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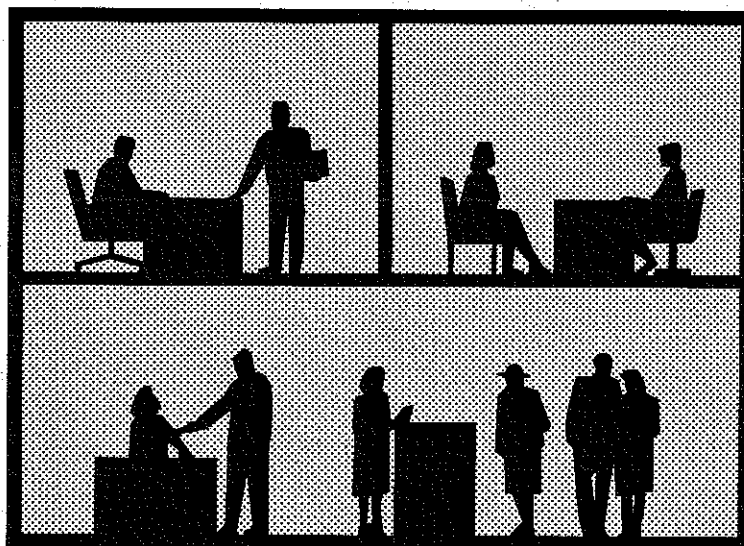
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Case Study of a Learning Organization: North Carolina's Wake County Cooperative Extension Center



'Pinions, Pain, and Personal Life

March 2001

Case Study of a Learning Organization:

North Carolina's Wake County Cooperative Extension Center —

'Pinions, Pain, and Personal Life

It's late, almost 10:00 p.m. on Saturday. The celebration of youth leadership that had 50 children and their parents sharing accomplishments, balloons, centerpieces, and refreshments was over. A clean-up crew of three was putting the room back in order so that those who used the room next would feel welcome. The agent and her assistant were just about finished picking up stray pieces of trash. Their supervisor was vacuuming and turned to them and said, "You two have done a great job! Go on home — I'll finish this up." All three smiled, finished together, and left the hall feeling good about themselves and their accomplishments.

INTRODUCTION

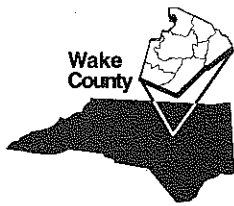
Quality public service depends on the ability of provider organizations to reflect on current practice and chart paths to improvement. In this light, public service agencies are viewed as “learning organizations” that grow from their experiences. Learning organizations nurture their staff and provide them with a sense of accomplishment and job satisfaction. In turn, the positive work environment results in enhanced productivity and sustainability. Unfortunately, many public service agencies are unable to adequately reflect on current practice due to limited resources or the scarcity of external evaluators capable of facilitating the process.

Evaluation, Assessment, and Policy Connections (EvAP), a unit of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, and the Wake County Center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (WCCES) joined resources to investigate ways in which this public service agency operated as a learning organization. During the fall of 2000, nine external evaluators (a) consulted literature and experts about Cooperative Extension programs, (b) shadowed eight staff from WCCES, (c) observed two staff meetings, (d) conducted eight individual interviews, and (e) led six focus groups that included almost the entire staff of 72. The evaluation team gathered data, identified relevant issues, searched for convergence within issues, challenged their preliminary findings, refined their methods of inquiry, and summarized results.

As evaluators grew familiar with WCCES, they became increasingly convinced that it was an exemplary learning organization – a place that actively engaged its constituents in thoughtful action and guarded the value of individuals at almost every level. Overall, the study revealed amazingly high levels of collaborative programming and job satisfaction. Consequently, the investigation focused on discovering which factors contributed to these effects. Five issues emerged that appeared to explain why WCCES was an exemplary learning organization:

- Contextual Factors Unique to Wake County Cooperative Extension.
- The Nature of Work in Cooperative Extension.
- Operations: How the Work Gets Done.
- Atmosphere: The Work Environment.
- Leadership: The Power of Empowerment.

The section that follows presents background information about Cooperative Extension in the United States and North Carolina that frames the work of WCCES. Next, two sections present brief statements of theory — a summary of the learning organization model and case study method. Following, four sections present evidence gathered during the case study. Relevant data are organized by the emerging factors that contribute to WCCES as a learning organization. A conclusion section summarizes the case study evidence and lessons learned.



CONTEXTUAL FACTORS UNIQUE TO WAKE COUNTY COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Cooperative Extension in the United States and North Carolina

Cooperative Extension was created in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act. It established an outreach component in American universities and sought to bring research and knowledge to rural citizens. The Cooperative Extension system was built on a partnership of federal, state and county resources. Traditionally, the agriculture agent helped farmers improve their crops and livestock; the home economist helped the farm wife meet the family's nutrition, clothing, and housing needs; and the 4-H agent engaged youth in life-skills education.

Much has changed for Cooperative Extension since its inception, and North Carolina vividly reflects these changes. Agriculture in North Carolina has grown from subsistence farming to a multibillion-dollar industry, feeding well over 120 people per producing farmer. Nearly all those in rural areas have modern conveniences of electricity, telephone, and running water. However, many rural citizens also face modern inconveniences such as pollution, traffic, congestion, and crime. With these changes have come new challenges for the Cooperative Extension system. Growth and modernization has accelerated lifestyle and cultural changes in modern America and forced Cooperative Extension to reinvent itself.

Cooperative Extension in Wake County

WCCES provides outreach education in Wake County. Serving both urban and rural citizens, the agency's educational initiatives address various community issues to meet their mission "to help individuals, families, and communities put research based knowledge to work to improve their lives." Through collaborative efforts, the organization provides cost-effective services while maximizing resources through volunteers and development. Wake County, the fastest growing urban center in the state, still produces 68 million dollars worth of crops and livestock while maintaining a diverse agricultural base. Presently, there are 772 farms in Wake County covering 113,000 acres. As one of the largest agricultural producing counties in the state, Wake County also faces tremendous pressure from urban sprawl.

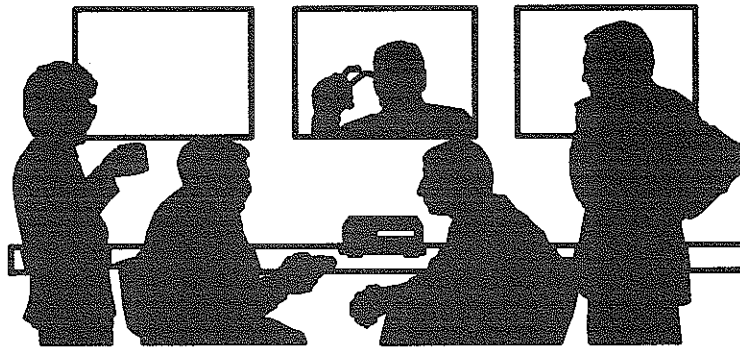
WCCES, with deep roots in the community and relationships with two state universities (North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University), is a respected participant in the county infrastructure. The agency identifies educational and informational needs of citizens across the county by collecting information from advisory leadership groups, environmental scans, and public forums. Recently, the organization has assumed less traditional responsibilities as social service and technical support team to the county government. The Director of the WCCES provides leadership to the county agency while working under the umbrella of Wake County's strategic plan. The agency's expanding role makes the Wake County Center unique. Currently, approximately 72 people at WCCES support programs in agriculture, family and consumer science, 4-H youth development, and community resource development. Funds to support these programs come primarily from federal, state, and county sources.

Overall, WCCES shares many things in common with other Cooperative Extension Centers in North Carolina and the United States. However, a number of unique factors

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may contribute to the agency's ability to function as a learning organization. WCCES is large and benefits from additional resources and opportunities. WCCES is directly linked to North Carolina State University and enjoys its resources and continuing education opportunities. The exceptional population growth of the county has created a greater demand for social service programs consistent with the organization's mission. This market expansion has resulted in public support for Extension activities. Additionally, a large organization guarantees that people have the luxury of working with coworkers with similar programmatic interests. For example, there are more than one 4-H person and more than one nutritionist. Similarly, a large organization can coordinate administrative support systems more efficiently than smaller agencies. Furthermore, large organizations provide staff a wider pool for interaction and possible collaboration, which usually guarantees more natural, harmonious groupings.

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THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION MODEL

Much of what frames program efforts at WCCES is guided by Cooperative Extension guidelines. Additionally, much of what frames WCCES stems from its need to meet changes in programming demands. Any organization that is 85 years old, like WCCES, must confront these demands to keep pace with social change. In Wake County, changes in customer needs and leadership of the larger County organization have been dramatic. These developments obligated WCCES to learn how to meet new customer needs and work within a new context. WCCES has met this challenge by becoming an exemplary learning organization.

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Recently, *Fortune* issued a challenge to organizations. "Forget your tired old ideas about leadership. The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called a learning organization" (Senge, 1990, p. 14). To excel in the future, organizations must discover how to cultivate people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels of the organization.

According to Peter Senge (1990), change is learning and learning is change. Through learning, we re-create ourselves and extend our capacity to create. Traditional organizations are transforming into learning organizations in which (a) workers expand their capacity to create desired results, (b) new patterns of thinking are encouraged and nurtured, (c) collective aspiration is facilitated, and (d) workers are learning to learn together. Accordingly, organizations become places where workers are continually discovering how they create their reality and how they can change it.

Learning organizations are created and sustained by five disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Ott, 1996). Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that is used to analyze complex problems and interrelated events. Personal mastery, nourished by a commitment to lifelong learning, refers to people who approach life and work as an artist would approach a project. Mental models are deeply held assumptions or mental images that influence how we understand the world. Shared vision binds people together around a common sense of destiny and promotes commitment rather than compliance. Team learning encourages people to suspend assumptions and think together in dialogue.

A learning organization employs these five disciplines to expand its capacity to create new ideas, knowledge, and solutions. The learning organization moves past survival learning to engage in generative learning that enhances our capacity to create. Shared experience expands new patterns of thinking and strengthens the problem-solving skills of the entire organization.

The following case study describes how WCCES reflects the characteristics of a learning organization, where management creates a caring work environment that enhances the ability of individuals and departments to meet customer needs efficiently and effectively. Additionally, leaders promote a shared vision and recognize the need for collaboration to meet new organizational challenges.

EVALUATION AND THE CASE STUDY METHOD

This evaluation used the case study methodology to explore the degree to which WCCES is a learning organization. Case study is an important social science and business study model (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). This qualitative research approach involves the presentation of significant details, contextual data, and their impact on organizational processes. The case study method is particularly useful for studying complex social phenomena.

Stake (1987) and others have shown the importance of case studies for evaluation. The case study is an important evaluation tool because it clarifies the contextual dynamic in which expected program or organizational outcomes occur. A case study can produce the real life story of a program, give voice to participants, and portray nuances of an organization. Case study method involves activities such as report review, program planning, documentation review, shadowing people as they go about their business, and participation in ordinary office routines. The evaluation report of a case study is designed to integrate all these various observations and present an accurate picture of the process or organization under investigation.

The present case study was conducted as a graduate student exercise during Fall 2000. Eight School of Education doctoral students at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill conducted the study with the cooperation of WCCES. The case study report was delivered to Extension program leaders at North Carolina State University and at North Carolina A&T State University. The case study evaluation process was a useful learning experience for all concerned and should prove instructive to both other Extension Centers facing similar issues of change and non-Extension audiences who face similar challenges.

CASE STUDY OF WAKE COUNTY COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

WCCES employees indicated that working in an Extension office is satisfying for a variety of reasons. The work is goal-oriented, allows for flexible scheduling, and involves a variety of tasks. Most importantly, the work focuses on families and children, and is perceived as “making a difference in people’s lives.” Employees, regardless of their level in the organization, believe that they are developing programs that reach out and help others. The same conditions are true for most Cooperative Extension workers in other states.

WCCES employees are encouraged to pursue higher education. The organization supports their growth as program developers and individuals. Many opportunities for professional development are directly applicable to the skills needed in the workplace. Through the rich diversity of the programs offered at WCCES, employees serve the public in a variety of capacities and share a common vision of bettering the community in which they work. WCCES workers enjoy the fact that they engage others in learning activities addressing all aspects of family life and that their work involves direct contact with clients. The level of satisfaction among program participants is recognized as the most important measure of a program or activity’s success. This direct relationship causes many workers to value their tasks and job.

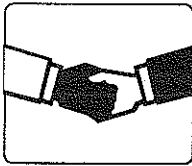
Not surprisingly, WCCES staff report less satisfying aspects of their jobs as well. Job flexibility also means that workers do not have the typical work schedule, which means they must work nights and weekends. A common area of concern for WCCES workers

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is budget and funding. Working under federal, state, and local grants means many jobs are not permanent. Additionally, within a limited resource environment, employees must evaluate their job's importance and defend its existence. Consequently, there is much paper work to be done, often in triplicate. Some staff expressed a concern about communicating program results to county and state supporters.

Leadership at WCCES has lessened some of the concerns about funding by placing greater emphasis on marketing programs and providing administrative support. Leaders encourage employees to educate and train themselves through further schooling and in-service training. The fact that leaders in the organization value their employees and the jobs they do causes employees to be confident that the administration will fight for their positions.

Like other types of jobs that focus on helping others (e.g. teaching and social work), WCCES staff does not earn huge salaries. However, the nature of their work contributes greatly to job satisfaction. Additionally, collaboration and communication among employees develops positive and supportive relationships that also contribute to overall job satisfaction. As one focus group participant indicated, "If you didn't love your job you would have to leave." Obviously, the nature of their work and how it is valued within the organization rather than salary causes employees to remain at WCCES.



OPERATIONS: HOW THE WORK GETS DONE

Repeatedly, employees referred to daily operations as an important component of the organizational climate at WCCES. Unlike common Cooperative Extension programs and practices, operations reflect local decisions about how people in the organization implement their tasks. For example, all employees are expected to meet their job responsibilities; how that is monitored is normally a local decision. For WCCES, organization-specific implementation choices that surround employee independence, communication, and growth greatly contributed to a positive work environment.

Independence

"Staff reported that they are not micro-managed. Instead, they are given freedom to be creative, to take risks, and to decide how best to fulfill their job responsibilities. Supervisors serve as sounding boards and support systems, not dictators."

Professionalism, autonomy, trust, and respect are all words used to characterize operating conditions at WCCES. Staff reported that they are not micro-managed. Instead, they are given freedom to be creative, to take risks, and to decide how best to fulfill their job responsibilities. Supervisors serve as sounding boards and support systems, not dictators. WCCES staff claims that this approach is largely a result of leadership at the top. "We have a team approach and shared decision making because the person at the top allows it. He supports innovation and risk taking." Additionally, the nature of Cooperative Extension work and the size of some WCCES programs make it "essential to trust people and give up micro-managing just to survive." In the words of one employee, "At staff meetings, everybody has a chance to say something, to voice their opinion, about everything that's on the agenda if they want. My opinion matters. It makes you feel valued as an employee." The staff believes that their ideas and opinions are valued. They value the freedom to "create" their own jobs. Furthermore, data indicate that this discretion and flexibility extends to employees at all levels, boosting the overall atmosphere of professionalism and level of personal responsibility.

Likewise, teamwork and cross programming characterize operating conditions at WCCES. In the words of one employee, "We are always encouraged to do cross-program-

ming. We are always wondering what other people can bring to the table. With cross-programming, we're resources for each other." Collaboration provides opportunities to share ideas, promotes personal growth, and fosters effective staff relationships. "No one is pigeon-holed into a specific job. Employees collaborate with others...you don't have to worry about people being territorial." In general, coworkers support each other to complete tasks and achieve success.

However, while most staff stated that collaboration was positive, others noted areas for improvement. Specifically, one staff member complained that the decision making process at WCCES is sometimes "too democratic." Occasionally, it takes too long for decisions to be made because everyone must have a vote. Other employees spoke about extensive and redundant paperwork, budget cuts, lack of funds for staffing vacant positions and support staff, and increasing job responsibilities.



Communication

Communication at WCCES fosters inclusion. An environment of trust and organizational structures enable the staff at all levels to interact freely. For example, the open-door policy encourages the staff to deal directly with administrators. Additionally, the presence of open dialogue among staff was observed. Meetings provided an opportunity for all of the staff to participate and leaders employed a consensus building approach to decision-making. Consensus building promoted inclusive communication among the staff and contributed to job satisfaction.

However, not all staff members characterized communication at WCCES as inclusive. A number of staff members would like to have more feedback about specific projects and initiatives. One staff member expressed job frustration due to a lack of communication with supervisors. Face-to-face communication is made difficult by varied schedules and locations. "Because we are operating out of three different buildings, it's hard to track people down. I prefer face-to-face contact with everybody when I can."

Professional and Personal Growth

Personal satisfaction was evident among many of the staff at WCCES. "There's a lot of room for growth. There are a lot of educational opportunities." WCCES provides many opportunities for personal growth. Close proximity to NCSU allows for a variety of workshops and training sessions. Additionally, cross-programming and in-service training are available to all staff members. "Being an extension of NCSU, every opportunity that comes up within the University, Wake County Human Services, or Extension, we are notified. Furthermore, WCCES staff report that their coworkers, especially those within the same department, offer assistance when needed. "When working together with other teams, we recognize success of all parties and recognize each other. All members of the organization are expected to succeed and assistance towards this goal is provided when appropriate. In addition to professional support, WCCES Staff members report that they receive personal support from coworkers and administrators. "They care about your family. They support family."

However, not all staff report feeling valued and supported by their leaders and supervisors. Some employees report feeling stressed and overworked. Other employees desire more recognition from co-workers and leaders. One staff member mentioned that training was not adequate and that it needed to be accompanied by professional feedback.

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ATMOSPHERE: THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

"LIKE A FAMILY."

"The feeling of family seems to relate to how employees view the work of WCCES. 'We work with families, we encourage family success,' noted one employee. 'Supervisors support you when you need time for your family,' another added."

"When my husband was ill in the hospital, almost everybody from the whole staff was dropping by, asking, 'Do you need anything else? Do you need me to pick your son up from school or go feed your dog?' They don't have to do that, it's not part of their job description, but they do, and it makes me feel appreciated."

Impromptu gatherings in the hallway, friendly fighting over blueberry bagels at the end of a meeting, a thank you note being dropped onto a fellow employee's desk – these are some of the scenes which shed light on the important role of the work environment, or atmosphere, at WCCES. A family-oriented atmosphere permeates almost every part of the organization. In addition, a feeling of belonging and being a valued member of the team was a recurring theme related to job satisfaction. A sense of the organization as a family emerged repeatedly as employees were asked what was unique or special about working at WCCES. "It's more than an office. We really function like a family," said one employee. The staff knows each other beyond the boundaries of work, including knowing about spouses, families, and even pets. When new employees arrive, they are immediately welcomed and feel they are part of the team. Some employees worried that as the organization continues to grow, this sense of family will be difficult to maintain. Already, one employee observed, "At staff conferences, there are people whose names you don't know."

The feeling of family seems to relate to how employees view the work of WCCES. "We work with families, we encourage family success," noted one employee. "Supervisors support you when you need time for your family," another added. Though the nature of the work is demanding, employees at WCCES find time for one another. They share successes, problems, and responsibilities, as well as sick days. "We had a colleague that had just started and she didn't have all of her benefits yet. She had to have surgery, she didn't have enough days, and we could share our days. She didn't have to ask, people got it together and did it themselves." Likewise, if someone is having a family crisis, they could expect others to show their support. "When my husband was ill in the hospital, almost everybody from the whole staff was dropping by, asking, 'Do you need anything else? Do you need me to pick your son up from school or go feed your dog?' They don't have to do that, it's not part of their job description, but they do, and it makes me feel appreciated."

Consequently, the degree to which leadership at WCCES has intentionally promoted this family atmosphere was investigated. Leaders indicated the steps they have taken to make employees feel comfortable at WCCES. Supervisors have created mechanisms that promote informal interactions. For example, supervisors take new hires out to lunch, further the sense of community by putting pictures of employees up on a bulletin board, plan communal events such as breakfast get-togethers, and assure that personal lives are recognized. A fund called the Sunshine Committee was created to buy flowers for employees on their birthday or in case of a family death or illness. One supervisor created a system where employees keep jars on their desks in which notes of compliment, recognition, and praise can be shared. When referring to WCCES as a "fun place to work," one employee commented, "We wouldn't have this atmosphere without the leadership."

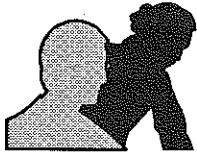
Many employees specified that the feeling of belonging and being a valued member of the WCCES team was a crucial to their job satisfaction. Most employees reported that individual opinions are sought and respected. "People listen to what I'm saying both on a professional and personal level. My opinion and expertise are valued and respected. At staff meetings, everybody has a chance to say something." As one employee summarized,

"As one employee summarized, 'I feel valued because our opinions matter, our pain matters, and our personal life matters – the three P's.'"

"I feel valued because our opinions matter, our pain matters, and our personal life matters – the three P's." The importance of job satisfaction is underscored by the statements of employees who do not feel affirmed. One team expressed a sense that other staff and WCCES leadership did not understand or fully appreciate their work. When commenting on what aspects of the organization could be improved, this team expressed a desire for better communication across teams, a deeper sense of belonging to the larger group, and an increase in their sense of being valued by the others in the organization.

Leadership at WCCES promotes a team approach and shared decision-making. Staff retreats and conferences reflect a calculated effort on the part of leadership personnel to promote a sense of teamwork. Cross-program collaboration encourages the staff to interact with others and supports the notion that all employees are valuable. One employee noted that although she is not a supervisor, people come to her for her opinion and help, making her feel that her "opinion and expertise are valued." Many employees expressed feeling a sense of 'trust' from the leadership. Employees feel freedom to be creative in doing their work and are empowered to do the best job possible. Leaders mirrored this perspective. "It is essential to trust people and to give up micromanaging." The leader's ability to refrain from micromanaging projects reflects a high level of trust in employees and causes employees to "give 100% back to the organization."

WCCES is described by many as a place where "achievement is recognized." Employees report that the climate supports their efforts and that leaders expect success from all employees. At staff meetings, accomplishments are celebrated, often through frequent applause. One employee noted that the deliberate recognition of achievements and successes helps create employees who are "happy, encouraged, and encouraging."



LEADERSHIP: THE POWER OF EMPOWERMENT

"NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF THE PERSON AT THE TOP."

The evaluation team noted early in the process of investigating WCCES as a learning organization, that leadership was an important factor. The type of leadership valued in the agency permeated the entire organizational structure. From the Extension Director, who was consistently described as a good leader, to Agents, Program Assistants, and volunteers — all were seen as leaders and were praised for their leadership work.

While people at the top of the organizational structure were perceived as extremely important to WCCES, decrees from above were noticeably absent. Rather than asserting authority, supervisors adamantly asserted and demonstrated their steadfast belief in team leadership. They argued that the power of the organization lies not in individuals at the top of the pyramid who are gifted leaders, but in the worthiness of the staff and teams who lead WCCES.

Observations within WCCES demonstrated this leadership perspective and its results. Staff meetings, including Leadership Team meetings, did not showcase the wisdom and expertise of supervisors; rather, the leadership and success of the staff are highlighted. The staff appeared creatively engaged in their own programs and effective collaboration strengthens the organization. Discussions with a number of staff members revealed a team of people confident of their leaders' support and empowered with the authority and freedom to exercise leadership in meeting client needs creatively and effectively. Security, autonomy, and collaboration seem to be the themes of the WCCES work experience.

In analyzing data from multiple interviews, observations, and focus groups, four themes emerged concerning the role of leadership at WCCES. Each of these characteristics was praised by WCCES staff as central to their success as professionals, their job satisfaction, and to the growth of the organization:

- Leadership with Vision.
- Leadership that is Accessible.
- Leadership that Values People.
- Leadership as Empowerment.

As with any service organization, the importance of responsiveness to market needs was mentioned as paramount to the survival of WCCES. Members of this organization were confident that they "have the leadership it takes to be competitive" and that it is the long-range vision of the leadership team at WCCES that has allowed it to move forward. Staff indicated that WCCES has always been "ahead of its time," whether it was computer systems, telephone technology, innovative programming, or new staffing approaches. One leader quoted Helen Keller concerning the necessity of having vision, as well as sight, and she applied it to the current director's vision for WCCES. The director's conception of the role of Cooperative Extension in a contemporary urban community such as Raleigh has helped to magnify and modify the services the organization offers. His skill in negotiating the governmental and educational complexities of the county was identified as a strength. His openness to networking along with his willingness to acknowledge the work of others, help WCCES meet the needs of Wake County citizens. These leadership qualities were described by WCCES staff as promoting security and confidence.

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"Members of this organization were confident that they 'have the leadership it takes to be competitive' and that it is the long-range vision of the leadership team at WCCES that has allowed it to move forward."

"The leadership theme most frequently mentioned as important to the work of WCCES is a collaborative, rather than authoritative, leadership style. Freedom, flexibility, and trust were highlighted in almost every conversation with employees as crucial to their engagement, energy, commitment, and success. Autonomy served to empower the intellectual, emotional, and energy of entire teams."

The director's door is always open was a statement frequently heard in discussions regarding the working atmosphere of WCCES. Observations and comments revealed all levels of staff enter his office to pose questions, suggest projects, and argue for solutions. Employees report that the director actively listens to them when they talk to him, physically putting work to the side and focusing on the individual. Staff consistently shared similar observations about other leaders in the organization, who are never too busy for an impromptu conversation.

A natural corollary to a leaders positive attentiveness to their staff – and a third theme that emerged in the investigation – is the degree to which the staff feels valued. Data indicate that the leadership at WCCES made employees feel valued by showing a genuine interest in their personal lives. The Director and the Human Services Team Leader were singled out consistently as displaying natural enthusiasm, praise, and warmth that were particularly appreciated. Additionally, reports suggested that leaders value the professional expertise of their staff. Leaders recognize and reward accomplishments, grant autonomy to their staff, and expect success. Staff are actively recognized and rewarded for their dedication, innovation, leadership, and collaboration. This atmosphere of respect and encouragement begins with those at the top of the organizational structure and contagiously permeates the entire agency.

The leadership theme most frequently mentioned as important to the work of WCCES is a collaborative, rather than authoritative, leadership style. Freedom, flexibility, and trust were highlighted in almost every conversation with employees as crucial to their engagement, energy, commitment, and success. Autonomy served to empower the intellectual, emotional, and energy of entire teams. Opportunities to develop leadership skills were valued as well. The staff also appreciated the leader's willingness to "get their hand's dirty," and to follow as well as lead. At all levels of the organization, there exists a consistent team approach to interviewing, hiring, goal setting, problem solving, professional development, and decision-making. Collaboration encourages staff engagement, commitment, and enjoyment.

The importance of collaborative leadership for WCCES and other learning organizations is confirmed by evidence of the effects of its absence. In one situation, the evaluation team discovered that staff did not receive direction, connection, encouragement, or freedom that promotes job satisfaction. They felt distanced from the staff geographically and isolated programmatically. They expressed a desire for feedback and recognition. Although they expressed other positive attributes of the work environment, the lack of supportive leadership diminished their levels of job satisfaction. Caring leadership is an essential component of a learning organization.



LESSONS LEARNED

Contextual Factors Unique to Wake County Cooperative Extension

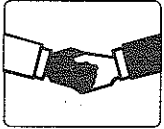
- The large size of WCCES allows its 70+ employees a number of advantages including the opportunity to work with colleagues who have similar interests and an administrative infrastructure that makes work easier.
- Access to resources from both North Carolina State University and a resource rich county facilitates the work of WCCES.
- An extremely high growth rate for the county contributes to the market for WCCES services.
- A County government structure that considers WCCES one of its agencies provides programmatic support.

General Findings



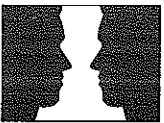
The Nature of Work in Cooperative Extension

- Making a difference in people's lives is rewarding.
- An emphasis on continuing education is viewed positively.
- Working in interdisciplinary teams enhances job interest and performance.
- Job flexibility is appreciated.



Operations: How the Work Gets Done

- Professionalism, autonomy, trust, and respect contribute to job fulfillment.
- Open lines of communications foster inclusion.
- Democratic decision-making makes people feel valued.
- Encouraging professional growth and development promotes personal satisfaction.



Atmosphere: The Work Environment

- A sense of family makes staff feel as though they belong.
- A family orientation permeates the organization.
- Employees feel that they are valued members of the team.



Leadership: The Power of Empowerment

- Leadership with vision provides the staff with a sense of security about the future.
- Accessible leaders contribute greatly to job satisfaction.
- Leadership that values people recognizes and rewards individual effort and contributes to job satisfaction.
- Collaborative leadership permeates the organization and results in greater productivity.
- Without supportive leadership, other learning organization factors are seriously diminished.

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