

Agents for change: developing transformative and Adaptive Leadership capacities among early-career extension professionals

Agents for
change

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Abstract

Purpose – The Agents of Change program is a two-year, project-based learning program to develop Extension Professionals' capacity to engage in Adaptive and Transformative Leadership. Its primary goal is to develop the capacity of Extension Professionals to engage in leadership to create more diverse, equitable, inclusive and just Extension programs and community change initiatives. This manuscript describes the program and an initial evaluation and results.

Findings – Results of an evaluation of the first year of the program indicate that regular training sessions and support are appropriate for leadership development and that Extension Professionals are using the learning, awareness and tools from this program to address challenges with Adaptive and Transformative Leadership elements. Also, Extension professionals demonstrated commitment to personal growth, community engagement and understanding of their multifaceted roles as change agents.

Originality/value – Participants are sharing resources from the program with colleagues, leading meetings differently, questioning the status quo and pushing others to try new ways forward.

Keywords Transformative leadership, Adaptive leadership, Teaching and learning of leadership, Cooperative extension, Leadership education application and outcomes

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction

Extension offers non-formal education and learning opportunities to farmers and other populations in rural and urban areas (United States Department of Agriculture – National Institute of Food and Agriculture [USDA-NIFA], n.d.). The Cooperative Extension System is tasked with developing local solutions by bringing cutting-edge research-based information to community members who can put that knowledge into practice to help their communities address their challenges (USDA-NIFA, n.d.). Cooperative Extension Professionals – hereafter

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referred to as “Extension Professionals” – have a specific programmatic area and are hired for their positions based on their critical competencies in that particular field (Berven, Franck, & Hastings, 2021; Berven, Penn, Cluck, & Hastings, 2021). Due to the structure of the Cooperative Extension system, many Extension Professionals feel that their primary role in their community is to deliver science and research-based education from their Land Grant University to the public and farmers for process improvement based on science (Karbasioun, Mulder, & Biemans, 2007). However, this approach positions Extension Professionals as reactive information dispensers rather than proactive community developers. It does not account for the other roles they are expected to fill, particularly in meeting emerging needs in their communities (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021).

The challenges that Cooperative Extension faces are similar to other organizations hiring folks who have recently graduated from programs that prepared them within the scope of their particular field but not necessarily to engage in leadership that is vital to the success of working with and for communities (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021). This has become apparent as Cooperative Extension has continued to evolve with complex programmatic needs that actively affect the communities they serve (Karbasioun *et al.*, 2007). To provide successful and relevant educational programs, Extension Professionals must also build collaborative partnerships with other agencies and communities to form effective coalitions to meet community needs (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021). Thus, Extension Professionals must have access to leadership development that addresses complex challenges, community change, and creating more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just programming and communities.

Extension Professionals are described as change agents by the Extension Service (Scott, Weeks, & Weeks, 2018). They are tasked with encouraging individuals to adopt new knowledge and practices to mobilize individuals and communities to make process improvements and facilitate community building and practice improvements (Scott *et al.*, 2018). However, Extension Professionals may fail to meet this description, even within their specific programmatic areas (Scott *et al.*, 2018), mainly because Extension Professionals do not learn the skills and processes that are needed to be change agents through their coursework in their degree programs (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021). Further, limited resources, such as time and funding, paired with the focus on reporting outcomes for funding and policymakers, has negatively impacted the perceived value of focusing on relationship building and community engagement that create long term impacts for communities (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021).

Addressing the professional development of Extension Professionals can be challenging, as they are geographically dispersed and working in unique counties and communities, without much time or funds to offer towards professional development that builds towards long-term programmatic shifts; thus, one-day training programs have been attempted to fill this gap (Scott *et al.*, 2018). Training is often designed to address technical subjects within professionals’ programmatic areas of responsibility, such as pesticide application, youth development models, and safe food handling. These topics are presented in single or multi-day training sessions within a week or so, as professionals will come together on campus or to another specific location for a short time. These training sessions are better suited to address technical challenges that can be solved by applying expertise in the existing processes and procedures (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). This does not work well for developing the leadership necessary for complex change.

Providing support to new Extension Professionals to develop job-related skills is essential during the early stages of their careers, as they often feel overwhelmed with the diverse responsibilities of their job (Halbritter, Wallau, Bengé, & Mackowiak, 2021). The first two years of employment are often crucial since this is when the intention to leave an organization is usually high, and it is equally the period when organizations should leverage professional

growth and development to minimize intent to quit (Benge, Muscato, & Beattie, 2020). The dynamic nature of Extension work and the need for professionalism can be challenging for early career Extension Professionals who face unique challenges as they navigate the complex contexts of their career; thus, professional development in early career Extension should include leadership (Benge *et al.*, 2020; Jayaratne, Collins, & McCollum, 2021). To effectively serve communities and meet the evolving needs of their clients, early career Extension Professionals need to develop Transformative and Adaptive Leadership capacities that enable them to effectively navigate complex social, economic, and political contexts and engage with diverse collaborators.

Cooperative Extension is called on to engage and serve all audiences (Ingram, 2013). Thus, Extension Professionals require continued professional development related to diversity, equity, and inclusion focused on building the capacity to: (a) acknowledge inequity and the organizational and societal ways it is perpetuated; (b) remove barriers to participation; and (c) develop culturally responsive, appropriate, and accessible programs while enacting structural changes in the organization to contribute to justice (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015; Fields, 2017; Gonzalez *et al.*, 2021). Such needs can be met by developing the capacity of Extension Professionals to engage in Adaptive Leadership to address complicated challenges for which there is no existing solution and in Transformative Leadership to center justice and equity outcomes in all solutions (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Shields, 2010, 2011, 2016; 2020).

Review of related scholarship

Leadership development programs are widely acknowledged as a practical approach to enhancing an individual's ability to tackle unanticipated issues, drive transformative initiatives, and effectively lead and engage with others (Sowcik, Benge, & Niewoehner-Green, 2018). Through participation in leadership development programs, early-career Extension Professionals can acquire the necessary knowledge and tools to become effective leaders capable of navigating complex situations and driving positive outcomes. Providing leadership development training to Extension Professionals in the 21st century is essential for addressing rapid changes in both local and global contexts (Sobrero & Jayaratne, 2014).

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive Leadership is the process of motivating individuals to work together to overcome difficult obstacles and thrive, making it an excellent paradigm for Cooperative Extension's work (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Adaptive leaders work to determine what thriving means to a community and then build on traditions, value and elevate diverse perspectives, experiment, manage resistance, and persist in necessary change (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). Adaptive Leadership is driven by challenges with no existing solution within the organization or community and requires changing attitudes, values, and behaviors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). It includes developing, articulating, and executing responsive strategies and is particularly useful during crises when quick and effective decision-making is essential (Goode, McGennissen, & Rutherford, 2021).

To engage in Adaptive Leadership, people need to be prepared for deep learning and then allow that learning to drive individual and collective behaviors (Dugan, 2017). Such knowledge will change values and assumptions, create losses, and encounter resistance; thus, Adaptive leaders must be prepared to navigate these processes (Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Preparation for Adaptive Leadership must include developing the capacity for the iterative process of observing and interpreting situations, developing potential interventions based on interpretations, engaging as a participant and an observer, managing disequilibrium and creating a holding environment,

keeping attention focused on the work, giving the work back to the people, and protecting voices of those without authority (Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Dugan (2017) positions Adaptive Leadership as a vanguard theory – a novel approach that pushes the boundaries of how theory is understood. While Adaptive Leadership is not supported by a large body of empirical evidence, it does provide a definition of leadership that is separate from management, a framework for engaging in challenges regardless of one's levels and types of authority, and a process for creating environments for learning and leadership based on learning (Dugan, 2017). This approach involves identifying and responding to emerging challenges, experimenting with new techniques, and learning from successes and failures. Adaptive leaders can navigate complex and changing environments, build collaborator consensus, and inspire others to take action. Thus, it is a valuable paradigm for Extension Professionals as they are expected to mobilize communities to take on challenges for which there are no existing solutions and which will require new knowledge (Scott *et al.*, 2018).

Further, Adaptive Leadership is rooted in the belief that every organization is perfectly positioned to attain the existing results and that leadership should focus on sustaining change by supporting people through the risk of losing the benefits they currently receive under the organization to create better results moving forward (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009). This is the work Extension Professionals are tasked with, as they are expected to be change agents who facilitate practice and process improvements to create thriving communities (Scott *et al.*, 2018). Intentional development of Extension Professionals' capacity as Adaptive leaders can help Cooperative Extension reach these goals.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative Leadership is a democratic process that focuses on “creating conditions for emancipation, empowerment, and full participation” (Shields, 2016, p. 39). It seeks to transform the individuals practicing it and the society in which they work and live with an overriding commitment to justice, equity, and a democratic society (Shields, 2011; van Oord, 2013). People enact Transformative Leadership through the application of eight tenets: (a) a mandate for deep and equitable change; (b) the need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks; (c) the need to address the inequitable distribution of power; (d) an emphasis on private and public good; (e) a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice; (f) an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness; (g) the necessity of balancing critique with promise; and (h) the call to exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2016).

As Extension seeks to emphasize relationship building and community engagement for long-term impacts (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021), understanding and applying Transformative Leadership to disrupt the status quo and center justice and equity through working with the community becomes an essential skill for the Extension Professional (Shields, 2011). Each of the eight tenets is crucial to fulfilling the responsibility Extension Professionals have for addressing power and privilege, weaving social justice into their programs and policies, and combating the status quo that perpetuates injustice among the people who are typically forgotten in their communities (Brown, 2004; Shields, 2016). The development of Transformative Leadership capacities allows individuals and organizations to foster difficult conversations and inquiry, find ways to overcome power disparities, address systemic barriers, see communities as flexible and ever-changing, develop respectful and mutually beneficial communities, attend to the welfare of all, engage in critique and critical action, and act courageously with others to enact change (Freire, 2000; Green, 1999;

Shields, 2020a, b). Transformative leaders can mobilize resources, build collaborator trust, and catalyze sustainable change.

While Extension seeks to effect community change through Extension Professionals, it is challenging to find professional development opportunities that build upon these skills purposefully for Extension Professionals to adapt and utilize in their communities (Scott *et al.*, 2018). As the focus remains on reporting and outcomes from implementing programs, encouraging Extension Professionals to focus their time and energy on these ideals has proved tricky (Scott *et al.*, 2018). It is one thing to understand the objectives of equity and justice on an ideological level; it is another thing entirely to understand how one's own identity has been shaped by the perspectives that one holds to be able to stand up and speak/act out against the status quo, and to actively advocate for equitable practices and behaviors within one's organization or institution (Shields, 2011).

Adaptive and Transformative Leadership in tandem

Transformative Leadership establishes underlying tenets that guide action and focuses on work that creates a more inclusive and equitable future for everyone; it does not prescribe an iterative process for creating such change (Shields, 2016). Adaptive Leadership can provide a process to achieve the values and end goals of Transformative Leadership. The success and impact of Extension services are closely linked to the development and strengthening of human resource capacities, hence the need for continuous investment in Adaptive and Transformative Leadership capacity within the Extension system. Thus, Agents for Change incorporates Adaptive and Transformative Leadership to support Extension Professionals seeking to engage in such change with specific processes.

Project-based learning

While learning theories is useful for understanding potential new ways of operating, knowledge without practice in an application will not move an individual beyond curiosity and seeking new knowledge (Bruce, McKee, Morgan-Fleming, & Warner, 2019). Project-based learning (PBL) is a way to engage learners with their own Adaptive and Transformative challenges throughout the learning process so that they can affect change within their scope of influence with an intentional structure that connects them to their real-world challenges, requiring them to work independently while seeking out expert and peer support throughout the program (Bruce *et al.*, 2019). Throughout the experience of developing and implementing a project rooted in addressing a challenge, the professionals can experience leading change and addressing challenges and thus develop agency and capacity as change agents (Adderly *et al.*, 1975; Guile & Griffiths, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This experience positions them as practitioners, facilitating identity development as a change agent (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Description of application

The Agents for Change program is a two-year leadership development program for early career Extension Professionals. The overarching program goal is to develop the capacity of Extension Professionals to engage in Adaptive and Transformative Leadership to create Extension programs and community change initiatives that are more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just. [State] Extension Professionals from any program area – 4-H Youth Development; Agriculture & Food; Community; Forest Resource; Health & Nutrition; Home & Family; Lawn & Garden, Solid Water & Air – who have five years of experience or fewer in their current position are invited to apply in the fall before their program years begin. The application includes questions about the Extension Professionals' desire to be in the program

and learn about leadership, messy challenges they already face, and comfort with trying new things. These questions are intended to identify applicants who are interested in leading complex change and willing to engage in the necessary learning. Each applicant must also include a support letter from their County Extension Director, County Manager, or related State Extension Specialist. These letters are to demonstrate that someone in an administrative role will support the Extension Professionals in applying their knowledge and skills from the program, not to testify to the Professionals' qualifications. Cohort selection is completed by the faculty facilitator and a member of the [State] Cooperative Extension leadership team in the middle of November and all applicants are notified before the end of November and provided the dates for the next year's sessions. Due to pandemic conditions, all sessions for the first cohort were conducted on Zoom. As conditions permit, the program will include one face-to-face meeting per calendar year.

Through project-based learning, the program aims to equip early career Extension Professionals with the knowledge and skills to engage in Adaptive and Transformative Leadership to identify and tackle societal challenges and enhance equity and access through formal and informal means. Each Extension professional works on an individual project to apply Adaptive and Transformative Leadership in their community while meeting monthly in cohort sessions with the faculty facilitator to discuss concepts. They complete "work-work" assignments between sessions to apply concepts and develop an intervention for a challenge in their work with a focus on systems level change to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice outcomes.

For the first year, cohort sessions focus on understanding Transformative and Adaptive Leadership concepts and operationalizing them to the work Extension Professionals do. All cohort sessions are led by the faculty facilitator with short lectures, whole and small group discussions, and role-playing opportunities. Extension Professionals are expected to complete "work-work" – because they do it at work, not at home – that applies session content to their jobs. Each session begins with a discussion about what Extension Professionals have learned from the "work-work" and a connection to Agents for Change content and then moves into a brainstorming session to solve emerging issues or a lecture on new content. The schedule for the first year is as described in [Table 1](#).

In the second year, Extension Professionals are more engaged in working with their new networks and advisory groups to develop and implement interventions to their challenges. Thus, cohort session content and structure shifts and more time is spent on the Extension Professionals' questions, frustrations, and needs. All Professionals and the faculty facilitator then work together to develop solutions, identify additional resources, and practice difficult scenarios. While the first cohort – those who have completed the program – presented their work on a Zoom session, we are planning a culminating event for the current cohort to present their project progress and plans to Extension leadership and potential funding sources so that they can continue their work beyond the Agents for Change program. The schedule for the second year is described in [Table 2](#).

Discussion of outcomes and implications

After the first year of the first cohort of the Agents for Change Program, we interviewed participating Extension Professionals for a formative evaluation. Interview questions were derived from Adaptive and Transformative Leadership theories and the program's structural components. Of the 13 Extension Professionals who completed the first year, five agreed to participate in interviews about their experiences. A graduate student, who was also an Extension Professional, completed the interviews on Zoom, downloaded the Zoom transcripts, de-identified them, and analyzed them using the In Vivo coding method for the first round and Axial coding for the second round coding ([Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020](#)).

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Month	Adaptive leadership content	Transformative leadership content	Work-work assignment
January	Introduction to theory; Identifying Adaptive challenges in Cooperative Extension	Introduction to theory; connecting Extension's Adaptive challenges to justice and equity issues	What are your values? Cooperative Extension's? Your collaborators? On-going refinement of proposed challenge
February	Identifying and articulating shared values and rooting your work in them	Connecting justice and equity work to our shared values	Practice framing ideas, opinions and contributions in terms of shared values. Reflect on these interactions On-going refinement of proposed challenge
March	Identifying collaborators and their desired outcomes, engagement, power, values, loyalties and alliances, potential losses, interconnectedness and commitment to change	Identifying inequitable distributions of power	Developing a table of collaborators (existing and aspirational) and their characteristics On-going refinement of proposed challenge
April	Review of collaborators and characteristics; Creating and maintaining just and equitable productive zones of disequilibrium	Creating and maintaining just and equitable productive zones of disequilibrium	Work-work: Identify potential sources of resistance to addressing the challenge you have identified. Invite collaborators to meet before August 1 to begin defining the Adaptive and Transformative Leadership challenge together
May	Archetypes of Adaptive Challenges	Archetypes of Transformative Leadership Challenges	Diagnosing your challenge. Schedule a one-on-one meeting with the facilitator for July or August
June	Addressing the archetypes		Skills practice addressing the archetypes present in each participant's challenge, reflection on practice, and development of a plan for continuous improvement
July	How Adaptive organizations function		How Adaptive is your organization (complete at the office and collaborator group level)?
August	Building Adaptive culture		Skills practice in creating Adaptive culture and reflection on practice Schedule another collaborator group meeting before October 1
September		Organizational readiness for Transformative Leadership	How ready are you and your organization for Transformative Leadership (complete at the office and collaborator group level)?

(continued)

Table 1.
Schedule of content for
the first year of agents
for change program

JOLE

Month	Adaptive leadership content	Transformative leadership content	Work-work assignment
October		Building organizational readiness for Transformative Leadership; deconstruction and reconstruction of frameworks	Work-work: skills practice in building readiness and reflection (complete at the office and collaborator group levels)
November	Systems thinking, interconnectedness and interdependency		Develop a map of the challenge, its leverage points, its reinforcements and its warning signals
December	Systems thinking, interconnectedness and interdependency		Develop a map of the challenge, its leverage points, its reinforcements and its warning signals

Table 1. Source(s): Authors' own creation

The faculty investigator analyzed the transcripts using an Axial coding method as well and the researchers compared codes. Analysis of the interviews uncovered *internal growth and shifts in views of self*, *engaging others in the change process*, and *seeing themselves as agents of change* as changes in the Extension Professionals and it revealed some program successes and challenges.

Internal growth and shifts in view of self

Self-awareness, reflection, and understanding one's role in the process of leading change also came up for many of the professionals when asked to reflect on what makes leadership Adaptive and if they saw themselves as leaders of change after their first year in the program. David mentioned that the role of a leader is to "take care of your people" and that a component of leadership is "knowing when and how to ask for help from others." Sarah also reflected that she has difficulty asking for help, which is one of her continuing goals to work on for her leadership abilities. John mentioned that he is now more confident in his leadership abilities "with what (he has) been learning in the Agents for Change program."

Extension Professionals also spoke about the specific leadership development they have experienced in the program. David talked about the importance of "not run[ning] away from conflict" while Marie named the importance of "be[ing] comfortable in the discomfort. . . to be able to see what challenges could be and that sort of thing, naming it, and then being able to adjust, still keep it action-oriented or Adaptive." Margaret spoke about shifting perspectives and thinking about "challenges and the moving pieces of a program or partnership that may not be working- I am more aware of all the moving pieces of my position that allows me to see where there is a need for change." Systems thinking was shown through the desire to connect networks and community members and organizations, to bridge gaps such as when John inquired about "the disconnect between producers and people buying or cooking the food, and how can we better connect everyone and better support the quality of life and health in (our) County?"

Engaging others in the change process

The program participants who participated in interviews spoke about their engagement with the community in various ways throughout their interviews, with Marie and John mentioning

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Month	Adaptive leadership content	Transformative leadership content	Work-work assignment
January	Developing Adaptive and systemic interpretations of challenges; Review productive zone of disequilibrium	Deconstruction & reconstruction review; Ensuring interpretations include consideration of emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice	Develop at least 2–3 interpretations of your challenge with your collaborator group
February	Debrief interpretations, issues, unanswered questions; identifying support needed to move forward		Reflect on progress to date
March	Designing Adaptive and Transformative Interventions		Begin to develop Adaptive and Transformative interventions with your collaborator group
April	Designing Adaptive and Transformative Interventions		Begin to develop Adaptive and Transformative interventions with your collaborator group
May	Assessing and addressing power distributions and your ability to act politically		Identify the power inequities within your collaborator group and across the people your collaborators represent. Develop a strategy to act politically to develop greater equity in your process and interventions
June	Debrief on interventions developed, power distributions, and ability to act politically		Continue to develop and refine interventions with collaborator group while implementing your strategy to act politically
July	Implementing interventions as experiments; Planning for resistance & change		Being implementing interventions (if ready, otherwise continue to develop). Track issues, resistance, and your reactions Submit a list of people to invite to December's celebration and sharing
August	Debrief implementation and issues		Continue implementing interventions. Track issues, resistance and your reactions
September	Debrief implementation and issues		Continue implementing interventions. Track issues, resistance and your reactions
October	Thriving, Critique and Promise, Moral Courage		Skills practice articulating your grounding and non-negotiables, developing your support network, emphasizing promise
November	Sharing early successes – real change is slow!		Develop a short presentation of your challenge, process and progress to date
December	Participant presentations and celebration		Keep in touch with the facilitator and each other as you continue the work

Table 2.
Schedule of content for
the second year of
agents for change
program

Source(s): Authors' own creation

a desire to work with various sectors of the community to challenge norms and assumptions, introduce new ideas, encourage different approaches to problems, and offer resources that help them make informed decisions. David mentioned engaging the youth members of the community and leading by example, ethically and with moral conduct, and Sarah said reaching wider audiences and various food system and public health-oriented organizations by effectively communicating the vision for change and motivating them towards it. Margaret mentioned the need to consider “who (the challenge) involves and how it would affect them.” The need to consider every individual’s needs and demonstrate empathy is evident. Sarah asked questions about language interpretation services at her events, Marie and John mentioned the need for demographic representation on their advisory councils, and Sarah mentioned the need for inclusive programming that thinks about people’s “reading levels, learning styles, program costs”, and marketing across the community to reach as many people as possible.

John shared that he now believes that leadership means, “working with different groups, volunteers, coworkers, I think that understanding and listening to the community needs and bringing out some new perspectives, talking to community leaders about those perspectives.” Marie referred to a practice of interviewing collaborators to “build relationships with them, getting to know what their perspectives are, sort of in a formal way, that was helpful with exposing any threats and seeing what their needs and wants were.” David stated that to know what people are thinking, “it is better to assume that you do not know what people are thinking and wanting-ask them.”

David spoke about the importance of “listening to folks who are showing resistance to meet them where they are and bridge communications”, “persevering through challenges, bringing everyone to a collective table as a team and not running away from conflict,” and addressing those concerns in creative ways outside of formal meetings as they are sensed and needing to be addressed swiftly. John named the need for intentional connection and alignment throughout the change initiative process as critical to success, along with the importance of including “new perspective(s) and creative ideas” from both the internal Extension collaborators and the external community collaborators.

Much of what was discussed was building relationships and trust among collaborators and communities. John spoke specifically about “respecting (others) and encouraging different perspectives, letting people know that they are understood, and they are heard, no matter who it is, when it comes to change, helps make things run smoother, helps people think in their mind:

Oh, you know what? We have been doing things this way for a long time, and it works to an extent, but I would love to reach out to more people. You have been great at listening to how I feel about this and those challenges and fears, but you also gave me some great perspective, ideas, and support behind your programming.

One of the things that can be scary about change processes is the fear of them not working. John spoke to this with, “I think there is that whole idea where there is a lot of fear in general, not just within me, but with our ever-changing communities, and folks may not be comfortable with it, but letting them know that with change there is going to come mistakes, there is going to come accidents, but it is all about how do we work with them.” The Extension Professionals indicated increased confidence in mobilizing and sustaining others through periods of change and learning from their experiences and mistakes with an experimental mindset to adjust future interventions accordingly.

Seeing themselves as agents of change

The Extension Professionals said one needs to look inside oneself to achieve external changes. Extension Professionals had mixed things to say about viewing themselves as

leaders of change at this point; some said that their confidence in themselves as leaders and change agents has grown, and others said that they could see what to do and have the tools but that the development of a leader identity with a focus on leading change initiatives is still in process for them. Marie explained her current sense of her leadership by saying,

I think I want to be (a leader of change), I think it just takes time for sure, and it is continually evolving too . . . I feel that Adaptive part of it for sure and how to orchestrate it still would be the skill builder. Mobilizing people to make change(s), but with a different approach. . . look at your leadership role as a way to mobilize your community for change

David shared that he first realized one was a leader “as soon as people start looking at you and modeling your behavior.” John shared that he does view himself as a leader of change now, that he is “more confident to go out and take more action with how to go in and communicate with these people and let them know that I really would like them to have a voice and to hear their perspectives, so leading from there.” Margaret shared that she thinks of herself as a leader of change “more so now. I think it is hard for me to label myself as a leader of change, but that is just my personality. So, I think I am learning to be a leader of change, and I aspire to be one because I do look up to those leaders.” Confidence in one’s ability to take more actions and communicate with others came up for the Extension Professionals, with a keen awareness of the need to listen to others, speak up on behalf of anyone, and catalyze change.

Programmatic successes

Broadening the reach of Cooperative Extension through in-office partnerships was mentioned by John, who has now re-imagined the advisory group for not only his program but one that involves his coworkers’ programs as well, thereby de-centralizing control and leadership. Sarah spoke about the need to reach those “with a similar vision and goal for how to reach the community.” While Cooperative Extension is well known for the technical trainings that are often offered as short-term interventions, professionals spoke of wanting to have a more significant long-term impact on their community’s well-being, with John mentioning the specific need to “get away from the one-and-done programs that are common in Extension”, and to “create new traditional practices” because leaders need to grow constantly and their needs may change over time. This demonstrates that Agents for Change program participants understand the need for continuous engagement and support through frequent short leadership training sessions and through individual and group projects, ensuring that progress and enthusiasm are sustained.

In providing feedback for the program materials, participants identified the structure of monthly meetings as helpful. In particular, they appreciated the time to work on their work-work assignments and then to discuss concepts together as a group. John, David, Ashley, and Marie all said that it made them feel less alone in the specific types of challenges that they were experiencing but that more unstructured time dedicated to troubleshooting would be appreciated as a program adaptation.

There was overall excitement about the next year of the program and continuing to work on their projects and tackle Adaptive challenges with the new framework and set of tools they have been building. Extension Professionals’ comments that information sharing is helpful and makes them feel less alone during periods of relational isolation (pandemic conditions) in our society support the importance of programs like this.

Programmatic challenges

Marie, who is in the first two years in her position, mentioned that some of the “work-work” assignments were difficult because she had not fully met her communities and had started working during COVID-19, so identifying some of the particulars felt difficult. Due to the

pandemic, a few Extension Professionals mentioned that their changing job responsibilities made it difficult to complete all the assignments. However, they were glad to have them to look back on as resources moving forward. Sarah mentioned that when she missed a session due to external constraints, she felt out of the loop, and it was hard to get back on the same page as everyone. After learning this, we have recorded all sessions and made them available to program participants. Further, we have added more opportunities to meet with the program facilitator one-on-one to adapt work-work and learning to specific contexts and constraints.

John and Marie commented that in-person sessions a few times throughout the program to build on the camaraderie would be appreciated. This was an intended part of the program, and as pandemic conditions have lifted, we plan to hold some in-person sessions. Marie also spoke of the need to continue to engage in the concepts in future projects and to build on them because “I think that there are still many techniques to be explored and then shared.” This indicates a need to provide support beyond the two years of the program.

Conclusions and recommendations

Leadership development is a long-term endeavor, and both Adaptive and Transformative Leadership theories involve shifts in one’s understanding of oneself, organization, and community. With the changes we have seen in the Extension Professionals after one year in the program, there is a strong indication that combining learning and support in the long term is an appropriate approach to such leadership development.

Leadership programs are essential for early-career professionals to build the tools and skills to lead organizations and communities as they progress through their careers. Extension Professionals spoke to the fact that they are using their learning, awareness, and tools from this program to address the challenges they identified for their projects and in their other work. They share resources with colleagues, lead meetings differently, ask questions about how things have always been done, and push others to try new ways. We saw a substantial shift from before and after the first year of the program in how Extension Professionals actively challenge the status quo through deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks that give rise to inequity, power, and privilege; and work to shift people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties when they are not aligned with their stated values.

Collaborator involvement is key in Extension service delivery. Collaborators help Extension Professionals identify challenges, foster relationships, understand needs and wants, and expose societal threats. Engaging collaborators is an expectation of professionals working in Extension (Berven, Franck *et al.*, 2021; Berven, Penn *et al.*, 2021; Karbasioun *et al.*, 2007; Scott *et al.*, 2018), and being able to do that well is also a learned skill that is necessary for Adaptive and Transformative change. All Extension Professionals indicated an increase in their ability to engage their collaborators before, during, and after a change, to secure their buy-in in the decision-making process, and to communicate the need for change with their collaborators when change is necessary.

Regarding internal growth and perspectives of self, Extension Professionals were confident in their ability to lead others and ask for assistance where necessary. Extension Professionals need to be able to search their own biases and belief systems and challenge their thinking internally, as leading change efforts without understanding our blind spots creates unintended consequences and potential harm to the community that we are seeking to serve (Brown, 2004; Fields, 2017; Fields & Nathaniel, 2015; Shields, 2010). Further, without identifying and addressing this thinking, we risk recreating harmful systems (Shields, 2010). The participants in Agents for Change Program articulated increased confidence in their abilities to lead and to ask for help. Further, they expressed the desire to continue to grow.

We recommend that professional development programs for Extension Professionals use long-term engagement with a cohort of peers in a mix of virtual and face-to-face sessions. Further, we recommend assigned work for the time between sessions – herein called “work-work” – that allows for applying skills in smaller attempts and supports the overall project of each participant. Finally, we believe that Adaptive Leadership and Transformative Leadership are important paradigms for Cooperative Extension. Long-term engagement in programs to develop such leadership capacity is vital to the thriving communities Extension Professionals seek to establish.

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