

Florida Extension Agents' Perceived Level of Trust with Their County Extension Director



M. Benge¹, E. Cash²

Abstract

County Extension Directors (CEDs) act as the administrative leader of the county Extension office and implement their own educational program. County Extension agents act as the leader of their program area and corresponding community audience. Because of the autonomous nature of the agents' work, it is imperative that Extension agents trust their CEDs. The Trust in Leaders Scale (TLS) was created to measure person-based trust between leaders and followers through four constructs: competence, integrity, benevolence, and predictability. A census study was conducted by distributing the TLS to the UF/IFAS Extension agents that report to a CED. Results indicated perceived moderate levels of trust between agents and CEDs, and demographic variables did not impact whether agents trusted their CED. UF/IFAS Extension should seek to understand the impact of moderate trust between county Extension agents and their CED, as research show low trust typically leads to lower job satisfaction and higher employee turnover.

Keywords

Leadership, competence, integrity, benevolence, predictability

1. Matt Benge, Assistant Professor, University of Florida, 126B Bryant Hall Gainesville, FL 32611, mattbenge@ufl.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5358-3233>
2. Elisha Cash, Graduate Student, University of Florida, ecash@ufl.edu,  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0930-8322>

Introduction and Problem Statement

The Cooperative Extension Service provides practical education to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future (National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], 2021; Seevers et al., 1997). University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) County Extension Directors (CED) are Extension agents that have both programmatic and administrative responsibilities and serve a critical role as they are responsible for their individual Extension programming and are the leader for their local county Extension program (UF/IFAS Extension, 2022). CEDs coach, mentor, and serve in a supervisory capacity over the other Extension agents in their office, thus defining the relationship between a CED and Extension agent differently than relationships amongst other Extension agents. Trust has been identified as one of the necessary CED relationships and interpersonal leadership competencies through Extension literature (Benge & Harder, 2017; Bruce & Anderson, 2012; Cooper & Graham, 2001; Moore & Rudd, 2004; Sanders, 2014).

Within organizations, a climate in which employees feel trusted by their leader significantly influences follower work engagement, and that climate can be created through the trustworthy behaviors of the leader (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2010). Because Extension agents have a high level of autonomy in planning, implementing, and evaluating their programs, CEDs must delegate leadership and trust that the Extension mission will be accomplished (Franz & Townson, 2008). Trust between Extension agents and their CEDs has not been studied in the specific context of Cooperative Extension, and therefore it is unknown whether CEDs are perceived to be trustworthy by Extension agents.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Trust is defined as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the outcomes of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (Mayer et al., 1995, p. 712). Schoorman et al. (2007) explain that when someone seeks to trust another person or group, that person is being vulnerable, opening themselves to risk, and giving up control. Though trust does not define a relationship between two or more individuals (Schoorman et al., 2007), trust does have an impact on that relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Trustworthiness was identified by Sanders (2014) as an important leadership competency for CEDs to possess. In fact, trust was identified as a top five CED leadership competency by county administrators and a top seven competency by other county extension directors (Sanders, 2014). Benge (2015) is the only known study of trust within Extension, which found that agents reported moderate levels of trust regarding their CED. Because the nature of the relationship between an Extension agent and their CED is personal, we chose to use the Trust in Leaders Scale (TLS) which is derived from person-based trust approach and theory (Adams et al., 2008). The TLS is a person-based trust instrument that seeks to capture the essence of trust between a leader and their follower using four trust concepts, or antecedents:

- **Competence:** The extent to which the person exhibits a group of skills, competencies and characteristics that allow them to have influence in some domain.
- **Integrity:** The extent to which the person is seen as honorable, and their words match their actions.
- **Benevolence:** The extent to which the person is seen to be genuinely caring and concerned.
- **Predictability:** The extent to which the person's behavior is consistent.

We chose the TLS for our study because the trust relationship between CEDs and Extension agents involve a high amount of interaction and direct contact. Additionally, CEDs and Extension agents have shared experience and history, making the TLS and ideal instrument to measure trust within Florida. This is the first time the TLS has been used in an Extension context.

Purpose

The purpose of our study was to examine the perceptions of trust antecedents between UF/IFAS Extension agents and CEDs. Our research objectives were to:

1. Describe the level of trust between UF/IFAS Extension agents and CEDs.
2. Determine if significant differences existed among trust antecedents and participant characteristics.
3. Determine if significant relationships existed among trust antecedents and participant characteristics.

Methods

We obtained approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board prior to conducting our study. Our quantitative study utilized survey methods (Dillman et al., 2009) to examine the perceptions of trust antecedents between UF/IFAS Extension agents and CEDs. The population of interest for our study was county Extension agents who were not a CED, Regional Specialized Agent (RSA), or State Specialized Agent (SSA). We attained the list of UF/IFAS Extension agents ($N = 349$) from the UF/IFAS Extension Business Services Office. After we removed CEDs, RSAs, and SSAs from the list, our target population consisted of 246 Extension agents.

We used the TLS which consisted of 20 items and yields high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .97 (Cronbach, 1951). The TLS items were measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale: 1 = *Completely disagree*, 2 = *Very much disagree*, 3 = *Somewhat disagree*, 4 = *Neither agree or disagree*, 5 = *Somewhat agree*, 6 = *Very much agree*, and 7 = *Completely agree*. The TLS does not provide an interpretation of the mean, so we created a mean interpretation as follows: 1.0 – 2.5 = *Very low*, 2.6 – 4.0 = *Low*, 4.1 – 5.5 = *Moderate*, 5.6 – 7.0 = *High*. We also added six demographic questions, including year of Extension experience, number of years worked with their CED, gender, their CED's gender, Extension district, and if their county was rural or urban. We used an expert panel and reliability measures to ensure internal consistency (Ary et al.,

2006; Shavelson, 1996). The five-member expert panel that reviewed the survey included the three researchers, one Extension agent, and one CED. We measured the Cronbach's alpha coefficient to ensure the TLS antecedents maintained internal consistency and mirrored the TLS alpha levels (see Table 1).

Table 1

Reliability Levels of Trust in Leaders Scale (TLS) Antecedents

TLS antecedent	TLS Alpha Levels	Study Alpha Levels
Competence	.95	.98
Integrity	.89	.96
Benevolence	.94	.96
Predictability	.90	.92

Note. Reliability levels $\geq .80$ considered acceptable (Cronbach, 1951).

We used Qualtrics to format and deliver our online questionnaire due to its advantages, such as ease in distribution, anonymity, low cost, and access to both the researchers and participants (Ary et al., 2006; Dillman et al., 2009). Because our target population was small, we used a census sampling procedure to gather as much data as possible (Ary et al., 2006). We used the Tailored Design Method (TDM) by Dillman et al. (2009), which yields high response rates, reduces sampling error, develops trust with the respondents, and allows the researcher to follow scientifically founded survey procedures. In January 2021, we sent a pre-notice letter to all Extension agents regarding the study one week prior, an invitation email, and three follow-up emails. There were 107 Extension agents who completed the survey, which yielded a response rate of 44%.

We used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data (Ary et al., 2006; Shavelson, 1996). We used the Pearson r correlation coefficient to examine the strength of association and direction between trust antecedents and participant demographic characteristics (Shavelson, 1996). A value of $r = +.70$ or higher indicates a very strong association, $+.50$ to $+.69$ signifies a substantial positive association, $+.30$ to $+.49$ is a moderate positive association, $+.10$ to $+.29$ suggests a low positive association, $+.01$ to $+.09$ implies a negligible positive association, and a $.00$ r means no association exists (Shavelson, 1996).

There were three limitations of our study. First, respondents may have misinterpreted the questions, which would decrease the validity of our results. Second, respondents may not have been honest when answering the survey, perhaps out of fear or reporting poor performance. We addressed this limitation by informing the respondents the study was anonymous and all data collected was secure. The third limitation is the low response rate of our study. To address this limitation, Lindner et al. (2001) and Sivo et al., (2006) recommend comparing early to late respondents to minimize nonresponse error. We did not identify any significant differences between early and late respondents when testing against all of the demographic variables of our study.

Findings

Objective One Results

The first objective was to describe the level of trust between UF/IFAS Extension agents and CEDs (see Table 2). Participants tended to moderately trust their CED across all four trust antecedents. Benevolence was the trust antecedent with the highest reported mean ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.55$), followed by integrity ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.52$), competence ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.47$), and predictability ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.21$). The three individual trust items with the highest means were “I believe my CED is honest” ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.65$), “my CED is genuinely concerned about my well-being” ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.73$), and “my CED has my best interests in mind” ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.62$). The three individual items with the lowest means were “I know exactly what my CED will do in difficult situations” ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.36$), “I can anticipate what my CED will do” ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.22$), and “my CED puts their words into action” ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.67$).

Table 2

Index Means and Standard Deviations of UF/IFAS Extension Agents' level of perceived trust with their CED

Perceived trust with their CED	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Benevolence	5.23	1.55	107
Integrity	5.21	1.52	107
Competence	5.19	1.47	107
Predictability	5.02	1.21	107

Extension agents reported competence as the lowest reported trust antecedent regarding number of years as an Extension agent and their gender (see Table 3). Extension agents that have been on the job between 11-15 years reported the highest levels for all four trust antecedents of trust among others' length of years on the job. Regarding gender, female Extension agents reported higher levels of benevolence ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.53$), integrity ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.48$), competence ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.17$), and predictability ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.45$) than their male colleagues.

Table 3*Index Means and Standard Deviations of Demographic Characteristics Related to Respondents and the TLS Antecedents*

Demographic characteristics of respondents	Benevolence		Integrity		Competence		Predictability	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Years as an Extension agent								
0–5 years (<i>n</i> = 39)	5.19	1.68	5.15	1.69	5.08	1.33	5.20	1.67
6–10 years (<i>n</i> = 25)	5.08	1.58	5.04	1.51	4.89	1.02	4.96	1.53
11–15 years (<i>n</i> = 20)	5.54	1.10	5.43	1.09	5.13	0.96	5.43	1.12
More than 15 years (<i>n</i> = 22)	5.27	1.68	5.37	1.56	4.98	1.40	5.25	1.38
Gender								
Male (<i>n</i> = 26)	5.10	1.60	5.22	1.59	4.90	1.35	5.14	1.53
Female (<i>n</i> = 78)	5.33	1.53	5.25	1.48	5.07	1.17	5.25	1.45

Extension agents reported competence as the lowest report trust antecedent regarding the length of their working relationship with their CED and their CED's gender (see Table 4).

Regarding their CED's gender, Extension agents had higher levels of benevolence ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.73$), integrity ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.61$), competence ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.35$), and predictability ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.60$) if their CED was female.

Table 4*Index Means and Standard Deviations of CED Demographic Characteristics of Respondents and the TLS Antecedents*

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents	Benevolence		Integrity		Competence		Predictability	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Years working relationship between CED and agent								
0–5 years (<i>n</i> = 73)	5.21	1.62	5.21	1.58	5.02	1.19	5.14	1.53
6–10 years (<i>n</i> = 19)	5.54	1.22	5.41	1.29	5.22	1.08	5.47	1.25
11–15 years (<i>n</i> = 8)	4.70	1.50	4.65	1.28	4.60	1.10	4.75	1.48
More than 15 years (<i>n</i> = 6)	5.53	1.80	5.56	1.63	5.03	1.90	5.56	1.47
CED's gender								
Male (<i>n</i> = 53)	5.27	1.35	5.20	1.39	4.95	1.07	5.20	1.34
Female (<i>n</i> = 51)	5.27	1.73	5.29	1.61	5.12	1.35	5.24	1.60

Extension agents in the northeast Extension district reported higher trust levels regarding benevolence ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.44$), integrity ($M = 5.48$, $SD = 1.33$), competence ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.15$), and predictability ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.38$) than agents from other Extension districts (see Table 5). Extension agents serving rural counties reported higher trust levels regarding benevolence ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.41$), integrity ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.36$), competence ($M = 5.16$, $SD =$

1.23), and predictability ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.32$), followed by mixed and urban counties, respectively.

Table 5

Index Means and Standard Deviations of Demographic Characteristics Related to Respondents' Location and the TLS Antecedents

Demographic characteristics of respondents	Benevolence		Integrity		Competence		Predictability	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Extension district								
Northwest ($n = 19$)	5.22	1.41	5.24	1.38	5.14	.98	5.29	1.18
Northeast ($n = 21$)	5.56	1.44	5.48	1.33	5.25	1.15	5.49	1.38
Central ($n = 27$)	5.41	1.48	5.34	1.54	5.03	1.37	5.47	1.37
Southeast ($n = 20$)	5.07	1.59	5.07	1.59	5.13	1.01	4.71	1.81
Southwest ($n = 16$)	5.26	1.67	5.27	1.46	4.60	1.44	5.20	1.39
Rural or urban county								
Rural ($n = 30$)	5.52	1.41	5.57	1.36	5.16	1.23	5.52	1.32
Urban ($n = 43$)	5.17	1.50	5.09	1.42	4.96	1.12	5.08	1.42
Mix ($n = 30$)	5.28	1.66	5.25	1.65	5.01	1.37	5.22	1.60

Objective Two Results

Our second objective was to determine if significant differences existed between trust antecedents and participant characteristics. There were no statistically significant differences between the trust antecedents and participants' demographic characteristics.

Objective Three Results

Our third objectives sought to determine if significant relationships existed between trust antecedents and participant characteristics (see Table 6). All four trust antecedents had a very strong association with each other; however, none of the antecedents were correlated with any of the participant demographics.

Table 6*Correlations Matrix between Trust Antecedents and Participant Demographic Characteristics*

Trust antecedents and participant demographic characteristics	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Benevolence	-	.94*	.79*	.88*	.07	.01	.06	-.01	-.04	-.06
2. Integrity		-	.79*	.89*	.09	.01	.10	.03	-.03	-.08
3. Predictability			-	.80*	.01	-.03	.06	.07	-.12	-.04
4. Competence				-	.07	.03	.03	.01	-.09	-.07
5. Years worked in Extension					-	.49*	-.04	-.22*	.07	.05
6. Years working relationship						-	.03	-.01	.09	.00
7. Gender							-	-.01	-.01	.00
8. CED' gender								-	.18	-.05
9. Extension district									-	.22*
10. Urban or rural county										-

* $p < 0.05$

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Extension agents reported moderate levels of trust with their CEDs amongst the trust antecedents of benevolence, integrity, predictability, and competence. This study's results mirror that of Benge (2015) that found moderate levels of trust using a different trust inventory. The first potential reason for moderate trust in this study is the nature of the relationship between CED and agent may not require a high level of trust. Though CEDs and agents have person-based trust due to high interactions and direct contact (Kramer, 1996), they are also colleagues to one another, (UF/IFAS, 2022) potentially affecting the dynamic of the relationship and inevitably changing the trust needs between the CED and agent.

The second potential reason for moderate trust could be related to low-quality relationships between Extension agents and CEDs. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) explain low-quality relationships will have low trust between followers and leaders, whereas high-quality relationship yields high trust. Benge and Harder (2017), which is the only strength of relationship study in the Extension literature, found that only 60 percent UF/IFAS Extension agents perceived they had a quality relationship with their CED. Also, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) explain that all new relationships start with low-quality interactions and low trust. If UF/IFAS Extension has a high amount of agent turnover and refills those positions, the relationships between the new Extension agents and CEDs would automatically begin in the

stranger phase of leadership, which is accompanied by low trust. If the same is true of the current study's participants, this might account for the moderate levels of trust.

A third potential reason for moderate trust could be that Extension agents perceive their CED not trusting them to do their job. Katz (1955) explained that CEDs as the "top managers" need to use their human and conceptual skills when interacting with their followers and trust the agent's technical skills to do their job. CEDs may need additional training if they are managing and supervising Extension agents to ensure they are using appropriate skillsets in their role (Sanders, 2014). Additionally, there is an absence within the trust and leadership literature that explains how much trust followers should have with their leaders within an organization, which makes it difficult to determine if moderate trust levels are standard within organizations.

Unintended outcomes of the study were that female Extension agents and rural Extension agents perceived themselves trusting their CED more than male Extension agents and urban Extension agents. Though agent gender and location did not demonstrate significant differences when analyzing the data, it is noteworthy and could shed light on future research and training opportunities.

Regarding recommendations for research, a more thorough examination is needed to understand how trust forms and exists between UF/IFAS Extension agents and CEDs. Other state Extension systems could employ the TLS to explore if their own system has the same or varying levels of trust and to understand if moderate levels of trust in Extension are the norm when compared to this study's context of UF/IFAS Extension.

Regarding recommendations for practice and application, working towards an environment where agents and CEDs experience high trust should be a priority for UF/IFAS Extension, as such environments support follower's organizational vision and engagement and ability to accomplish goals (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Winston, 2003; Wong et al., 2010). UF/IFAS Extension administration could include a trust measure during the screening and hiring process to ensure potential CED hires have the appropriate leadership skillset needed to lead others upon entering the job. Organizations that employ leadership education see improved situational approaches to leader/follower interactions, skilled leader mentors (Amagoh, 2009), and competency-based leader behavior change (Sowcik et al., 2018). Therefore, leadership development specialists should be encouraged to provide leadership education (Ricketts et al., 2012) to both new and seasoned CEDs to ensure a culture of trust is being developed within their Extension organization.

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