PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT COMPETENCIES FOR EARLY-CAREER AND ESTABLISHED 4-H AGENTS

Abstract

Many competencies are thought to contribute to success as a 4-H agent (Boyd, 2004; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Gregg & Irani, 2004; Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). The purpose of this study was to identify the competencies thought to be the most important for 4-H agents, depending on career stage, and compare those competencies to the official 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competency Model (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). To accomplish this, interviews were conducted with agents serving in leadership roles within their state and national professional associations. Participants had specific expectations for the competencies they would need going into their first jobs as 4-H agents. They prepared through internships, previous 4-H experience, and academics. Each remembered important lessons learned during the early days of work and those lessons helped shape their advice for incoming agents. Many of the same competencies recommended for early career agents continued to be relevant for established agents, but those competencies were chosen based upon experience, not because of the 4-H PRKC. Important competencies included conflict management, communication, multi-tasking, managing volunteers, and youth development.

Introduction

4-H is a community of young people across America learning leadership, citizenship, and life skills. It is also the official youth development organization of the United States Department of Agriculture and the land-grant university system, administrated by Cooperative Extension. Nationwide, 4-H reached almost seven million youth in a single year, through traditional 4-H clubs, school enrichment, summer camps and other outreach programs (USDA, 2003).

With so many youth and families involved in 4-H, the importance of having capable professionals leading the program cannot be overstated. One of the best ways to ensure 4-H professionals (also known as agents or educators) are equipped to handle the demands of the job is through the use of competencies (Stone, 1997). According to Stone and Bieber (1997), there are three reasons for the use of competencies. One of these reasons is "competency development is a highly participative process" wherein "Extension professionals have the opportunity to identify the knowledge, skills and behaviors they will need to get the best results as well as skills and functions that are no longer effective" (¶ 6). Another reason is the use of competencies is helpful for making important decisions for the future.

In fact, several different state-based competency models have been developed (Boyd, 2003; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Gregg & Irani, 2004), as well as a national framework (National 4-H Professional Development Task Force, 2004). The result of these research efforts is a long list of competencies, which can be overwhelming for the time-crunched 4-H professional looking to improve their own skills. The 4-H program needs to consider taking a more practical approach to the use of competencies, focusing on the most critical areas. To do this, 4-H professionals must be provided the opportunity to have a strong voice in determining what competencies are most necessary for the continuance of a successfully administrated 4-H program in the future.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The most comprehensive of the 4-H competency models is the 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competency Model, which is the official professional development model for 4-H (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). The 4-H Professional Research, Knowledge and Competency Model (4-H PRKC), is the result of a collaborative effort by a task force of 4-H experts, who synthesized research applicable to youth development into one comprehensive model. The 4-H PRKC was developed as a multi-layer model: domain, topic, component and competency. With the domains representing subject matter, and the competencies representing job skills, the 4-H PRKC attempts to address both the academic and practical sides of work in youth development (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004).

Six domains of knowledge are designated in the 4-H PRKC, in the areas of youth development, youth program development, volunteerism, partnerships, organizational systems, and equity, access and opportunity (National 4-H Professional Development Task Force, 2004). Each of the primary domains contains multiple topics, components, and competencies. For example, youth development theory is one of the topics for the domain of youth development. Under this topic are three components: positive youth development, ecological model, and resiliency theory. Each component is then broken down into competencies, such as "intentionally designs programs to promote positive outcomes for youth through the provision of opportunities, relationships, and supports" (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004, p. 8).

While the 4-H PRKC is extremely detailed, it does not necessarily reflect the same competencies agents themselves feel are necessary for a successful performance. A study by Hange, Seevers, and VanLeeuwen (2002) explored the domain of volunteer management in an effort to describe 4-H agents' attitudes and perceptions towards nine competencies. Boyd (2003) conducted a Delphi study to determine the competencies essential for managing 4-H volunteers in the year 2010. A panel of volunteer administrators, Extension specialists and university faculty members reached consensus on five constructs, containing 33 competencies in total. Organizational leadership, systems leadership, organizational culture, personal skills and management skills were all found to be important constructs for volunteer management. In comparison, the 4-H PRKC lists personal readiness, organizational readiness, engagement of volunteers, and sustainability of volunteer efforts as topics for volunteerism (National 4-H Professional Development Task Force, 2004).

Boyd's (2003) findings were adopted for use by Stedman and Rudd (2006) to evaluate the leadership styles and volunteer administration competence of 4-H county Extension agents. In addition to the constructs developed in the Delphi study, Stedman and Rudd (2006) included accountability and commitment to the profession as additional constructs. Their work found that leadership style was influenced by several of the constructs, including commitment to the profession, organizational leadership and systems leadership.

Leadership was also the subject of a study by Moore and Rudd (2004), who developed a model of the necessary leadership competencies for Extension leaders. Competencies identified as important were clustered into domains labeled Human, Conceptual, Communication, Emotional

Intelligence, Industry Knowledge and Technical Skills. A follow-up study by Moore and Rudd (2005) investigated the perceived importance of six leadership domains, as well as the perceived proficiency of Extension leaders in those domains. Respondents indicated they both valued and had at least average proficiency in every domain but Technical skills. Emotional Intelligence was found to be the most important domain.

Also contributing to the understanding of key competencies for agents is a study of county agents and their supervisors in Arkansas (Cooper & Graham, 2001). This study encompassed all Extension disciplines, not only 4-H, but yielded remarkably similar results to the work of Boyd (2003) and Stedman and Rudd (2006). Constructs developed in this study were categorized as program planning, public relations, personal and professional development, faculty/staff relations, personal skills, management responsibilities, and work habits.

Finally, Gregg and Irani (2004) addressed a unique competency construct unmentioned in any of the previous studies, examining the use of information technology by Extension agents in Florida. A strong argument can be made for the inclusion of information technology as a competency. Gregg and Irani (2004) noted: "the ability of Extension agents to use computers, software, and associated peripheral devices for purposes of serving clientele, research, and in support of Extension's administrative infrastructure, has become an essential job-related skill" (¶ 2).

It is evident many competencies are considered to be important for Extension agents to master. Yet it remains unclear which of these competencies will be most critical for sustaining 4-H in the future; which competencies should new and hopeful Extension agents focus on early in their careers and what skills need to be covered in professional development for experienced agents? A more in-depth look at the subject is needed to better understand this problem.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practical competencies necessary for success as a 4-H agent, and compare those competencies to the 4-H PRKC.

Procedures

There are many different competency models addressing the ideal skills that a 4-H agent should possess. To get a more practical perspective, expert agents from the Western region of the United States were purposively selected for an interview. To qualify, the participants must have held an elected regional, state or national leadership position within the last three years. Elected leaders are often opinion leaders in their own social system, influencing the beliefs of followers (Rogers, 2003). Therefore, understanding the opinions of the elected leaders can provide greater insight into the organization as a whole.

The agents selected for this study had served in such roles as regional director, president, president-elect, treasurer, vice president, and secretary within the state and national levels of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents. There were two male and two female agents. Together, the participants represented forty-seven years of 4-H experience, ranging from six to

twenty-five years. Although each agent had a significant percentage of his/her time devoted to 4-H, each also had additional responsibilities in areas such as family and consumer sciences, livestock, natural resources, and service as a county director.

Phone interviews were used to gather the data. A semi-structured interview guide provided a framework for the conversations. The researcher used handwritten notes to record each conversation. The notes were then typed by the researcher to create an electronic record. To establish credibility, each participant was e-mailed a copy of the electronic record for verification. This informal member check provided participants with the opportunity to verify the researcher accurately recorded their interviews and gave them the opportunity to clarify any ambiguity. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985): "the member check…is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Lincoln and Guba also asserted a more formal member check is necessary to establish credibility. This was accomplished by sharing a copy of the reported findings with the participants and soliciting their input.

This study consisted of five individual cases, comprised of the interviews with the experts (4) and the 4-H PRKC document analysis (1). According to Merriam (1998), a cross case analysis is appropriate when analyzing multiple cases. This type of analysis is defined by two stages; a "within-case" analysis and a "cross-case" analysis (p. 194). The first stage allows the researcher to understand the contextual variables of each case, while the second stage may result in the identification of commonalities between the cases. For the research reported here, the within-case analysis for each interview was conducted by the researcher, while the 4-H PRKC was treated as a within-case analysis conducted by the National 4-H Professional Development Task Force (2004). Following the within-case analysis, the contextual variables of the individual cases were compared in the cross-case analysis stage. The results of the cross-case analysis are reported in the findings.

Findings

The findings from the four cases (interviews) were compiled to provide an overview of the emerging themes (in italics for emphasis). Following is the cross-case analysis section.

Experienced Agents' Perceptions of Necessary Job Competencies

To investigate the practical competencies that are necessary for success as a 4-H agent, the interview questions were divided into three categories addressing the experienced agents' perceptions of necessary competencies: before employment, during the first year of employment, and for experienced agents.

The interviews began by asking participants to discuss the competencies they thought were going to be most important before they began their first Extension job, as well as how prepared they felt they were in actuality. Going into the job, all of the participants mentioned competencies such as *communication*, *organization*, and *people skills*. Two of the participants mentioned *subject matter skills*, but only one of them thought "subject matter expertise was going to be most important for me." Another agent, having had the opportunity to intern for her predecessor, commented that "because I was told, I knew conflict management was important." However, no

other participant included *conflict management* as an expected competency prior to starting the job.

Experience, both on the job and in the classroom, was the best preparation for learning the skills needed as a 4-H agent. *Academics* played a key role for two participants, both of whom mentioned their graduate work in Extension Education as a leading contributor for career preparation. In fact, three of the four participants had earned a Master's of Agriculture in Extension Education (and, in fact, were graduates of the same program) and all four had a degree from at least one land-grant university. For the three graduates of the Extension Education program, the practical experience gained from completing a required twelve-week *internship* in an Extension office was irreplaceable. One graduate of the program said: "my two internships I had…prepared me the most."

For the fourth agent, experience was gained through the *4-H program* itself. As a youth member, he learned life skills that would help prepare him for an eventual career in Extension. Later, the experience continued through involvement with collegiate 4-H, including a term as president and work as a 4-H camp counselor. Time as a residence hall director supplemented his 4-H experience, teaching him "additional management and personnel skills."

Despite having valuable prior experiences with Extension, the participants were in agreement that starting as an agent was not without its challenges. Responses to how prepared they felt varied from "I would say I was fairly well prepared but there were some things that surprised me" to "not very, because in a little county in Western Kansas, you're doing all of it; working with volunteers, clubs, summer outreach." The difference between types of experience was noted by one participant, who stated that in terms of education, she was "very prepared…but in life experience…[trails off]." The same participant went on to say that "it took three years before I felt really good about doing my job."

Perhaps the most experienced of the participants had worked both in and outside of Extension. A job in customer service provided the opportunity to practice *conflict management skills*, "but in 4-H, it's a different kind of conflict management." A similar sentiment was echoed in reference to the *ability to multi-task*; the participant "had done it on some level, but not the same as an agent." In fact, it was during a role as an intern and interim agent that the most valuable information was learned. Without that experience, the participant felt that starting as an agent would have been "a lot more challenging."

Many jobs have a learning curve, and working as a 4-H agent is no exception. Each participant was able to recall an important lesson they learned during their first months as an agent. It was during the job interview that one participant learned his first lesson. The interview panel provided the opportunity for him to ask them questions after they had concluded theirs, and he asked "so what happens if I don't know all the answers?" Their response resonated with him and he has remembered the essence of it ever since, "But there is no way you can know all the answers. That's why universities have specialists – to help field staff or county Extension agents."

The importance of *conflict management* was mentioned again. One agent said: "the biggest lesson I learned was that…if you're doing your job right, then someone is going to be upset and disappointed. You can't please everyone." Continuing along the same vein, the agent added "you just have to make tough choices that aren't always going to make everyone happy…if you accept that, it's a lot easier to do your job." Another agent found that he was surprised by the "amount of conflict that there was, particularly in the 4-H program."

Sometimes, conflict was the result of not knowing how to work with different personalities. One participant felt that learning about *managing different personalities* in her graduate class was very different than actually doing it in the real world. She recounted a time when she "cancelled" a 4-H contest when the word she should have used was "postponed." After enduring angry phone calls, she quickly realized that it would have been helpful to know "what words to use"; what she also described as "the political stuff."

The participants also gave some thought to what competencies were important for agents starting their careers now. Some of them, such as *organizational skills* and *communication skills* were repeats of the same competencies the participants had expected to need when they started. But with the benefit of having survived their own first years in Extension, they offered additional advice for newcomers to the profession. They recommended having a solid understanding of what it meant to provide *youth development through 4-H*, versus just knowing how to create a program. It was also mentioned that "having a background in *adult education* is just as important as [having a background in] youth" because "You spend more time working with adults than you do with kids." That participant felt this was particularly true in larger counties, where volunteers are relied upon more heavily to meet the needs of hundreds of 4-H members. Because of the high degree of involvement with volunteers, another agent included knowing the ISOTURE [*volunteer management*] model as a possible competency, but felt more strongly that new agents had "to do a better job [than their predecessors] of *work/life balance*." Achieving that balance could prevent the "burn-out" that was mentioned as a challenge for established agents.

Earlier, a participant mentioned a lesson learned about the difficulty in making everyone happy. The same topic was brought up again as advice for new agents:

> I guess [another agent] is the one who taught me this in a roundabout way. There's going to be things that frustrate you and you have to let them go. He sent me this e-mail once and I still have it because it's so true. People are going to criticize you no matter what you do. Some people are going to love it, some people are going to hate it, and that's just how it is.

As experienced agents, the participants also continue to utilize many of the competencies that they perceived to be important for new agents. *Conflict management, multi-tasking, communication, volunteer management, developing partnerships and collaborations*, and an *understanding of youth development* continue on as key themes—it is no wonder that one participant felt that there were "a bazillion" competencies required to do the job! Time had also brought a more practical wisdom, like "being able to do preventative things when you know something is going to come back and bite you." Yet despite the challenges of the occupation, the participants felt the reward was worth their continued efforts, as best described by the participant

that said “it’s a different kind of enjoyment now that I know the job and know what to do…just being able to make a difference in the lives of kids.”

Cross-Case Analysis of Agent Perceptions and the 4-H PRKC

After being given the opportunity to discuss the competencies the participants perceived to be important for early career and established agents, they were asked to share their opinions about the 4-H PRKC model. Two participants felt they were “pretty familiar” with it, one because of a national leadership role and the other through interactions with one of the state 4-H specialists. However, the other two participants had far more frank replies to the question, “How familiar are you with the 4-H PRKC model?” One laughed, and said “I know it exists” and the other remarked “I know where to look it up.”

All the participants, even those who were familiar with the model, expressed a certain amount of skepticism about its practical usefulness. The PRKC was described as “a good place to start” and interesting for evaluation purposes. Unfortunately, it was also stated that the PRKC is “too long” and that “if you could do it all, you could have Cathann Kress’ job [as National 4-H Headquarters Director of Youth Development].” The perceived lengthiness of the document could be a contributor to why the participants were not using the PRKC on a regular basis. Overall, participants were in agreement that it was not a factor in the way they did their jobs or pursued professional development opportunities.

A comparison of the competencies identified as most important for 4-H agents reveals similarities with the 4-H PRKC (see Table 1). An audit trail is included for trustworthiness. The competencies mentioned by participants were largely included in the domain of organizational systems. However, the 4-H PRKC model contains many more competencies than were identified by participants (National 4-H Professional Development Task Force, 2004). In addition, there were competencies identified by participants that were not a part of the 4-H PRKC, such as conflict prevention and coping with difficult decisions.

Table 1

A Division of the Competencies Identified by Participants into the Domains of the 4-H PRKC

Youth Development -Understanding of 4-H Youth Development (BW, DL, AH, CJ)	**Youth Program Development** -Youth Program Development (BW, CJ)	**Volunteerism** -Volunteer Management/Adult Education (BW, DL) -Multi-generational Learning (BW, DL)
Equity, Access and Opportunity -Equity, Access, and Opportunity (BW)	**Partnerships** -Youth/Adult Partnerships (BW) -Organizational Alliances (BW)	**Organizational Systems** -Communication (BW, DL, CJ) -Conflict Management (DL, CJ, AH) -Organizational Skills (BW, DL, AH) -Interpersonal Relations (DL, AH) -Time Management (DL, CJ) -Work/Life Balance (DL, CJ) -Multi-tasking (DL, AH)

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Prior to starting their careers as Extension agents, each participant had expectations for what the job would entail and what competencies they would need in order to be successful. These expectations were formed as a result of personal experiences with 4-H, academic preparation for a career in Extension, and internships. It is interesting to note the importance assigned by participants to having an internship experience prior to starting as a 4-H agent. The participants clearly valued the opportunity it gave them to develop job-related insight. It is possible this experience helped to hasten the learning curve, making it easier to progress more rapidly as a new agent.

There is another unique similarity between three of the participants, which was their successful participation in the same Extension Education graduate program. Was it coincidence that three out of four of the participants were graduates of this program? What role did their academic career have in developing their leadership capabilities? During the same time span that the participants for this study were serving as state and national association leaders (2004-2006), there were several other program graduates in leadership roles in the state association. Future research should consider exploring the potential relationship(s) between a graduate degree in Extension Education and future engagement as a leader within 4-H.

Several competencies were considered necessary for early career agents, most of them residing in the 4-H PRKC domain of organizational systems (Stone & Rennekamp, 2004). The competencies tended to cluster under the topic of personal effectiveness. From this, it may be hypothesized that mastering the topic of personal effectiveness must occur before success can be maximized in the other 4-H PRKC domains. Of these, conflict management was most often mentioned by participants, indicating its essential role as a competency for 4-H professionals. This supports Moore and Rudd's (2005) finding that Emotional Intelligence was the most important leadership domain for Extension leaders. Not included by most of the participants were skills residing in the equity, access, and opportunity domain, or the partnerships domain. This suggests these domains are less relevant in the everyday activities of a 4-H professional.

Also, the 4-H PRKC failed to capture some of the respondents' more abstract competencies learned through experience, such as accepting it is very difficult to always make clientele happy. For the participants, these lessons were of equal, if not greater, importance than any competency listed in the model. These competencies served as practical solutions to dealing with the realities of the job. They helped the participants to overcome obstacles and challenges in ways that are not prescribed by any model.

There was little difference between the competencies considered important for early career agents versus established agents. Although the participants perceived themselves to be more competent than when they first started, they felt overwhelmed when trying to pinpoint exactly what skills were needed to be competent. The 4-H PRKC did not help them feel any less overwhelmed by the expectations of the job, due to its rather lengthy nature. Instead, experience, rather than any professional development model, was credited for improved performance as an agent. While the participants did seek out professional development opportunities, they did not select them with the 4-H PRKC in mind, but rather due to personal interest. If the 4-H PRKC was intended for agents to use on a regular basis, a more concerted effort needs to be made to get agents to do so.

Due to the nature of this study, the results may not be generalized to any other population. However, they do bring into focus several topics worth further investigation, such as the impact of internships on early-career preparation and the challenges faced by early-career agents. The findings indicated a positive relationship between competency in the Organizational Systems domain and professional success. Future research should examine this relationship more closely. Conversely, it may be useful to determine why the participants chose not to value competencies in the other domains as highly. Finally, the honest feedback from the participants about the 4-H PRKC may be indicative of a more widespread lack of use by 4-H agents. Revisions may be necessary to create a more practical model.

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