Leading the Way: The Importance of Leadership in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work

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Introduction

In 2016, Extension Directors recognized the need to help communities engage in meaningful conversations around race. The Extension Committee on Operations and Policy (ECOP) charged a small team of Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and non-Land-Grant University (LGU) professionals (referred to as a Rapid Response Team) to examine the current capacity of CES to respond to the need for dialogue to promote racial understanding and healing, and to provide recommendations to build CES capacity in this area. Following the April 2017 report to ECOP, a team of 23 professionals both from within and outside the LGU system organized and refined a training process designed to prepare Extension teams to serve as dialogue trainers within their own states.

The *Coming Together for Racial Understanding* (as it was titled) initiative integrates this top-down initiation with bottom-up change efforts to create momentum for change. From a top-down perspective, Extension Directors and Administrators approved this initiative and provided support for its implementation. The focus on dialog, rather than on mandated training, created a mechanism for bottom-up initiatives around policy and practice and emergent changes in programming and interpersonal interactions.

Summary Focus and Findings

This issue brief addresses the role leaders play in supporting efforts to increase dialogues around racial understanding. Based on a survey of State Training Teams who participated in the inaugural Coming Together for Racial Understanding train-the-trainer event (2018), six variables related to leadership support were identified that team members felt were critical to success including actively communicating support, verbally encouraging me in the work, actively participating in dialog, demonstrating support in the face of dissension and risk, and trusting the team to lead the initiative. For this work to truly make a difference, this brief points to the importance of matching administrative leadership efforts with expectations for support, particularly regarding aligning resources and time-on-task to the vision for change.

The resulting unique approach provides an ideal opportunity to look more closely at the role institutional leaders play and are expected to play in building the capacity of Extension to successfully engage communities in dialog around race. To date, the *Coming Together* (for short) national training team has trained state teams representing 1862, 1890, and 1994 LGUs in 32 states. As these state teams began working to build capacity within Extension to facilitate community dialogues, a research team convened to study the potential of this approach to create meaningful change. Early findings from this evaluation work suggest that those participating in the training experienced change in their personal and interpersonal interactions and saw positive movement toward change in institutional and cultural practices.

The *Coming Together* Research Team surveyed members of the 2018 state training teams in 2020 to collect data on how implementing the initiative led to changes in their work situation and programming. Additionally, the survey asked a series of quantitative and open-ended questions about the ways in which their work was being supported as they sought to implement *Coming Together* training and dialogue processes within their state systems and in their communities. This issue brief focuses on the role institutional leaders played in advancing efforts.

To help us understand how the top-down support for bottom-up initiated change was working, we asked training team members to reflect on a set of variables that had previously been identified as important in supporting dialogue efforts. Six of these were directly related to leadership support, including leaders who were: participating in the sessions, communicating support for the change effort, demonstrating support in the face of dissention, trusting the state team to do the work, verbally encouraging the team to do the work, and providing time for other Extension employees to participate. For each variable, survey respondents were asked to reflect on changes in these six variables over the past year on two dimensions: (1) the support they felt and (2) the importance of that support to them in their work.

According to the data, most team members saw at least some growth in their leaders' actions on four of the six variables while on one (leaders' active participation in dialogues) most saw no change and on the other (leaders actively communicating their support for this work as a priority) most noted seeing less support. In responding to the changes in each variables' importance, team members reported recognizing the need for the support as increasing on all six. Figures 1 and 2 below show the order of each variable when sorted by growth in changes ("much more" plus "a little more"). When

ordered by the amount of growth, the listing of the support demonstrated or in support importance had a similar alignment yet changed some. This is important in considering where leadership has made progress in supporting teams and in identifying areas where additional support is needed.
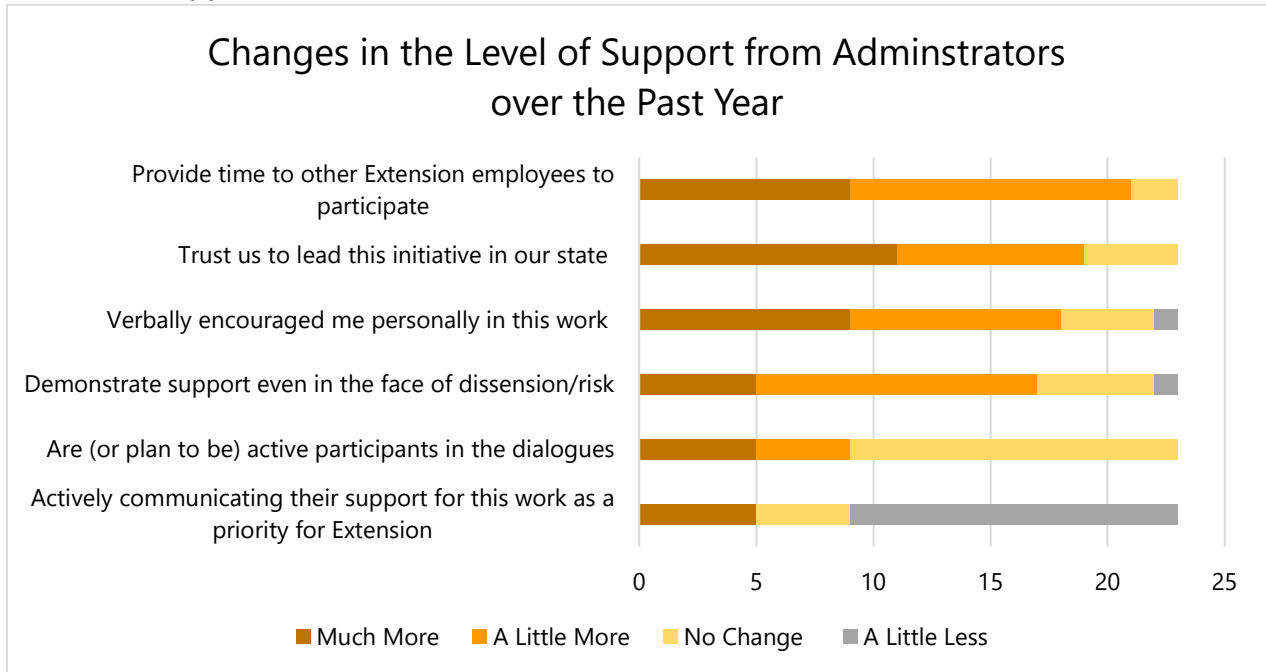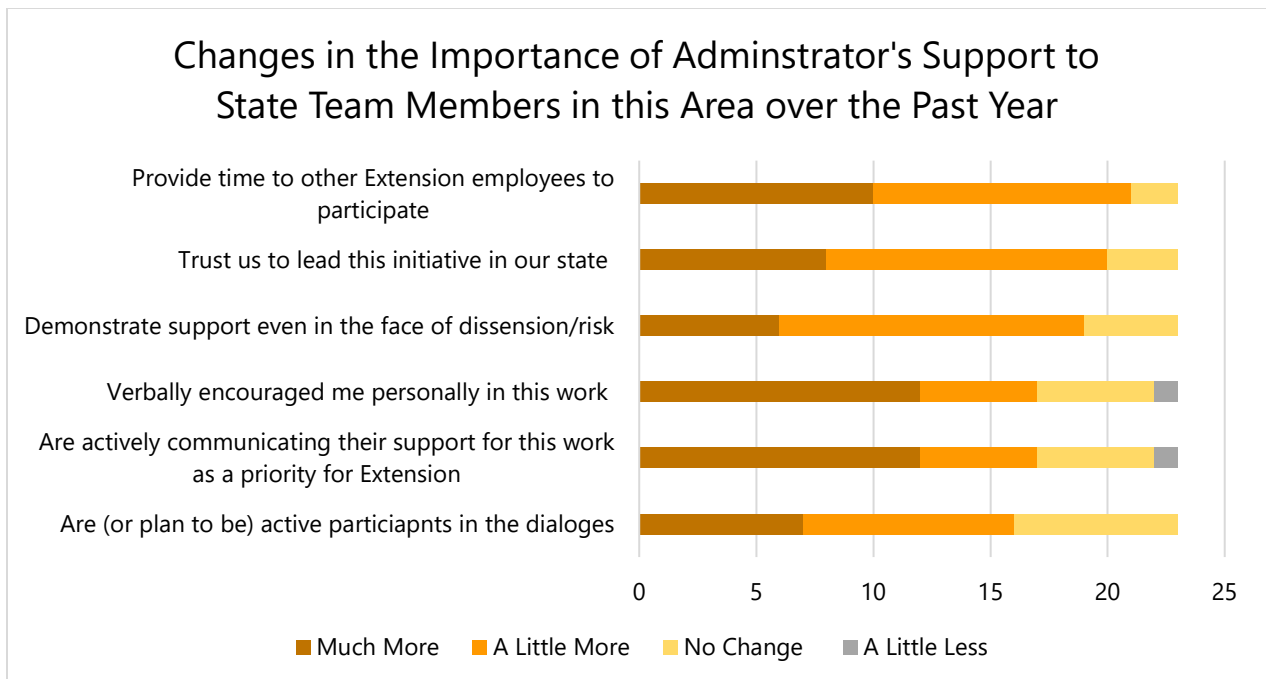

Figure 1: N=23

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These data indicate that the kind of leadership support for dialogue work that makes a difference reflects Posner and Kouzes, *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* (2011). These five practices emerged from their research on successful institutional change efforts.

- **Model the Way:** Great leaders don't just ask people to do things, they demonstrate the importance of doing things differently through their participation. *Coming Together* team members rated both importance of leaders participating in dialogs and the level of support they received related to participating in the dialogs lower than most other variables. Importance was rated slightly higher than level of support. In analyzing the reasons behind this finding, the *Coming Together* team found reason to develop alternative sessions for leaders due to the discomfort some leaders and employees reported with having leaders participate in the sessions.

  "Continued support from administration and active participation in the workshops" was reported as a positive impact on the ability to lead the Coming Together effort.

- **Inspire a Shared Vision:** Great leaders bring a passion to their work and with that passion for making things work well, they share a dynamic vision of what is possible with clear goals and opportunities to celebrate success (Moncloa et al., 2019). In inspiring people to lead *Coming Together* efforts by actively communicating support for this work as a priority for Extension, 13 team members rated it as "no change" while 12 team members rated it of high importance indicating a possible gap between expectations of administrators and actual administrative practice. This finding was used to guide development of some new programming to better prepare administrators for supporting *Coming Together* efforts in their states.

  "My administrator is fully committed to this body of work."

- **Challenge the Process:** Effective leadership requires leaders who will stand up to those challenging the need for change. Seventeen of the 23 team members rated this item as one receiving "a little more" to "much more" support while 19 rated the importance of demonstrating support as "a little more" to "much more" demonstrating alignment between levels of support and expectations of support. This finding may speak to both the challenge of creating lasting change in the higher education environment and the changing political environment.

  "I think we have initiated important learning processes among our colleagues, but we still need to see more institutional investment in staff/faculty Full Time Equivalent (FTEs) assigned to this work and funds. We still need changes in our institutional reward systems to adequately value and recognize this work in annual reviews and tenure/promotion processes."

- **Enable Others to Act:** Too often, leaders espouse a new vision of what is possible, yet overlook the need to realign resources to support the changes they wish to see. Great leaders not only encourage the heart and model the way, but they also reorganize resources and assignments in ways that facilitate doing the work differently. Moncloa et al. (2019) document the importance of providing real support as leaders work to implement and create an inclusive environment. As the qualitative data suggest, it is in this area that many have shared concerns. On this item, 21 team members rated both level of support and importance of support at a little more to much more.

Participants are challenged in "carving out adequate time to prepare in addition to my existing, ongoing duties."

- **Encourage the Heart:** Transformational change requires a commitment to take on the challenge of doing things differently. Great leaders recognize the need to encourage the commitment to change as barriers to change may seem overwhelming. In this area, respondents demonstrated strong alignment between expectations of support and levels of support, as 18 team members rated level of support for verbally encouraging me personally in this work as a little more to much more and 17 rated a little more to much more in importance.

"My Extension director's support verbally and financially to host dialogues across the state" has positively impacted training. "Greater awareness has prompted greater interest."

Administrative support that:

- *Models the way,*

- *Inspires and enables others to act,*

- *Challenges the status quo, and*

- *Encourages the heart*

can lead to real and meaningful change in creating more equitable and welcoming systems.

Early results for this project indicate that this approach of implementing top-down initiatives coupled with a bottom-up engagement strategy shows promise in using dialog to address the everyday ways of thinking and doing and that shape policy and practice related to racial understanding and healing. For this approach to truly be effective, our work points to the importance of matching administrative leadership with expectations of support, particularly as it relates to actively communicating this work as priority. Institutional capacity building takes both resources and administrative support to effect real change.

Acknowledgements

References

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