preparing a plan for grassroots Farm Bureau policy development and implementation.	4.37	0.72

Note: The response scale was one to five, where 1 = "Poor" and 5 = "Good".

Source: 2006 *Farm Bureau Foundations* workshops associated with Florida Farm Bureau's *Strengthening the Voice* program. (N=143)

Conclusions/Recommendations

The FFBF realized the need for leadership development at the local level and has made an investment and commitment to provide this leadership training. The FFBF plans to implement two workshops per year around the state in a continuous cycle with the hopes that all county Farm Bureau board members will participate in the STV program.

After early success of FFBF's *Farm Bureau Foundations* sessions, other groups have expressed interested having UF-AEC develop similar professional development programs for their organizations. One example is an e-mail request from a leader in the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association. Agricultural industries throughout Florida are realizing the need to build the leadership capacities of their leaders and will be looking for similar programs and opportunities.

Leadership education faculty and academic units can be successful in providing valuable programming to community groups and nonprofit organizations. As part of the land-grant mission, departments of agricultural education should be reaching out to serve constituent clientele. This outreach can and should be representative of the department's expertise, but programming should also be tailored specific to the group being served.

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