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LEADERSHIP AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS



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INTRODUCTION

Under the Training and Visit (T & V) extension system which is currently being used for extension delivery nationwide, the spheres and responsibilities of the core extension personnel are clearly specified at all levels. The core extension personnel comprises the Director of Extension (DOE), the Zonal Extension Officers (ZEOs), Subject Matter Specialists (SMSs), the Block Extension Supervisors (BESs), Block Extension Agents (BEAs) (WIA) and the Village Extension Agents (VEAs).

At headquarters, the DOE is responsible to the Programme Manager on matters of extension. Under the DOE are the ZEOs, with general responsibility for direction of the SMSs. The BESs assist in the organizational aspects of the work of the BEAs/VEAs. The BEAs/VEAs are responsible for the execution of field extension activities, working directly with the farmers. The responsibilities of all other extension staff is, therefore, ultimately to make the VEAs more effective in their work.

In essence, every extension worker, from the village extension agent to the top most person in the extension management hierarchy is a leader. It is obvious, however, that effective leadership requires that each worker understands some basic concepts and techniques of leaderships. This bulletin, discusses the basic concepts of leadership, leadership and extension management, the essentials of leadership roles, leadership styles, conflict management strategies and tips to effective leadership in agricultural extension.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

There are as many definitions of the concept leadership as there are definers. Others define leadership as an activity of influencing people to co-operate towards some goal which they find desirable. Similarly leadership can be considered as a relationship between an individual and a group, built around some common interest and behaviour as directed or

determined by the leader. A more recent definition of the concept, sees leadership as: a process by which one person attempts to influence the behaviour of another (or a group) with the expressed purpose of achieving a goal (or goals). However, a leader, as it should be viewed in the context of this bulletin, is one who influences or attempts to influence the behaviour of an individual or a group of people to cooperate toward some goals which they, that is the people, have found desirable.

LEADERSHIP AND EXTENSION MANAGEMENT

The demands of extension work necessarily imposes leadership status on the extension worker. The spheres and ramifications of leadership role expectations, however, differ depending on the position, task specifications and the type of group the extension worker deals with, in or outside the extension organization. Thus, while a VEA is expected to play leadership role among his clientele i.e. the farmers, a Zonal Extension Officer (ZEO) or the head of women in Agriculture (WIA) is essentially a manager and leader of extension workers under him/her within the extension organization.

There is the general belief that the effectiveness of job performance in any organization depends largely on how such organizations are structured and managed. Often, failures or poor performance of public institutions like the Extension Organization in Nigeria is blamed on inefficient administration and management. Skills or dimensions commonly ascribed to “organizational behaviour” are motivation, leadership, communication, conflict management, delegation, decision-making and team building. What this may imply is that an organization is likely to function efficiently if the principles and practices of leadership, motivation, decision-making, conflict management, delegation and team building are properly applied in its day-to-day functioning.

THE ESSENTIALS OF LEADERSHIP ROLE

There are some essentials and inherent facts or pre-requisite a person must possess before he can perform leadership role in a group. Three of these are:

- i. ability to influence others;
- ii. the leader must be a member of the group, and
- iii. a common goal must exist at the point of influence.

LEADERSHIP STYLES

Different people will have different attitudes to different things and situation. The same is true of leadership. This different attitude or perception in exercising leadership function is termed styles of leadership. The generally recognized styles of leadership are autocratic, democratic and laizes-faire.

Autocratic leadership:

The autocratic leader centralizes power and decision-making around himself. He structures the work situation and expects subordinates to do what they are told . The leader determines all policies, activities and goals of the group or organization. He takes no part in the work except when conducting meetings, telling others what to do. Members of the group led by an autocrat are usually uncertain about what to do and only act on what they are told to do. The major advantage of autocratic leadership is that decisions can be taken quickly, because only one person decides for the group. The major disadvantages are:

- i. dependency;
- ii. lack of initiative;
- iii. slow down of group activities, especially when the leader is not around, and
- iv. fear and conflict develop easily.

The Democratic Leadership

The democratic or participative leader is one in which the leader shares with the group members, policies decision making, planning and execution of activities. Subordinates are encouraged to express their ideas and suggestions in decision-making. The leader helps to develop a feeling of responsibility on the part of every member of the group gives constructive criticisms and praises the members when the group achieve a set objective. This type of leadership style is considered better for many reasons including:

- i. high productivity and quality of work;
- ii. high morale – both individual and as a group;
- iii. sense of group feeling, and
- iv. group members feel secured and satisfied to belong.

Other personal qualities of a democratic leader are:

- i. he gives clear instructions based on good decisions;
- ii. he sets good examples for his colleagues;
- iii. decides on facts and not hear-say;
- iv. he is a very active and careful planner;
- v. he keeps good records;
- vi. he is knowledgeable and takes good decisions;
- vii. he understands and appreciates each group members problems;
- viii. he is a good teacher and good communicator;
- ix. he is a leader and not a “boss”, and
- x. he is trustworthy and dependable.

The democratic leadership style seems to offer the best for achieving maximum results in agricultural extension. However, situation may arise when a leader may need to apply different leadership styles.

The Laizer-faire leader

The laizer-faire leader is one who believes that the group members can get on without him. He gives minimum guidance, and remain in the background. He seems to have no confidence in himself. The results of this style of leadership if used dominantly, are:

- i. low moral and productivity;
- ii. too much freedom which cause laxity;
- iii. group members have complete freedom, become restless, and lack incentives to work, and
- iv. chaos and breakdown of law and order becomes common.

Generally, no particular style of leadership is considered as the best. Most successful leaders are those who carefully adjust to situations and apply a wide range of interpersonal skills and are able to unite and stimulate followers toward defined objectives in specific situations

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Interpersonal skills refer to the skills, ability and/or intricacies involved in successfully maintaining or managing a relationship (interacting) with other people. In general, leaders use three different types of skills namely: technical, human, and conceptual.

The technical skills

This is a person's knowledge and ability in any subject matter area; process or technique, e.g., the skill of an agronomist, the agricultural engineer, the veterinary doctor, etc.

The human skills

Is the ability to work effectively with people and to build team work. It is otherwise referred to as interpersonal skill. The technical skill deals with things, human skill concerns people, while the conceptual skill deals with ideas.

The conceptual skills

This is the ability to understand and utilize models, frameworks and broad relationships, such as formulating long range plans.

The technical and conceptual skills can be taught or acquired through systematic training or on the job experience, the interpersonal skill is somewhat more difficult to acquire through such broadly organized methods. The extension worker needs the application of interpersonal skills in team building for effective functioning of any group.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The day to day activities of the extension leader require routine and careful application of interpersonal skills. This is because the extension leader deals with people of different backgrounds, point of views, values, needs and personalities, and through the interaction of people of such diverse characteristics, a variety of conflicts (interpersonal and inter-group) often develop. Four basic strategies for resolution of interpersonal and inter-group conflicts have been identified. These are: avoidance, defusion, containment and confrontation.

Avoidance

Two basic approaches are used in “avoidance”. The first is to ignore the conflict because the matter is either trivial or a symptom of larger problems. The second circumstance for which avoidance strategy is appropriate is when decisive action is required or a consensus is unlikely.

Defusion

When a conflict situation is kept aside or its importance is played down, this strategy is described as “defusion”. The approach under this strategy is to divert attention from the conflict situation.

Containment

The third type of strategy is “containment”, in which the conflict situation is addressed by controlling the issues and the manner in which they are discussed by either bargaining or structuring the interaction.

Confrontation

When an attempt is made to integrate or reconcile the parties involved in conflict, the strategy is referred to as “confrontation”. The resolution under this method is to redesign the organization, particularly when the sources of conflict come from the co-ordination of work and when the work can be easily divided into clear and self contained work groups. These strategies are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Conflict Management Strategies.

Conflict Resolution Strategy	Type of Strategy	Appropriate Situation
Ignoring the conflict	Avoidance	When the issue is trivial When the issue is symptomatic of more basic pressing problems.
Imposing a solution	Avoidance	When quick, decisive action is needed. When unpopular decisions need to be made and consensus among the groups appears very unlikely.
Smoothing	Defusion	As stop-gap measure let people cool down and regain perspective. When the conflict is over non-work issues
Appealing to super-ordinate goal	Defusion	When there is a mutually important goal that neither group can achieve without the cooperation of the other. When survival or success of overall organization is in jeopardy.
Bargaining	Containment	When the two parties are of relatively equal power. When there are several acceptable alternative solutions that both parties would be willing to consider.
Structuring the interaction	Containment	When previous attempts to openly discuss conflict issues led to conflict escalation rather than to problem solution. When a respected third party is available to provide some structure and could serve as a mediator.
Integrative problem solving	Confrontation	When there is a minimum level of trust between groups and there is no time pressure for a quick solution. When the organization benefits from merging the differing perspectives and insights of the groups, in making key decisions.
Redesigning the organization	Confrontation	When the sources of conflict come from the coordination of work. When the work can be easily divided into clear project responsibilities (self-contained work groups) or when activities require a lot of interdepartmental coordination over time (lateral relations).

While the foregoing measures can be applied in situations where conflict has already developed, it is usually more beneficial to adopt measures which would minimize or prevent conflict in an organization. Experiences has shown that some group maintenance behaviours, if properly applied by leaders, can minimize or prevent conflict in the work environment. On the other hand, if wrongly applied, can result in conflict. First, the behaviours of leaders which are self-oriented and which can lead to interpersonal and inter-group conflict include:

Aggression

Deflating a group member or members, expressing envy or unreasonable disapproval or attacking the task at hand.

Domination

Over asserting authority or superiority or manipulating group or individual members through flattery, commands, interruptions during discussions, threats, emotional pressure, etc.

Dependence

Deliberately polarizing group to achieve selfish ends, lining up with certain strong individuals or groups or encouraging the formation of cliques.

Blocking

Resisting stubbornly, disagreeing unreasonably with ideas or opinions of individuals or groups which are considered antagonistic to the cause of the leader, bringing up an issue that had once been passed, and showing lack of interest in ideas of individuals or groups who are not considered as favourites of the leader.

Agricultural Extension Leaders should as much as possible avoid the behaviours discussed above.

They should strive to cultivate those behaviours which help in team building and which encourage group harmony. Some of these team building and group harmony maintenance behaviours are presented below:

Encouraging

This include praising, agreeing with and accepting reasonable contributions and ideas of subordinates and other members of the group.

Harmonizing

Reconciling disagreements and relieving tensions by the use of practiced and pleasant humour.

Observing

Carefully watching how the group operates, identifying the strengths and weakness as of individuals in the group and skillfully providing a feedback to individuals within the group and the group as a whole on what is observed.

Sensitizing

Making sure that all group members have a sense of belonging in the group and ensuring that all members of the group have a fair chance to participate in decision making.

Setting standards

Offering standard for the group to attempt to achieve or meet. Creating an environment for healthy competition.

Supporting

Making compromises to move along with the group, gracefully admitting errors whenever an error is committed, being self-disciplined in order to maintain group harmony.

Following

Going along with group, accepting ideas and opinions of others, serving as audience in group discussions and accepting the principle, that leading means service to others.

The suggestions concerning group maintenance behaviours as discussed above require extension leaders to carefully interpret and apply them as the situation dictates. Behaviours such as aggression, domination, dependence and blocking are subject to individual interpretations. For instance, the extension leader must draw a line between aggression and assertiveness. While aggressive individuals may humiliate, manipulate, openly criticize and unfairly dominate others, assertive people are direct, honest, expressive and make others feel valued. Being unassertive on the other hand can be counterproductive. Unassertive people may look timid, show an inferiority complex and elicit either pity or scorn from others. Both aggression and unassertiveness are less effective for achieving a desired goal. It is, therefore, important that the extension leader develops appropriate positive behaviours that would improve group cohesion and interpersonal effectiveness. This can be achieved by communicating effectively with subordinates and colleagues creating a climate where subordinates are fully involved in their jobs and providing opportunities for subordinates to grow on the job. The latter can partly be achieved through the practice of delegation. The next part of this bulletin therefore discusses the practice of delegation.

DELEGATION

Delegation simply means getting work done through other people. Delegation does not mean “dumping” or abdication of responsibility and authority but rather it should be practiced as a process of job enrichment. Extension leaders may not always be able to accomplish all planned activities.

Therefore, tasks that can be done more effectively by other members of the extension team should be delegated to enable leaders to focus on the high-priority tasks that are most critical to their own performance.

Advantages of delegation

Delegation has some advantages:

- i. it helps to develop and groom subordinates;
- ii. it saves the leader's time, and
- iii. utilizes the skills and abilities of subordinates and frees the leader to manage.

Despite these clear advantages of delegation, many leaders are skeptical of the value of delegation of responsibility and therefore do not practice it.

Reasons why leaders do not delegate

The following are highlights of reasons why some leaders do not delegate:

- i. power – the desire to have people dependent on them;
- ii. fear that subordinates will learn too much about their techniques;
- iii. fear of subordinates' failure;
- iv. lack of trust in people;
- v. fear of losing control of their department, or unit;
- vi. jealousy – the desire to take credit for all achievements, and
- vii. lack of role clarity, where in tasks and duties to be delegated are not clear and known to the manager.

While some of the above fears may not be entirely unreasonable in some organizations, particularly where there are over zealous, or over ambitious subordinates, leaders who understand how to and what to delegate, and have a positive attitude about people and their reaction to work would reap great benefits from the practice of delegation.

Assignments that can be delegated:

It is usually difficult to make exact prescriptions on what can or cannot be delegated. However, the following are suggested as assignments which a leader can delegate:

- i. problems or issues that require exploration, study, analysis, and recommendations;
- ii. activities beyond day-to-day operations but still within the scope of the subordinates' job or abilities;
- iii. projects that guide human talent in a positive direction toward the organization's goals and also toward the employees' continuing development and growth, and
- iv. problems which if handled well by the subordinate would conserve the leader's time.

Tasks that cannot or should be delegated:

Leaders have generally agreed on certain tasks that cannot or should be delegated. These include:

- i. setting plans within larger goals or objectives;
- ii. morale problems that are of considerable importance to the unit or department;
- iii. reconciling staff conflict or differences;
- iv. coaching and training subordinates and reviewing their performance;
- v. assignments that have been given specifically to the leader by his/her superior;
- vi. any part of a committee or task-force assignment (especially if information is confidential) to which a leader is expected to give personal commitment;
- vii. certain projects, ideas, or activities of the leader, and
- viii. matters on which there is not enough qualified staff available for delegation, or which involve too much of a risk.

How to delegate:

Three steps are followed in delegation:-

- i. assigning responsibility;
- ii. granting authority, and
- iii. creating accountability.

In assigning responsibilities, extension leaders should not end it with giving clear descriptions of duties and tasks to be performed. They should specify what results are expected, and how performance will be measured. The process of granting authority can be divided into two phases: (1) a preliminary phase, and (2) a continuing support phase.

1) The preliminary phase:

At the preliminary phase, the leader should:

- i. ask subordinates to present ideas and plans for achieving the desired result;
- ii. suggest possible alternatives and help subordinates to explore all aspects of the problem situation;
- iii. prompt subordinates to think about and identify potential problems and how to overcome them, and
- iv. agree on the course of action to be followed.

2) The continuing support phase:

The continuing support phase requires the leader to help their subordinates with advice and counsel as the task progresses.

It is only when the ingredients of effective delegation have been implemented that subordinates can be held responsible for results (good or bad) of their duties.

Reasons for subordinates refusal to accept delegation:

Sometimes, subordinates may not accept delegation. There are a number of reasons for this. These include:

- i. fear of failure;
- ii. subordinates are overloaded with work;
- iii. when there is confusion due to poor organization, and
- iv. subordinates may also refuse delegation if the task is not challenging or if it is routine or uninteresting.

Extension leaders must therefore, delegate in such a manner as to stimulate confidence and handle subordinates' mistakes tactfully.

TIPS ON EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

- i. a leader must inspire confidence in subordinates. To be an effective leader, the extension leader must have the confidence of the people he/she is to lead. To inspire confidence, he/she should show competence and knowledge of technical tools and processes with which his/her followers work, has knowledge and understanding of the broad policies of the organization, keep his/her promises, and exercises good judgement always;
- ii. be persistent in driving toward the goal. The leader must belief firmly in what he/she strives to accomplish, and must persistently look for right methods of attaining the goal;
- iii. communicate clearly without misunderstanding;
- iv. be willing to listen receptively. This attribute often distinguishes a leader from the boss or commander. The leader should listen with an open mind to subordinates' point of view and have the desire to understand and make the best use of the other person's point of view;
- v. have a genuine interest in the welfare of the people being led;
- vi. a leader should understand why people behave the way they do and sympathizes with them;
- vii. a leader must be objective and should not allow the sentiments of other people to act on his own feelings;

- viii. a leader must be forthright;
- ix. make quick and sound decisions;
- x. take risks;
- xi. does not get too comfortable with his job;
- Xii. does not waste time putting subordinates on trial for their mistakes;
- xiii. plan ahead (identify problem areas);
- xiv. shun perfectionism, get on with the job;
- xv. willing to break tradition (champion new ideas);
- xvi. hire top-notch people;
- xvii. communicate, keeps in touch and wanders around;
- xviii. slow down to criticize, but quick to praise;
- xix. sociable/flexible/respectable;
- xx. expect results;
- xxi. control and influence events;
- xxii. motivate staff;
- xxiii. aware of organizational climate, familiar with rural problems and have local extension work experience to enable him/her to develop empathy for extension staff and farmers;
- xxiv. creative and systematic thinking with a flair for writing;
- xxv. accept change and challenge;
- xxvi. assign responsibilities according to professional competence and qualifications, and
- xxvii. politically neutral.

Although these are the characteristics of good leaders, productivity will suffer if the organization has a negative climate. The following are important points for agricultural extension leaders to develop a positive organizational climate in the extension service:

- i. be a sympathetic listener and advisor;
- ii. reward each person fairly (no favourites);

- iii. use group to develop programs, set priorities and solve problems;
- iv. set a good example in positive attitude;
- v. clarify roles and responsibilities;
- vi. take interest in subordinates' work;
- vii. delegate responsibilities;
- viii. be easily approachable by staff;
- ix. diagnose problems before taking action;
- x. if work fails to meet norms, administer discipline;
- xi. provide incentives for good work, and
- xii. show concern for staff welfare.

In summary, a leader must inspire confidence in people, be dependable, free from the habit of worry, be generous, and have self confidence and a strong sense of fair play.

CONCLUSION:

In this bulletin, an attempt has been made to discuss leadership, interpersonal skills, conflict management and how extension leaders can apply the practice of delegation for effective job performance. Some of the points discussed and suggestions made are widely applicable to all leaders particularly in agricultural extension, research, training and rural development organizations.

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