

Selection for Leadership

... is the crucial decision.

MANY educators would agree that the selection of an individual for a leadership position is a crucial decision. If an able person with basic qualifications is selected, he can be expected to develop in skill and understanding; and on the other hand, a truly weak individual can never develop genuine professional competence.

It seems ironical that while there is general agreement that selection is crucial, agreement is almost as widespread that selection procedures are far less effective than they should be. Too many mediocre and even weak people are being appointed to leadership positions.

Why? In what ways do existing procedures fail? Above all, what procedures can be used to help assure that stronger persons will be appointed to leadership positions?

Problems of Bias

Experience in a variety of situations provides abundant evidence that the selection process will be no better than the people doing the selecting. A person's emotional equipment, his own unique ways of looking at things, color his views of all procedures and persons, and hence play an important role in determining the outcomes of selection procedures.

Biases which cloud objective judgment frequently come into play during the selection process.

The bias which seems to come into play most universally in the selection of leadership personnel is the tendency toward symbolization of the family. When someone is to be selected for a leadership position, the people doing the selecting almost invariably see the situation in family terms, and prefer the person who is symbolically a member of the family. If you will think objectively about selection processes in which you have participated, you will have seen that a person often prefers someone who has graduated from his own alma mater or who comes from his native state (such a person is symbolically a sibling); that a person prefers someone who has been one of his students (such a person is symbolically a son or daughter); or that if a consultant is to be employed, a person tends to choose one of his former professors. If there is to be a promotion from within the staff, feelings are likely to be strong, far beyond the logic of the situation (some want brother promoted to father, whereas others do not).

Clarence A. Newell is Professor of Educational Administration, University of Maryland, College Park.

Loyalty to one's alma mater, state, students, or teachers—that is, loyalty to family—is commendable. When these feelings become exaggerated, as is so often the case in the selection process, however, they distort realities and prejudicial judgments.

Probably everyone shares to some extent the tendency to see institutions and groups of people as symbolizing his own family. This tendency is so slight in some individuals that it does not affect selection procedures unduly. Experience in a variety of selection processes, however, indicates that in most situations this bias is present, and colors the deliberations and hence the outcomes in leadership selection.

Family symbolization is not the only bias affecting the selection process. Prejudice related to sex, race, religion, ethnic group, and a host of other factors, stands in the way of selection of the most able persons available for leadership positions. The best procedures in the world are vitiated to the extent that emotional biases, many of them at the level of unawareness, come into play.

Selection procedures can be effective, therefore, only to the extent that the persons doing the selecting really know themselves. Unless their own biases have been brought to the level of awareness, these biases will nullify the best selection procedures.

It is thus with crossed fingers that I shall discuss selection procedures, for these procedures are never any better than the people using them. At the same time, selection procedures are important. Persons who can operate objectively need also to move with procedural astuteness. The following suggestions, though they do not cover all aspects of the selection process and are not entirely logical in organization, are presented to

emphasize certain important considerations.

Sound Procedures

The selection procedures should be designed to obtain the best person possible for meeting the needs.

Although this point would seem to be obvious, the selection process is often initiated with an inappropriate question such as: "Shall we appoint a local person or someone from the outside?" Or, "How can we proceed to fill this position?"

A prior question which needs to be asked is: "What are the most urgent needs to be met by this staff replacement or addition?" This question is often bypassed to the detriment of the program. In a large high school, for example, a helping teacher resigned and was replaced. After about a year, the school principal complained that the school no longer needed the type of supervision which this helping teacher was prepared to offer, but that it had urgent need for an additional counselor. If mistakes of the foregoing type are to be eliminated, each position to be filled needs to be evaluated in relation to the needs of the total program.

Careful consideration of the nature of the position leads naturally to a listing of the competencies and qualifications needed by the person in the position. Once this listing has been duplicated, it can be widely distributed to potential candidates.

In the selection process, all relevant information needs to be considered, and no one measure should be allowed to exclude the others. Thus, although scores from tests such as the Graduate Record Examination and Miller's Analogies are useful, no specific cutoff point should be used; otherwise a person who is one

point below the cutoff score may be eliminated from consideration, despite excellent recommendations and other strong favorable evidence. Furthermore, there is always the danger that a test measures only the extent to which a candidate conforms to the ideas of the test makers. It is suggested that a candidate's total file, including his test scores, be appraised as a whole.

The interview is a time-tested and useful selection device, and should be viewed as an opportunity to see how effectively a candidate can present and defend his own point-of-view, rather than to see whether he agrees with the interviewers. In our internship program, the final interview is conducted by a panel of eight persons, four from the school system and four from the university. This procedure produces a certain amount of stress similar to that encountered in many administrative situations.

Actual Experience

Real and simulated experience should be utilized as a means of appraising individual capabilities.

Although appraisal based on actual experience is not a new concept, new ways of applying this principle have been devised. A person who is to be placed in a leadership position in education should first of all be an effective teacher and, in addition, should have had numerous experiences which provide not only for growth in leadership competence but also for appraisal of the individual. These experiences might well be provided through committee membership or chairmanship, in leadership roles in faculty meetings, in serving as faculty sponsor for the school patrol or the student council, in developing a

schedule for cocurricular activities, and in analogous kinds of activities.

The leadership role may be simulated in order to gain some idea as to how an individual will react in a particular situation. Cases and episodes have been used for some years by a few school systems as part of their selection procedures. Thus, a situation in administration is described, and the person being appraised is asked to respond by analyzing the situation or by telling what he would do as an administrator in this situation. School systems may decide also to use the "in-basket out-basket" technique, which has been developed to simulate an actual administrative situation. With this technique, considerable time is spent in orienting the "administrator" to a hypothetical community, and the "administrator" is then confronted with a series of hypothetical situations (his in-basket) in each of which he must make a decision.

A school system may provide a workshop on educational leadership as part of its in-service education program. Face-to-face role playing of a realistic situation, which is perhaps the best simulated situation for finding out how a person's feelings will affect his behavior in a specific situation, may also be used in the workshop as part of the total selection process.

An internship program in administration and supervision is perhaps the best way to test overall leadership competence before a person is placed in an actual leadership position. The actual carrying of responsibility makes realistic appraisals possible. A careful analysis of one intern's experiences during the 1960-61 school year revealed that during the first two months of the internship, the intern carried full administrative re-

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sponsibility in 23 percent of his activities, and that by the middle of the year, he was carrying full responsibility in 51 percent of his activities. This actual carrying of responsibility helps also to identify the specific type of position for which an individual is best suited, and perhaps best of all, it stimulates self appraisal. A number of the interns have found the internship program helpful in enabling them to select a particular aspect of leadership for which they are best suited. Thus, for example, one of the interns who had demonstrated excellent scholarship in academic work decided as a result of his internship experience that the pressures and stresses which an administrator must undergo are too great for him; this individual has had a highly successful career as a civilian counselor for military personnel.

Existing Staff

The selection procedures should contribute to strengthening the morale of the entire staff.

The selection process offers opportunities for strengthening the staff, and hence for enhancing the work situation of each staff member. It might seem surprising, therefore, that the entire selection process is often viewed with distrust by many staff members. Irresistible change, which seems to be implicit in the coming of a new staff member, coupled with the feeling that there is discrimination in selection processes, often results in deterioration rather than improvement of staff morale.

If morale is to be improved, the policies governing selection of leadership personnel need to be in written form available to all staff members. These policies need to indicate the basis on

which selections are made, the procedures utilized, and steps which can be taken with a goal to obtaining a leadership position. Perhaps the policies can also indicate a range from a minimum to a maximum percentage of leadership positions which will be filled from within the staff. The policies should provide for nomination of one staff member by another, and for self nomination for any position. In short, they should make clear to one and all that the present staff members have just as much opportunity as anyone else for winning appointment to a leadership position. One school system goes so far as to provide a program of staff development in order that the present staff will be in a position to compete successfully with "outsiders" for leadership positions.

It should go without saying that the staff should have an appropriate part in determining selection policies and procedures. In addition, some school systems and universities utilize selection committees which function with reference to all major positions to be filled. The selection committee may recommend one person to the appropriate administrator, or it may recommend half a dozen acceptable persons. If the head of a department or dean of a college is to be selected, persons in that department or college are often made members of the selection committee.

Staff selection committees have been opposed by some on the grounds that they require excessive staff time. This criticism, which seems to the writer to have considerable merit, can be partially overcome if the selection committee performs only specific functions, such as the following: (a) sets ground rules in advance to govern all its actions; (b) reviews the nature of the position,

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