

# Utilizing a Four Frame Approach to Provide Best Practices in FFA Programs<sup>1</sup>

Savannah J. Scott, Matthew Sowcik, and Debra M. Barry<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The National FFA Organization was started nearly a century ago by a group of young farmers to prepare future generations to feed the population (National FFA Organization, 2024a). Since the early days of the FFA, the focus of the organization has shifted. Today, the National FFA Organization focuses on premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education (National FFA Organization, 2024a). Additionally, the National FFA Organization (2024b) has shared that there are over one million student members in the United States and U.S. territories within the organization. That population has grown significantly over the last century.

FFA is one component of the three-circle model that represents the aspects of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) (National FFA Organization, 2024d). There is a wide variety from school to school, state to state, and region to region in ways students engage with the FFA program based on the activities offered and the interest of the students. Understanding what motivates students to enroll in an agricultural education pathway could influence what local FFA chapters integrate into their SBAE programs. Including these aspects could increase student engagement.

Organizational leadership frameworks have the potential to benefit many organizations by helping define what task or ideas will spark engagement or improvement. Bolman and Deal's (2021) leadership framework includes four components to assess when improving an organization. The four frames in Bolman and Deal's framework are structural, human resources, political, and symbolic (Bolman & Deal, 2021). Understanding Bolman and Deal's (2021) frames and ways to engage students at all levels throughout the National FFA Organization and high school agricultural education could benefit student involvement.

## Structural Frame

When examining student involvement in the classroom and FFA through Bolman and Deal's (2021) structural frame, it helps to ensure that organizations are running efficiently and have higher engagement. The structural

frame focuses on roles and responsibilities within an organization. Clearly defining students' roles, setting expectations for students' responsibilities, and creating standard schedules can have a positive impact and ensure all students are collaborating with others.

- **Clearly defining possible student roles and responsibilities:** Parks and Dyer (2005) shared that students involved in a leadership role tend to have higher self-efficacy and have the opportunity to develop skills that will prepare them for their futures. Having clearly defined options for roles and responsibilities benefits those students' leadership and collaboration skills. Rose et al. (2016) noted that students who participate in career development events (CDEs) or hold leadership roles (e.g., an officer role, a committee member role, or a team member role) have a deeper appreciation of what it takes to complete a task. Competing in contests and attending conventions that are open to all can facilitate a sense of engagement, belonging, and responsibility among participating students.
- **Meeting times:** Scheduling FFA meetings can be difficult, especially with students' schedules that might involve sports, work, or other obligations. Phelps et al. (2012) found that many students lack engagement due to scheduling issues. A survey of which days and times work best for chapter members could assist in more student involvement and collaboration in monthly meetings or in creating practice schedules for CDEs or LDEs (leadership development event). Additionally, scheduling regular meetings that occur on the same day each month could increase engagement and assist in member retention.

## Human Resources Frame

To examine how to increase student involvement in FFA, the human resources frame from Bolman and Deal (2021) can be applied. The human resources frame focuses on the needs and well-being of those within an organization. SBAE has many resources available to students through engagement at the chapter level. A safe space for students

is needed. This space should motivate and engage students and allow them to provide feedback.

- **Student motivation:** Reis and Kahler (1997) noted that student engagement in contests and school activities increases student satisfaction and motivation. Providing more opportunities for students to participate can increase student motivation through engagement. Having higher student motivation increases the outcome and success of the overall local FFA program (Phelps et al., 2012). One way to address students' motivation within engagement is to share student recognition with the local school and community. Recognizing all students who engage is important.
- **Training on goal setting:** Setting goals is a major component of SBAE. Teachers have a huge impact on students' ability to set goals and can encourage future academic and career aspirations (Sanok et al., 2018; Irlbeck et al., 2014). Students create goals not only in the classroom, but also through their involvement in supervised agricultural experiences (SAE) and FFA. Goal setting can be incorporated into lesson plans, SAEs, or FFA competitions. Through these activities, students can develop goals they want to accomplish throughout their experiences or contests. Officer goal setting for the whole chapter is another helpful exercise. Examples of officer goals could be to recruit 20 new members, increase member attendance at leadership conferences, or recruit more members to engage in a CDE or LDE.

## Political Frame

Applying Bolman and Deal's (2021) political frame can help identify where local FFA programs could improve. The political frame focuses on power and resources within an organization. The political frame can be affected by many factors, including board members and alumni. The following ideas serve as suggestions for agriculture educators when addressing the political frame within local FFA chapters.

- **Power and influence:** The National FFA Organization has power and influence, whether at the local, state, or national level. The agricultural educator and the advisor within the FFA chapter impact and influence all decisions and events that occur in a chapter. Each local FFA program has a group of chapter officers who also hold power. Student leaders, such as officers, make a huge impact on how the local chapter operates (Mills et al., 2023). Family members, agricultural teachers, school leaders and teachers, community, past FFA members, FFA activities, and the agricultural program were identified as key factors that influence students to obtain leadership roles and to participate within local FFA chapters (Ricketts et al., 2004; Talbert & Balschweid, 2004). According to Ricketts et

al. (2004), motivational needs such as power, achievement, and affiliation influence the behaviors of individuals within FFA. Local FFA chapters are strongly influenced by people within the community and local alumni (National FFA Organization, 2025). One example of influence from the community is an officer selection committee. This committee can look different depending on the school and program. Selection committees review applications, interview individuals, and make their recommendations for who should serve (Mills et al., 2023).

- **Coalitions and alliances:** Local FFA alumni chapters help to support, promote, and influence the local chapter needs (National FFA Organization, 2025). Sanok et al. (2018) noted that intentions play a role in how active past FFA members and chapter advisors are in their alumni chapters. Alumni chapters often help to fund events, trips, and materials for local chapters and provide feedback (Sheehan et al., 2023). Alumni, community professionals, and stakeholders can identify what skills are needed for students to enter the agricultural workforce (Norris, 2021). A successful alumni chapter could positively influence local chapters by including community members, industry stakeholders, and past FFA members. These stakeholders can help through funding, resources, and time. A local organization of alumni and supporters could assist in training and coaching, providing resources such as farm animals for livestock judging, or even supporting the needs of the agricultural educator for expertise and relevant experience.

## Symbolic Frame

Bolman and Deal (2021) noted that the symbolic frame of organizations focuses on rituals, stories, values, missions, and cultural norms. SBAE has many widely recognized forms of symbolic components and symbols. The following ideas address ways to ensure the symbolic frame is seen and utilized when aiming to understand student engagement in agriculture education and FFA.

- **Organizational culture:** Building a classroom and FFA culture around celebrating the small wins, motivating students, offering opportunities to all students, and recognizing student involvement is what encourages students to be engaged (Israel & Hoover, 1996). The cultures of the classroom and FFA chapter shape how they will run and how the members will interact (Martin & Kitchel, 2014). The Association for Talent Development (n.d.) identifies organizational culture as a group with shared values, beliefs, practices, and behaviors that contribute to the environment. The culture of an organization impacts its longevity, effectiveness, capacity, and collaboration of those involved (Jacobsen et al., 2024). Martin and Kitchel (2014) noted that students add value to their

daily lives by participating in and engaging at FFA events. Encouraging students to become more engaged could influence the organizational culture by creating a sense of shared experience, belonging, friendships, and connection (Phelps et al., 2012). The educator/advisor should be encouraging all students to attend events and compete in contests to ensure students are getting the most from their involvement in SBAE and FFA. It can be easy to rely on student officers, but when you open experiences to all students, officers or not, the relationships between students thrive.

- **Ethics, integrity, and values:** To ensure local chapter members remain fair and ethical, set rules and guidelines for participating in any competition. Additionally, promote the FFA Code of Ethics and incorporate values into daily lesson planning. The National FFA Code of Ethics aligns well with classroom values. The FFA Code of Ethics encourages students to be respectful, courteous, communicative, honest, and generous, and to demonstrate good sportsmanship (National FFA Organization, 2023). The values that agricultural teachers view as important are honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and courtesy (Mounce & Terry, 2001). To lead by example and instill those values in FFA members, teachers need to practice the values every day in the classroom, during contests, while communicating with fellow teachers and other agricultural educators, and anytime students are present or nearby.

## Conclusion

Bolman and Deal (2021) share insight on ways to improve an organization through four leadership frames: structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. The National FFA Organization has used these frames but also has many other opportunities to embed the frames. Having an FFA chapter that establishes a sense of belonging and supports the involvement of all students can be a catalyst for increasing engagement in an agriculture program and FFA chapter. Student leaders and educators should always be encouraged to keep the students at the center. It can be complex to incorporate the four frames into an FFA chapter when there are already norms in place from previous years, advisors, and officers. Challenging students and/or new teachers to find ways to improve a chapter could benefit the organization, its current and future students, and the longevity of teachers in the classroom. Teachers and FFA members should determine what works best for everyone in the SBAE classroom and FFA, so that in the long term, more students will engage and benefit.

## References

Association for Talent Development. (n.d.). What is organizational culture?  
<https://www.td.org/talent-development-glossary-terms/what-is-organizational-culture>

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2021). *Reframing organizations (7<sup>th</sup> edition)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Irlbeck, E., Adams, S., Akers, C., Burris, S., & Jones, S. (2014). First generation college students: Motivations and support systems. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 55*(2), 154–166.  
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.02154>
- Israel, G. D., & Hoover, T. S. (1996). Expanding opportunities for FFA chapter recognition: A model for community needs assessment. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 37*(3), 1–8.  
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.1996.03001>
- Jacobsen, T. A., Bush, S. A., Connors, J., & Cletzer, D. A. (2024). What norms do team-based leadership development event teams use to create a culture of success? *Journal of Agricultural Education, 65*(1), 78–98.  
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v65i1.97>
- Martin, M. J., & Kitchel, T. (2014). Urban FFA members' sense of the organizational culture of the FFA. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 55*(5), 173–190.  
<https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2014.05173>
- Mills, M. D., Anderson, R., & Paulsen, T. H. (2023). Are selection processes allowing talent diverse members advance through the leadership ranks of FFA? *CTE Journal, 11*(2).  
[https://www.thectejournal.com/uploads/1/0/6/8/10686931/mills\\_fall\\_2023.pdf](https://www.thectejournal.com/uploads/1/0/6/8/10686931/mills_fall_2023.pdf)
- Mounce, A. R., & Terry, R., Jr. (2001). Students' perceptions of unethical practices in FFA competitions. *Journal of Southern Agricultural Education Research, 51*(1), 33–49.
- National FFA Organization. (2023). *Student handbook — 17<sup>th</sup> edition*.  
<https://ffa.app.box.com/s/s1k3vnpwivxlpf07u6bfxrrotgcep8c5>
- National FFA Organization. (2024a). About us.  
<https://www.ffa.org/about/>
- National FFA Organization. (2024b). Our membership.  
<https://www.ffa.org/our-membership/>
- National FFA Organization. (2024c). FFA mission and motto. <https://www.ffa.org/about/who-we-are/mission-motto/>
- National FFA Organization (2024d). Agricultural education. <https://www.ffa.org/agricultural-education/>

- National FFA Organization. (2025). FFA alumni and supporters: Join. <https://www.ffa.org/alumni-and-supporters/join-alumni/>
- Norris, S. (2021). Leadership from ourselves and respect from others: Refining interpersonal skills and social emotional learning through FFA. *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, 94(2), 15–18. <https://www.naae.org/naae/document-server/?cfp=/naae/assets/file/public/magazine/volume94/2021%2009%20--%20september%20october.pdf>
- Park, T. D., & Dyer, J. E. (2005). Contributions of agricultural education, FFA, and 4-H to student leadership in agricultural colleges. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 46(2), 83–95. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2005.02083>
- Phelps, K., Henry, A. L., & Bird, W. A. (2012). Factors influencing or discouraging secondary school students' FFA participation. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 53(2), 70–86. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2012.02070>
- Reis, R., & Kahler, A. A. (1997). Factors influencing enrollment in agricultural education programs as expressed by Iowa secondary agricultural education students. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 38(2), 38–48. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.1997.02038>
- Ricketts, J. C., Osborne, E. W., & Rudd, R. D. (2004). Female leadership in rural Florida FFA chapters. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 45(1), 42–53. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2004.01042>
- Rose, C., Stephens, C. A., Stripling, C., Cross, T., Sanok, D. E., & Brawner, S. (2016). The benefits of FFA membership as part of agricultural education. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 57(2), 33–45. [www.doi.org/10.5032/jae.2016.02033](http://www.doi.org/10.5032/jae.2016.02033)
- Sanok, D. E.-M., Stripling, C. T., Stephens, C. A., & Griffith, A. P. (2018). Factors impacting former FFA members' decision to discontinue FFA after high school. *Journal of Research in Technical Careers*, 2(2), 26–35. <https://doi.org/10.9741/2578-2118.1037>
- Sheehan, C. Z., Rada, L. L., Greiman, B. C., & Livstrom, I. C. (2023). Benefits, barriers, and implementation strategies experienced by teachers adopting FFA affiliation membership: A case study. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 64(4). <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.v64i4.86>
- Talbert, B. A., & Balschweid, M. A. (2004). Engaging students in the agricultural education model: Factors affecting student participation in the National FFA Organization. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 45(1), 29–41. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2004.01029>

<sup>1</sup> This document is AEC846, a publication of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date March 2026. Visit the Ask IFAS website at <https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. © 2026 UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

<sup>2</sup> Savannah J. Scott, graduate student, UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Gainesville, FL; Matthew Sowcik, associate professor, leadership development, UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Gainesville, FL; Debra M. Barry, assistant professor, agricultural education, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center, Plant City, FL; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.