

Expressed Values of 4-H Adult Volunteer Leaders: Implications for Rural Teachers and 4-H Staff

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Historically, the collaborative efforts between rural teachers and 4-H have provided enhanced opportunities for youth that would not have been otherwise possible. As resources continue to diminish in rural communities, this collaboration is valuable to both schools and the 4-H organization. Currently rural schools are concentrating on the increased demand for academic accountability through performance testing and other evaluation instruments. This trend has resulted in less time for the elective outlets that have traditionally been an important part of school.

At a time when 4-H could help fill an important gap in rural communities, changes within the organization have left some volunteers feeling overwhelmed. This article offers a theoretical framework for understanding the feelings and values of rural 4-H volunteers during a period of dramatic organizational change.

Created at the turn of the 20th century, 4-H was designed to improve the quality of life for youth in rural America. Since its inception, 4-H has accomplished its mission most profoundly through clubs, consisting of at least five members working on similar projects over a period of time with a local leader. Historically, 4-H has changed and developed primarily as a reflection of national events, i.e. two world wars, a depression and a post-war economic boom (Rasmussen, 1989). However, throughout most of its history, 4-H sought to improve the efficiency of agriculture by transferring technical information to youth as a means of reaching their parents. As agriculture became more efficient, the number of farms decreased and there was a general out-migration of farm youth from rural communities. Indeed, during the 20th century, the number of people living in rural American declined from 60 to 25 percent of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

Coinciding with the dramatic decrease in agriculture population, there was an increased national focus on youth issues. Initially labeled Youth at Risk following the release of a Nation at Risk (1983), it became apparent that youth issues were not solely an urban problem, rather youth in rural communities were exhibiting similar behaviors as their urban counterparts.

To meet these changing societal demands, during the 1990s the statewide 4-H program in the state where this study was conducted shifted its emphasis from technology transfer to youth development by adopting a set of "core concepts" to underpin all educational activities. The hallmark "hands on" or experiential projects continued to be implemented, but the focus of the projects shifted from skill development to developing more life skills, whereby youth would a) learn and practice self responsibility and social responsibility to feel accountable and in control of their own lives; b) recognize when and how to make informed

decisions and implement these decisions to solve problems or achieve goals; c) communicate effectively both verbally and in written form; and d) obtain career and occupational information to prepare for the world of work.

This progression and ultimate shift from an emphasis on technology transfer to youth development was consistent with Hall's (1994) description of the six period life cycle of an organization. The first three periods, foundation, expansion and stability, reflect a linear growth and development. However for all organizations, there is inevitably a breakdown period usually brought upon by a shift in societal and cultural values and needs. During this period, the organization experiences a confusion of values. Shortly thereafter there is a critical period in which the organization does one of the three things: a) ceases to exist, b) continues on a minimal basis, or c) tries to renew itself. If the latter choice is made, the organization experiences a sixth period of revitalization whereby there is a re-envisioning of values to ensure their relevance in changing times.

The behavior of the 4-H program in the state where this study was conducted was a reflection of this movement into the sixth period that Hall (1994) described. To implement this shift in 4-H program emphasis, content and process trainings were conducted with staff and volunteer leaders over a period of several years. Yet, despite on-going training, the shift in emphasis for 4-H has not been easy, particularly in rural counties.

This study focused on one of the state's smaller counties in population, with approximately 6,500 inhabitants. Its relatively stable population had an agricultural base although approximately fifteen years prior a state correction facility was built and became a major employer. Approximately 900 school-age children attended the county public schools. Sixty-eight percent of the school-age

population were white; 25% was Latino/Hispanic; and 6% were Native American.

The earliest available county 4-H records date back to 1923. During the early years, 4-H was dominated by livestock clubs that catered to boys. However, by 1958 girls outnumbered boys 4 to 1. By 1963 records indicated that there were 134 members and 44 volunteer leaders. This appears to have been the largest enrollment ever. During this first 60 plus year period, the 4-H program could be described as “traditional,” i.e. livestock and home economics projects dominating the club activities.

In the mid 1980’s, a group of adult volunteer leaders began a mountain climbing project. This 4-H project also offered skiing and hot air ballooning. At the time of this study, its membership was over 40 youth. In addition, other projects being conducted included martial arts and softball. Overall, these non-traditional projects made up over two-thirds of the county’s total 4-H youth enrollment. Many of the adult volunteer leaders of these 4-H clubs were not from an agricultural background and many were not natives of the county.

In general, there was a division within the county 4-H program between the new and traditional clubs and each tended to operate independently. The adult volunteer leaders and parents of the traditional projects filled more of the leadership roles within the county 4-H program but this was not a problem between the two groups. Although the two groups have operated in parallel tracks, all leaders expressed concern about the changes that occurred in Cooperative Extension and the state and national 4-H program.

In addition to describing the life cycle of organizations, Hall (1994) suggested that a critical factor in the transformation of both people and organizations is their values, which give meaning to life and are needed to survive on a daily basis. Hall (2000) described a four phase cycle of value development. Each presents opportunities for individuals and organizations to integrate new values into their worldview. The first phase is based upon survival and physical needs, where self-preservation and safety are dominant. The second phase involves belonging, achievement, and approval by others; self-worth and education are dominant. When moving into the third phase, there is a basic change in world view that alters individual behaviors in relationships with others, specifically in the way an individual sees and relates to institutions. During this phase creative expression and directing one’s own life are important. Self-actualization and independence are dominant. The fourth phase is movement toward global harmony, with wisdom as the dominant value.

Because values underpin both personal worldview and organizational culture, Hall (2000) stated that it is essential to understand what values both individuals and organizations hold. This understanding is particularly important during times of change because values and feelings may be important indicators of the success or

failure of that change. As 4-H has shifted its emphasis, the values and feelings of adult volunteer leaders have not been explored. The findings of an initial exploration are presented here.

Methodology

A sample of 10 adults from the list of 25 active volunteer leaders self-selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. The sample size reflects Hill, Thompson, and Williams’ (1997) recommendation that samples in qualitative research are small, containing 10-15 participants. Of the population interviewed, four were women and six were men. All were white, reflective of the total 4-H volunteer leader population in the county. Of the ten, four were college graduates, five had some college and one was a high school graduate. Their tenure as leaders averaged just less than 10 years (9.7 years) with a range of 1 to 32 years. Seven of the 10 interviewed had been 4-H members themselves.

The primary source of data in this study was semi-structured interviews. Over a period of two months, interviews were conducted, each taking approximately 30 minutes. To establish a climate of trust, an important criteria for successful interviews (Hill, Thompson and Williams, 1997), the investigator who lived in the community conducted the interviews. This individual had regular contact with the volunteer leaders over time but did not provide direct oversight of the 4-H program.

During the interview, as ideas emerged, participants were encouraged to expand on their interview answers as much as they chose. As an aid in interpretation, the interviewer made summary statements. However, if the respondent did not demonstrate a willingness to explore either nuances or new ideas of a subject, the interviewer did not press for elaboration.

Each interview was tape-recorded. Staff not associated with the project transcribed verbatim each interview and the investigator who conducted the interviews checked them for accuracy.

Grounded theory described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and adapted for use in a social constructivist paradigm served as the basis for data analysis for this study. Grounded theory uses a constant comparative method of data analysis to identify patterns in the data to develop a substantive theory rather than applying preconceived analysis to the data. Constructivist grounded theory seeks to define conditional statements that interpret how individuals construct their realities (Charmaz, 2000). Leadership for the analysis was provided by one of the investigators who had no direct involvement with the volunteer leaders, but had thorough knowledge of the 4-H program. Two other researchers made up the team so that a variety of opinions were available for each decision.

All interviews were open coded using a line by line process. Intact interviews were used for this analysis

because it was assumed that the information derived from a particular question would not automatically fall into one category, nor were certain questions the only source of data for a specific category. The data revealed that interviewees often responded to multiple questions at once which is similar to the findings of Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997).

The initial analysis resulted in the discovery of several very broad themes. The strongest statements and the first theme to develop related to parental/adult involvement in the lives of their children. Another strong theme focused on the activities of the 4-H program. However, there was a strong sense of loss and an undercurrent of fatalism in the face of a rapidly changing world throughout the interviews.

Once the categories were agreed upon, axial coding, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions was conducted. All interviews were again reviewed to include all relevant ideas, refine the description of the categories, and serve as an audit. Based on the data, the team agreed on the categories presented.

Results

Interviews with adult 4-H volunteer leaders were conducted as a means of exploring the values and feelings that volunteers hold as the 4-H organization undergoes a period of dramatic organizational change.

Responsibility, duty and obligation emerged as primary values held by these adult volunteer leaders. These values were reflected in how the volunteers viewed themselves, young people, other adult volunteer leaders, parents, as well as the institutions of Cooperative Extension and the State Legislature. In order to maintain the social order, they made clear distinctions of specific responsibilities they believed to be assigned to various societal roles. Living up to obligations was equated with being good and there was a strong sense of blame of those who did not fulfill the obligations of their respective roles. It further appeared that many of the volunteers believed that these values are important to cope with a hostile world and that structured time learning specific skills is an antidote to negative societal influences.

The respondents further appeared to believe that the adult volunteer leaders bear the burden of being role models and instilling the values of responsibility, duty and obligation in youth. For instance, one participant noted that "a successful 4-H club needs really good leaders, a lot of effort and ambition from those leader and ...the largest worry is getting the kids and making sure they learn something." While many of these leaders felt that they were living up to their obligations of creating dutiful young people, they expressed concern that others were not living up to their respective obligations. Furthermore, despite their own desires, leaders also expressed having a hard time living up to their own sense of obligation and often described guilt/conflict about that. "I've always wanted to

take more ...I just truthfully just don't have the time to do that."

Another responsibility of adult volunteer leaders was to create opportunities for youth to develop as leaders themselves. These volunteers stated as well as inferred that 4-H activities should be both constructive and consistent with the interests of the young person, but the actual activities and the goals associated with the activities should be determined by the adult. How these volunteers defined leadership seemed to be associated with a very specific process that involved public speaking. Furthermore, the real mark of a leader was seen as being able to influence others, particularly those they perceived to be important.

In response to questions about public funding and the relationship between 4H and Cooperative Extension, there was a strong undercurrent that neither the university nor the state legislature was living up to their societal obligations regarding 4-H. However specific actions or inactions were not mentioned. A typical response was, "it seems to me like the university has backed away from 4-H a little bit." Despite all of the sense of duty and responsibility, each interview included a usually brief statement about the importance of simply being a part of a young person's life.

Discussion

Values are ideals that provide a foundation or significance to life. They are reflected in the priorities that individuals and organizations choose to act upon consistently and repeatedly. Each individual involved in the 4-H program holds his/her own set of values. Organizational values are reflected not only in the organizational structure and policies, but its programmatic emphases. The purpose of this study was to explore the values held by 4-H adult volunteer leaders during a period of organizational revitalization and re-envisioning of organizational values to ensure their relevance in a changing society.

Duty, obligation, and fulfilling the responsibilities associated with various societal roles were the pervasive values held by these leaders at the time of the interviews. These values are consistent with Hall's (2000) second phase of value development. Personal and organizational choices are based upon the law and respected institutions of authority. On the other hand, the organizational values as expressed in the "core concepts" are consistent with Hall's (2000) third phase. At this stage there is an internal shift in perception of who runs and directs human lives. For the first time, values appear to be relative and personal choices are based on a personally meaningful set of values. Rules and lawful guidelines are important, but the person modifies them if necessary, based on personal conscience.

Of note, although the cycles and phases of Hall's theory are on a continuum, the shift from the second to third phase represents a bridge to a new paradigm, with values that reflect inner authority and vision (Phase III), rather than an

externally driven one (Phase II). It is a transitional cycle that requires a new set of skills.

The primary findings revealed in this study were that the volunteers appeared to be in an external authority phase of their world view and the organization is attempting to implement a program that reflects internal authority. Responses by the adult volunteer leaders also suggested that the organization is also practicing these values. This is found most clearly in the statements that the university and state legislature are not living up to their responsibilities as well as the statements that the volunteers feel that they are carrying the burden of their responsibilities, but no one else is.

This distinction in an external and internal locus of control was more clearly seen when these results were juxtaposed against the “core concepts”. Whereas the core concepts focus on determining one’s own direction in self and social settings, leaders appeared to understand self and social responsibility as a response to institutional authority. Although there were no overt statements negating the importance of individual needs, it appeared that these volunteer leaders have such a strong loyalty to the 4-H program, as they understand it, that their desire is for young people to adapt their behavior in order to belong to 4-H, rather than the 4-H program being adapted to meet the needs of different groups. Furthermore, the 4-H program was consistently given more credit in the development of the child than the normal maturation process. Indeed, there was a very strong sense that 4-H provides an almost guaranteed means of ensuring that the personal qualities valued by these volunteer leaders will be continued into the next generation.

Parents are seen as critical in the development of their children, however 4-H is consistently described as an important means for children and their parents to work together. In some instances, the interviewees stated that parents and their children would not have this opportunity to effectively bond without the 4-H program. Further, parents who were seen as neglecting their parental responsibilities as defined by these volunteer leaders were cast in a somewhat negative light.

This difference in worldview is not only reflective of Hall’s work, but of others who have written about social change. The volunteer leaders interviewed appeared to see 4-H in what Wheatley (1992) described as a machine model, consisting of discrete activities that fit in a certain sequence. It is possible to move the activities around, but they must all be there. Missing pieces makes the whole incomplete, creating angst on the part of the volunteer leader. Perhaps most telling is the sense of conflict about not being able to do more for 4-H.

Goal-setting appeared to be an important underlying element for these volunteer leaders, although they appeared to be more the leader’s than the young person’s goals. These adults believe that when a young person completes an expertly designed project through their own discipline and hard work, success and well-being can be achieved. They

also repeatedly stated that record keeping is critical in building self esteem, although they readily acknowledged that the youth do not necessarily share the same sense or feeling of accomplishment. This is more consistent with the historic expert or technology transfer model used to enhance agriculture efficiency.

Implications and Recommendations

Although the sample size is small, the qualitative findings presented have important implications for organizations experiencing change. The two different sets of values represented by the organization through the core concepts and the volunteer leaders as found through these interviews may seem incongruous. However, after further reflection, it becomes apparent that the two sets of values can also be complimentary. Hall (2000) indicated that personal development is a cyclical process of integration as a person grows in a world view. In this 4-H study for example, core concepts are not taught in a vacuum, but are taught in the context of the organization and individual experiences. Therefore, while individual volunteer leaders may have differing values from those expressed in the core concepts, they could be viewed as a process of personal growth and change from one who reacts to the world in which they live to one who creates the world in which he/she lives. Hall (1994) further suggest that institutions can play a vital role in this process by creating supportive reinforcements of values at the next stage of development. To accomplish this, what is perceived as conflict must be recognized as a natural and healthy process of personal and social transformation.

On a practical level, strategies and opportunities to help long-term 4-H leaders develop with the organization are needed. One strategy could be to use the same process 4-H used in teaching “new-fangled” agricultural ideas to agricultural producers – through the kids. To accomplish this, 4-H professionals nationwide are teaching volunteers facilitation skills to “partner” with youth. Thus, rather than the traditional model of adults transferring knowledge to youth, the facilitation role of the volunteer puts youth and adults as full partners. The result is a program that meets the needs of youth rather than a model of perpetuating programs that no longer interest youth. It is also a model that allows for local priorities. Rural teachers can help the 4-H program by recognizing this change in the 4-H model and to encourage the growth of the organization. Rural teachers may also need to recognize the changes happening within their own school districts and take a step back to see where they are in Hall’s model. That insight may help make change less stressful.

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