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Is There Justice? Seeking Fairness in Cooperative Extension Programs During Times of Change

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PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



POST
A COMMENT

0

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Abstract

Cooperative Extension Service administrators on the federal, state, regional, district, and county level will be challenged in the coming years to provide leadership as their organizations are defined in a changing society. Recognizing and implementing strategies to ensure positive perceptions of organizational justice will reap tremendous rewards in the form of increased satisfaction, commitment, trust, and citizenship. At the same time, positive perceptions of justice will reduce employee turnover and workplace aggression issues. This article defines organizational justice, including its four constructs; raises the importance of the issue; and offers strategies to address fairness/justice in the workplace.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service continues to be challenged to address: (a) balancing budgets under extreme federal, state, and county/local fiscal constraints; (b) repositioning educational efforts in an evolving, global society, (c) integrating and balancing technology with traditional teaching and delivery methods; (d) reorganizing and reducing staff; (e) implementing cost-recovery strategies; and (e) managing risks associated with community-based programming. As decisions are made, it is expected that Extension employees will question the outcomes and how they are made, including the frequencies and effectiveness of communication.

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice, peoples' perceptions of fairness in an organization, consists of four constructs, including the outcomes or decisions made (distributive justice); process by which decisions are made (procedural justice); opportunity for input and having a voice in the decision-making process (interactional justice); and the overall structure of decision-making (systemic justice) (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001; Greenberg 1987)

As Extension administrators across the country address new and evolving challenges, there will continue to be new decisions, new strategies of communication, involvement of stakeholders, and the influence of the underlying, informal networks. All individuals, regardless of their roles in their respective organizations, are affected by major decisions. With decisions come both positive and negative reactions from employees, depending on the perceived impact. Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton (1992) stated that "persistent justice typically produces immediate and direct consequences, such as equitable pay improves individual performance, equal treatment raises

group spirit, voice creates commitment to a decision, and access creates a loyal ally" (p. 102).

Pursuing justice in the organization potentially leads to: (1) increased performance effectiveness; (2) a sense of community among employees; and (3) a sense of individual dignity and humanness among employees (Beugre', 1998; Sheppard, Lewicki, & Minton, 1992). Positive perceptions of organizational justice typically result in positive attitudinal (job satisfaction, commitment, and trust) and behavioral (organizational citizenship, behavior, turnover, and workplace aggression) reactions (Beugre', 1998).

Strategies

Extension administrators can take many steps and implement a variety of strategies to help ensure positive perceptions of organizational justice that will ultimately improve job satisfaction, commitment, citizenship, and behavior, while potentially reducing turnover and workplace aggression. All administrators should consider the following strategies.

1. Develop alternative reward structures beyond traditional compensation methods, such as: (a) offering innovative grant programs on a competitive basis; (b) awarding scholarships to support professional development opportunities; (c) awarding scholarships to individuals presenting papers at professional conferences; (d) providing limited-time stipends to individuals taking on additional roles during reduced staffing periods; and (e) providing financial incentives to existing organizational recognition programs. (Distributive Justice)
2. Strengthen faculty/staff engagement in decision making through: (a) special task forces or committees brought together to address a specific issue; (b) membership on advisory committees that provide direct feedback to central administrators; (c) sounding boards for county chairs/directors; (d) e-newsletters and up-to-date Web sites; (e) distance technology, such as phone conferences, satellite, and interactive video-conferencing; and (f) regional/district program area meetings. Administrators, when communicating actual or perceived bad news, must do so directly, yet compassionately. (Interactional Justice)
3. Focus on the procedures used to arrive at and communicate decisions. Administrators should consider: (a) communicating the procedures used when announcing decision outcomes; (b) allowing employees involved in the decision-making process to also provide input into the procedures used to arrive at decisions; (c) inform stakeholders when the procedures are not controlled by the decision-makers, and (d) provide, in writing, the procedures used for promotion and tenure, performance evaluation, hiring, disciplining, and terminating employees, and reorganization processes. (Procedural Justice)
4. Recognize that informal networks of faculty and staff across the state may serve as a benefit as well as hinder progress in an organization, especially during times of extensive change. Thus, administrators should: (a) consistently apply policies and procedures, regardless of the individuals involved (recognizing differences in faculty and non-faculty positions); (b) intentionally identify individuals from all segments of the organization to serve in leadership roles; and (c) engage individuals, regardless of their points of view or agreement or disagreement with administrative philosophies. (Systemic Justice)

Conclusion

When the country's economic engine begins to roar again, faculty and staff positions begin to be able to be filled, and organizational budgets increase, the desire will be, by many, to return to previous staffing patterns and implement programs or processes that were lost during the downsizing. However, administrators must not allow this mentality to take over the organization as they make the tough decisions that align and advance the organization as society continues to evolve and face new challenges.

Organizational leaders must face the reality that all future decisions are going to be difficult. It will be imperative to identify alternative reward structures, involve employees in decision making in creative ways, clearly articulate procedures used, and nurture the informal and formal networks in order to maintain or improve satisfaction, commitment, and trust in the organization that undoubtedly will continue to change.

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Discussion