



Center for  
Creative  
Leadership®

# Golden LEAF Scholars Leadership Program

*Lessons of Experience from Rural Leaders in North Carolina*



Golden LEAF  
FOUNDATION 



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# Lessons of Experience from Rural Leaders in North Carolina

1

Becoming a Rural Leader

2

Growing as a Rural Leader

3

Succeeding as a Rural Leader

## The Research Study

In summer 2017, the Year 3 Golden LEAF Leadership Scholars interviewed rural leaders from their home communities as part of their summer projects. These interviews were modeled after the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL) original Lessons of Experience research (McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). A small team of Golden LEAF Scholars and researchers from CCL worked together to analyze the data in response to three research questions:

1. How do you become a rural leader?
2. How do you grow as a rural leader?
3. How do you succeed as a rural leader?

Please see Appendix for more information about the rural leaders included in this research.



# Becoming a Rural Leader

Our first goal to understanding rural leadership was to examine the ways that individuals become rural leaders. We found three main factors that influence pathways to rural leadership: **education, mobility, and family and community ties.**

**Education:** Rural leaders used lessons learned in school and educational attainment to find better opportunities and positions of more influence in their communities.

*"I was going for my bachelors. I was the only one working at that time. I have a wife at home with two kids. I just made the decision to go back to school to pursue a degree to better ourselves financially."*

**Education: 9.8%**

*"Networking is so key every place. You need to be able to have people around you that you can learn from. Sometimes you have to learn to adjust for size and take help from others."*

**Family and Community: 50.0%**

**Family and Community:** Our research suggests that having strong working knowledge of the often-implicit values of the community, which are usually passed down through community relationships, is important for becoming a rural leader. Rural leaders use community and family ties to effectively procure jobs and opportunities. Additionally, ties to family and land, as well as commitment to the community, often influence the decision to live in rural NC.



**Mobility: 40.2%**

*"When my job went overseas... I was laid off for the third time in my life, and I had to make a decision to work for myself. "*

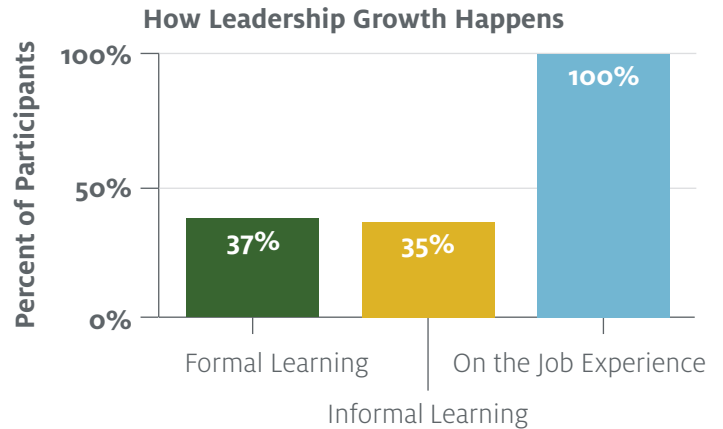
**Mobility:** While rural leaders often experience a blend of intramobility (promotion within an organization) and intermobility (promotion through external networks), most rural leaders have utilized intermobility to rise to prominence in the community, as industries have greatly changed in rural NC over previous decades, forcing many individuals to adapt and grow.



# Growing as a Rural Leader

## Rural leaders grow by learning from experience.

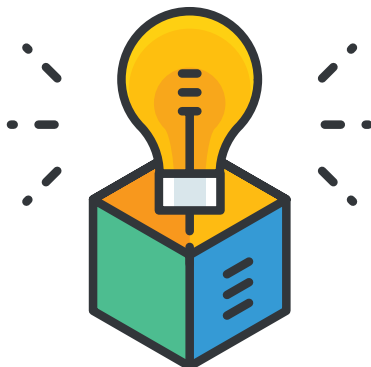
All respondents cited on the job experiences as key to their continued leadership learning, while about a third of respondents said that either formal learning (university courses or classroom style professional development) or informal learning (seminars, workshops, etc.) were formative to their growth as a rural leader\*.



**MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED FROM ON-THE-JOB EXPERIENCE:**  
 (1) JOB-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE; (2) HOW TO DEAL WITH ADVERSITY AND CONFLICT; (3) PERSEVERENCE; (4) DEVELOPING OTHERS (MENTORSHIP)

**What are the most frequently cited challenges to leading in a rural community?**

Of these on-the-job experiences, **the majority of participants (65%) described that their key learnings came from challenges and failures rather than successes (15%).**



**67%** Responding to forces outside of the leader's control (e.g., lack of resources)

**55%** Managing conflict (e.g., tensions with colleagues that go unaddressed)

**47%** Difficulties with supervisor (e.g, a lack of alignment between an employee and boss)

**43%** Managing day-to-day job responsibilities (e.g., too many priorities for one individual to accomplish)

**43%** Lack of support from boss or colleagues (e.g., a perceived lack of trust and other means of social support)

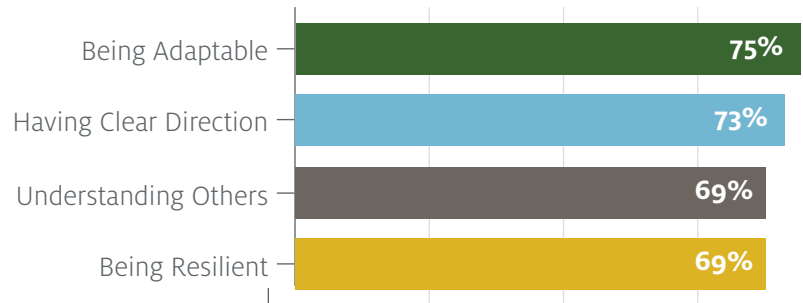


# Succeeding as a Rural Leader

## What makes a rural leader successful?

We asked current successful rural leaders about the qualities that help rural leaders influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of their organization or group. Success was defined as being able to create positive change, that is sustainable, and has benefited communities or groups of people.

Most Important Qualities for Successful Rural Leadership



### Being Adaptable - Flexible, yet stable and in control

*"I was expecting about 50 people and only 20 showed up. Also, my keynote speaker did not show up... I had done a lot of planning to showcase my work. I wanted to cancel the event on the spot. However, I did away with that mindset and it honestly became one of the best events of my career."*

### Having Clear Direction - Leader clearly communicates values, vision, and priorities

*"Always do things in writing and have contracts. Do very good interviews with people. Be very clear from the start about the way things should and should not be."*

### Having Resilience - Being resilient at challenges, pushing through difficult times

*"I know managers who have been fired three times and had successful careers. It was still a humbling experience... You have to keep going though the good and bad."*

### Understanding Others - Hearing opinions and being patient with other's views

*"I learned that everybody is different... I had to realize that everyone is not the same and you cannot put everybody into one box and expect them to operate the way you think they should operate. So, just learning differences even between the ways that people process things."*

## WHAT NOT TO DO: LESSONS FROM INEFFECTIVE LEADERS

1

### Being Negative

Having a negative attitude

2

### Being Intimidating

Using power or position to get your way

3

### Having Biased and/or Selfish Motivations

Acting without understanding or without thinking of the good of the group

4

### Micromanaging

Controlling all parts of a task

5

### Unwilling to Change

Stuck in a certain way, arrogant or over-confident and unwilling to admit you are wrong or need help

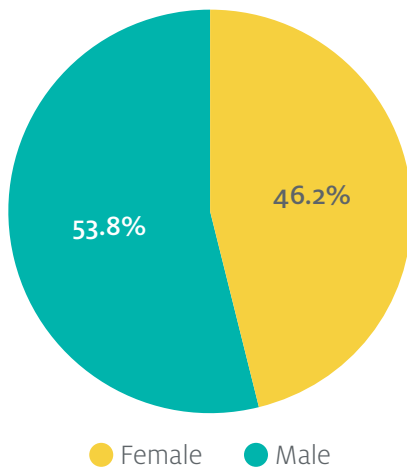


# Appendix

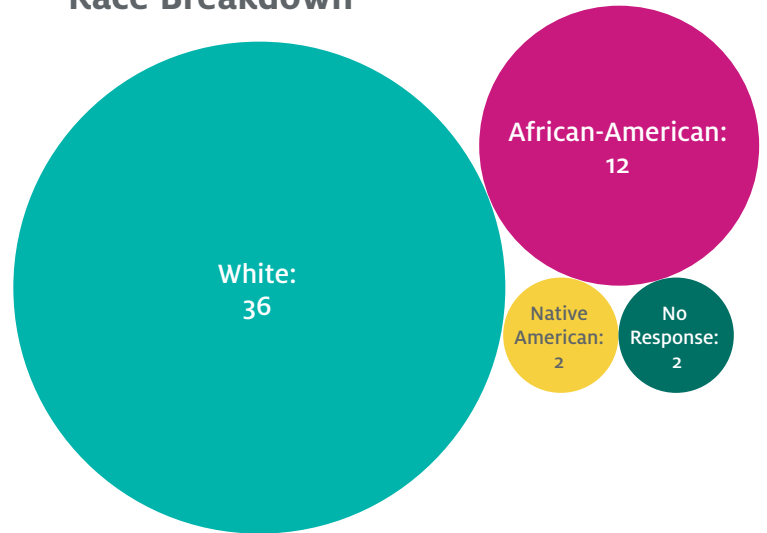
## Participant Descriptives

There were 51 interviews conducted with leaders in rural, economically distressed, tobacco-dependent counties. One interview was conducted with two individuals simultaneously, giving a total of 52 leaders interviewed.

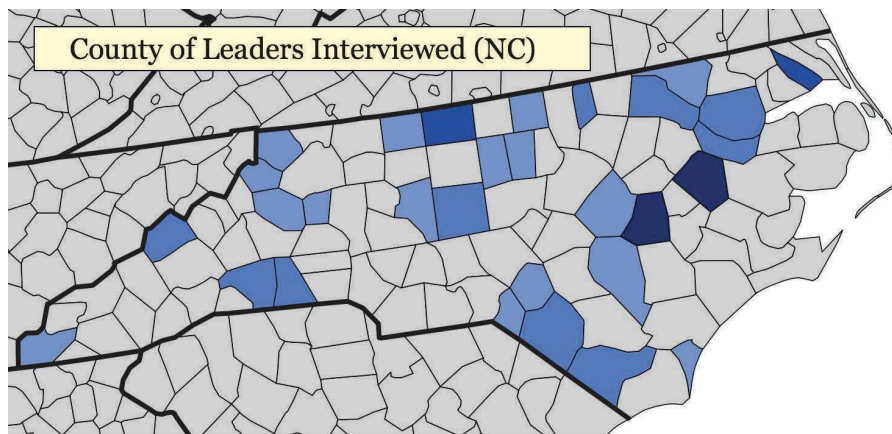
### Gender Breakdown



### Race Breakdown



### County Breakdown



Location of rural leaders interviewed in this study. The darker the county, the more leaders. There were no more than 5 respondents from any county.

### Learn More

Interested in learning more about the Golden LEAF Scholars Leadership Program?  
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