

# Evaluating the Influences on Extension Professionals' Engagement in Leadership Roles

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*Developing leadership within any type of volunteer organization can be a difficult task; however fostering commitment long term has been a proven key component to the sustainability of such organizations (Collins, 2001). Extension professionals rely heavily on their professional organizations to offer stability and professional development on a national basis, thereby strengthening the extension profession as a whole. Within the 4-H youth development field, this stabilizing organization is the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA). While over 1,200 extension 4-H professionals gather annually to engage in organizational activities at their national meeting, the board has found it increasingly more difficult to recruit and retain leadership at the national level. Previous research shows in order for volunteers to partake in leadership opportunities they must feel the benefits outweigh the costs (Inglis, 1994). In order to further understand the membership and determine their motivations a Delphi study was conducted to determine why the current NAE4-HA leadership team chose to step up and lead. As a result, professional development and recruitment efforts were suggested to assist in developing NAE4-HA leaders for the future, essentially enhancing leadership development within Extension professionals themselves and the communities they serve.*

Keywords: volunteer leadership, NAE4-HA, cooperative extension, professional development

## Introduction

The vision of the National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4-HA) is “to be the first choice of the youth development professional for building professional and personal competencies” (NAE4-HA, 2010, para. 1). 4-H is the youth serving organization of United States Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension (NIFA, 2010). 4-H provides agricultural and family and community sciences education to youth 5–18 years of age across the United States through non–formal and formal educational opportunities (Rasmussen, 1989). NAE4-HA is the professional organization of the 4-H Youth Development profession, offering networking and professional development opportunities.

Members serve as the governing body of the association in a volunteer capacity. The board is responsible for managing financial, communication, and professional development

aspects of the association. All of these aspects are critical to keeping the association in place. Every year the Organizational Stewardship committee, responsible for recruiting new leadership, struggles to fill these voluntary roles, why? This study examined why individuals currently in leadership positions within NAE4-HA chose to take the additional responsibilities associated with leading the association.

Fostering new leadership within an organization will aid the performance of that organization (Barnes, Haynes, & Woods, 2006), while building and strengthening the leadership and decision making skills of leaders within an organization. This aids in sustaining that organization over the long–term (Collins, 2001).

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and Cooperative Extension, as the over–arching organizations of NAE4-HA, have demonstrated continued commitment to professional development opportunities for Extension professionals which helps build

competencies across the system (Stone & Bieber, 1997). NAE4-HA provides leadership opportunities at several levels. Professionals may get involved at the committee level as a member, take on leadership within committees, or step into upper leadership. This includes committee representation on the board, regional directors, one of five Vice-President Roles, or President's Council roles. Extension professionals look to these organizations for competency building and networking opportunities. The Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (Jackson, Hubbard, Habecker, Kroenke, Reichenback, & Traaholt, 2004) surveyed their membership to determine why they chose to be a part of the organization. They indicated a need to belong to an organization with members of similar interests and networking opportunities as the primary reasons to belong.

Volunteer motivation has been the focus of research for many years; however, much of that research has specifically identified motivational factors associated with non-member serving organizations (Cleveland & Thompson, 2007; Fritz, Barbutto, Marx, Etling & Burrow, 2000; Harrison, 1995; Hibbert, Piacentini, & Dajani, 2003; Kulp & Schwartz, 1999). These researchers provided a framework for understanding the basic dimensions related to voluntary participation in organizations and provided that motivation, regardless how defined, required the attention of volunteer program leaders to ensure the success of the programs they administered.

Rogers (2005) determined the motivation of teachers to move into leadership roles to be structured around the need for achievement, affiliation, and esteem. Rogers' study was important because it highlighted working professionals' desire to take on leadership roles within their disciplinary professional organization. Inglis (1994) looked at the needs of volunteers who serve on boards and found that if the individual perceives a benefit that outweighs the demand of being a part of that board they will continue to serve. Likewise, Fritz et al. (2000) found that 4-H volunteers chose to volunteer because of their strong affiliation to the program.

The National Research Agenda: Agricultural Education and Communication, 2007–2010 outlines clearly the need for developing and

disseminating effective leadership education programs, RPA 1, within Agricultural Leadership (Osborne, 2007). Professional organizations are safe environments for Extension professionals to take part in leadership education opportunities. Association leadership also addresses Agricultural Education in Domestic and International Settings: Extension and Outreach RPA 2 (Osborne, 2007). Professional competencies that prepare 4-H Agents to be successful agents of change can be developed and implemented through leadership within the association (Rogers, 2003).

### Theoretical Framework

The area of volunteer leadership has grown more important as organizations embrace ways to recruit and retain members to serve in leadership roles. One particular area which serves as a measure for understanding why members elect to serve in leadership roles is motivational theory. While there are many viewpoints of motivation the intent of this study was to determine motivation related to the purposive approach. The purposive approach addresses motivational needs based upon the goal-directed nature of behavior (Beck, 1990).

There are a number of motivational theories which have been used to address volunteer needs in non-profit organizations (Connors, 1995). These include Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), and Herzberg's Two-Factor Model (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). All of these theoretical approaches to understanding motivation and need were derived from the broad purposive perspective. For the purposes of this research, Learned Needs Theory was selected for the purpose of categorizing statements through the Delphi. McClelland's work has been used to identify volunteer motivation previously and provided an organized way to analyze respondent comments.

#### *Learned Needs Theory*

From the purposive perspective, McClelland (1967) developed the learned needs theory. McClelland's approach identified three central routes to motivation: achievement, power, and affiliation. His work sought to, "explain and predict behavior and performance based on a person's need for achievement, power and

affiliation” (Lussier & Achua, 2010, p. 42). This unconscious process drives individuals to make choices about their behavior. McClelland postulates that each person has each of the three motivational needs, but can vary by degree based upon environmental (nurture) experiences.

#### *The Need for Achievement*

The motivational need associated with achievement stems from an individual’s desire (or concern) for excellence. Excellence is typically derived from personal accomplishments. Of the three needs, achievement is the most researched (Connors, 1995). With that, assessment of individuals scoring high in achievement provides important information about their behavior. Connors (1995) speculated that individuals with high achievement needs will: (a) set goals just difficult enough to maintain a sense of challenge and achievement, (b) seek feedback to measure success and increase the quality of their personal performance, and (c) will avoid routine and seek other new challenging tasks to make progress toward.

In terms of voluntary contributions high achievement individuals will take on responsibilities in which they have the opportunity to be successful and recognized. According to Connors (1995, p. 27) these include, but are not limited to “fundraising, membership campaigning, researching and analyzing, reporting, chairing committees or occupying leadership positions, filling executive directorships, and doing nitty-gritty work.”

#### *The Need for Power*

This motivational need is derived from an individual’s desire for power described as, “the unconscious concern for influencing others and seeking positions of authority” (Lussier & Achua, 2010, p. 42). Individuals with high power scores are often seen as wanting to be in control of a situation or people and they typically enjoy competition, not necessarily for a personal satisfaction of achievement (high achievement) but to win. They are comfortable confronting others and do not shun away from conflict. They enjoy positions of authority and status.

According to Connors (1995) individuals with power seek to surround themselves with symbols associated with power and will often

find ways to call attention to themselves. With that, volunteer-related duties and responsibilities should include tasks which can fulfill this need. These may be “public speaking, fund-raising, writing newspaper articles, being a CEO, chairing events that bring public attention to a cause, or managing many people” (Connors, 1995, p.28).

#### *The Need for Affiliation*

An individual’s need for affiliation is often reflected in a subconscious need to develop or maintain close relationships (Lussier & Achua, 2010). There are two distinct forms of this behavior, need for affiliation and need for intimacy. High affiliation individuals are characterized as highly sensitive and have a strong need to be liked by others. The activities they seek out are often associated with developing, helping or teaching others. Connors (1995) provided that need for affiliation also manifests in desires related to forming “alliances and partnerships with individuals or groups.”

High affiliation individuals can be characterized as needing and seeking approval from others, confident, assertive, enthusiastic, and expressive. Additionally, they are hesitant to seek feedback or evaluation from others (fear of disapproval). Those with a need for intimacy are conversely considered to be warm, sincere, appreciative, less dominant and self-centered and will often get involved in “deeper relationships” (Connors, 1995, p. 28).

In this case volunteer-related activities will differ based upon a person’s distinction between need for affiliation or need for intimacy. For those with high need for affiliation the following responsibilities are recommended: “ushering, task force membership, hospitality committee, banquet committee,..., social activity worker” (Connors, 1995, p. 29). Those with high need for intimacy may be involved with, “recognition events, case worker, friendly visitor, or counselor” (p. 29).

There is a distinct need for being able to recognize an individual’s needs and motivations. As organizations become more adept at doing so, members will feel more fulfilled by their personal involvement. This involvement is crucial to creating opportunities for members to move through the organization and take on additional leadership roles either as a chair of committee or executive office.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to develop a consensus listing of influences leading extension professionals to engage in leadership positions in a professional extension organization.

### Methods

The Delphi method is a process developed by Dalkey and Helmer (1968) designed to collect knowledge and create a consensus on a topic from a group of experts specializing in the area of interest (Ziglio, 1996). This study employed the conventional Delphi version identified by Wilhelm (2001) and outlined by Stitt-Gohdes and Crews (2004). The first step was to select the expert panel to serve as the purposive sample. In this study, the panel consisted of 29 extension professionals serving as the leadership team for NAE4-HA. While this may appear to be a small sample size, it is acceptable when using the Delphi method. Quality results have been created out of panels with only 10–15 participants (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). Of the 29 chosen, 41% were male ( $n = 12$ ) and 59% were female ( $n = 17$ ). They represented 20 different states with equally distributed regional representation.

The Delphi method has been noted as an effective way to obtain consensus with a purposive sample of experts (Stufflebeam, McCormick, Binkerhoff, & Nelson, 1985). It is also conducive to gaining insight into priorities that are difficult to analyze analytically from those with the needed information (Dalkey & Helmer, 1968). In this case, the individuals with the needed information were those currently participating in leadership roles in a professional extension organization. The NAE4-HA leadership team was chosen for the study because 4-H professionals represent all categories of programmatic expertise within extension. The 29 chosen for this study reported additional position responsibilities outside of 4-H in extension areas including agriculture ( $n = 8$ ), family and consumer sciences ( $n = 14$ ), community development ( $n = 4$ ), horticulture ( $n = 2$ ), and natural resources ( $n = 1$ ).

The extension professionals chosen to run for and hold professional leadership positions within this organization must be nominated or approved by their state extension director. State

extension directors can only nominate/approve professionals they feel have leadership potential and fulfill the goals of NAE4-HA: meet the needs of youth development professionals by maximizing the use of technology; provide progressive levels of professional development; elevate the quality of youth development work through scholarship, research and practice; advocate for the 4-H youth development profession; and facilitate networking throughout the association and the youth development profession. The need for informed opinion on the topic at hand is imperative to the success of a Delphi study (Wicklein, 1993).

Following the Delphi method (Moore, 1987), the study consisted of three questionnaires, given in three stages at the four-day annual meeting of NAE4-HA where all leadership team members are present. The first round used one open-ended question, *What were the main influences leading you to run for and take an office in a professional extension organization?* This question was used to generate multiple responses from the study participants. Respondents were given this single question on a sheet of paper and asked to respond in writing on the first day of their annual meeting. The initial responses were collected, summarized, and categorized by two of the researchers for the creation of the questionnaire used for the second round.

In round two, the panel members were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items categorized in the first round. A hard copy instrument was created using the responses from round one with each statement collected being rated on a Likert-type scale (1–Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Uncertain, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree). The instrument was distributed to the respondents on the second day of their annual meeting. The responses were collected, entered into SPSS, and descriptive statistics were run on each item. Data collected in round two (Likert-type questions) were treated as interval data to report means and standard deviations for selection purposes. A mean score  $\geq 3.50$  was set *a priori* for the item to continue to the third round.

The third round was used to determine consensus among the remaining items. Consensus was assumed to be reached when agreement was indicated by a certain percentage of panel members (Scheibe, Skutsch, & Shofer,

1975). A percentage of 66% was set *a priori*. A third instrument was created using the items that passed the second round ratings. The third and final instrument was distributed on the third day of the annual NAE4-HA meeting. Panel members were asked to indicate their agreement with each statement. If they disagreed with a statement, they were asked to provide open-ended comments explaining why they could not agree. Responses were collected, entered in to SPSS and descriptive statistics were run on each item. Percentages were used to report the nominal data collected in the third round to report frequencies. All 24 items in this round reached consensus. Most Delphi studies reach consensus in the third round (McC Campbell & Stewart, 1992). Five members of the panel were not present on the third day of the meeting.

Finally, the items reaching consensus in the third round were grouped by three researchers according to the learned need they most appropriately addressed. Prior to reviewing the items the researchers reviewed generalities about the learned needs McClelland (1967) identified. They then classified several of the items into needs categories together to gain consensus on

their classification plan (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of the three researchers then grouped the items individually by the needs they felt the item addressed. After reviewing all of the items individually, the researchers discussed their classification choices. The researchers performed peer reviews by discussing their personal perceptions and generalizations regarding each item and came together to create consensus on the classification of each item.

## Results

A 100% response rate was achieved in the first two rounds because all participants in the study responded in these portions of the study. An 80% response rate was achieved in the third round due to several participants being unavailable. Forty-five influences were identified by the participants in Round One. Table 1 lists the influences identified by more than two participants. The variety of influences identified dealt with personal, professional, and organizational influences pertaining to taking on a leadership role.

Table 1  
*Round One Results (n = 29)*

Influences	Responses <sup>a</sup>
To give back to the association	10
I was asked	9
I believe participation in leadership is a part of my role as a member	5
Networking	4
The respect I have for colleagues who have served the association prior to my service	3
To grow my skills as a leader	3
I wanted to learn about the inner workings of the organization	3

<sup>a</sup>Influences identified by only one or two participants are not included in this list, but were included in Round Two.

Of the 45 influences identified on the Round Two questionnaire, 24 were retained for the third round. The means for the items ranged from 2.07 to 4.48 (see Table 2). The highest level of agreement ( $M = 4.48$ ) was reached on to *give back to the association*. The next six

highest rated items were influences related to service including making a difference, contributing to the profession, and believing it is important to get involved when you believe in the organization.

Table 2  
*Round Two Results (n = 29)*

Influence	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
To give back to the association	4.48	0.58
To make a positive difference	4.41	0.68
To contribute to the association	4.28	0.75
I have a passion for 4-H	4.25	0.93
I want to give back to the extension organization	4.25	0.70
I think it is important to get involved in organizations I believe in	4.10	0.77
To contribute to the profession	4.07	0.65
I was encouraged by others to serve	4.07	1.00
For personal growth	4.04	0.78
I believe participation in leadership is a part of my role as a member	4.03	0.78
I have a vested interest in the association	3.93	0.88
My belief in the mission and vision of NAE4-HA	3.86	0.92
I was asked	3.79	1.15
The respect I have for colleagues who have served the association prior to my service	3.72	1.16
For personal fulfillment	3.72	0.70
I enjoy being part of a team	3.71	0.90
I felt I had something to bring to the association	3.69	0.93
To grow my skills as a leader	3.69	0.81
I believe it is important to actively participate in all roles within extension which includes professional association work	3.68	1.02
I wanted to be challenged	3.61	1.07
I wanted to step up to lead	3.57	1.03
Networking	3.57	1.03
To help others grow and develop as professionals	3.55	0.99
I get personal satisfaction in professional participation	3.50	0.96
For personal achievement	3.48	1.06
I love professional development at the national level	3.46	1.04
I felt it was a professional obligation	3.36	1.22
I felt a responsibility to help lead the profession at the national level	3.36	1.06
I enjoy meeting people from around the country	3.21	1.00
To be a role model for younger agents	3.21	0.94
I wanted to make the association more efficient	3.21	0.92
I was encouraged to run based on my skills	3.14	0.99
I was interested in the topic area of the position	3.07	1.26
To test my leadership abilities	3.07	1.09
It was the right time for me to serve on the board	3.07	1.02
I want to build self confidence in leading others	3.04	1.00
I wanted to learn about the inner workings of the organization	3.00	1.36
I want to learn more about the organization so I can help others	3.00	0.90
I enjoyed a similar role at the state level	2.86	1.35
I have had past positive experiences on a conference committee	2.79	1.26
I wanted peer support and encouragement	2.57	0.96
For packet enhancement (promotion)	2.29	1.46
At a state association meeting our president handed out a quote that stuck with me "if not now, when? If not me, Who?"	2.29	1.21
I am interested in public relations	2.28	1.03
My state 4-H leadership asked me to run	2.07	1.25

The twenty-one items not retained for Round Three were below the *a priori* set level of agreement needed to be retained. Variability within these items existed as indicated by the high standard deviations. Round Two standard deviations ranged from a low of 0.58 for “to give back to the association” ( $M = 4.48$ ) to a high of 1.46 on “for packet enhancement (promotion)” ( $M = 2.29$ ). These ranges may be due to extension system differences across states.

In Round Three, participants were asked to provide a dichotomous indication of whether or not they agreed with the 24 items retained from Round Two. If a participant was not in agreement with a statement they were

encouraged to explain this disparity. All 24 items included in Round Three reached the *a priori* set level of agreement and were deemed a consensus (see Table 3). 100% agreement was reached on nine of the influences. These items included wanting to give back to the Extension organization and the association, contributing to both NAE4-HA and the youth development profession, their belief in the mission and vision of NAE4-HA, and feeling it is important to get involved in organizations they believe in. Additional influences reaching 100% agreement included wanting to make a positive difference, their passion for 4-H, and the enjoyment they get from being part of a team.

Table 3  
*Round Three Results (n = 23)*

Influence	Agreement %
I want to give back to the Extension organization	100.0
To give back to the association	100.0
To contribute to the youth development profession	100.0
To contribute to the association	100.0
My belief in the mission and vision of NAE4-HA	100.0
I think it is important to get involved in organizations I believe in	100.0
To make a positive difference	100.0
I have a passion for 4-H	100.0
I enjoy being part of a team	100.0
I have a vested interest in the association	95.7
I believe participation in leadership is a part of my role as a member	95.7
I was encouraged by others to serve	95.7
I was asked	95.7
I get personal satisfaction in professional participation	95.7
Networking	95.7
For personal fulfillment	91.3
For personal growth	91.3
The respect I have for colleagues who have served the association prior to my service	91.3
To help others grow and develop as professionals	91.3
I believe it is important to actively participate in all roles within extension which includes professional association work	91.3
I wanted to step up to lead	91.3
I felt I had something to bring to the association	87.0
To grow my skills as a leader	87.0
I wanted to be challenged	73.9

### Conclusions

Prior to beginning this study there was limited information on why 4-H extension professionals choose to lead. Studies have indicated 4-H volunteers lead because of their strong connection to the program or affiliation (Fritz et al., 2000). A Delphi study approach was

used to develop a clearer picture of why board leadership in NAE4-HA chose to lead through their individual descriptions. After consensus was reached on the study the results were categorized by three researchers based on learned needs as seen in table four (McClelland, 1967). All three learned needs were clearly represented in the results.

Table 4

*Results Categorized Based on Learned Needs (McClelland, 1967)*

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*Need for Affiliation*

- To give back to the association (NAE4-HA)
- To give back to the Extension organization
- To contribute to the youth development profession
- To contribute to the association (NAE4-HA)
- My belief in the mission and vision of NAE4-HA
- I have a passion for 4-H
- I enjoy being a part of a team
- I was encouraged to serve
- I was asked
- The respect I have for colleagues who have served the association prior to me
- To help others grow and develop as professionals

*Need for Achievement*

- I think it's important to get involved in organizations I believe in
- To make a positive difference
- I get personal satisfaction in professional participation
- Networking
- For personal fulfillment
- For personal growth
- I believe it is important to actively participate in all roles within extension which includes professional association work
- To grow my skills as a leader
- I wanted to be challenged

*Need for Power*

- I have a vested interest in the association
  - I believe participation in leadership is a part of my role as a member
  - I wanted to step up to lead
  - I felt I had something to bring to the association
- 

Need for affiliation had the strongest representation with 11 statements relating to the specific need. A strong affiliation need shows board members identify strongly with the association and have a strong desire to develop beneficial relationships within the group. Need for achievement had nine indicators as a result of the study. This shows a concern for excellence. Members of the board who have a high need for achievement may set goals that will challenge themselves and seek feedback to

increase their performance (Connors, 1995). Finally, the need for power had four indicators. This need was expressed by the board due to a concern for influencing others and looking for positions based on the impact they may have on the organization (Lussier & Achua, 2010). As a result, it was concluded that the NAE4-HA board chose to lead as a result of their need for affiliation, achievement and power with the strongest needs being affiliation and achievement.



### Implications

While recruiting volunteers to serve in leadership roles is a challenge faced by professional organization at all levels, it is essential to recognize choosing to volunteer is a personal decision. Previous research has indicated motivations for volunteering are often related to the connection the individual feels towards the organization (Fritz et al., 2000). This is further emphasized by this study, showing the need for affiliation is the most important reason why professionals have chosen to take on leadership roles within NAE4-HA. Current leadership or committees charged with recruitment efforts need to consider this need when preparing strategies for recruitment and professional development opportunities designed to encourage members to move into new leadership roles.

Given that affiliation is the strongest need indicated in this study some strategies for recruitment can include bringing in prior leaders to the table to coach and encourage potential candidates to step into leadership roles. Also providing social interactions with current leadership and potential candidates will model behavior to members and offer networking opportunities that may break down current barriers.

Strategies in relation to the need for achievement may include setting clear goals for leadership in advance of recruitment strategies. These goals should include opportunities for member feedback and recognition when goals are met. Recognition may include membership outside the board that contributed to reaching set goals. This additional layer of recognition could aid in *sparkling* interest in leadership opportunities from within membership.

As a result of this study associations can begin to understand why individuals have made the decision to volunteer and begin to address barriers to service. If affiliation and achievement are the strongest motivators for service then recruiting potential leadership candidates along those needs may prove very helpful.

### Recommendations

If lack of leadership within professional extension organizations is going to be addressed, it is essential that recruitment efforts be focused on making connections between the needs and motivations of those choosing to take on leadership roles and new members. For organizations to succeed and remain tangible, focusing on building and strengthening the leadership and decision making skills of new leaders within the organization is necessary (Collins, 2001).

Gaining an understanding of the reasons individuals choose to lead will assist associations in determining where to target their recruitment efforts. Given that affiliation is the strongest need indicated in this study, strategies need to include establishing strong bonds between past and future leaders. For example, coordinating sessions where prior leaders can coach and encourage potential candidates to step into leadership roles, explaining the process and dedication the organization has to its members could provide an environment where people will begin to feel connected. In addition, providing social interactions between current leadership and potential candidates where they can model leadership behavior to members and offer networking opportunities that may break down current barriers could also be helpful. Any opportunities where members feel welcomed and part of the organization and leadership team, rather than disconnected and separate should be taken advantage of.

It is also recommended, as a result of this study, that research be directed at those who have chosen not to take on leadership roles in order to further discover the barriers to service. The information uncovered by this Delphi study in conjunction with identified barriers may help further solidify how individuals make choices regarding leadership. In addition, replicating this research in other professional extension organizations may help further define motivations and provide deeper insights into recruitment and retention.

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