

Evaluation of Transfer of Training and Skills Learned as State 4-H Council Members

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate if the environment of the State 4-H Council fosters transfer of training to life after the 4-H program. Purposive sampling identified former members of a State 4-H Council. The research methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Major findings of the study noted that most areas of the council environment encourage the transfer of training, however, some facets of the council environment need improvement to promote training transfer. Recommendations include conducting a needs assessment of all incoming State 4-H Council members, developing an experiential training method, implementing training on working with different personality types, improving communication among the group, and continuing to reward council members for using the skills they gain while on the council.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The Cooperative Extension system sponsors the 4-H youth development program. The State 4-H Council is a group of youth elected by their peers to fill the highest positions attainable in the 4-H organization. Each year approximately 34 members are elected. In this state, council members plan retreats, conferences, and camps for the 4-H members that they represent. They are the most visible of all 4-H members, being responsible for industry contacts and public appearances representing the state organization. Individuals elected to State 4-H Council positions receive opportunities that are not available to other 4-H members, including travel, networking, training, and scholarships for post secondary education.

Cooperative Extension states that the 4-H program develops leadership and life skills among its members (National 4-H Council, 2003). In preparation for the year of travel, speeches, workshops, and conferences, the State 4-H Council members receive leadership training and professional development. Seevers and Dormody (1995) found that holding an office is one of the capstone leadership development experiences. Although holding an office develops leadership skills, training is still a necessity for young people in an officer position to learn specifics of the position, hone skills they will utilize throughout their terms, and get acquainted with their fellow officers.

Training is beneficial for both participants and the organization. The organization benefits through improved employee performance and increased productivity. Trainees benefit by developing new skills and improving their performance (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). Garavaglia (1993) defined transfer of training as the successful and long-term use of skills learned in training and on the job. Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999) identified key factors that influence the effectiveness of the transfer of training.

The Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999) model divides factors that affect the transfer of skills into two categories: motivation and ability. Noe (1986) defined motivation to transfer skills as the desire of the students to use the material they learned in training to their job. Motivation is further broken down into five elements including perceived relevance of training, choice in attending training, outcome expectancies, self-efficacy, and job involvement.

Noe's (1986) ability related factors affect the capacity of learners to transfer training. Those factors are knowledge acquisition and situation identification. Environmental factors are features of a work environment that aides or hinders transfer of training. Elangovan and Karakowsky's (1999) categories of environmental factors are job related and organization related. Job related factors are specific to a job setting. They vary from situation to situation. Consistent elements include job requirements and norms and group pressure. Organizational factors apply to the whole organization and are: rewards and organizational culture.

Organizations, including Cooperative Extension, spend a great deal of money on employee training. Training dollars could be maximized if organizations examined their training processes using the factors identified by Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999), and Noe (1986). Members would utilize more of the concepts promoted in the training, thus becoming more effective leaders.

Purpose/Objectives

There is strong evidence that youth learn leadership life skills as members of the 4-H program (Seevers & Dormody, 1994a; Seevers & Dormody 1994b; Mueller, 1989; Boyd, Herring & Briers, 1992). However, little is known about what happens to skills once youth leave the 4-H program and begin the next stages of their lives. Garavaglia (1993) tells us that by evaluating the transfer of training, one can demonstrate how training improves an organization and employee efficiency and verify training effectiveness. The purpose of this study was to evaluate, using the factors advocated by Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999) and Noe (1986), whether the environment of the State 4-H Council encourages the transfer of training and skills members learned while on council to their lives after they leave the 4-H program.

Methods/Procedures

Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) say that random or representative sampling is not preferred when doing naturalistic inquiry because the researcher's major concern is not to generalize the findings of the study to a population, but to maximize discovery of the features and issues that occur in the context under study. Purposive sampling, a technique that intentionally seeks out participants because of certain qualities, was used to find participants who were willing to discuss their experiences as State 4-H Council members. The names of first participants for this study were from personal knowledge. That is they were those students who, in some way, identified themselves as former council members. A snowball sampling method was then used whereby members of the first group identified members of the second group (Babbie, 2001). Within naturalistic inquiry there is no concrete rule for sample size. The key is to look more for quality than quantity, more for information richness than information volume (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Patton (1990) says that sampling size adequacy is subject to peer review. This study focused on 15 individuals who had participated in the State 4-H Council program from 1988-1989 through 2001-2002.

The researchers used interviews to gather data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) say that interviews allow researchers and respondents to move through time in order to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future. Interviews help the researcher to understand interpersonal, social, and cultural aspects of the environment (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Semi-structured interviews were conducted and coded to retain confidentiality. These codes are included in the results section, in parenthesis after the quotations, as part of the trustworthiness confirmability and the

audit trail. Data analysis followed the traditional methods described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). These methods allowed the researchers to analyze data throughout the entire research process, not just at the conclusion. Lincoln and Guba adopted the Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparative method for use in naturalistic inquiry. The researchers' use of this method followed that adaptation and is outlined as follows: unitization of data, categorization of units, merging categories, and journaling.

In this study the researchers established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, member checking, and reflexive journaling. The researchers used thick description in the reporting of respondent's thoughts and ideas relative to the research questions and purposive sampling to establish transferability. Peer debriefing meetings occurred four times throughout the study, and each time, memos were prepared for the peer debriefing team. Member checking was done with each of the interview participants by reviewing the content of the field notes with the interviewee at the conclusion of each interview. Once field notes were fully transcribed, interviewees were given an electronic copy and allowed full editorial control, ensuring the transcription accurately reflected the interview, and changes were made as necessary. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirm ability. Using the above mentioned techniques as a part of the methodology of the study establishes trustworthiness.

Results/Findings

Using the transfer of training elements of Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999) and Noe (1986), the researchers identified areas where transfer of training is encouraged and where improvement is necessary to ensure greater transfer of training by the Council members to life after 4-H. As a reminder, the numbers in parenthesis following each section represent the codes for each interviewee who made statements supporting that training element.

The more important the trainees perceive the training to be, the greater the chance they will transfer the skills; this is perceived relevance of training. The council members interviewed had differing perceptions of the relevance of their training. Some of the council members perceived that the training they received as state officers was very relevant (I1, 2, 5, 9, 11, 13, 14).

- "I definitely saw the relevance in the training. I saw how she {a former state president} acted, and then I experienced the training and I saw how it all fit together" (I2).
- "Everything about council was so new to me. I really didn't realize what was ahead of me. I think that it {training} was all relevant. I probably just didn't realize it. And like I said it wasn't in depth training, it was more the crash course" (I11).
- "Everything they told us, you could tell we'd use it at some point. There was nothing that didn't come in handy at some point" (I13).

Others did not see the relevance in their training, and instead felt time would have been better spent on other activities (I3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 15).

- “Looking back I think we need less of the kind of stuff that they gave us- like public speaking and that kind of stuff and more just together times. We didn’t ever really get the chance to know each other” (I3).
- “I just don’t think that having us prepare the memento ‘schpeel’ was enough and that certainly isn’t public speaking” (I4).

According to Noe (1986), having a choice in attending training is key in an individual’s decision to transfer skills. In the case of the State 4-H Council, there is consensus among members that there is only one major training session. Individuals interviewed unanimously shared that the training session is a mandatory event. In fact, if an individual cannot attend this training, in its entirety, it is the belief that the individual will have to forfeit their spot on the council (I1-I15).

Outcome expectancy, or the trainees’ belief that if they learn and use the new skill, it will produce the expected or intended outcome, is the third transfer element. Several council members discussed their ability to see how the knowledge and skills taught would be useful in their “real life settings” as they went out to do their jobs (I1).

- “I definitely felt like I would use it {the training materials}. I mean you’re always going to have to know the stuff that we learned there” (I1).

Other council members talked about the applicability of their training to the activities they participated in throughout their council years. One council member discussed using the materials in workshops and camps they helped put on in their home and neighboring counties (I5).

An individual’s belief that they can accomplish the goals of the training (self-efficacy), is the next element. Noe (1986) says that by enhancing an individual’s self-efficacy, the trainer increases the odds of positive transfer. In the case of the State Council, participants’ degree of self-efficacy was high from the beginning. They unanimously believed they had the skills necessary to do their jobs as council officers, regardless of their feelings about the training. They also unanimously believed they could use those skills with success (I1- I15).

- “At the same time though, it’s like we’ve been trained our whole lives for this. We came to {training location} ready to take on those roles” (I3).
- “I don’t know that I learned or improved on anything during that time, honestly. I felt like I knew and had the skills that I needed to do the job” (I6).

Job involvement and job demands are two elements of transfer of training that are similar enough that the researchers can discuss them together. Job involvement describes an individual’s level of involvement in his or her job. Job demands play a major role in transfer because someone will only transfer skills if the opportunity arises for them to do so. The perception of job involvement and job demand varies a great deal within this group of council members.

One interviewee participated in up to 25 activities per month, during their State 4-H Council year. This individual believed, because of the information given to them in training, that every time they were invited to an event, they should consider the event mandatory (I2).

- “Everything I went to was mandatory. At least that is how I felt you know? You get called and people want you to be there and come to things, even if it is just to look pretty. So, everything I got called for was mandatory for me. I guess I just felt like anytime that I got to go and wear the jacket and share my message was a mandatory event” (I2).

Other interviewees felt like only the events that were state sponsored, where council members play prominent roles, were mandatory. In that case, the training event held for the council and state conferences, approximately four events throughout the year, were mandatory and participation in other invited events was by choice (I1,3,4,5,8,9,10,11,13,14).

- “The last two events were mandatory, the training in {training location} and again in January. Other than that, it was all voluntary. I mean if you were called you could kind of pick and choose if you said yes or no” (I3).

Knowledge acquisition is an important element in the transfer of training because students who learn and retain skills are more equipped to transfer those skills to other areas. All of the council members interviewed acknowledged that during their council year they acquired new knowledge (about themselves) or skills (communication, relationships) (I1-I15).

Situation identification, or applying training to a job or situation, is the next element in transfer of training. Individuals who understand where they can apply skills learned in training to other areas are more likely to transfer those skills to other situations. In this research, all interviewees identified situations where their training was applicable (I1-I15).

- “I mean you’re always going to use etiquette. Eventually you’re going to be looking for jobs or doing whatever in classes and so knowing how to present yourself is always going to be something you have to know (I1).

Norms and group pressure is the next transfer element. Norms are the standards that affect the transfer of skills. Even if someone has learned and retained skills, transfer will not happen if pressures from his or her group intervene. While on the State 4-H Council, members were encouraged to take things away from the training environment for use in other areas. Most of the individuals interviewed talked about peers and advisors encouraging them to seek opportunities to use their skills outside of the state officer arena (I1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 14).

If people outside of the council notice and reward the students’ new skills, students are more likely to want to transfer the skills to other areas. This idea of a reward system for learning and using new skills is the next transfer element. While there were both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated individuals in this group of

interviewees, they discussed only two rewards for using their training. Many of the Council members mentioned that the honor of wearing the green jacket was reward enough (I1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15). Others mentioned the watches and briefcases given to those individuals who did things “the most” such as those who wrote the most thank you notes (I4, I6, I9, I10, I11).

Organizational culture is the final element in the transfer of training and skills. An organizational culture that encourages employees to grow, improve their performance, and form new ideas will positively impact the transfer of new skills (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). In the case of the 4-H Council, members talked about being stifled and their creativity discouraged by advisors (I3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).

- “I wish that they would have let us lead the state instead of calling us leaders and the only thing that we did was decide on themes. We never built our own schedules or made our own choices. We’re figureheads and not leaders” (I6).

Other members of the council felt that the organizational culture was very positive (I1, 2, 5, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15).

- “Our advisors were great! I think that something that was real important was that they realized that we were still kids, but at the same time, we really were somebody important too. And so that is how they treated us” (I1).

Discussion and Conclusions

The goals of the State Council training program are ambiguous and the material covered in the program was repetitious for some members. The more relevant learners believe the training to be, the greater the chance that skills will be transferred (Noe, 1986). Because the relevance of this training was lost to some members, if skills were learned, their transfer was unlikely. The researchers recommend that advisors of the council conduct a needs assessment for training content. It would help advisors to understand the needs of the council members and closely align the training with those needs. It would also be crucial in creating the perception that the training is relevant to the members. Advisors should clearly articulate the goals of the training to the council members. They should repeatedly articulate the goals throughout the program. As councils change each year, council members and advisors should reassess training goals so they consistently align with the needs of the incoming council members. The researchers further recommend that this assessment initiate a greater number of experiential trainings, instead of a traditional one-time experience. If the council members believe that the training is relevant, there is greater likelihood that they will see ways to use skills in other situations and make the transfer (Elangovan and Karakowsky, 1999).

The council members interviewed believed that the training is mandatory. Because of this perception, transfer is unlikely, according to the research (Elangovan and Karakowsky, 1999). This is a second area where a needs assessment would be helpful. If advisors felt that a certain number of trainings should be required, a certain number of experiences could be made mandatory, instead of the one shot

situation. Or, based on the needs assessment results, advisors could set up concurrent sessions during a training experience, where the council members could choose to attend sessions in areas where improvement is needed or desired.

The clearer the link is between what someone is learning and what they are expected to learn, the greater the chance for training transfer (Noe, 1986). Many council members had positive outcome expectancies for their training experience. This will aid members transferring those skills to other areas. Advisors should implement reflection time throughout the council experience. During this time, advisors and council members should help each other synthesize the experiences in which members participated. This will help members make connections between training, the council experience and “real life” contexts.

Members of the State 4-H Council demonstrate a high degree of self-efficacy, thus furthering their opportunity to transfer the training they receive. Advisors should continue to encourage a high degree of self-efficacy among council members by allowing more decision-making about council events.

Elangovan and Karakowsky (1999) discuss job involvement, or the degree to which an individual is involved in their job, and job requirements, or demands, as two factors of training transfer. The degree of job involvement varied among council members, and advisors do not clearly communicate their expectations to everyone. This discourages the transference of training. Advisors need to clearly define the expectations at the outset of the experience and frequently reiterate those expectations throughout the year. Council advisors should also capitalize on the desires of the members to have autonomy and make decisions in this area by having State 4-H Council members help develop the job expectations.

Knowledge or skill acquisition is a key element of training transfer, as those individuals who gain and retain knowledge can transfer that knowledge (Noe, 1986). Council members acquire new knowledge or skills as part of their experience which aids in the transfer of training. Reflection would also be appropriate to help members to make meaning of what they have experienced.

An individual’s ability to apply training in other situations is an element of transfer (Noe, 1986). Council members demonstrated an ability to identify situations where they could utilize their training furthering transfer. Advisors should continue their efforts in identifying situations where members can use their skills.

Positive group pressure to apply and transfer skills will aid in skills transfer (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). Those members who felt encouraged were more likely to transfer the training than those who felt they lacked encouragement. Advisors should lead by example and encourage all council members to seek out their own opportunities to use their skills. They could develop a list, with the help of former members, of organizations or groups where State 4-H Council members

could volunteer to speak. This would also help council members encourage each other to use their skills, creating more opportunities to transfer the training.

An extrinsic reward system is successful in getting the members to use their skills (I1-I15). Individuals will be more ready to transfer new skills if their organization rewards them for it (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). Council advisors should continue rewarding the council members for using their skills. Since the researchers discovered that the State 4-H Council members interviewed tended to be extrinsically motivated, this could also encourage members to seek opportunities to use what they have learned in other areas of their lives.

Positive organizational cultures encourage the transfer of training. This type of culture includes encouraging employees to grow, improve their performance and form new ideas (Elangovan & Karakowsky, 1999). The organizational culture of the State 4-H Council is operationally undefined. This negatively affects the transfer of training. Council advisors and members should undertake training to encourage the development of a positive organizational culture, including identifying and working with different personality types, conflict management, gender and ethnic sensitivity training, and group decision-making skills.

Each element of training transfer plays an important role in a trainee taking what they have learned and applying it to their job or other situations. While elements of the State Council environment encouraged the members to transfer training, some elements of the environment presented challenges to training transfer. The researchers recommend that advisors take note of the areas where training transfer will be a challenge, and develop strategies, like those suggested above, to rejuvenate those areas and improve training transfer. It is also recommend that all organizations conducting leadership training take note of the elements affecting training transfer to improve the effectiveness of those efforts.

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