

Leadership and Managerial Skills of County Commissioners as Perceived by County Commissioners, Ohio State University Extension Chairs and Assessment Center Assessors

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The need for effective local governance systems has never been greater. Actions by federal and state governments have shifted responsibility for many programs and services to the local level and local officials are being required to make decisions having significant political, social and economic consequences. In Ohio 12,126 men and women held county, township, and municipal government positions in 1988 (Collamore, 1988). These positions include commissioners, mayors, trustees, auditors, treasurers and other elected and appointed department heads. Leadership and managerial skills are essential qualities for elected officials to possess. Several agencies provide general training after the leaders have been in office for a time. Little evidence is available regarding new and emerging elected leaders in small and mid-size communities having access to personal assessment of their public administration and leadership skills (Boothe, 1990).

Turnover is high among elected officials with nearly 20 percent of Ohio's elected officials being replaced biennially (Collamore, 1988). Dr. Cornelia Flora, of the Kansas Rural Development Center, has suggested that one characteristic of strong, innovative rural communities is a flexible, dispersed leadership (Flora, 1988). Both turnover and the need for broad-based public policy leadership point to the growing demand for preparation in public decision making.

Officials, most of whom are part-time volunteers in service to their communities, find themselves overwhelmed at the number and scope of decisions they must make and the criticism expressed by their constituency. A complaint about public life is that when well-motivated individuals leave their comfortable private-sector occupations to take on elective or appointive office they often find themselves in hopelessly frustrating bureaucratic situations, strangled by red tape, and thwarted by poorly designed public process

(Gardner, 1990). Gardner's assessment is probably even more true for these officials in rural areas who face particularly difficult challenges, with little access to professional advice and expertise. These citizen-leaders must provide an integrated package of programs and services, manage the funds to pay for them, and face the pressure of eliminating some popular programs because local funds are insufficient to support them. Information to make these decisions is not always available, and the expertise local officials bring to public office is not always sufficient to do the job (CIES, 1987).

Because of this lack of professional advice, information and expertise for rural counties, Ohio State University Extension developed an assessment center to assist current and aspiring county commissioners in identifying their current managerial capabilities and training needs. The assessment center is composed of eight different exercises which enable participants to demonstrate their abilities on 15 job related dimensions. The 15 job related dimensions were based on a competency profile developed in February, 1991 of rural Ohio county commissioners. These dimensions were identified through the DACUM process. DACUM (Developing A Curriculum) was the method used to determine the competencies or tasks that must be performed by county commissioners. A group of eight experts selected from all county commissioners in Ohio were recruited to serve on the DACUM committee. The committee worked for two days under the guidance of three facilitators to develop a DACUM chart. Modified, small group brainstorming techniques were used to obtain the expertise and consensus of the committee.

The job related dimensions of the Assessment Center for County Extension Chairs of the Ohio State University Extension were also utilized. The 15 dimensions were oral

communication, written communication, leadership, initiative, planning/organizing, decision making/judgment, development of co-workers, behavioral flexibility, organizational sensitivity, assertiveness, objectivity, perception, sensitivity, management control and collaborativeness.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the managerial and leadership skills of county commissioners and to determine the difference in perceptions of county extension chairs, county commissioners and assessors of county commissioners' managerial and leadership skills concerning the 15 assessment center dimensions.

Procedures

Population

The populations in this descriptive case study were all county commissioners who volunteered their participation in the Ohio State University Extension Assessment Center between July 1991 and October 1991 (N=16), county extension chairs of Ohio State University Extension from those counties represented by the commissioners (N=15) and assessors taking part in the process (N=6). Assessors consisted of trained extension personnel that were members of the development committee for the assessment center for county commissioners.

Instrumentation

A one-part questionnaire was utilized for the purpose of collecting data from county extension chairs. The instrument was the same as that completed by the participating commissioners and assessors. The instrument measured the perception of the county commissioners leadership and managerial skills on 15 job related dimensions identified by a panel of experts. These experts were current county commissioners serving terms in rural Ohio counties. Respondents were asked to rate the commissioners on a five-point Likert-type scale. The five points on the response scale were 1 = Poor, 2 = Fair, 3 = Average, 4 = Very Good and 5 = Excellent. Each score was used as a single item rating.

The original assessment center that was modified and then used for this study was

developed by Ohio State University Extension to assess county extension chairs. Sixteen county extension chairs identified by Ohio State University Extension administration developed the dimensions for the assessment center over a two-day period. These chairs were chosen on subjective evidence that they had been successful chairs as viewed by administration. The overall reliability for the assessment center was computed by Kwartang (1986) after all chairs (83) had gone through the assessment center. The resulting Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was .95. In addition, he computed an inter-rater assessors reliability value of .79. This same assessment center has been utilized since 1985 for assessment of county chairs. To reemphasize, the same format was used for county commissioners' assessment centers with modifications of the activities to relate to the role of a county commissioner.

Face validity of the questionnaire instrument was established by a group of eight county commissioners selected by Ohio State University Extension. Content validity was determined by these experts, these same eight commissioners, through the DACUM process by developing a competency profile for the position of county commissioner. This profile identified required duties and competencies for county commissioners.

The assessment center for county chairs identified 16 dimensions from which to measure participants performance. The assessment center for commissioners utilized 15 of those dimensions. From the competency profile the expert group defined each dimension as it related to the job of a county commissioner.

Data Collection

Three sets of data were collected in this study. The first set of data consisted of the performance ratings on the 15 dimensions of the assessment center for each county commissioner that participated in the assessment center. These ratings were determined by the assessors participating in the assessment center. Assessors observed the commissioners over a two-day period as they participated in eight activities to measure their leadership and managerial skills. Activities in which the commissioners participated were background interview, group discussion, assigned roles, group discussion-nonassigned roles,

inbasket, interview simulation, fact finding, case study, and press conference. Each commissioner was assigned a lead assessor that compiled a final rating on each individual dimension. These exercises were developed to simulate the 15 job related dimensions identified for county commissioners. This allowed assessors to observe, record, classify and evaluate job relevant behavior in job relevant situations. Using job simulation exercises tailored specifically to the dimensions of the job allows candidates to "get into" real life simulations. (Joiner, 1984). Ratings ranged from 1 to 5 where 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = average, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

The second set of data was collected from county extension chairs representing the counties of the participating commissioners. A questionnaire gathering respondents' perceptions of leadership and managerial skills as related to the 15 dimensions was mailed to county extension chairs. The chairs rated the commissioners on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = average, 4 = very good and 5 = excellent.

The third set of data consisted of post assessment center evaluations completed by the county commissioners. After completing the two day assessment center process the commissioners completed a self evaluation and rated themselves on the 15 dimensions. Responses were obtained from twelve of the 16 county commissioners.

Data Analysis

The statistical package (SPSSX Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was utilized from the Instruction and Research Computer Center (IRCC), The Ohio State University for analysis of this study.

Descriptive statistics were utilized to organize and describe data. Frequencies, percentage distributions, and means were computed to describe the county commissioners', county extension chairs', and assessors' perceptions of the county commissioners leadership and managerial skills as related to the assessment center dimensions.

One-way ANOVA was computed to describe the differences between the perceptions of the three groups: county commissioners and county extension chairs, county commissioners

and assessors, and county extension chairs and assessors on each of the 15 assessment center dimensions. A Tukey test was conducted on each dimension to determine which groups were significantly different. The dimensions analyzed were oral communications, written communications, leadership, initiative, planning/organizing, decision making/judgment, development of co-workers, behavioral flexibility, organizational sensitivity, assertiveness, objectivity, perception, sensitivity, management control and collaborativeness.

Findings and Implications

Assessors' perceptions of the county commissioners performance in the assessment center ranged in mean scores from 3.35 to 3.81 (Table 1.). According to the assessors' ratings, commissioners performed highest on the dimensions of organizational sensitivity, assertiveness and objectivity. Their lowest mean scores were on the dimensions of written communications, perception and leadership. As a group, the commissioners performance was above average in the activities measuring leadership, written communication and perception. They were rated very good on their performance measuring organizational sensitivity, assertiveness and objectivity.

The assessors' ratings were based on what they observed during the simulation activities of the assessment center. Notation should be made that the behavior in one exercise could have influenced the individual dimension ratings. County commissioners could have also fallen victim to the halo effect where assessors have their own idea of what a good manager is and their ideas may not be appropriate for the job of a county commissioner.

The assessors rated the commissioners well above average with the majority being rated very good. Speculation is that those commissioners who participated in the assessment center are what would be considered "top" commissioners in the state. These individuals participate in training programs to better their performance, therefore, the conclusion for high ratings.

Mean scores for the county commissioners self perceptions ranged from 3.0 to 3.83 (Table 1.). The commissioners did not tend to rate

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and F-ratios for Assessment Center Dimensions

Dimensions	Assessors (n=6)		County commis- sioners (n=16)		County chairs (n=15)		F	Prob.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Organizational sensitivity	3.8	.54	3.6	.79	4.1	.83	1.491	.24
Assertiveness	3.8	.54	3.2	.58	4.2	.78	9.654	.01
Objectivity	3.8	.66	3.5	.52	3.7	.72	.800	.46
Development of co-workers	3.8	.78	3.3	.62	3.4	.50	2.384	.10
Sensitivity	3.8	.58	3.8	.58	3.5	.52	1.080	.35
Collaborativeness	3.8	.68	3.8	.62	3.9	.52	.178	.84
Oral communication	3.7	.60	3.5	.67	4.4	.62	7.908	.01
Initiative	3.7	.60	3.5	.52	3.8	.66	.924	.41
Behavioral flexibility	3.7	.48	3.6	.52	3.3	.60	2.061	.14
Decision making/judgment	3.6	.62	3.6	.79	4.0	.82	1.432	.25
Management control	3.6	.72	3.0	.43	3.7	.78	4.347	.02
Planning and organization	3.6	.73	3.7	.65	3.9	.80	1.034	.36
Leadership	3.6	.73	3.3	.47	4.3	.78	7.392	.01
Perception	3.6	.73	3.2	.60	3.8	.78	2.065	.14
Written communication	3.4	.69	3.2	.78	3.6	.76	1.244	.30
Ranges	3.4 to 3.8		3.0 to 3.8		3.3 to 4.4			

Scale used to compute means: 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = average, 4 = very good, 5 = excellent.

themselves below the average, however, the group scored themselves lower than the group of assessors and county chairs. The commissioners' scores indicated that they felt their highest performance was on the dimension's sensitivity, collaborativeness, and planning and organizing. Their lowest rating was on the dimension's management control, written communication and assertiveness.

This implies while the commissioners did not score themselves below average, they did perceive themselves to be slightly above average. Notation should be made that the self assessment was taken following their participation in the assessment center which may have had a reflection on the ratings. They may have realized that what they thought were their strongest points could need further development. The assessment took place over a two-day period. Measurement of their leadership and managerial skills may not necessarily indicate how they would perform over time and under stress.

The county extension chairs rated the county commissioners higher than the other two groups. Mean scores ranged from 3.3 to 4.4 (Table 1). The county chairs perceived the

commissioners to perform highest in oral communication, leadership and assertiveness and lowest on behavioral flexibility, development of co-workers and sensitivity. Interpretation could be made by authors that the county chairs typically are in contact and interact with the commissioners frequently on a one-to-one basis. This may explain the highest rating for oral communication. Lower ratings in behavior flexibility and development of co-workers could be explained by the fact that these county chairs may not clearly understand the dimensions and/or that they may not see the commissioners in all of these dimension roles. The county extension chairs probably rated the commissioners according to their perception of commissioners' performance on a daily basis. Their ratings were probably based on how they see the commissioners actually performing on the job.

Ratings by the chairs suggest that the commissioners performed better in "real life" than they did in the assessment process and that others believe them to be higher performers than they believe themselves to be. One limiting factor may be that some of the commissioners were made aware of the assessment center opportunity by the county extension chairs in their county and may be an explanation for the high ranking in leadership.

The county chairs may have felt that their commissioners were good leaders and would be good candidates for the assessment center. Significant differences were found among the groups on four of the 15 dimensions. The groups of county extension chairs/county commissioners and county extension chairs/assessors differed significantly on the dimensions oral communication and leadership. The assessors/county commissioners and county commissioners/county extension chairs groups differed significantly on the dimensions of assertiveness and management control. County extension chairs rated the county commissioners much higher than the assessors of the county commissioners rated themselves.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based upon the findings from this study and suggestions arising out of the study.

A longitudinal study should be conducted to compare the performance of the commissioners during the assessment center with on the job performance. This study would give further and more detailed evaluations to the participating commissioners. Follow-up studies should be conducted to determine developmental plans recommended by the assessors as a result of their assessment center performance have been implemented. These follow-up studies would assist in determining if the suggested plans have been acted on to improve performance on the job. Finally, the Ohio County Commissioners Association should encourage all county commissioners and those that aspire to be county commissioners to participate in training and development programs such as an assessment center.

The assessment center serves as a basis for evaluation of participating commissioners. Currently, the only evaluation they received is the vote of their constituents. If they are not elected or re-elected they can only assume it was due to poor performance. Having experienced the assessment center and upon review of self, assessor, and extension chair assessments, the commissioners will recognize their strengths and weaknesses and overall potential for self development. The benefits to the participants will also include a better understanding of what a commissioner does and the qualities needed to be successful. When used

effectively, these benefits provide a basis for career development, placement and manpower utilization (Boehm & Hoyle, 1977). The assessment center ratings provide information to plan a personal development program.

The results of this study helped to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the county commissioners' leadership and managerial skills and provided a basis for planning personal opportunities. The assessment center aids in providing a liaison between Ohio State University Extension and county commissioners by providing research based information.

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