

A Study on Leadership Qualities of Supervisory Officers (Divisional / Institution Heads) in ICAR Institutes

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is the role and status of one or more individuals in the structure and functioning of group organizations which enable & to meet a need or purpose, through co-operation of the group members. The ICAR is an apex body with a multitude of research institutes under its realm. The organization is manned by scientific staff of different cadres, prescribed by hierarchical set-up. The leadership qualities of the immediate supervisors have a direct bearing on the productivity of the scientists in succession, which in turn determine the efficiency of technology flow and its transfer to the client system in the field. The present study was undertaken to assess the leadership qualities of supervisory level officers in the hierarchy. More than half of respondents (53.63 %) opined that the immediate supervisors possessed professional knowledge and expertise only to some extent, while 65.22 % said that the level of planning was largely top down, implying a bureaucratic approach. About 42.02 % said that considerable scope was given by superiors to act independently and 56.52 % reported of motivating the staff substantially to achieve higher level of performance. A democratic leadership, involving a bottom-up approach must be fostered within the limits of official hierarchy to enable the individuals in the organization to show case their skills and ability for enhancing the productivity of the organization.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, privatization and liberalization trends have ushered in a remarkable metamorphosis in the Indian economy, which demand an increase in knowledge and technology transformation required for developing a sustainable competitive advantage in the global market. As the number of people, who access a pool of knowledge increases, the pool expands. Considering the unpredictable scale and pace of change and the shift in the nature of competencies required in today's era, the winners would be those who are willing to face, fight, experiment and ride the change. The Indian agricultural scenario is no exception to this yardstick. There is a need to throw light on the management aspects of agricultural research institutions since, routine approaches cannot always meet the task of evolving new technology expeditiously and then ensuring its speedy application. For a steady and progressive growth, management and job efficiency of scientists, the leadership traits provided by immediate superiors like heads of divisions/officers in charge of sections/units/cells need to be assessed and analysed, in order to give feedback about their capabilities and weak points to make corrective measures to improve their managerial abilities. Management activities such as planning, organising and decision-making are dormant cocoons until the leader triggers the power of motivation in people and guides them towards goals. The heads of various divisions/sections have to interpret the future prospects to those in succession, and reinforce them with positive ideas. They must motivate the best talent to remain with them and imbibe the cardinal principle of productive contribution for overall growth. Effective leadership practices thus become an important force behind the continued success of any research organisation. In this backdrop, a study was conducted to assess the leadership qualities among heads of department /organisation in Indian Council of Agricultural Research institutes.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted during January and February, 2009 with scientists working in different ICAR institutes. An interview schedules was administered to 69 respondents in the cadre of scientists, scientists (senior scale), senior scientists and principal scientists who are working in ICAR institutes situated in different places like Karnal, New Delhi, Coimbatore, Chennai, Lucknow, Palampur in Himachal Pradesh, Katra in Himachal Pradesh and Mathura, in Uttar Pradesh to assess the leadership qualities of immediate superiors. A simple percentage analysis was worked out to interpret the results. The names of respondents and their institutes were kept confidential to protect their identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents' profile is presented in Table 1 to understand their working background. Most of the respondents were middle aged (55.07%), working in the cadre of scientist (senior scale), having less than 10 years of job experience (50.72%) and had served under one to three leaders (49.28%). The variation with respect to number of bosses / Heads served might be due to the number of places of posting, change of Heads due to retirement/promotion/appointment and change of nature of duties of individual scientists

Seventeen leadership qualities of the immediate supervisors of the respondents were analysed and are listed in Table 2. These pertain to the leadership qualities of immediate supervisors of respondents at the time of investigation. The respondents disclosed that majority of the supervisors possessed only small extent of professional knowledge and expertise (53.63%) and had a considerable ability to guide the subordinate staff on all aspects (55.07%) which might be due to lack of interest in periodic updation of knowledge and skill as well as lack of interaction in their field of specialisation.

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Although opportunities are available, several heads neither update themselves nor facilitate the subordinate staff to acquire the required competencies. Sometimes, they feel that highly capable scientists are a threat to them in terms of name, fame, recognition etc. The personal insecurity as being felt by incompetent heads results in developing jealousy towards skilled subordinates. In most of the institutions, top-down approach (65.22%) was followed by supervisors for planning

Table 1. Personal information of the respondents

		(n=69)	
Personal Information		Number	Percentage
Age of respondents	(i) Young (<35 years)	20	28.98
	(ii) Medium (36-50 years)	38	55.07
	(iii) Old (>50 years)	11	15.95
Designation of respondents	(i) Scientist	11	15.94
	(ii) Scientist (Senior Scale)	31	44.93
	(iii) Senior Scientist	15	21.74
	(iv) Principal Scientist	12	17.39
Number of years of service completed	(i) Upto 10 years	35	50.72
	(ii) 11-20 years	20	28.99
	(iii) > 20 years	14	20.29
No. of leaders so far served	(i) 1 to 3 leaders	34	49.28
	(ii) 4-5 leaders	22	31.88
	(iii) > 5 leaders	13	18.84

Table 2: Leadership qualities of immediate supervisors as perceived by respondents

		(n=69)	
Leadership Qualities		Number	Percentage
Possession of professional knowledge and expertise	(i) Nil	7	10.14
	(ii) Only to some extent	37	53.63
	(iii) To a great extent	25	36.23
Ability to guide the staff on all aspects	(i) No ability	14	20.29
	(ii) Considerable	38	55.07
	(iii) Highly capable	17	24.64
Level of planning	(i) Only top down	14	20.29
	(ii) Largely top down	45	65.22
	(iii) Mainly bottom up	10	14.49
Communication of information	(i) Very little	12	17.39
	(ii) Considerable	43	62.32
	(iii) Very transparent	14	20.29
Tolerance to failure	(i) Nil	11	15.94
	(ii) Substantial	39	56.52
	(iii) Focus on success again	19	27.54
Willingness to initiate/ act	(i) Do nothing	1	01.45
	(ii) Slight preference	31	44.93
	(iii) Action oriented	37	53.62
Level of delegation	(i) Very little scope to act independently	20	28.99
	(ii) Considerable scope to act independently	29	42.02
	(iii) Large scope to act independently	20	28.99
Ability to anticipate problems, ideas & innovation	(i) Little interest	15	21.74
	(ii) Substantial	45	65.22
	(iii) Future driven	09	13.04
Periodical review of subordinate's work	(i) Not very much	16	23.19
	(ii) Moderately	38	55.07
	(iii) Very much	15	21.74
Facilitating to acquire variety of competencies	(i) Do nothing	11	15.94
	(ii) Substantial	43	62.32
	(iii) Great extent	15	21.74

research/teaching/extension programmes at divisional/institute levels. The official circulars/office orders/communication were transmitted only to considerable extent (62.32%) to the staff indicating that bottom up planning and transparency in communication was mostly on paper. The respondents revealed that the information is immediately communicated by supervisors when there is a benefit/advantage to them, otherwise it will be kept secret or revealed only to those who are close to them encouraging favouritism / nepotism / partiality, ultimately leading to low level of morale among fellow scientists.

Even though 53.62 per cent of respondents opined that supervisory officers had the willingness to take initiative and were action oriented, only 27.54 per cent of them had the tolerance to failure and focusing on success again. It indicated that several organisational factors also played a role in exercising effective leadership and providing adequate importance to human resource development (HRD) components by the heads at institute level. About 42.02 per cent of supervisors delegated the duties/responsibilities/powers to considerable extent indicating that independence given to work needs to be improved a lot. Periodic review of subordinate's work was moderately done by 55.07 per cent of superiors while 63.77 per cent of them used to act timely and rationally to address staff grievances only to some extent revealing that the leadership qualities were not properly exercised by the supervisory officers for enhancing the individual scientist's productivity. Although half of the supervisory officers (50.72%) often invited suggestions from their staff in relation to work, only one-fourth of them (24.64%) took risk and responsibility for the decisions taken and implemented. The study conducted by Jayalakshmi and Kishore Kumar (2000) at College of Agriculture, Vellayani, Kerala showed that the scientists were not fully satisfied with HRD components and mandate of the university. They suggested that recognising the values of openness, trust, mutuality, collaboration and enthusiasm within the system by every member of the organisation could contribute significantly to increased productivity and excellence.

A scientist cannot be expected to bypass the head and approach the Director every time to get the things done and leadership qualities should be imbibed in heads through executive training at NAARM, Hyderabad and other similar management institutes. Mere seniority, meager subject knowledge and routine research publications without enriching the subject cannot be the considerations for becoming the heads or any other higher positions in agricultural research organisations. In order to guide and motivate the scientists for increasing the overall productivity of respective ICAR institutes, considerable importance should be given to assessment of leadership qualities of candidates who apply for the posts of heads. Moreover, a suitable mechanism should be evolved to identify incompetent heads in order to streamline and make them useful to ICAR system for prosperity of Indian agriculture.

Suggestions for Efficient Leadership Practice

Certain leadership practices which have brought laurels in

private sector organisations are to be communicated in detail for heads in ICAR institutes to adopt the same depending upon the place, positions and urgency. Not all leaders are made for all kinds of situations and enterprises, since their capabilities are not the same. A leader should be good at bringing multi disciplinary groups into a mutually reinforcing and tightly knit team. The aim should be to integrate all levels of personnel operationally, functionally and emotionally with the overall mission and awareness of how the contributors of each mesh with those of the rest. There should not be a single leadership agenda. Sensing the need of the time, altering the agenda and continuously rationalizing the agenda are very vital. The various leadership practices that are essential for smooth running of any enterprise are listed below.

If the scientists are new recruits, it is extremely important to give them time to acclimatize themselves to the workspace. It is only when the poor performance persists even after a considerable period of time that one needs to initiate action. Leaders need to be friendly, correct the mistakes and not ignore them. They should give attention to what the employee perceives as the stumbling block in his or her performance. They should not let the employee get complacent about the amelioration in performance. Communication is a strong motivator as people have greater zeal to know what is happening to them and the organisation. Leadership styles differ and each leader selects a style best suited to his personality. Not only warmth and concern for people and total commitment to the highest values of integrity but also passion to win, to achieve, to enjoy and celebrate team victories, a commitment to excellence to the best are great binding features in any enterprise. The ability to get the message across is what ignites people in organisations to act in synchronisation with the given objectives and goals. While written communications may be appropriate in certain formal or legal contexts, personal chemistry operating in face to face interaction is important for getting results since it imparts and improves clarity on the spot, regarding the course of action to be taken, induces a sense of participation and pride in the ideas generated, facilitates unobstructive monitoring of on going action, promotes better mutual understanding and maximizes the synergy in the achievement of objectives.

Commitment to training and development, ensuring the introduction of the latest technologies and processes and flexibility to change and adapt to the needs of the customer must be the driving force. Risk acceptance, quick decision, staying power, killer instincts are expected qualities of leaders of private sector enterprises. Accountability, transparency, prudence, propriety and probity are expected qualities of leaders in public sector enterprises.

The relative contribution of every staff towards the job needs to be acknowledged. Leaders should encourage and praise the poor performers whenever they perform well. It is a fine thing to have ability, but the ability to discover ability in others is true capability. The unremitting glare of public scrutiny makes it incumbent on persons in leadership positions in government to inspire trust and confidence of the people as also every stakeholder with whom it has dealings. Trust welds

human beings into a cohesive team, enthusing them to throw themselves heart and soul into whatever tasks they undertake.

Leaders are required to amalgamate the varied talents and disciplines the generalists and specialists so as to pool their resources towards achieving the intended objective. They should set examples that are consistent with shared values and commitment. Sometimes, incentives are seen more as manipulation than motivation. Lavish incentives may indeed tempt the employees into sticking around longer if only to enjoy the perks, but in the long run, the hunger for skill recognition is what that counts.

Leaders should not only avoid public disparagement or criticism of their associates, but also build up their self-esteem and effectiveness. Recognizing individual contribution to the success of any project and celebrating the team's success regularly will inspire the subordinates. Once a decision is taken leaders should refrain from interfering in the execution, so long as the follow-up action conforms to the time frames and targets agreed upon. Leaders invariably should uphold exercise of judgment and discussion even if it is not in tune with their line of thinking, provided it is guided by consideration of public or national interest. Articulating the values clearly and repeatedly is the key to establishing long-term beneficial partnerships with all stakeholders.

Strategies need to be constantly evaluated and adapted both in response to anticipated changes in the environment and for proactively shaping the environment. Leaders need the right structure and teams that are tailor made for specific assignments to ensure flawless execution of the strategy and greater transfer of knowledge through cross-fertilization of ideas. They need people with a deep passion for the job and a desire to succeed. Quick decision making is critical and possible only by empowering people at all levels with leadership qualities. Encouraging exploration of uncertainty, while keeping an eye on the bottom line would help foster the entrepreneurial culture to exploit the abundant opportunities that exist in uncertain situations.

The 360° feedback is a method of systematically collecting data about a person's performance and capabilities from a wide range of co-workers. Intensive behavioural interventions can be structured in a manner so that participants receive and give feedback in a non-threatening environment and yield a workable plan for setting goals for continued personal and professional development and strategies for attaining them.

Leaders should develop a sixth sense to critically assess innovations without stepping into the areas where the professional is responsible. The heads will be better off if they understand that most of the leaders are uncomfortable with stars that shine as brightly. They should be ready to experiment with new ideas and bold enough to take risks.

CONCLUSION

Indian farmers by and large are quite receptive towards

scientific innovations and the country is blessed with state of the art technology and highly talented scientists. For enhancing the productivity in the lands of farmers, one has to think of the development and management of agricultural research organisations where scientific ideas are conceived, nourished, culminated, generated and disseminated to the field. In an era of speed, adaptation and rejuvenation where agenda of agricultural research has changed, hierarchies have been replaced by networks, management by control has evolved into relationship based management and interaction. With the requirement for survival and growth in any ICAR institute, the deployment of the skills of supervisory officers is very important. Hence effective leadership practices help the people discover their potential by themselves, which in turn would lead to increased productivity in any organisation.

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