

DEVELOPING A COMPREHENSIVE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM FOR EXTENSION COUNTY DIRECTORS

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In 2010, Tennessee Extension launched a strategic planning process to honor the past and look to the future. The strategic plan provided a roadmap to guide Extension to achieve excellence and focus attention on what matters most: advancing Extension in Tennessee. The plan resulted in five overarching goals that included strategies and action steps to achieve each goal. One strategy was to develop a world-class Extension team of staff and volunteers, with an action step to develop and conduct a comprehensive training program for county directors.

Background

County directors are key middle managers in the Tennessee Extension system and manage day-to-day operations in the ninety-five county offices across the state. They are responsible for personnel, facilities and fiscal management at the county level. The need for a training program specific to county directors arose from the findings of the 2010 environmental scan. In 2010, Tennessee Extension had more than 134 agents eligible for retirement within the next 10 years. Included in that figure were 46 out of 95 county directors. With the pending retirements for nearly half of UT Extension's county directors and fewer experienced employees to be promoted into these roles, the issue of providing comprehensive leadership development training for county directors was viewed as critical for succession planning. Given this situation, developing a comprehensive leadership program for county directors became an essential step toward fostering success for Tennessee Extension in light of a changing workforce.

Purpose and Objectives

In 2014, a diverse implementation team representing a cross-section of employees from across the state was charged with developing and implementing a county director training curriculum that would:

- Increase competency.
- Increase job satisfaction.
- Establish consistent leadership and direction across the system.

Methodology

Early in their work, implementation team members proposed a training program that would include resources, information and experiences that would enable and encourage county directors to be effective in fulfilling the duties of their position.

Recognizing differences in learning and retention styles, the inclusion of a variety of teaching methods and components in the training curriculum were part of the earliest considerations. The team identified key skill and knowledge areas believed to be important for successful county directors through a brainstorming session at their first meeting.

Review of Peer Institutions

After reviewing existing training resources in Tennessee Extension, implementation team members conducted a review of peer institutions' training offerings by communicating with contacts from Extension programs at 17 land-grant universities to learn if they offer training for county-level supervisors and to learn more about existing training programs. The information compiled from interviews with peer institutions informed the implementation team's discussion and next steps in the environmental scan.

Delphi Study

To build upon and validate the information collected through brainstorming and reviews of existing programs, the team conducted a Delphi study to obtain input from four panels consisting of a total of 42 county employees representing different positions (county directors, agents, administrative assistants and program assistants) and program areas from across the state. The top five most important training needs for county directors identified across the panels were:

1. Communication
2. Performance Management/Working with Others
3. Leadership
4. Knowledge of Rules and Expectations
5. Financial Management/Budgeting

Major Outcomes

The team developed a comprehensive training program called LEAD95. This name was selected to emphasize leadership development for county directors in Tennessee's 95 counties. LEAD95 consists of five components: face-to-face training, online learning, an online tool kit, a multi-rater assessment and mentoring.



Face-to-Face Training

Face-to-face sessions are held quarterly throughout the year. Based on the concept of intentional relationship building, county directors come together from across the state to network as they gain knowledge and develop new skills. Each session includes leadership development topics, as well as targeted and time-sensitive duties of county directors. In addition to content specifically developed for LEAD95, the program includes a session on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and leadership content from FranklinCovey.



Online Learning

Online learning is readily available for county directors to increase knowledge and build leadership skills at their own pace. UT's online learning management system, K@TE, gives employees access to more than 300 e-learning professional development courses on a variety of topics. At each LEAD95 quarterly session, cohort members are assigned at least one online course to complete prior to the next session.



Online Tool Kit

The LEAD95 website, referred to as the County Director Online Tool Kit, enables county directors to locate frequently needed resources and information quickly. Keyword searchable and easy to navigate, the internal website's homepage features category tiles, such as leadership resources, personnel and financial management, and program planning. Site users can submit requests for additional resources to be developed or linked, and the site is frequently updated with new resources, making it a reliable source for current information.



Multi-Rater Assessment

The Leadership Competencies in Extension (LCE) Assessment provides county directors with multi-rater feedback from his or her regional director, direct reports, peers and stakeholders. The Leadership Competencies in Extension assessment includes 81 competencies in six skill areas: Human Skills, Conceptual Skills, Technical Skills, Communication Skills, Emotional Intelligence Skills and Industry Knowledge Skills. The assessment process is administered via an online survey with each member of the cohort on an annual basis, after they have had at least six months of county director experience.



Mentoring

A formal mentoring program pairs a seasoned county director with each member of the cohort, in partnership with the UT Extension Mentoring Program for new employees. Long-term relationships between mentors and mentees provide continued support and ongoing success beyond the initial assigned mentoring relationship and have been an additional benefit of LEAD95.



Sustainability Plan

Responsibility for sustaining the LEAD95 program resides in the department of Extension Evaluation and Staff Development, with recurring budgeted funds to support the program. The implementation team transitioned to a standing committee to serve as an advisory group for program content. In 2018, due to multiple requests, the program was expanded to include experienced county directors who expressed interest in participating in the program to enhance their leadership skills.

Initiative Team

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