The Perceived Value of an Extension Leadership Network: Enhancing Personal and Organizational Effectiveness

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Abstract
This study was designed to determine the value of the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network in the United States. Of particular interest was determining the value added by the network for individual extension administrators, their state organizations, and the southern region. The researchers conducted a series of focus groups and an electronic survey of the members of the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network to determine the value of the network. The Program Leadership Network was found to provide great value for the vast majority of study participants at the individual, team, and organizational levels. This value included enhancing individual performance, encouraging critical thinking, catalyzing best practices, providing opportunities for leadership and skill development, enhancing the relationship between extension programmes, and serving as a think tank for regional and national initiatives. Extension and programme administrators in other regions and countries should examine leadership networks to determine if they are adding value to extension work. Development of a network similar to the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network could improve individual, team, and organizational effectiveness. This is especially true for enhancing multistate, regional, and national programming. Extension systems and workers will find value in this study since the results indicate that networking of extension workers enhances personal, team, and organizational performance. A secondary value includes the increased number of multistate, regional, and national coordination of extension programming efforts.

Keywords
School of Education, Extension, Teamwork, Networking, Multistate, Value-added, Performance, Collaboration, Leadership

Disciplines
Leadership Studies | Organization Development | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

Comments
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Abstract

Purpose

This study was designed to determine the value of the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network in the United States. Of particular interest was determining the value added by the network for individual Extension administrators, their state organizations, and the Southern Region.

Design/methodology/approach

The researchers conducted a series of focus groups and an electronic survey of the members of the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network to determine the value of the network.

Findings

The Program Leadership Network was found to provide great value for the vast majority of study participants at the individual, team, and organizational levels. This value included enhancing individual performance, encouraging critical thinking, catalyzing best practices, providing opportunities for leadership and skill development, enhancing the relationship between Extension programs, and serving as a think tank for regional and national initiatives.

Practical Implications
Extension and program administrators in other regions and countries should examine leadership networks to determine if they are adding value to Extension work. Development of a network similar to the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network could improve individual, team, and organizational effectiveness. This is especially true for enhancing multistate, regional, and national programming.

*Originality/value*

Extension systems and workers will find value in this study since the results indicate that networking of Extension workers enhances personal, team, and organizational performance. A secondary value includes the increased number of multistate, regional, and national coordination of Extension programming efforts.

*Keywords*

Extension, teamwork, networking, multistate, value-added, performance, collaboration, leadership

*Paper type*

Research

*Value of Networking*

Networking and collaboration have long been used to improve individual and organizational effectiveness (Gray, 1996). Studies reveal that partnerships increase organizational effectiveness (Wellins, Byham, & Dixon, 1994), enhance personal empowerment and development (Purser & Cabana, 1998), and decrease professional isolation (Franz, 2005; Sackett, 1993). Partnerships also create synergy for individual and
group transformation by transcending personal interests in favor of the common good (Osborne, 2000; Avolio, 1997; Bass, 1985).

Networking involves an ongoing process of actively staying abreast of what happens within and outside an organization by attaining and circulating information. People network to solve problems, to get work done, or to gain personal or strategic advantage (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). The purpose of networking often focuses on hiring or retaining desired employees (Bierman, 2005; Friedman & Holtom, 2002). “True networking is when you spend time with people who do the work you want to do, talking shop” (Soper, 2009). Good networking involves working with other active professionals, even if it’s on a volunteer project, or to learn something new. Networking includes rubbing elbows and talking about activities related to the work you want to accomplish. Networking involves building community, then nurturing it for the benefit of all those involved (Soper, 2009).

Although many studies indicate networking is important and necessary to share knowledge and information, uncover hidden opportunities, and build relationships much of the work on networking has focused on career development and job attainment in the private sector (Driscoll, 2003; Ibarra & Hunt, 2002). Few studies have focused on networking in higher education and in particular with Cooperative Extension. A review of one journal focused on Extension found only three studies about networking. They described the role of a network broker in a privatized Extension system (Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2009), revitalization of an Extension system as an educational network
(Poussard, 1999) and a peer support network for Extension workers in Australia (Bourne, 1999). The research described in this article expands this research by looking specifically at the value of administrative networks for Cooperative Extension in the southern region of the United States.

**Cooperative Extension and Networking**

The Cooperative Extension System (CES), a land-grant university-based outreach and educational organization exists nationally in every state and territory of the United States. Although most widely known for the 4-H program, CES educators work in local municipalities as an “extension” of the land-grant university providing diverse educational programs in agriculture, community development, family and consumer science, youth development, and natural resources, making it the largest adult education organization in the country (Griffith, 1991). Established in 1914, Cooperative Extension has local offices in more than 3,000 locations (typically county-based), with a common mission of providing research-based information and education to people to help improve their lives (Applebee, 2000).

Cooperative Extension program administrators in the United States are familiar with the importance of networking so they intentionally facilitate environments and infrastructure to enhance program improvement and organizational development. However, the distinct value of face-to-face networking must be examined to determine if the intended outcomes from the networks or collaborations are being realized. In addition, the networking approach described here may provide best practices for other Extension organizations.
This study in particular explores the value of the Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network (PLN) to determine if it provides value for individual Extension workers, their work teams, and the organization.

**Southern Region Cooperative Extension Program Leadership Network**

Since Cooperative Extension strives to build strong multistate relationships (Cudaback, 1989; Bull et al. 2004; Archer et al. 2007). In 1989 the Southern Region Extension directors and administrators appointed a Task Force on Organization to explore addressing regional and multidisciplinary issues. As a result, the southern directors and administrators created a Program Leadership Committee to enhance multistate collaboration. Now known as the PLN, the group meets annually to bring together Extension administrators, program leaders, information technology directors, communications directors, and program planning and staff development leaders to discuss common issues (Southern Region Program Leadership Network, 2008). After almost 20 years in operation and several changes, research on the impact of the PLN on its membership was needed to determine its value.

**Methodology**

No previous research has been conducted on the value of Extension executive networks so a two-phase study was designed to explore this phenomenon. Focus groups were initially used to determine the values of the Southern Region PLN. The findings from the focus groups were used to create an electronic survey to determine to what degree the values were common across a wider range of network participants. The Institutional
Review Board at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University approved this research with human subjects.

Five focus groups with 47 Southern Region Cooperative Extension PLN members representing southern 1862 and all 1890 land grant institutions in the United States were conducted at the annual face-to-face PLN meeting. Each group of 9-10 people represented a specific PLN committee (i.e. administrators, program leaders, information technology directors, communications directors, and program planning and staff development leaders). Program Leader Network members attending the annual conference were contacted by e-mail prior to the meeting and invited to participate in the study. Members voluntarily signed up to participate in the focus groups during meals and free time at the meeting. The focus group protocol included the following questions:

- What has your involvement been with the Southern Region PLN?
- Why are you involved with the Southern Region PLN?
- What do you like best about the PLN?
- What value has the PLN brought for you?
- What value has the PLN brought for your group?
- What value has the PLN brought for your organization?
- How has your work changed as a result of the PLN?
- How have you changed as a result of the PLN?
- What is it about the PLN that brings value to Extension?
- What one word best describes the value of the Southern Region PLN?
Each focus group was facilitated by the same project investigator and lasted an hour and a half in length. The focus groups were not audio or video recorded but note takers and observers were assigned to each group.

Focus group data were analyzed by hand noting common themes within and across groups. Researchers coded lines in the notes to identify emerging themes. Quotes form the notes were then arranged around each theme. After the coding process was conducted by individual researchers, the team as a group compared and contrasted interpretations of the themes and patterns. This practice moved back and forth between inductive and deductive processes across focus groups. These procedures followed the case analysis processes suggested by Eisenhardt (1989) and grounded and pattern theory approaches to data analysis (Cresswell, 1998; Strauss, 1987).

Several steps were taken to enhance the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the data (Koch, 2006; Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Rogers & Cowles, 1993). Table 1 describes these actions in detail.

(insert Table 1)

A follow-up survey based on the findings from the focus groups was developed by the research team. The survey was piloted with three PLN members and adjusted prior to dissemination. The survey was sent electronically to all 232 registered members of the PLN. The Southern Region Extension Administrator announced the survey and distributed the URL to the survey using the PLN list-serve. Forty-five percent of the
members responded. All surveys were usable. Survey data were analyzed using
descriptive statistics and triangulated with focus group notes and research team
observations. Participant review of the results was used as a trustworthiness procedure
(Patton, 2002).

Research Questions

The study questions set by the Southern Region Extension Directors and Administrators
for the research team were:

- What value does the Southern Region PLN bring to Cooperative Extension for the
  individual, committees, and the organization?
- How does the PLN enhance multistate collaboration?
- What change has resulted from the PLN?

The overall purpose of the research was to determine the value of the PLN for Southern
Region Extension systems belonging to the network.

Findings

Motivation to Participate

Focus groups members participated in PLN for networking and collaboration
opportunities with peers, others across Extension, and across states. They also attended
network meetings for professional support that provided a more holistic sense of
Extension work, their own work, and accountability to their peers. Some participants
were required to attend PLN by their Extension system to bring back best practices and to
represent their institution. Survey respondents were motivated to participate for the following reasons:

- Networking (87%)
- Collaboration building (85%)
- Professional support (74%)
- Gain more holistic sense of Extension work (38%)
- Job expectations (36%)
- Show accountability to peers on joint work (19%)

**Best Features of PLN**

Focus group participants believed the best aspects of the PLN included training, group discussions, sharing best practices, networking, and developing leadership skills in committee leadership roles. Participants found PLN provided a venue for deep discussion and brought a variety of leaders together to create one voice for Extension work. One participant said, “PLN gives us enough time to have thoughtful conversations unlike other conferences,” and another said, “Discussions are very lively and give us food for thought. This discussion allows each person to benchmark their institution against peers, creates multistate projects, takes individuals and their work to the next level, and saves time and money at home.”

Networking was mentioned often as a benefit of PLN. Participants’ comments included, “It helps you feel more connected,” “If I have problems, I know people who can help. They are my security blankets,” “It pumps you up to keep moving. It is a therapy
"session," and “PLN is the one meeting I look forward to every year. It is the one meeting I hate to leave. This group is like family. We can disagree but remain strong friends.”

Survey respondents thought PLN’s best features were:

- Sharing best practices (83%)
- Networking (82%)
- Discussions (75%)
- Exploring emerging issues (76%)
- Developing and supporting multistate projects and partnerships (63%)
- Developing leadership skills (41%)
- Benchmarking their home institution with peers (33%)
- Training (23%)

**Benefits of PLN for the Individual**

The vast majority of focus group participants agreed PLN was valuable for them as individuals. Participants said, “I learn from other’s wisdom,” “This group helped me figure out my job,” and “I respect and know colleagues enough to trust their ideas.”

Survey respondents individually gained the following through PLN:

- Building networks (85%)
- Implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices (71%)
- Widening their view of Extension work (51%)
- Catalyzing connections with people (46%)
- Reflecting critically on their work (42%)
- Training/professional development (40%)
- Developing leadership skills (33%)
• Gaining confidence in work and personal skills (33%)
• Mentoring for job competency and problem solving (25%)

**Benefits of PLN for Committees**

The most common value of PLN articulated in the focus groups for the network’s committees was the opportunity to build on and leverage each other’s ideas and best practices. The PLN was seen as a place where ideas begin and later gain larger prominence. One participant said, “We work together and get things done. We make a difference in our state with the work we do and some of our work moves from the committee to the Southern Region and then national projects.” Committees also enjoyed working with Southern Region directors and administrators to have a national voice and to build legitimacy, credibility, and influence. One participant said, “We speak stronger as a group.” Survey respondents believed the PLN committees they served on valued the experience for the following reasons:

• Building on and leverage each other’s ideas and best practices (73%)
• Helping each other problem solve and deal with struggles (72%)
• Supporting each other (72%)
• Developing joint projects/share resources that save time and money (55%)
• Initiating ideas in committee that later gain larger prominence (44%)
• Working with Extension directors/administrators for national voice (43%)
• Building stronger bonds between 1862 and 1890 institutions (41%)
• Developing and supporting southern region solidarity (35%)
• Keeping members on their toes/accountable for joint work (14%)
• Increasing funding for projects (11%)
**Benefits of PLN for State Extension Systems**

The most often mentioned value of the PLN in focus groups for state Extension systems was saving time and money through multistate partnerships and projects, implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices, collaboration, and catalyzing organizational change. Survey respondents felt PLN provides the following value for their state system:

- Implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices (75%)
- Enhancing collaboration (68%)
- Recognizing and affirming best practices used by their system (60%)
- Saving time and money through multistate partnerships and projects (41%)
- Building a stronger bond between 1890 and 1862 institutions (35%)
- Exposure to keynote speakers for local use (33%)
- Catalyzing organizational change (28%)
- Training for employees (26%)
- Recruiting employees (9%)

**Benefits of PLN for Extension in General**

Participants in focus groups felt PLN created an environment that enhanced multistate projects that increased the depth and scope of programming. Survey respondents believed PLN provided value to Extension by:

- Leveraging knowledge and resources (75%)
- Providing networking and support (75%)
- Developing multistate projects that increase programming depth and scope (62%)
- Developing peer groups (57%)
- Fostering a wider view of Extension work (56%)
• Influencing Extension at the national level (56%)

• Enhancing the bond between 1862 and 1890 Extension programs (49%)

• Providing professional development (46%)

• Supporting southern solidarity (32%)

Discussion

Participants in the study highly valued the networking and collaboration opportunities offered by the PLN due to a variety of individual, team, and organizational benefits. Similar to the literature, this study found that formal networks improved effectiveness by catalyzing the transfer of Extension best practices across the region and nation (Rogers, 2003). This included enhanced individual leadership skills and group critical reflection on work that lead to increased multistate and multidisciplinary projects and partnerships that sometimes led to national adoption.

The findings from this study also affirmed previous research that partnerships resulting from networks promote employee interest in the common good (Osborne, 2000; Avolio, 1997; Bass, 1985). In particular, the PLN helped a diverse set of Extension systems in the southern United States work together to realize regional and national improvements to programming and program infrastructure. Of specific note are the stronger relationships between 1862 and 1890 Extension systems. The organizational differences in history, target audiences, and institutional resources can make it difficult for these institutions to work together on a common issue or problem. These partnerships, processes, and
products would most likely not have taken place or been accomplished on such a large scale without the PLN.

The PLN also as the literature suggests, built community and relationships among participants through creation of strong bonds around common goals that enhanced trust (Franz, 2005; Sockett, 1993). These bonds encouraged deep discussion for better problem solving and the accomplishment of new or stronger educational programming. In fact, initial networking led to the formation of stronger ties through new alliances, partnerships, coalitions, and collaborations as described by Borden and Perkins (1998). In the southern region of the United States, the PLN appears to have nurtured a “southern solidarity” that resulted in a unified and strong national voice for Extension work as well as a strong mentoring and training system for Extension workers.

Strategic advantages of networking were also found from the PLN work similar to networks in the private sector (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007). The PLN participants felt the network helped them explore emerging issues and respond to these issues with unified action. Part of this process included benchmarking and comparing individual institutional strategies with peer institutions across the region that led to more strategic local, regional, and national work.

Individual gains from networking documented in previous research were also found in this study (Soper, 2009; Purser & Cabana, 1998; Gray, 1996). Specifically, as in other studies, career development for Extension employees was clearly provided by the PLN.
(Driscoll, 2003; Ibarra & Hunt, 2002). Participants found the network helped them with job orientation, support for problem solving, assistance with navigating tough personal issues, and securing career mentors. For some participants, the PLN provided an important venue to develop leadership skills through committee work. Finally, some individuals were recruited for employment in other Extension systems through the PLN.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This study reflects the perspectives of 47 focus group and 104 survey respondents out of 232 members. Future inquiry should strive to examine the perspectives on the PLN for more of its membership. The researchers on this project were members of the PLN. It would be interesting to see if study participants’ answers would differ if outsiders conducted the research. This study was not designed to examine ways to further enhance the value of the PLN or to determine non-beneficial aspects of the network. Future research should explore particular improvements that could be made to the PLN structure and process or non-beneficial aspects to further enhance its value. This study also was not designed to determine whether similar networks in other Extension organizations would return the same benefits. Studies of the potential return on leadership networking in other Extension organizations would add value to the field and this study. Similarly, it would be of interest to determine if the amount of program and infrastructure innovations and multidiscipline and multistate work are the same as other regions without a similar formal network. Finally, the value of the PLN may not be equally distributed between 1862 and 1890 land grant institutions. It would be of interest to determine how PLN value differs
for each type of institution based on the differences in organizational structures, resources, and mission.

**Implications for Extension**

The results of this study suggest a number of implications for Extension organizations. First of all, Extension could more fully realize increased cross-institution, cross-discipline, and multistate programming by creating formal networks intended to meet these goals. An opportunity for individual institutions to report their best practices, for groups with similar programming interests to meet and discuss emerging issues and problems, and strategic action planning time for network committees/groups could enhance meeting these network goals.

Extension struggles with attracting, hiring, and retaining top talent. Formal networks like the PLN can help develop this talent through providing network committee leadership roles, opportunities for employees to learn from and support each other, and encourage projects that stretch skills and promote critical thinking. Networks such as the PLN can also help retain employees through building strong bonds and trust amongst network participants that help employees navigate tough times.

The professional development of employees can be costly, especially for Extension systems with minimal fiscal and human capital. Formal Extension networks like the PLN can provide low cost career development through peer mentors, exposure to best practices, orientation to job responsibilities through peer interactions, and venues to
discuss and solve work related problems and issues. In a network like the PLN where a variety of people gather, employees also become more aware of the wide range of roles available to them in Extension for career development.

Most importantly, Extension systems are always searching for best practices and innovations to enhance their value for clients and stakeholders. A network like the PLN catalyzes this process by bringing together a wide variety of Extension institutions to share their practices and innovations with each other and to determine together how to advance those practices and innovations more widely. This may be the one most important value of formal regional networks for sustained success of the Extension system.

Finally, the Extension system in the United States struggles at times to be a national system rather than a federation of 75 land grant institutions. A formal network like the PLN helps build solidarity and unity important to realizing system-wide effectiveness and efficiencies. Network participation helps employees better understand the value of the nation-wide system and to feel empowered to contribute to its work. Regional and national leaders are often born in these local networks.

**Summary**

This study of a regional network of Extension employees in the southern region of the United States revealed a variety of benefits for individuals, work teams and the organization as a whole. Findings suggest Extension systems can benefit form creating,
maintaining, and monitoring these formal networks to promote adoption of best practices for programming and program infrastructure, for employee career development, to expand and deepen programming, and to attract and retain top talent. Formal employee networks can also enhance the effectiveness of Extension work more widely by serving as a think tank and trying ground for new best practices and developing future leaders.

References


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