COMMENTARY

BUILDING A PARADigm OF NONFORMAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION:
FOCUS ON COMPETENCIES

Arlen W. Etling, Associate Professor
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
114 Ag Hall, P.O. Box 830700
Lincoln, NE  68583-0700
(402) 472-9008
(402) 472-9024 (fax)
aetling@unlvm.unl.edu

Abstract

The literature on administration, management, and leadership is extensive. Few sources, however, address the competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) of effective administrators in nonformal education. None of the sources put those competencies in a scheme that is simple yet comprehensive. The author has developed a paradigm of nonformal education administration based on his experience in teaching and consulting in nonformal education. Competencies are a significant component of this paradigm, and the focus of this article. The paradigm sketched into a diagram in this presentation has potential for guiding competency-based training programs and self-directed professional development for administrators. It can also be used to guide search and screening committees in hiring the best candidates for administrative positions in nonformal education.

The Need to Understand Competencies of Administrators in Nonformal Education

How many of your colleagues have become administrators without really being prepared? They were good teachers or researchers or extension workers; so they found themselves rewarded with an administrative position. Yet, they had only a partial idea of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that they needed. If they had any time or interest, before the avalanche of administrative problems, they might have picked up a book on management or administration in the private sector.

The literature on administration in business is voluminous. The focus of books and articles ranges from “how to” (Winston, The Organized Executive, 1994; Nelson & Economy, Managing for Dummies, 1996) to theoretical (Senge, The Fifth Discipline, 1990; Gitlow & Gitlow, Total Quality Management in Action, 1994; Hersey & Blanchard, Management of Organizational Behavior, 1977). Literature on leadership, likewise, varies from the highly theoretical (Bass & Avolio, Transformational Leadership, 1993; Yukl, Leadership in Organizations, 1998) to popular treatments (Covey, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, 1989; Peters, Thriving on Chaos, 1987; Smith, Taking Charge of Change, 1996). Still, the competencies of administrators in the private sector are often not the same as the competencies needed by administrators in nonformal education. Even the competencies of school administrators differ from those of nonformal educators.

Nonformal education is learner-centered. The organization must adjust to the learners rather than expect learners to adjust (like elementary school students) to the organization. Nonformal education favors a cafeteria curriculum and a lower level of structure than schools. So, administrators must be more flexible. Practical learning and immediate usefulness are two features of nonformal education that mean
administrators must be more responsive to their clients. They cannot hide behind legalistic and bureaucratic walls if they are to be effective. In nonformal education we often depend heavily on volunteer staff who have different requirements than paid staff.

A recent text, Management in Extension (Buford, Bedeian & Lindner, 1995), is more relevant to nonformal education than the sources mentioned above. It presents many issues facing administrators of U.S. Extension programs. It does not, however, provide a framework that defines administration of nonformal education, and the competencies of administrators.

**A Paradigm of Nonformal Education Administration**

A paradigm of nonformal education administration, including the competencies of administrators has been developed by the author. It was initially conceived in diagram form as part of a course on public administration for international development, taught by Dr. Robert LaPorte at Pennsylvania State University in 1994. The diagram was inspired by R. A. Mackenzie’s article, The Management Process in 3-D, in the Harvard Business Review (November-December, 1969). In 1995 and 1996, the diagram was used in courses and workshops on international nonformal education in the United States and Mexico. In 1997, it was used as the theoretical frame for a course at the University of Nebraska, “Administration of Agricultural Agencies and Organizations.” In each case, the elements of the diagram were tested by students’ and administrators’ experience, and by the literature on management, especially Cooperative Extension programming.

The paradigm is shown in Figure 1. The bottom slice (shaded) is the key for the rest of the diagram. At the center of the diagram are the “assets” of the administrator: people, ideas, and resources (funds, materials, equipment, and time). Assets possessed by administrators enable them to fulfill the “roles” of leader, creative thinker, and manager. Furthermore, “abilities” needed to execute these roles include communication, decision-making, and problem solving.

The numbered “steps” in the next layer are the basic steps of the administrative process: anticipate, plan, organize, staff, facilitate, and evaluate. The bottom layer gives the specific competencies that administrators need in order to be effective.

Although this list of competencies may appear to be generic to any administrative position, it is quite different from Mackenzie’s list of competencies for business. Some of the most striking differences are in steps 2 through 5. An administrator in nonformal education usually is quite concerned about securing external funds and coordinating with other agencies (step 3, organize). Staffing (step 4) includes attention to both paid staff and volunteer staff. The latter are quite different in their supervisory requirements and expectations. Step 5, facilitate, is usually called “direct” in management literature. Directive leadership is appropriate for highly structured organizations seeking profit and employing paid staff. An administrator in nonformal education, however, needs to use democratic and non-directive leadership styles as well as a directive style. This combination of three styles employed depends on the particular situation, and is called “facilitator leadership” by the author. For a more detailed discussion of facilitator leadership, see the article on Leadership for Nonformal Education published in this Journal [Etling, 1994].
Uses of the Paradigm

So, what use is this paradigm of administration in nonformal education? The author would like to suggest three potential applications. Unlike in business, training for administrators in nonformal education is often “on the job.” The diagram could be used as a guide for professional development for new administrators. It could serve as a checklist for administrators to evaluate their own competence and then as a guide to seek inservice training opportunities.

If programs are being developed to train new administrators or to update experienced administrators, the diagram could be a guide for the content of the training. It could be used as a checklist to assess the needs of trainees in order to choose content that is most appropriate to any particular group.

A third application is for recruitment and selection of candidates to fill an administrative position. Too many times administrators are chosen for their “fit” in the organization. “Fit” often means the likelihood that the candidate will follow orders and not make waves. The diagram allows search committees to focus on competencies and ask questions which cause candidates to focus on those competencies.

A Caution

Research is needed for the diagram to realize its full potential. Potential areas of research include (a) verifying and validating the competencies in actual nonformal education settings, (b) differentiating between competencies needed by administrators in the private sector and in nonformal education, and (c) correlating competencies with administrative effectiveness. Based on results obtained, the paradigm could
be refined and evolve into a model which would have reliability and utility.

**References**


