

Assessing transformative leadership beliefs and values of cooperative extension leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to explore the current transformative leadership values and beliefs of Cooperative Extension leaders. Specific research objectives included, (1) characterize Extension leaders' beliefs regarding transformative leadership, and (2) determine differences in transformative leadership beliefs based on selected characteristics.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study applied transformative leadership theory to examine the values and beliefs regarding equity, justice, and leading change held by leaders in the Cooperative Extension System. A sample of 138 administrators across the U.S. completed the Transformative Leadership Scale (TLS), which presents 32 contrasting statements representing dimensions of transformative leadership.

Findings – Results found the mean TLS score was 70.61 out of 100, indicating nascent awareness of equity concerns but substantial room for growth in fully embracing transformative leadership principles like social activism and egalitarian distribution of power. The score distribution skewed slightly left, with 16% possessing a highly transformative belief system, 71% demonstrating moderate awareness of equity issues, and 13% focused more on organizational efficiency over justice. Differences emerged based on diversity leadership roles and years of experience.

Practical implications – The findings establish an important baseline for aligning leadership development with Extension's mandate to champion inclusion and confront systemic barriers as social change agents. This research kicks off a vital dialogue regarding transformative leadership's implications for guiding community-engaged institutions like Extension pursuing democratic engagement.

Originality/value – This represents the first study to apply transformative leadership to a national assessment of values and beliefs among Extension education leadership.

Keywords Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, Transformative leadership, Extension education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Cooperative Extension, as part of the land-grant university system, has a complex history intertwined with issues of equity and inclusion. Extension's origins date back to 19th-century legislation including the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 that established land-grant colleges focused on agriculture, science, and engineering (Franz, 2011). While the 1862 act produced institutions that primarily served white students, the 1890 legislation specifically supported colleges for Black students in Southern states. This bifurcated system laid the foundation for continuing struggles with diversity and inclusion within Extension (Reynolds, 1993).

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In recent decades, Extension has sought to broaden its reach through targeted programs for underserved groups. However, progress has been uneven. Studies find Extension's clientele still skews heavily white, and professionals of color remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Colby & Moreland, 2020; Janeiro, Martin, & Atilas, 2015). As the nation's demographics continue to diversify, extension risks becoming out of touch with its communities (Iverson, 2008).

The type of leadership within an educational organization significantly influences the quality of personal transformation experienced by stakeholders. Creating an organizational climate centered on transformation requires leadership committed to equity as a priority. However, administrators tend to come from traditional Extension backgrounds that do not emphasize equity (Iverson, 2008). Transforming Extension to meet 21st-century challenges will require purposeful efforts to develop leaders with the skills to champion diversity, model inclusiveness and remove barriers to access (Deen, Parker, Hill, Huskey, & Whitehall, 2014; van Oord, 2013). As Donovan and Kaplan (2016) argue, leadership sets the tone for the organization and its approach toward inclusivity.

Leadership development has become an increasingly important focus for Cooperative Extension programs in recent years. As Extension educators seek to address complex societal issues like food insecurity, health disparities, and climate change, there is a need to equip leaders with the skills to drive transformational change (Boyd, 2004; Greenhaw & Denny, 2020; Sowcik, Bengel, & Niewoehner-Green, 2018). Transformative leadership has emerged as a relevant theory to guide leadership development in Extension. This model emphasizes leadership that critiques inequitable practices, addresses injustices, and envisions a more equitable society (Shields, 2010).

While transactional and transformational leadership theories have historically informed Extension's approach to leadership development, transformative leadership brings a social justice orientation that is well-suited to Extension's mission of community empowerment and capacity building (Franz & Townson, 2008; Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). By focusing on deep and equitable change, transformative leadership moves beyond individual skill-building to address systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups. This emphasis on liberation, democracy, and social justice connects well with Extension's role as a change agent within communities. Therefore, this study sought to explore the current transformative leadership values and beliefs held by Cooperative Extension leaders. Understanding the prevailing mindset will help inform professional development and education efforts aimed at building capacity for leading complex change.

Theoretical framework and related literature

Transformative leadership theory has emerged in recent decades as a critical approach to leadership grounded in theories of social justice, democracy, and equity (Shields, 2010). According to Caldwell *et al.* (2012) it is built upon key elements from six leadership perspectives: (1) transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), (2) charismatic leadership (Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000), (3) level 5 leadership (Collins, 2001), (4) principle centered leadership (Covey, 2006), (5) servant leadership (Hamilton & Nord, 2005), and (6) covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003; see Table 1).

Transformative leadership blends the key elements of these perspectives to promote leadership that is focused on equity and justice. Transformational leadership is a key factor in transformative leadership because it balances the interests of individual employees with those of the organization, focusing on long-term success while fostering trust and commitment (Burns, 1978). This alignment of goals creates a sustainable and ethical work environment, essential for the overall transformation of the organization. Charismatic leadership, another critical factor, involves the leader's ability to build strong, morally

Perspective	Elements
Transformational leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursues the synergistic interests of both individual employees and the organization • Focuses on long-term wealth creation and maximizing employee commitment and trust • Ethical foundation is a commitment to the welfare of the organization, employees, and society
Charismatic leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates a compelling morally-based personal relationship and connection with followers • Inspires followers to transcend self-interest and commit to a shared vision and purpose • Ethical foundation is virtue-based, focused on core principles and pursuing noble objectives
Level 5 leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines personal humility with a relentless resolve to achieve great things • Gives credit for successes to others but takes personal responsibility for failures • Ethical foundation is outcome-based, focused on achieving the best possible results
Principle-centered leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grounds leadership in universal principles and values • Views leadership as an ethical obligation to benefit society • Ethical foundation is virtue-based, focused on identifying and adhering to correct principles
Servant leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on serving followers and stakeholders over self-interest • Demonstrates authentic concern for the welfare, growth, and wholeness of others • Ethical foundation is an ethic of care that seeks the best interests of each individual
Covenantal leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners with followers to create new insights and meaning • Constantly pursues truth through learning and provides a learning culture • Ethical foundation is truth-based, focused on increasing understanding to benefit society

Table 1. Perspectives integrated into transformative leadership according to Caldwell *et al.* (2012)

Source(s): Table by authors based on tenets outlined in Caldwell *et al.*'s (2012) article, "Transformative leadership: Achieving unparalleled excellence"

grounded relationships with followers, inspiring them to go beyond their self-interests and commit to a shared vision (Conger *et al.*, 2000). This personal influence and moral integrity mobilize employees towards common goals, making it a vital component of transformative leadership.

Level 5 leadership factors into transformative leadership due to its combination of deep personal humility and strong professional will to achieve outstanding results. By giving credit for successes to others and taking personal responsibility for failures, this style emphasizes humility and accountability, crucial for ethical and effective leadership (Collins, 2001). Principle-centered leadership contributes to transformative leadership by grounding it in universal principles and values, viewing leadership as an ethical duty to serve society (Covey, 2006). This approach promotes a value-driven leadership style that benefits both the organization and society at large, reinforcing the ethical foundation of transformative leadership.

Servant leadership is an integral factor of transformative leadership as it prioritizes the needs of followers and stakeholders over personal gain, demonstrating genuine concern for their well-being and development (Hamilton & Nord, 2005). This selfless and caring approach fosters a supportive and growth-oriented environment, enhancing both individual and organizational well-being (Hamilton & Nord, 2005; Shields, 2010). Covenantal leadership is another important factor, emphasizing partnership with followers to create new insights and

foster a learning culture based on the pursuit of truth (Pava, 2003; Shields, 2010). This continuous learning and truth-seeking approach promote an organizational culture that values knowledge and ethical growth, essential for transformation.

In contrast to transactional models focused on management objectives or transformational models aimed at organizational effectiveness (Burns, 1978), transformative leadership begins with an activist agenda to challenge systemic inequities and promote deep and equitable change (Weiner, 2003). The principles of transformative leadership emphasize both critiques of inappropriate use of power and promise for a more socially just future (Quantz, Rogers & Dantley, 1991).

To develop transformative leaders, one must understand leadership identity that results in actions of equity and justice (McKee & Bruce, 2021). Transformative leaders articulate ethical purposes, acknowledge power dynamics, and focus on public and individual good (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; McKee & Bruce, 2021). They aim to deconstruct dominant ideologies that perpetuate marginalization and construct new inclusive frameworks (Capper, 2019; McKee & Bruce, 2021). This involves moral courage and persistence in the face of resistance (McKee & Bruce, 2021; Theoharis, 2007). According to Shields (2016), transformative leaders establish a mandate for change by recognizing inequities, critiquing deficit thinking, and emphasizing democracy and social justice. The goals of transformative leadership are individual achievement, organizational learning, and societal transformation toward democracy, liberty, and justice (Astin & Astin, 2000). Transformative leaders create conditions for all members to participate fully in the organization and reach their full potential (Jun, 2012). They foster systemic changes that enhance equity, emancipation, and social justice within the organization and beyond (Brown, 2004).

These perspectives, as factors of transformative leadership, highlight different approaches that emphasize ethical behavior, long-term success, and the well-being of employees and the organization. Understanding the differences within these factors helps identify the most effective leadership practices that align with the goals of creating ethical, sustainable, and high-performing organizations. Integrating these perspectives into transformative leadership research advances the field by providing a comprehensive understanding of diverse leadership approaches and their ethical foundations. It underscores the importance of aligning leadership practices with ethical principles and societal well-being, offering insights into how different leadership styles can be applied to achieve optimal outcomes. This holistic understanding of transformative leadership paves the way for more ethical and effective leadership practices in organizations.

The transformative leadership theoretical framework provides a critical lens to evaluate leadership identity and commitment to community empowerment and social change, particularly in public service organizations such as Extension (Upendram *et al.*, 2023). Assessing how leaders redistribute power, establish equity reforms, dismantle systemic inequities, and demonstrate activism reveals the extent to which transformative leadership is enacted (Kose, 2009; van Oord, 2013).

Ultimately, transformative leadership offers a means to judge leadership practices against ideals of liberation, democracy, and justice (Caldwell *et al.*, 2012; McKee & Bruce, 2021; Shields, 2016; van Oord, 2013). This enables the identification of areas for growth while highlighting successes in creating inclusive and socially just organizations (Jun, 2011). Transformative leadership thus presents a vital framework for cultivating ethical, emancipatory, and activist leadership dedicated to equity and the public good (Astin & Astin, 2000), which made it appropriate for this research.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the current transformative leadership values and beliefs of Cooperative Extension leaders. Specific research objectives included, (1) characterize

Extension leaders' beliefs regarding transformative leadership, and (2) determine differences in transformative leadership beliefs based on selected characteristics. Data were collected from Extension professionals who identified as administrative leaders within their respective land-grant universities (LGUs). Administrators for 1862 and 1890 institutions were included in the sample. The Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) organization's Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's (ECOP) Program Action Team on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) provided an initial sampling frame with 70 contacts in the Cooperative Extension System (CES). An additional list of contacts was acquired from the National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals (NAESDP) resulting in a final sample of 201 administrative leaders in Cooperative Extension across the United States. Data were collected from 138 respondents (response rate = 67%) via Qualtrics survey between January and February of 2023.

Dr Carolyn Shields created a transformative leadership evaluation instrument to gather baseline data from participants in her professional development programs (2010). Dr Shields used the data to guide the design of her leadership development programs. Dr Shields' original instrument was written for educational leaders and utilized language related to formal classroom settings. We adapted and modified the original instrument for the purpose of our study.

The adaptation process involved several key steps. First, the researchers modified the original items to replace formal classroom-based terminology with language and scenarios relevant to nonformal Extension education, ensuring that the items were comprehensible and applicable to the new audience. Following these initial revisions, a panel of five Extension leadership development experts, including those with expertise in transformative leadership, was assembled to review the modified items. These experts were selected for their deep understanding of both leadership development and the specific needs of the Extension context. Each panelist independently reviewed the adapted items and provided detailed feedback regarding their relevance, clarity, and appropriateness. The feedback included suggestions for further modifications to enhance the items' suitability for the Extension context. The researchers collected all the feedback and synthesized it to identify common themes and consensus points. Based on this comprehensive analysis, additional revisions were made to the items to reflect the collective input of the expert panel. The revised instrument was reshared with the panelists for a final review to confirm that the modifications adequately addressed their feedback and that the items were well-suited for assessing leadership development in the Extension context. This collaborative and iterative process ensured that the adapted instrument maintained the integrity and objectives of Shields' original tool while being appropriately tailored for the unique setting of Extension education. The panel did not suggest any additional edits and approved the start of cognitive interviews.

Cognitive interviews were conducted with 7 retired Extension leaders to pilot-test the adapted instrument. Cognitive interviewing is a technique that employs verbal probing to understand how respondents comprehend and interpret survey questions (Willis, 2004). Each participant was administered simultaneously while connected to a live Zoom session that included the lead researcher. While taking the survey, participants shared their thought processes as they responded to each item, along with feedback on wording, instructions, and response options. The lead researcher would probe during each participant's response, where necessary, to understand more about improving the accessibility of the instrument. The results of the cognitive interviews were compiled and presented to the aforementioned five-member expert panel for consideration. The panel reviewed the results of the cognitive interviews and provided feedback to help adapt the instrument. The author team then made decisions on incorporating this feedback, carefully balancing input from both the expert panel and the cognitive interviews. Changes to the instrument were finalized through a

consensus among the research team. This process served to optimize the survey's reliability within an Extension population before full-scale distribution.

The final instrument, referred to hereafter as the transformative leadership scale (TLS), presented 32 contrasting bipolar statements representing transformative leadership. Respondents selected their perspective between each statement pair. The respondent's score indicates the degree to which their beliefs align with principles of equity and social justice, with a higher score indicating stronger transformative beliefs. The four-step scoring process includes:

- (1) Respondent gets 1 point for each "a" response to questions 3, 6, 8, 11, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32. A maximum of 15 points is available.
- (2) Respondents get 1 point for each "b" response to questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31. A maximum of 17 points is available.
- (3) Total score is calculated by summing points. The maximum total score is 32 points.
- (4) The respondent percentage score is calculated by taking their total score divided by 32 and multiplying by 100.

If a respondent selects an option different from the one specified for an item, they receive zero points for that item. TLS scores may then be used to categorize respondents. The categories were originally developed by Dr Shields. Our expert panel also reviewed these classifications and did not recommend any modifications to original delineations and naming constructs developed by Dr Shields. A TLS score of 80 or more indicates the respondent "already possesses a transformative leadership belief system". Those scoring between 55 and 79 are "aware of the need for an equity focus on the organization". A respondent who scores below 55 "focuses more on an efficient organization and less on social justice issues".

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each item of transformative leadership across our sample, and an analysis of means via independent samples *t*-test and one-way ANOVA was conducted. Instrument reliability was calculated post-hoc and deemed acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72).

Evaluating transformative leadership in extension education also requires understanding the context in which leaders operate, and demographic factors provide essential insights into this context. So, in addition to the transformative leadership items, participants also responded to demographic questions including organizational position, if they are the official DEI contact at the institution, if they are prepared to lead in a DEI environment, and number of professional years in Extension. First, organizational position is crucial, as it helps contextualize responses and reveals how leadership is perceived at different levels within the organization (Chen & Bliese, 2002; DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty, & Salas, 2010; Diaz, Narine, & Gusto, 2024; Otara, 2011; Pascotto, 2018). Frontline staff may have different perspectives compared to administrators, highlighting varied leadership impacts across organizational strata. Respondents were asked to select their organizational position between the following categories: (1) organizational leader, (2) department leader, (3) regional leader and (4) county leader.

Next, identifying whether participants are the official DEI contact at their institution is also significant because they are likely to be more engaged with and knowledgeable about inclusive leadership practices, providing a deeper understanding of how these practices are implemented and perceived within the organization (Harriott, Tyson, & Powell, 2023). Their insights can illuminate the alignment between leadership strategies and DEI goals (Diaz *et al.*, 2024). Respondents were asked to simply select *yes* or *no*, when asked if they were the official DEI contact for their institution.

Assessing participants' preparedness to lead in a DEI environment is another vital factor. This measure gauges their readiness to navigate and address diversity challenges, which is a

core aspect of transformative leadership (Diaz, Silvert, Gusto, Jayaratne, & Narine, 2021; Diaz, Gusto, Jayaratne *et al.*, 2023, 2024; Shields, 2010, 2016; Stone, Caillouet, Muscato, Silvert, & Diaz, 2023). Leaders who feel prepared for DEI challenges are often more effective in fostering inclusive and supportive organizational cultures (Diaz, Gusto, Narine, Jayaratne, & Silvert, 2023; Stone *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, knowing respondents' years of professional experience in Extension further enriches the evaluation. It can demonstrate how organizational culture influences leaders' perspectives, as those with more experience may have witnessed and contributed to the evolution of leadership practices over time (Diaz, Gusto, & Narine *et al.*, 2023; Stone *et al.*, 2023). This historical perspective is invaluable for understanding long-term impacts and shifts in organizational culture, shedding light on how organizational culture may either catalyze or hinder progress in areas such as transformation, diversity, equity, and inclusion within extension education (Diaz, Gusto, & Narine *et al.*, 2023; Kargas & Varoutas, 2015). By considering these demographic factors, the evaluation of transformative leadership in extension education becomes more comprehensive, ultimately enhancing the ability to develop and implement more effective and inclusive leadership development strategies within the Extension system.

Results

Overall, respondents more frequently selected the statement representing transformative leadership on 27 of the 32 items. Table 2 provides a summary of responses to all 32 items on the transformative leadership scale (TLS). Each item consists of two possible response options, where one option aligns with a transformative belief system (i.e. T). The table indicates the percentage of respondents who chose each option.

Consistent with a transformative belief system, almost all respondents (97%) selected "A good leader understands that achieving intellectual growth is dependent on working with all members of the organization" (Item 19), and "In the interest of fairness, a good leader waives or modifies fees for members with limited financial resources" (Item 25). Similarly, 96% of respondents selected "An effective leader emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives" (Item 10), and 95% selected "A good leader sometimes takes controversial positions to advance the goals of the organization" (Item 16).

In contrast to a transformative belief system, the majority of respondents (73%) selected "A good leader believes a socially just education provides a just and inclusive working/learning environment for all" (Item 26), instead of the transformative belief system response, "A good leader believes a socially just education calls for action to redress global injustices and injustice." Also, 73% of respondents selected "The primary goal of education is to ensure that each student develops the knowledge and skills to be successful" (Item 5) instead of the transformative belief system response, "The primary goal of education is to promote a just and inclusive democratic society."

Table 3 provides a statistical summary of the Transformative Leadership Scale (TLS) score and the frequency distribution of respondents based on their belief categories. Skewness and kurtosis of the TLS were assessed to determine the normality and potential effect of non-normally distributed data in ANOVA. Generally, a cutoff of 2 for skewness and 3 for excess kurtosis implies an asymptotically normal distribution with a lowered effect of Type I error due to non-normality (Brown, 2015; Ryu, 2011). Respondents' mean score on the TLS was 70.61 (SD = 13.21), and the distribution was slightly skewed to the left (Skewness = -1.03) with a somewhat peaked curve (Kurtosis = 2.53). Both skewness and kurtosis were below the recommend thresholds and normality was assumed for the TLS. Concerning belief categories, results indicate that 16% of respondents ($n = 22$) possess a transformative belief system. The majority of respondents (71%) are aware of the need for an

Item No.	Option [T = response aligning to a transformative belief System]	%
1	The primary goal of a good leader is to ensure that the organization runs efficiently	24
	[T] The primary goal of a good leader is to ensure an equitable experience for everyone within the organization	76
2	A good leader believes that everyone is entitled to his/her individual beliefs	29
	[T] A good leader believes it is important to engage people in dialogue about topics like racism, classism, and homophobia	71
3	[T] A good leader acknowledges that some units need a greater share of resources than others and distributes resources accordingly	82
	A good leader acknowledges that equality is important and distributes fiscal resources equally throughout the organization	18
4	A good leader focuses on assessing the effectiveness of organizational practices	43
	[T] A good leader focuses on assessing the equity of organizational practices	57
5	The primary goal of education is to ensure that each student develops the knowledge and skills to be successful	73
	[T] The primary goal of education is to promote a just and inclusive democratic society	27
6	[T] A good leader takes individuals' backgrounds into consideration when making decisions	91
	A good leader does not take individuals' backgrounds into consideration when making decisions	9
7	A good leader always strives to find a win-win solution to a problem	24
	[T] A good leader always strives to find the most equitable solution to a problem	76
8	[T] A good leader encourages others to connect with individuals and organizations from around the world	86
	A good leader encourages others to focus on meeting required standards	14
9	A good leader ensures that the organization's approach to discipline treats everyone equally	35
	[T] A good leader ensures that the organization's approach to discipline recognizes societal impacts on individual behavior	65
10	An effective leader emphasizes the importance of a unified position	4
	[T] An effective leader emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives	96
11	[T] A strong leader acknowledges his/her responsibility to sometimes resist the rules and policies of the organization	70
	A strong leader acknowledges his/her responsibility to always implement the rules and policies of the organization	30
12	It is important that members of the organization adhere to the traditional national values of their country	14
	[T] It is important that members of the organization incorporate the values and beliefs of immigrant cultures	86
13	[T] A good leader knows and acts upon his or her own "non-negotiable" position	45
	A good leader complies with the majority perspective in the organization	55
14	A good leader acknowledges everyone's free speech right to express an opinion regardless of what it is	26
	[T] A good leader recognizes that free speech may sometimes need to be curtailed to protect others	74
15	A good leader supports the development of programs to address current organizational needs	53
	[T] A good leader supports the development of programs that address the individual needs of members	47
16	[T] A good leader sometimes takes controversial positions in order to advance the goals of the organization	95
	A good leader ensures that all organizational decisions and policies reflect the dominant organizational values	5
17	[T] A good leader begins by identifying the goals of the organization	56
	A good leader begins by examining the data related to the outcomes of the organization	44

(continued)

Table 2.
Descriptive summary
of transformative belief
items within
TLS ($n = 138$)

Item No.	Option [T = response aligning to a transformative belief System]	%
18	[T] A good leader recognizes that a major challenge to the success of all is an inequitable system A good leader acknowledges that a major challenge to the success of all is the differing views and practices of various ethnic and socio-economic groups	67 33
19	[T] A good leader understands that achieving intellectual growth is dependent on working with all members of organization A good leader understands that achieving intellectual growth is dependent on eliminating unmotivated, disruptive, or unruly members of the organization	97 3
20	A good leader acknowledges that developing individual capacity is unrealistic for the most deeply troubled members of the organization [T] A good leader acknowledges that high expectations are possible even for members of the organization who are deeply troubled	14 86
21	[T] A good leader takes responsibility for the organization's intellectual progress A good leader places the responsibility for progress and capacity building on individual members	73 27
22	A good leader always implements the requests of his or her superior [T] A good leader sometimes refuses the requests of his or her superior	13 87
23	A good leader believes that the major goal of education is to ensure that each person develops to his or her full academic potential [T] A good leader believes that the major goal of education is to ensure that each person learns to be a good citizen	68 32
24	A good leader determines what is sound based on accepted notions of "best practice" [T] A good leader determines what is sound based on the needs of his or her unit	19 81
25	In the interest of fairness, a good leader ensures that all members, regardless of financial resources, pay the same fees [T] In the interest of fairness, a good leader waives or modifies fees for members with limited financial resources	3 97
26	[T] A good leader believes a socially just education calls for action to redress global injustices and injustice A good leader believes a socially just education provides a just and inclusive working/learning environment for all	27 73
27	[T] A good leader encourages the development of awareness of how global events may relate to, and affect, the community A good leader encourages the development of competence by focusing on standards and outcomes	87 13
28	[T] A good leader acknowledges that having friends and acquaintances from multiple groups helps people to develop positive self-concepts A good leader acknowledges that individuals develop positive self-concepts by knowing themselves before they are able to form relationships with those from other social groups	57 43
29	[T] A good leader respects the aspirations of an individual regarding their career path A good leader respects the aspirations of an individual's family and society regarding their career path	80 20
30	A good leader waits for an issue to calm down before trying to address it [T] A good leader acts immediately when an inflammatory issue is brought to his or her attention	21 79
31	A good leader takes the dominant moral and religious values of the community into account when approving activities [T] A good leader approves activities that are inclusive of all, including LGBTQ + individuals, regardless of the dominant community sentiment	7 93
32	[T] A good leader provides specific diversity and equity training to all staff when it seems necessary A good leader makes suggestions of various professional development opportunities for staff but respects the right of each person to choose for themselves	63 37

Note(s): * [T] denotes item that aligns with Transformative Leadership theory
Source(s): Table by authors with items adapted from Carolyn Shields original instrument included in [Blakeway's \(2023\)](#) article

Table 2.

equity focus in their organization, while 13% of respondents ($n = 18$) are more focused on the efficiency of their organization and less focused on social justice issues.

Table 4 provides the results of an independent samples t -test (for 2 levels) and one-way ANOVA (for >2 levels) between selected characteristics and TLS score. Results of an independent samples t -test indicated a statistically significant difference in TLS based on respondents' position as an official DEI contact ($T = 3.76, p < 0.001$), with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 11.62$). Respondents who were the official DEI contact at their institution had a significantly higher mean TLS ($M = 77.20, SD = 9.96$) compared to those who were not the official contact ($M = 68.61, SD = 12.17$). For the ANOVA model, the Levene's test was used to assess homogeneity. As illustrated in Table 3, results of the one-way ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference in TLS based on employees' years of experience ($F = 7.36, p < 0.001$). The null hypothesis of the Levene's test was not rejected which suggests equal variances between the three comparison groups ($F = 0.86, p = 0.419$). Years of experience had a medium effect on TLS (Partial $\eta^2 = 0.10$). Using a Bonferroni post-hoc test with an adjusted family-wise p -value, results showed respondents with 0–6 and 7–14 years of experience had a significantly higher TLS than those with more than 14 years of experience.

Discussion, implications, and recommendations

This exploratory study provides important insights into leadership mindsets within the Cooperative Extension System at a pivotal moment in its history. As Extension evolves to meet the needs of diverse 21st century communities, perspectives on equity, social justice, and leading change have significant implications. The findings surface thought-provoking

Factor	Level/statistic	Value
Transformative leadership scale (TLS)	Mean (Range = 0–100)	70.61
	Standard Deviation (SD)	13.21
	Skewness	–1.03
	(Excess) Kurtosis	2.53

Table 3.
Transformative belief
score ($n = 138$)

Source(s): Table by authors

Factor	Level	n	Mean	SD	Stat.	p	Effect
Organizational position	Organization	34	70.13	12.07	1.00	0.397	–
	Leader						
	Department	38	71.22	12.73			
	Leader						
Official DEI contact at the institution	Regional Leader	4	64.06	15.05	3.76	<0.001	11.62
	County Leader	12	71.09	7.81			
	Yes	37	77.20	9.96			
	No	100	68.61	12.17			
Years of professional experience in extension	0–6 Years	23	74.73 ^a	10.36	7.36	<0.001	0.10
	7–14 Years	23	77.99 ^a	13.38			
	>14 Years	88	67.79 ^b	13.60			
	I am prepared to lead in a DEI environment	118	71.05	13.41			
	Disagreed	18	67.53	11.80			

Table 4.
Transformative
Leadership scale (TLS)
score by selected
factors

Note(s): Bonferroni post-hoc: $a \neq b$

Source(s): Table by authors

contrasts between transformative leadership principles and prevailing viewpoints among leaders that warrant deeper examination.

Overall, the moderate mean transformative leadership score indicates nascent awareness of equity issues but room for growth in adopting a transformative orientation. The sample conveyed general support for diversity and inclusion but stopped short of transformative leadership's activist disruption of systemic oppression (Shields, 2010). For instance, very few respondents endorsed actions like curtailing harmful speech or requiring targeted training to promote equity. Most felt that simply maintaining an inclusive climate achieves social justice. This demonstrates the limited conceptualization many leaders have of the proactive stance transformative leadership takes toward dismantling inequities embedded in social systems (Weiner, 2003).

Likewise, goals prioritizing organizational efficiency and individual achievement over equity or social justice prevailed. This finding echoes concerns that Extension remains steeped in technical-rational paradigms not inherently oriented toward cultural inclusion and empowerment (Iverson, 2008). The prevailing view of education as primarily developing individual knowledge, skills, and social mobility conflicts with transformative leadership's community-engaged mission (Astin & Astin, 2000). Without interrogating the systemic roots of disparities, diversity efforts risk being superficial and unable to prompt the "deep and equitable change" central to transformative leadership (Shields, 2010, p. 559).

On the other hand, the significantly higher transformative leadership scores among diversity, equity, and inclusion contacts show leadership training and positioning relates to internalizing equity-focused beliefs. This suggests that formalized DEI roles provide an occasion for transformative reflection on power, privilege, and justice. However, the overall moderate scores indicate professional development in transformative leadership cannot be isolated to DEI staff. Cultivating capacity for change leadership should occur systemwide (Deen *et al.*, 2014).

In terms of experience, early career professionals exhibited the highest transformative leadership alignment. Having entered Extension more recently, they may be less socialized into traditional technical-rational paradigms and more attuned to emerging calls for social justice advocacy. This highlights generational perspectives needing attention. While longer-tenured leaders offer institutional memory, new professionals bring fresh eyes to persistent challenges. Transformative leadership involves uniting experience with critical innovation to forge new paths (Shields, 2010).

Ultimately, the study surfaced thought-provoking complexities within Extension's leadership culture at a historic turning point. The findings suggest leaders connect diversity and inclusion to Extension's community mission but have further to go in embracing transformative leadership's forthright confrontation of systemic inequities. This research establishes a baseline for gauging readiness to confront barriers to equity and marshal community assets for social change—a mandate rising leaders increasingly recognize.

As an exploratory study, the findings provide an important first look at transformative leadership perspectives in Extension but cannot define conclusively the organizational culture. The sample was limited to administrators and lacked program staff who engage communities daily. Perceptions likely vary by role, necessitating wider sampling. In terms of methods, the transformative leadership scale is still being validated and quantitative measures have limits in capturing nuanced beliefs. Follow-up interviews and focus groups could enrich the data.

Additionally, studying how perspectives translate into behaviors would further clarify leadership culture. Observations, ethnography, and case studies could illuminate how espoused transformative beliefs manifest in practice. Comparative work is needed between administrators, program staff at various levels, and community members to triangulate perspectives. Longitudinal designs tracking culture over time would also be insightful.

This research establishes a foundation for ongoing inquiry into transformative leadership's implications for organizations like Extension pursuing inclusive excellence. Findings illuminate the needs and opportunities to align leadership development with the equity mandate of Extension's 21st-century community engagement mission.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the current transformative leadership values and beliefs held by leaders in the Cooperative Extension System. By assessing the prevailing mindsets around equity, social justice, and leading change, this research establishes an important baseline for aligning leadership development efforts with Extension's mandate to champion inclusion and confront systemic barriers as social change agents. The findings provide insights that can inform professional development and education aimed at building capacity for leading complex change, which advances both leadership development work within Cooperative Extension and the broader leadership education field focused on preparing leaders to drive transformative change toward more equitable and just communities.

This study makes significant theoretical and practical contributions by applying transformative leadership as a lens to analyze perspectives on change, equity, and justice within Extension. The findings surface thought-provoking contrasts between prevailing mindsets and transformative leadership principles that have substantial importance for organizational culture and leadership development priorities.

Results indicate a promising baseline awareness of equity concerns but substantial room for growth in embracing core tenets of transformative leadership like social activism, egalitarian power distribution, and liberation. Developing transformative change agent skills should be part of professional learning at all leadership levels as Extension evolves to meet the needs of rapidly diversifying communities. Transformative leadership offers a compass for navigating rising complexity amidst budget constraints and accountability pressures. By centering justice and community empowerment, transformative leadership aligns with Extension's mission to democratize knowledge and catalyze social change (Lindemann *et al.*, 2022).

This research establishes a foundation for ongoing inquiry into transformative leadership's role in guiding community-engaged institutions. Comparative studies within and beyond Extension would enrich the discourse. In-depth qualitative research examining how transformative beliefs play out in practice would further expand understanding. As Extension enters its second century, transformative leadership holds promise for directing overdue reforms that advance diversity, dismantle systemic barriers, and fulfill the promise of truly inclusive and socially just engagement within communities. This study kicks off an important dialogue that calls for expanded participatory research and inclusive policy development to actualize the possibilities ahead.

Leadership theories like transformative leadership provide conceptual frameworks to make meaning of the shared viewpoints that emerge (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This research comes at a critical juncture as Extension navigates increasingly diverse constituencies with evolving needs. Applying transformative leadership theory to examine perspectives on social justice can shed light on the readiness of Extension educators to tackle 21st-century challenges. The findings will help shape policy and training to align leadership development with the core tenets of critique, equity, and activism that define transformative leadership.

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