

Action Research: Evaluating and Implementing a Shared Vision in the Cornell Cooperative Extension, 4-H Youth Development Program

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This research develops a process to assist agricultural organizations to adapt to a changing environment. The organization under investigation is the Cornell Cooperative Extension, 4-H Youth Development Program, an educational human service organization focusing on youth. Due to existing fiscal situations and resulting budget cuts, a rapidly changing clientele and a changing focus, Cooperative Extension is encountering pressure to change (Forest, 1990; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). To facilitate survival, techniques must be developed to allow the organization to construct meaning, take charge of the environment, develop necessary skills and integrate program planning, evaluation and implementation.

One of the methodologies used by Cooperative Extension to evaluate new programs is evaluability assessment (Smith, 1989). This technique defines the meaning of a program as intended by program developers and as interpreted by stakeholders. Successful program implementation requires that differences in perception between or among these groups be identified and shared.

Action research minimizes the well-documented gap between research and practice (Deshler and Hagan, 1990; Ewert, 1990) and is frequently used in organizations (Gordon, 1991). It is an evaluative technique which requires the researcher to act as an active agent for change and as an observer. An action research process which simultaneously examines existing perceptions of program meaning and develops a more shared meaning could integrate program planning, evaluation and implementation within an agricultural organization.

Development of a shared meaning for vision is crucial to the success of an organization (Blanchard et al., 1985; Gordon, 1991). Vision has been described as a way of fostering a feeling of community and satisfying some of the higher-

level needs of Maslow's hierarchy (Vaill, 1989). Block (1987, p. 99) carries this one step further and stated that "Meaning comes from the act of creation and the primary thing we create at work is a successful and useful organization." Individuals in the organization gain personal satisfaction and fulfillment in achieving the vision. A vision allows organizational members to achieve autonomy by making decisions to act on the vision and by building their own vision.

One of the first steps of organizational empowerment is vision development (Blanchard, Guest and Hershey, 1985; Block, 1987; Gordon, 1991). The action of enactment of the vision is, according to Block (1987, p. 189), "The Essence of Empowerment." The first step toward enactment of the vision is to communicate it to the rest of the organization, to share the vision. An action research process which evaluates and shares vision meaning should increase success and adaptation of the organization and empower the organization and its members.

Reflection is a key component of learning in adults (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Friere, 1970; Mezirow, 1990; Novak, 1977) and is necessary to successful learning of an organizational vision (Senge, 1990). Tools or theories which encourage reflection and enable the clarification of perspectives on vision are necessary.

Assimilation theory is an educational theory based on a constructivist paradigm of epistemology (Ausubel, 1968; Novak, 1977) which posits that meaningful learning results when new concepts or ideas are interpreted and connected with an individual's prior knowledge structure. According to this view, knowledge consists of concepts and propositions and is constructed by individuals

based on what they already know. The perception of an event (or program) is based on existing knowledge. Knowledge depends on experience. Different perceptions of vision will lead to different understandings of vision meaning.

In support of the literature on vision development, assimilation theory suggests that existing perceptions of vision meaning must be identified and shared in the implementation process. Additionally, the new material must be meaningful (concepts defined and specified) to allow the learner to actively relate the new material to an existing knowledge structure. Program planners must identify the concepts and propositional structure of a new material.

Based on the preceding literature review, a successful learning of the vision in an organization requires stakeholder interaction and involvement in the learning process, reflection on and critique of the meaning of the vision and concepts related to the vision and the identification and sharing of these meanings. This will allow the vision to be learned meaningfully and encourage the development of commitment to the new vision. Commitment is crucial for the success and survival of agricultural organizations.

The Cornell Cooperative Extension 4-H Youth Development Program has recently developed a new vision. For the vision, to "be a leader in the design and delivery of experiential youth education programs and resources" (Vision Statement card, 1993), to be successful it must be shared. Program planners must determine if vision meaning is shared throughout the organization and learn techniques to communicate the meaning if the meaning is not shared.

Purpose and Research Questions

This research develops and evaluates a process to allow program planners in agricultural and human service organizations to evaluate existing perceptions of a new vision as it is being implemented. Educational learning theory is utilized as a tool for evaluation and organizational empowerment by facilitating the sharing of program meanings and encouraging meaningful learning. An action-oriented approach takes into account the budgetary and time constraints of the organization and the researcher.

This case study was designed to answer the following questions:

What perceptions of the organizational vision exist in the Cornell Cooperative Extension System?

How can examination of societal characteristics which may affect vision success encourage reflection and learning of the vision?

How can concept maps be used to share vision meanings, enhance communication and develop a shared vision?

Procedures

Methodology for this research was developed to share meaning, encourage reflection on the meaning of the vision and related concepts and encourage empowerment of the organization and its members. Research was designed as a qualitative study with a quantitative base. The study used mixed methods as a means of triangulating and clarifying results and to extend the breadth and depth of findings (Green, et al., 1989). According to Greene, mixed methods are also appropriate when it is desired to use the results of one method to develop another or to discover new frameworks or perspectives on the one method using the results of the other. During this study, mixed methods helped achieve these goals.

The study was conducted in two phases, an initial pilot study, which resulted in a change in the interview instrument followed by a second pilot study. Pilot study interviews identified perceptions of vision meaning and related concepts including learning, experiential education, youth development, knowledge and empowerment. Participants were asked for their perception of the meaning of each concept, how it could be achieved and how the organization could know when it had been achieved. Responses were used to create a visual representation of the meaning of each concept in the form of a concept map.

The full-scale study consisted of two phases--a quantitative mailed survey questionnaire (Phase II) and a qualitative component (Phase III).

This paper reports the results of the qualitative study. All phases of the study were designed to encourage reflection on vision meaning and included identification of societal characteristics which need to be successfully coped with by the organization if the vision is to be achieved.

During Phase III, participants ranked four concept maps of the meaning of vision related concepts developed from pilot study interviews according to how much they represented his or her perception of the meaning of the concept. Additionally, participants were asked to create a concept map of their perception of the vision using 19 vision related terms mentioned by pilot study respondents. Vision-related terms were put on "post-it" notes and participants utilized these notes to create maps. Lines were drawn between concepts using pencils to allow for change. These maps were taken by the researcher, put into a computer format and used to develop a "shared map". The individual and the shared map were sent back to each respondent for member checking and verification and to ask if the shared map could represent a vision with which the respondent could agree.

Qualitative interview techniques were used during the pilot studies and Phase III to allow the emergence of various perspectives on the vision and encourage the development of a shared vision. Since the purpose of naturalistic inquiry is to understand an event, not to test a hypothesis (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) this inquiry was naturalistic and nonmanipulative. Interviews were conducted following the recommendations of Patton (1990) and Guba and Lincoln (1989). Nineteen respondents from state-level administration and three associations participated in the pilot studies. In Phase III, one urban, one rural and one association with a mixed population in New York State were selected. In each association, one program leader, one volunteer and one agent participated in the study. In all cases, multiple perspectives on the issues were obtained from different levels of the organization including volunteers, faculty and association and state-level administrators. Triangulation of methods occurred when results of qualitative interviews were compared with results of the survey questionnaire.

Analysis of Data

Results of qualitative interviews were

analyzed using a concept mapping process developed by Joseph Novak (1977) based on principles of assimilation theory. Concept maps are an analytic tool used to represent a hierarchical conceptual knowledge framework (Novak, 1977). Concepts are linked by lines with appropriate linking words to create valid statements. The resulting map can depict the knowledge structure of individuals which they use to perceive and make meaning of experiences.

In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of concept maps as well as the research designed, an example map was constructed. This map is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 acts as a visual representation of the research design. The map clearly indicates the relationship between Phases I, II and III of the study and the purpose and relationship between the two pilot studies. Concept maps are generally useful to act as a clear and succinct visual representation and summary of a concept or idea. They can also be used to summarize the primary concepts developed from qualitative interviews.

Results of both quantitative and qualitative methods were compared and themes identified. In general, results of the quantitative surveys were substantiated by results of the qualitative interviews and vice-versa.

Results

Results indicate a new vision in the early stages of implementation and are summarized below.

Different perspectives and beliefs were identified and were, in part, due to varied understandings of vision-related concepts such as learning, knowledge, experiential education, youth development and empowerment.

Shared themes and perceptions of the vision were identified. Agreement or disagreement about the meaning of the vision focused around a number of themes. Areas of contention include the degree of top-down versus bottom-up involvement in education, the need for ownership over the educational process, the use of teamwork

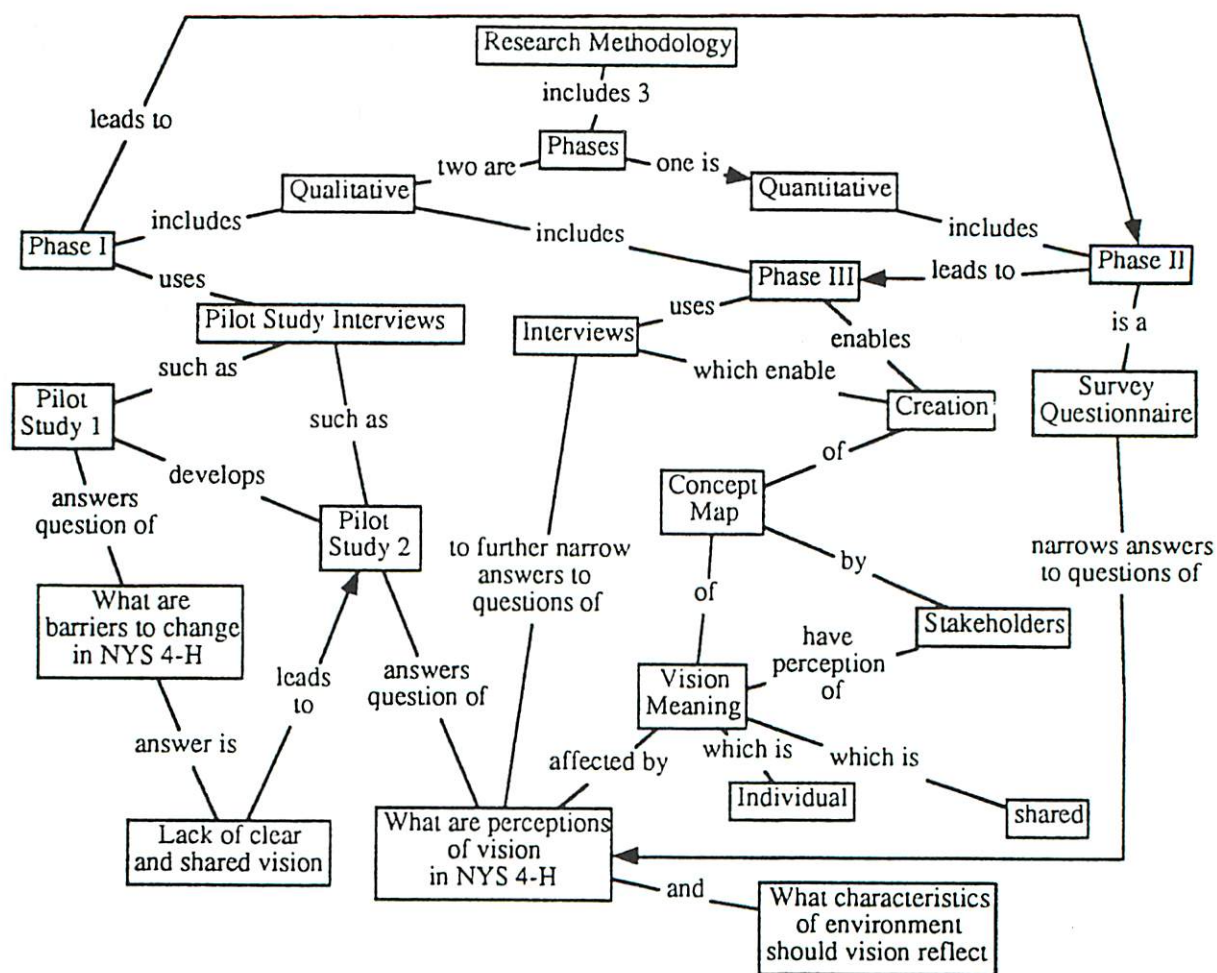


Figure 1. Concept Map-Research Design

and the inherent nature of individuals (whether basically lazy or self-motivated). Areas of agreement include a need for change in behavior or attitudes; the role of process in education and the need for empowerment, development of life skills, reflection and application of learned techniques to real life.

A shared vision was developed in which all participants felt they could agree. Most respondents felt that they preferred their own vision. The map of the shared vision is shown in Figure 2.

Respondents felt that environmental characteristics of time pressure and lack of resources may make it difficult for the vision to succeed.

The examination of societal characteristics which the vision must allow the organization to cope with was successful in encouraging reflection on the vision, altering assumptions concerning the vision (transformational learning), and in identifying areas within the environment in which the vision could not cope. In particular, a split in

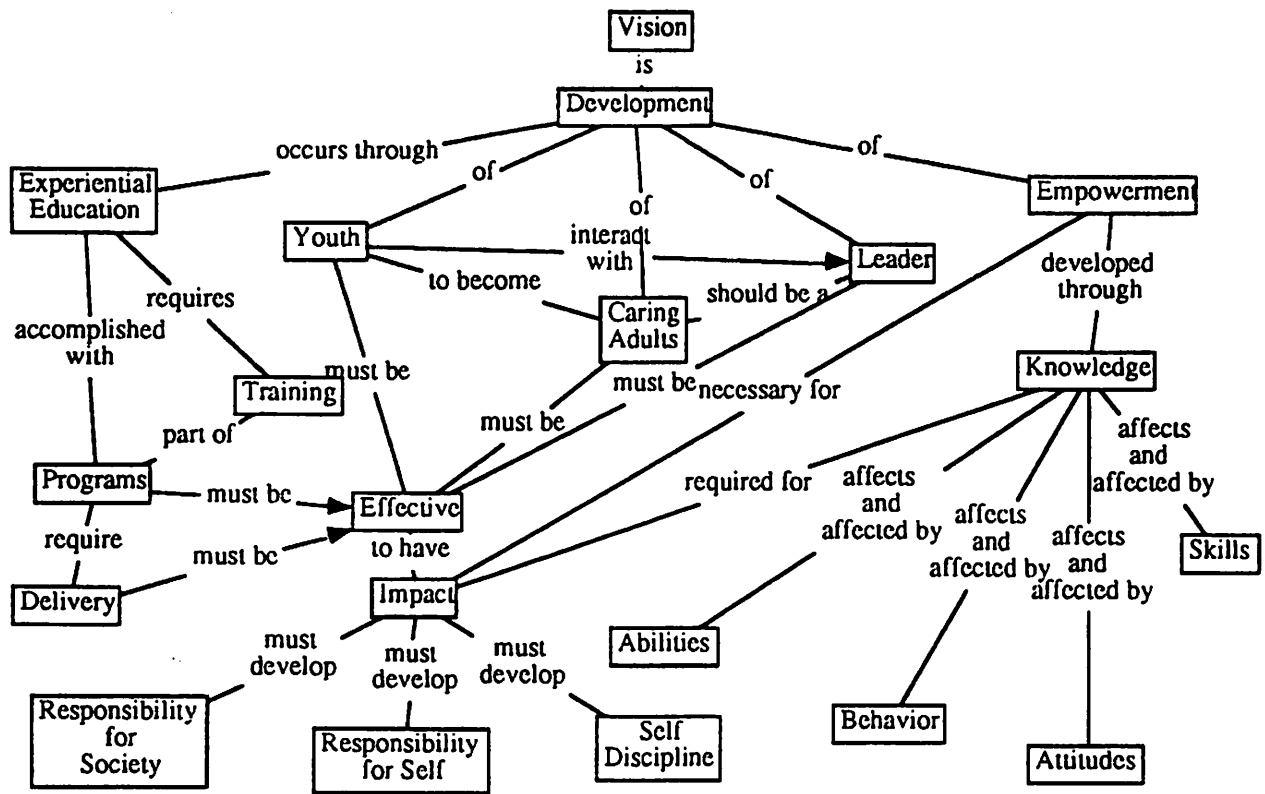


Figure 2. Concept Map-Shared Vision

the organization was identified as to whether environmental characteristics were related to youth-at-risk or traditional 4-H youth.

Concept maps were useful to help identify and clarify perspectives on the vision, increase participation in the vision sharing process, increase ownership over and commitment to the vision, develop a visual picture of vision meaning, encourage reflection and enhance communication in the organization.

Conclusions and Recommendations

During the vision implementation process the organization should consider the differing perspectives held by different groups. The understandings of vision-related concepts need continuous refinement, examination and sharing within and between groups in order for a shared vision to be successfully developed. To successfully implement a new program, individuals

within the organization must act consistently with the program (Brooks, 1989). During the implementation of a new vision, this consistency cannot be accomplished if individuals do not understand the vision or if they do not have ownership or commitment over the vision.

Areas of agreement could be used by the organization as a launching point to further expand the vision implementation process. Areas of contention need to be further examined until an understanding is reached with which the majority of individuals in the organization can agree. In both cases concept maps could be useful to summarize and examine the perceptions of importance individuals attribute to each of these themes as well as to answer the question of why individuals feel the way they do.

Of particular interest to the organization is the identified conflict over the inherent nature of individuals as being lazy or more self-motivated

and 'trustworthy'. Since empowerment in an organization has been determined to be a relationship built on trust (Kowalski, 1989), it is crucial that individuals within an organization are trusted and that they, in turn, trust others. Without this trust, empowerment cannot develop.

The development of a shared vision, as supported in the introduction, is crucial to organizational empowerment and adaptability. The shared vision enhances trust (Parsons, 1991), facilitates employee empowerment, increases self-direction and personal satisfaction (Murphy, 1987), raises the need level on Maslow's hierarchy and facilitates empowerment (Thompson, 1989).

The fact that respondents generally preferred their own vision is indicative of the commitment that creation of a concept map develops in respondents. Commitment is crucial to employee and organizational empowerment (Thompson, 1989) and to implementation of a shared vision (Carl and Stokes, 1991).

The organization should continue to encourage individuals to develop concept maps to clarify perceptions of the vision, teach meaningful learning and empower individuals, develop a visual representation of individual perceptions of vision and to further develop commitment to the organization and to the meaning of the vision. These individual representations should continue to be used to test and refine the 'shared vision' as well as the themes of agreement or disagreement which emerged during the study.

The 4-H Youth Development Program in Cornell Cooperative Extension should continue to ask individuals whether the identified societal characteristics are applicable to youth-at-risk or all 4-H youth. Individuals within the organization do not share an understanding of the identity of the organization's clientele. Additionally, a perception exists that only if the organization is dealing with youth-at-risk are these characteristics important. Since the organization works in a societal climate characterized by these factors, it is crucial that all individuals understand the effects of these factors on clientele.

The organization needs to further examine the perceptions of individuals regarding the ability of the organization to cope with time pressure and lack of resources. Uncertainty on the part of

respondents may lead to less motivation and decrease the success of the organization. Additionally, if existing perceptions of the vision will not allow the organization to successfully cope with these factors, perceptions of vision must be altered to allow the organization to succeed. Most importantly, the question should be asked, "How could the vision be changed to better allow it to cope with existing environmental factors?"

Overall, the process was successful in identifying and illustrating shared themes and in producing a base that can be used by the organization to further develop consensus and successfully implement the new organization vision. Concept maps were useful in identifying and sharing perspectives on the vision and thus acting as a tool to enhance communication. Additionally, reflection and creation of new concept maps resulted in an increased sense of commitment to the vision and agreement on a shared perspective of vision.

The process has implications for improving teaching and learning in agricultural organizations, providing a tool for agricultural leaders to evaluate and implement agricultural programs and for facilitating agricultural leadership. Additionally, the use of concept maps is encouraging reflection and facilitating teaching and learning in agriculture programs needs to be further explored.

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