

Leadership Styles of Florida's County Extension Directors: Perceptions of Self and Others

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Abstract

This study examined the leadership practices employed by Florida county extension directors (CEDs) using the Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes Posner International, 1997). The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) is the result of over 15 years of research in human leadership development conducted by the authors. At this time the instruments developers have evaluated over 12,000 individual leaders and have collected data from over 70,000 observers of leaders.

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership strengths and weaknesses as perceived by peers, co-workers, and the CEDs themselves. Kouzes and Posner identified five leadership practices that are prevalent in the leaders they studied. They are challenging the process, enabling others, inspiring a shared vision, encouraging the heart, and modeling the way.

The results of the study indicate that peers and co-workers perceive Florida CEDs at or above the 50th percentile in all five leadership practices. Observers ranked women significantly higher than men in four of the five leadership practices (challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others, encouraging others).

The CEDs ranked themselves slightly higher than the observers in all of the leadership categories. Their self-perception was significantly different from the observers in only one category – enabling others. The female CEDs ranked themselves lower in four of the five leadership areas than did the observers while the male CEDs ranked themselves higher than the observers in every practice.

The author recommends examining other factors, such as education, experience, time in the position, management skill, prior training, and location, that may influence leadership style. The author also recommends providing in-service training for current CEDs and leadership preparation for new CEDs to identify strengths and weaknesses in leadership style.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Are effective county extension directors leaders or managers? Perhaps they should be a combination of the two! According to recent University of Florida position announcements, the roles of the "county extension director" include providing leadership for the county program, supervision and coordination of staff, developing and maintaining relationships with constituents, effective oral and written communication, maintaining advisory committees, ensuring availability of resources, planning, budgeting, managing personnel, and organization skills. Certainly there are a number of roles that county extension directors are expected to fill but are they adequately prepared to do so? County extension directors are often promoted to the position based on performance as a county extension agent, unfortunately that is not the lone criteria for being an effective county extension director (Lyles & Warmbrod, 1994).

Historically, training programs for extension administrators (including county extension directors) have included instruction in program planning, personnel management, resource allocation and budgeting, advisory committee organization and other managerial skills. At the same time, there has been a lack of training for extension administrators in leadership skill areas like participatory leadership, visioning, communication, innovation, empowerment, and constituent recognition.

One example of training provided for extension administrators is the Managerial Assessment of Proficiency (MAP) training program. The MAP program focuses on evaluation and ultimately development of management competencies, management styles, and personal values in extension administrators. MAP participants assess management behaviors, interpret their assessment, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and finally develop an individual plan for personal growth, training and development (Training House Inc. 1995). Although this training is beneficial for training in management, it seems to fall short on the leadership development needs of extension administrators.

Leadership can be defined in many situations and under varying circumstances. Yukl (1989) identified prevalent leadership theories and definitions based on the available literature in the field. Five areas surfaced, power and influence, trait approach, behavior approach, situational leadership, and an integrated approach. Easily identifiable and learnable characteristics were present in each. Leadership is "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (Kouzes and Posner, 1995, p.30).

Effective leaders possess a set of observable, learnable, practices that can change over time (Posner & Kouzes, 1996). They can be developed and nurtured. In fact, Posner and Kouzes posit that exposure to leadership opportunities is the best way to develop these skills. Followers need direction, trust, and hope from their leaders (Bennis, 1994).

While there is evidence that supports differences in leadership behaviors in men and women, there is an equally compelling body of evidence that refutes leadership behavior differences between genders. Current research is not clear as to whether leadership differences exist between men and women (Park & Krishnan, 1997).

Management (as defined by Robbins and Cenzo, 1995) is "the process of getting activities completed efficiently with and through people (p.4)." A manager is simply a person who directs the activities of other people within an organization. Managers are primarily concerned with efficiency effectiveness. Efficiency in getting the most for the least input and effectiveness in doing things correctly (Robbins & Cenzo, 1995).

Much modern management theory can be traced to the work of French industrialist Henri Fayol who proposed that all managers perform the functions of planning, organization, commanding, coordinating, and controlling (Fayol, 1949). These original functions have been condensed to the basic four components of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Robbins and Cenzo, 1995). Although leading is included in the basic four components, it is in reality comprised of mostly managerial functions (completing activities with and through people) like directing personnel, selecting proper communication channels, resolving conflict and motivating people to be productive in their job. The primary function of the four managerial functions is to accomplish organizational goals.

Buford and Bedeian (1988) identified five management functions of extension administrators, including planning, organizing, staffing and human resource management,

leading and influencing, and controlling. Leadership as defined by Buford and Bedeian in this model is more closely related to management than to leadership. Their definition is, "Leading and influencing is the process of inducing individuals or groups (peers, subordinates, and non-subordinates) to assist willingly and harmoniously in accomplishing organizational objectives (p.6)." The "influencing and inducing" to fulfill organizational goals is not in line with participatory leadership discussed earlier.

Some of the leadership literature attempts to bring management into the leadership realm. Fleishman, 1953, Halpin and Winer, 1957, and Hemphill and Coons, 1957, believed that leader effectiveness can be determined by two dimensions, their level of consideration toward their subordinates and by their initiating structure. Level of consideration includes being supportive, friendly, listening to subordinates, and treating subordinates as equals. Initiating structure is the leader's ability to meet deadlines, criticize poor work, evaluate performance, and keep subordinates on-task. Seevers, Graham, Gamon, and Conklin (1997) stress that although a directive leadership (management) is appropriate at times, a flexible, participative leadership style is necessary for today's extension administrators.

In his review of leadership literature, Stogdill (1974), divided leadership characteristics into two distinct categories, task related characteristics and social characteristics. Task related characteristics included a desire for achievement, being goal driven, enterprising, and responsible. Social characteristics entailed the leaders ability to enlist cooperation from others, nurture followers, be socially successful, and use tact and diplomacy. Buford and Bedeian (1988) propose that all extension administrators are involved in management and non-management activities.

Bennis & Nanus (1985) coined the popular quote that "Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things." Although this quote helps us to begin to differentiate between management skills and leadership skills, it attempts to separate the two as if one person cannot perform in both capacities. The author would suggest that there are two distinct skill areas needed to administer or direct an organization. One skill area can be classified as management and the other leadership. Certainly there are times when the lines between the two are difficult to differentiate. Effective administrators move from one skill area to the other with relative ease.

There are literally thousands of books and scholarly articles written that address leadership and management. Although they are treated as separate entities, effective administrators learn to be effective in both realms. Unfortunately competent managers with a high level of leadership skills are in short supply (Toney & Brown, 1997).

Purpose and Objectives

The effective county extension director is both manager and leader. Much has been written about management in extension yet little attention has been directed toward the equally important concept of leadership among extension administrators. The purpose of this study was to assess the leadership styles of Florida's county extension directors with a 360-degree methodology using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI). The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. determine the overall Leadership Practices Inventory score of county extension directors as assessed by self-selected observers,
2. determine the overall Leadership Practices Inventory score of County Extension Directors through self-assessment and to
3. compare the County Extension Directors Leadership Practices Index self assessed scores with the Leadership Practices Inventory observer scores.

Methodology

A census of the 67 county extension directors (CEDs) in Florida was conducted in the fall of 1998 to assess the interest in completing this study. Fifty-one of the 67 (76%) county extension directors participated in the initial stage of this study (35 males and 16 females). Participation in the second phase of the study (fall 1999) dropped to 44 participants (66%) of the census population (28 males and 16 female).

The LPI designed by Posner and Kouzes was employed to assess the leadership styles of the participants. The initial phase of the study was conducted in the fall of 1998. Five observers were selected to evaluate the CEDs. They included their district extension director, another county director and three county agents or program assistants who worked with the county extension director on a regular basis. The county extension director selected the other CED and the agents or program assistants to evaluate their leadership style. This 360-degree method of analyzing leadership style has proven to be an effective way for leaders to gain a perspective of their leadership from those effected by it.

The second phase of the study was a self-assessment of leadership skills by the CEDs. This phase was conducted on the University of Florida campus in the spring of 1999. Forty-four CEDs participated in both stages of the project (66% of all Florida CEDs).

The LPI is the result of over 15 years of research in human leadership development conducted by the authors. At this time the researchers have evaluated over 12,000 individual leaders and have collected data from over 70,000 individual observers of leaders. Seevers et.al (1997) recognize the leadership practices measured by the LPI as necessary skills for extension administrators.

Kouzes and Posner began their look at leadership through conducting interviews with corporate leaders in the United States. Their initial sample of 1200 managers in middle to senior level positions represented a wide variety of public and private organizations and industries. From the initial research, five leadership practices were identified. They include challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart.

Leaders who are not bound by the status quo utilize the practice of challenging the process. These leaders are always looking for innovation and are not afraid to take risks in the organization. Leaders who display this trait know that failure is inevitable and approach failures as necessary learning experiences.

Leaders who inspire a shared vision are helping make the organization a reflection of the whole instead of an ideal of the leader. This practice includes an ability to see what can be while enlisting the creative energy of others to form the organization. Leaders who excel here are quiet persuaders and create a followership toward a common goal through their magnetism.

Enabling leaders give away power to their constituents so they can perform at their highest potential. Enablers foster collaboration and build teams in the organization. Leaders who enable others build trust in the organization and develop individual strengths to help others contribute to the organization.

Modeling the way includes following the same rules and guidelines set forth for everyone in the organization. Beyond that, leaders who model the way are continually setting the high standard for organizational performance by practicing what they espouse. Those who model the way help others through bureaucratic stumbling blocks and help others see their progress toward bigger goals. When people are working hard to accomplish the organizations goals, leaders who encourage the heart will be able to get their constituents to put in the extra effort for success. Leaders who encourage the heart are never afraid to offer thanks or congratulations. They recognize individual contributions and celebrate organizational wins. Leaders who encourage the heart make everyone feel as if they are highly valued.

Each leadership practice had a set of two strategies. The strategies include searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks (challenging the process), envisioning the future and enlisting others (inspiring a shared vision), fostering collaboration and strengthening others (enabling others to act), setting the example and achieving small wins (modeling the way), and recognizing individual contributions and celebrating team accomplishments (encouraging the heart). These practices and strategies accounted for over 70% of the behaviors described in the leader interviews conducted by Kouzes and Posner.

The LPI is a set of 30 statements that describe leadership behaviors. The observer is asked to rate the leader on a 10 point Likert scale from almost always displaying the leader behavior to almost never displaying the behavior. Each of the five leadership practice has six behavioral statements associated with it. Allowing 10 points per question with six questions per practice (60 points maximum for each practice and 300 points total for the instrument scores).

Percentile rankings compiled for the LPI were used to provide a baseline of comparison for county cooperative extension directors. The instrument developers consider scores falling below the 30th percentile to indicate a low propensity to perform a particular practice while a score above the 70th percentile would indicate a high disposition toward exhibiting the practice. Scores in between the 30th and 70th percentile are considered moderate.

All of the LPI practice constructs have an internal validity above .80. The test / retest reliability of the LPI is over .90 for each of the leadership practice constructs. The face validity of the instrument was established through the research process in identifying the constructs to be measured. The instrument developers matched the practices with behaviors that reflect the practices to develop the instrument. Factor analysis was utilized to validate the statements associated with the leadership practices.

Instruments were sent directly to the evaluators. The researcher used the Dillman Total Design Method for mail surveys (Dillman, 1978) to collect data. The overall evaluator response rate for the observers of the 51 CEDs was 92% (235 out of 255).

Findings

Objective 1 - Determine the overall Leadership Practices Inventory score of county extension directors as assessed by self-selected observers

The county extension directors mean scores for the five LPI leadership practices, were at or above the 50th percentile. The total mean score was 233.7 (SD = 25.9). Practice scores were in ranged from the 50th to the 60th percentile nationally. The practice of challenging the process had a mean score of 44.63 which placed it in the 50th percentile, while the practice of modeling the way rated at the 60th percentile nationally with a mean score of 48.71. See Table 1 for more information.

Do female and male county extension directors employ the same or different levels of the LPI leadership practices? Mean scores from the observers for men and women were significantly different ($\alpha < .05$ apriori) in all practices with the exception of modeling the way.

Table 1
Leadership Practices Inventory Observer Scores and National Percentile Rankings (N=51)

Practice	Mean Score (SD)	National Percentile
Challenging the process	44.63 (6.81)	50 th
Inspiring a shared vision	43.47 (6.58)	53 rd
Enabling others	50.01 (4.12)	55 th
Modeling the way	48.71 (5.51)	60 th
Encouraging others	46.75 (5.83)	52 nd

The overall score for the LPI was significantly different for men and women ($\alpha = .01$) with men scoring an average of 227.55 (SD = 25.71) and women scoring an average of 246.72 (SD = 19.96) See Table 2 for details. A total of 300 points are possible on the LPI.

Table 2
Gender Comparisons of Observers Leadership Practices Inventory Practices and Total Score (N=51)

Practice	Female mean (SD)	Male mean (SD)	Significance
Challenging the process	47.78 (5.09)	43.10 (7.07)	.01
Inspiring a shared vision	46.93 (4.61)	41.89 (6.79)	.00
Enabling others	51.96 (3.44)	49.11 (4.14)	.02
Modeling the way	50.31 (5.21)	47.98 (5.55)	.16
Encouraging others	49.73 (4.70)	45.38 (5.84)	.01
Total score	246.72 (19.96)	227.55 (25.71)	.01

The women and men's leadership practices scores were compared to the national percentile rankings for comparison. The women were consistent in their scores with percentile

rankings ranging from a low of 67th percentile for encouraging others to a high of 70th percentile for enabling others. The men had a wider range of scores from the 35th percentile for encouraging others to the 52nd percentile for modeling the way (Table 3).

Objective 2 Determine the overall Leadership Practices Inventory score of County Extension Directors through self-assessment

The County Extension Directors self assessment percentiles for the leadership practices ranged from a low of 52nd percentile for modeling the way to a high of 63rd percentile for enabling others. The three remaining practices were in the 50th – 60th percentile range (challenging the process 58th, inspiring a shared vision 55th, encouraging others 53rd).

Table 3
Observer Reported National Percentile Rankings by Gender (N=51)

Practice	Female Percentile	Male Percentile
Challenging the process	69 th	41 st
Inspiring a shared vision	68 th	46 th
Enabling others	70 th	47 th
Modeling the way	69 th	52 nd
Encouraging others	67 th	35 th

Table 4
Self Reported National Percentile Rankings by Gender (N=44)

Practice	Female Percentile	Male Percentile
Challenging the process	64 th	58 th
Inspiring a shared vision	55 th	58 th
Enabling others	70 th	63 rd
Modeling the way	62 nd	57 th
Encouraging others	56 th	54 th

The self reported scores for women were higher in four of the five practices and the total score than were the self- reported scores for men (Table 5). Men and women County Extension Directors were very close in their self assessment of leadership practices.

Table 5
Self Reported Leadership Practices Inventory Scores for County Extension Directors (N=44)

Practice	Female mean (SD)	Male mean (SD)	All CEDs
Challenging the process	47.1 (6.1)	46.1 (6.2)	46.5 (6.1)
Inspiring a shared vision	44.3 (6.8)	44.7 (7.7)	44.5 (7.3)
Enabling others	52.1 (4.3)	51.2 (4.3)	51.8 (4.3)
Modeling the way	49.1 (6.1)	48.6 (5.9)	48.8 (5.9)
Encouraging others	47.6 (7.2)	47.3 (7.0)	47.4 (7.0)
Total score	240.1 (22.5)	238.4 (26.9)	234.5 (25.1)

Objective 3 Compare the County Extension Directors Leadership Practices Index self assessed scores with the Leadership Practices Inventory observer scores.

In order to accomplish objective three, the researcher conducted two-tailed t-tests comparing overall, male, and female observer LPI scores to self-reported LPI scores. Self-reported mean scores for the total group of County Extension Directors were higher than the observer scores in every construct. Although the differences were not significant in most cases, the “enabling others” practice was significantly different between observers and self-reported scores. See Table 6 for details.

Table 6
Difference between LPI Observer and Self-Reported Scores for all CEDs (N=44)

Practice	Observer Mean (SD)	Self-Reported Mean (SD)	Significance
Challenging the process	44.7 (7.0)	46.5 (6.1)	.10
Inspiring a shared vision	43.6 (6.5)	44.5 (7.3)	.27
Enabling others	49.8 (4.2)	51.8 (4.3)	.01
Modeling the way	48.6 (5.6)	48.8 (5.9)	.45
Encouraging others	47.0 (5.9)	47.4 (7.0)	.36
Total score	233.7 (25.9)	239.0 (25.1)	.16

The male CEDs consistently ranked themselves higher than did their observers in all LPI constructs. The difference between self-reported and observer scores for men was significantly different in the constructs of challenging the process and enabling others. There was a statistically significant difference between the observers of the male CEDs and the CEDs themselves in two practices – challenging the process and enabling others (Table 7).

Table 7

Difference between LPI Observer and Self-Reported Scores for Male CEDs (N=28)

Practice	Observer Mean (SD)	Self-Reported Mean (SD)	Significance
Challenging the process	42.9 (7.4)	46.1 (6.2)	.05
Inspiring a shared vision	41.7 (6.7)	44.7 (7.7)	.08
Enabling others	48.6 (4.2)	51.7 (4.4)	.01
Modeling the way	47.7 (5.7)	48.6 (5.9)	.28
Encouraging others	45.3 (6.0)	47.3 (7.0)	.13
Total score	226.2 (26.2)	238.4 (26.9)	.06

Female CEDs were more critical of themselves than their observers, consistently scoring lower on the self assessment. The female CEDs rated themselves the same as the observers on one practice – enabling others (Table 8).

Table 8

Difference between LPI Observer and Self-Reported Scores for Female CEDs (N=16)

Practice	Observer Mean (SD)	Self-Reported Mean (SD)	Significance
Challenging the process	47.8 (5.1)	47.1 (6.1)	.31
Inspiring a shared vision	46.9 (4.6)	44.3 (6.8)	.09
Enabling others	52.0 (3.4)	52.1 (4.3)	.43
Modeling the way	50.3 (5.2)	49.1 (6.1)	.22
Encouraging others	49.7 (4.7)	47.6 (7.2)	.06
Total score	246.7 (20.0)	240.1 (22.5)	.12

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study assessed the leadership skills of county extension directors in Florida based on the Kouzes - Posner Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) from the viewpoint of independent observers and by the County Extension Directors themselves. The Kouzes - Posner model of leadership consists of five practices identified through extensive research with leaders in business, industry, and public service. The five practices are challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart.

As a whole, observers ranked the Florida county Extension Directors from the 50th to the 60th percentile for all of the LPI leadership practices. Observers considered the CEDs were most proficient at modeling the way for their supervisors, co-workers and subordinates. Their lowest observer score was in the practice of challenging the process. Although these scores are in the moderate range of performance for the LPI leadership practices, there is room for improvement. As a result of the observer data, the CEDs were offered professional development opportunities in the spring of 2000 to help them to develop each of these leadership skills to complement their

management skills.

When comparing observer scores of males and females, it is apparent that major differences in leadership practices exist. In fact, there is a statistically significant difference between men and women in four of the five leadership practices! The women had a tight range in their national percentile rankings (from the 67th to the 70th percentile) while the men were much lower, placing below the 50th percentile in all but one practice (modeling the way). Why do these differences exist? What specific actions or activities do the women practice that place them significantly higher than the men in the eyes of their supervisors, co-workers, and subordinates? More research is warranted to explore these gender differences in leadership practices.

The CEDs ranked themselves higher than did the observers in four of the five leadership practices. Female CEDs ranked themselves lower in four of the five practices, with one practice score, enabling others being the same for observers and self-reported scores. The male CEDs ranked themselves higher in every practice than did the observers.

The female CEDs did have a healthy view of their leadership practices although their perception of performance was lower than their constituents. On the other hand, the male CEDs perceived they were better leaders than their constituents would judge. Why does this discrepancy between genders exist? The researcher recommends a deeper examination of this finding to better understand this phenomena.

More information about the county extension directors is needed to build on the findings of this study. Does age, education, geographic location, time in the position, management skill, mentorship, leadership training and experience, or programmatic specialization influence leadership practices? More study is needed to understand the impact of leadership practices on extension administrator performance.

Extension administration involves a mix of management and leadership skills. Much effort is expended in developing extension administrators' management skills while little attention is given to the equally important set of leadership skills necessary for effective administration.

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A Critique

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The author has transcended the debate about the differences between management and leadership and moved the reader to consider leader behaviors of county extension directors. His use of an established instrument (Leadership Practices Inventory developed by Kouzes and Posner) allows him to extend comparisons beyond the sample to a national data base, and strengthens the implications of the study. Some of the results stimulate thought about the leadership change capacity of Cooperative Extension directors and the influence of gender on leader practices.

The lowest of the LPI practices reported by the observers was "challenge the process." At a time when Cooperative Extension is being encouraged to change, the relatively low national percentile ranking in "challenging the process" would indicate Cooperative Extension directors in this study may not have the leadership capacity to be catalysts of change. Perhaps over the years the traditional hierarchy of Cooperative Extension has not allowed reward for those who challenge established processes, and, therefore, this leadership practice is not exhibited to the fullest extent.

Observer scores on the five practices (challenging the process; inspiring a shared vision; enabling others; modeling the way; and encouraging others) indicate female county extension directors are believed to practice leadership behaviors at a significantly higher level than males. If the respondent demographics are representative of total director demographics, males outnumber females two to one in Florida Cooperative Extension director positions.

Why are female and male directors not equally represented? It could be that females have not aspired to director positions, but according to these results, it certainly isn't that they are less capable of leading. This also begs the question often asked when gender differences arise, must female leaders be stronger than male peers to be perceived as equally effective? The answer to this question involves a dimension not explored in this study, and that is perceived effectiveness. However, some would argue the LPI allows some opportunity for projection of total effectiveness. Without question, the gender leadership practice differences in this study merit further exploration, possibly through qualitative means.

In conclusion, the researcher is commended for using the results of this study as the basis for Cooperative Extension director training. He is encouraged to establish a longitudinal line of inquiry to determine if the training intervention affected the leadership practices as reported by the Cooperative Extension directors and their observers.