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MODULE TWO

UNIT SEVEN

Decision-Making and Problem-Solving

Introduction

This unit focuses on two key management functions, introducing the concepts of decision-making and problem-solving in schools.

Individual study time: 2 hours

Learning outcomes

After working through this unit you should be able to:

- define decision-making and problem-solving
- list the major factors which contribute towards effective decision-making
- state the importance of analysing data and information for the purposes of making sensible decisions
- involve pupils, teachers, parents and others in making decisions on matters which affect them
- outline steps that can help ensure that action is taken on decisions made in the school.

School heads frequently find themselves in situations which require them to make decisions. They make decisions when they delegate work or responsibility to staff and when they communicate to superiors or colleagues at work. Decisions are made at all levels in order to solve problems and affect the achievement of the goals and objectives of the school. If decisions are not taken, a crisis situation may arise. Decision-making and problem-solving go hand in hand and both are of fundamental importance in all aspects of school management.

Definitions

Decision-making

This is the process of identifying and selecting a course of action to be taken to solve a problem. It is a process through which human, material and financial resources of an organisation are allocated or committed toward the achievement of intended goals and objectives. It can further be defined as the process through which information, ideas, objectives and knowledge are brought together for action.

Problem-solving

This involves the seeking of solutions to problems that arise in an organisation. The

problem-solving process leads to the formulation of decisions intended to resolve the recognised problems. The problem-solving process contains six main elements:

- recognising the problem
- analysing the problem
- working out alternative solutions
- choosing the best alternative
- implementing the chosen solution
- evaluating its effectiveness.

Types and levels of decision-making

Management writers often distinguish between two types of decisions. These are routine decisions and innovative decisions.

Routine decisions

These deal with operating procedures and are made through a thorough knowledge of rules, regulations and policies of the organisation. For example, when you decide on the weekly duty roster for teachers, this is fairly routine. In some manuals on the running of schools, heads are guided as to how to make routine decisions.

Unique decisions

But what of unique or innovative decisions which go beyond established procedures?

Activity 7.1

Prepare a brief list of the key areas for decision-making in your school (for example, staffing, finance) and then see if you can recall an example of a routine decision which you have recently made in each area. Then think about any decisions which were in some way unique and note down their characteristics.

20 minutes

Comments

When a head is required to make unique decisions, there are usually exceptional problems involved which require creativity and imagination to resolve. Unique decisions could also be referred to as non-programmed decisions. They often take time to implement because various factors (for example, resources, training of personnel, production of support materials, etc.) may need to be taken into account in the implementation process. For example, a decision to renovate a school reading room to become the school resource centre for pupils, teachers and workers is an innovative one.

Activity 7.2

State who should be involved and why they should be involved in making a decision about renovating a school reading room to become the resource centre for pupils, teachers and workers.

10 minutes

Comments

Views on this will vary and may reflect prevailing cultural and organisational contexts. Two points can be made here. Firstly, as a school head, you should recognise that there are several levels of decisions. For example:

Policy decisions: These are made at higher levels of management such as the Ministry of Education Headquarters. These are decisions which govern matters such as the educational reforms for a whole country, new curriculum, training, employment and deployment of teachers, language policy, etc.

Operational decisions: These are made at the school level by the head, pupils and parents. You implement policy decisions within the framework of your school.

A second point concerns the extent to which participation in decision-making is desirable. We will look at this in the next sub-section.

Decision-making in the school context

Within the school there are many factors which can contribute to effective decision-making by the school head.

Activity 7.3

- (1) Refer back to your responses on Activity 7.1 and make a few notes on the extent to which members of your staff take part in decision-making in these various areas.
- (2) Prepare a list of those factors which you believe can adversely affect decision-making.
- (3) What, in your view, is good decision-making practice?

20 minutes

Comments

Decision-making can involve varying degrees of participation and much will depend on the nature of the decision area, your own management style and people's willingness to participate. Arguments in favour of greater participation include the sense of 'ownership' by those who are involved in implementing decisions and the possible reduction of conflict.

Decision-making can be influenced by a range of organisational, political and personal dimensions. For example:

- the role of the head, the teachers and the non-teaching staff in the school: individual behaviours, personality and style can affect the process of decision-making
- the role of school boards and parents: what decisions can they make and how do these affect the head's decisions?

Amongst the characteristics of effective decisions are that they are necessary and timely, and appropriate to the task and situation to hand. They need also to be realisable, clearly communicated to those who have to implement them and acceptable. The last point can be problematic and the school head may need to invest considerable effort in persuading staff of the desirability of the decision. Good

decisions ideally need to meet a variety of competing needs - the head's own needs, the staff's, the task and the situation. The possibility for conflict is always around.

Activity 7.4

- (1) Identify two decisions you yourself made during the last two weeks. Outline stages you followed to reach the decisions. What steps might you take to improve your decision-making?
- (2) A parent has informed you that her daughter is expecting a baby and one of the teachers is suspected to be responsible for the pregnancy. How do you go about solving this problem?

20 minutes

Comments

You may have found it difficult to present your decision-making process in terms of the rational stages of problem-solving suggested earlier in this unit, that is, from 'recognising the problem' to 'evaluating the effectiveness of your decision'. Decisions are rarely entirely rational because of the many complex variables concerned. The mini-case in the activity highlights this.

Decisions in the school which affect people's life and welfare require extensive gathering of data and information. The case requires extensive consultations concerning regulations on the discipline of pupils and the Teachers' Code of Conduct; legal provisions for affiliation, mothering and fathering out of wedlock. Attention will need to be given to social and cultural roles, the status of the teacher, the parents, the girl pupil and the head, and to reconciling a range of different perceptions as to what are appropriate and acceptable decisions to make about the problem.

Remember, no decision is final. All decisions are subject to continuous review in order to solve problems in life.

Summary

In this unit we have examined the nature of decision-making in schools noting its relationship to problem-solving. A number of characteristics of effective decision-making have been identified, including the importance of adopting a rational problem-solving process and the significance of participation in decision-making to help reduce conflict and improve the implementation of decisions.

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