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IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION OF THE TRAINING NEEDS OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION ADMINISTRATORS IN EFFICIENT DECISION MAKING PROCESSES IN THE PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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Recently the Government of Pakistan has asked the Extension Administrators (EAs) to work under a different paradigm i.e. Devolution of Power Plan 2001. The present study was formulated to analyze the competency levels of EAs to perform the work under this paradigm. The study represented descriptive survey research. The population for this study consisted of 134 Extension Administrators (EAs) employed in the Punjab Province, Pakistan. One hundred and twelve (112) respondents were selected randomly. Face and content validity of the instrument was established. Questionnaire containing decision making competency with 7 competency statements was mailed to these respondents. The useable response rate was 63% (71 out of 112). After data collection, data were analyzed by using SPSS "Statistical Package for Social Sciences". The discrepancies were ranging from lowest value 1.32 to highest value 1.55; it means that EAs needed training in all 7 competencies in decision-making. The scientific attitude towards decision making and problem solving is very rarely found in Pakistan especially in rural communities. However, it is very common among people of developed countries. The EAs who know the subject matter of Agronomy and other related aspects of agriculture need to be trained in scientific decision making process and procedure.
Keywords: Training needs, decision making, agri. extension

INTRODUCTION

The population of Pakistan is estimated to be 152.25 millions, making it the 7th most popular country in the world. Its land area (79.6 million Ha), however, ranks thirty-second among nations. Agriculture is the mainstay of Pakistan economy. Nearly one fourth (23%) of the total output (GDP) and 42% of the total employment is generated in agriculture sector (Govt. of Pakistan, 2006).

Farming is the largest economic activity in all areas of Pakistan. Most of the crops are grown in the Indus plain in the Punjab and Sindh. Although considerable development and expansion of output has occurred since the early 1960s; however, the country is still far from realizing the large potential yield that well-irrigated and fertile soil from the Indus irrigated farming community particularly the extension administrators are not competent regarding timely and scientific decision due to which a big gap between potential yield and the average yield has been resulted.. The purpose of the study was to examine the training needs of Agricultural Extension Administrators (EAs) in efficient decision making process in the Punjab, Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

Population and sample: The descriptive survey research was used for this study. The population for this study consisted of 134 extension administrators employed in the Punjab Province, Pakistan. The population form was obtained from Department of Agriculture (Extension Wing), Punjab, Lahore**.**

Instrumentation: The researcher developed the survey instrument by adopting competence from the instruments developed by Easter (1985). Face and content validity of the instrument was established. After pre-testing suggestions were incorporated. Likert scale was used ranging from 1 to 5, 1-Very Low (VL), 2=Low (L), 3=Average (A), 4=High (H), 5=Very High (VH).

Data collection and data analyses: Questionnaires were mailed to the respondents along with stamped self-address envelope. Two follow-ups (First in English and second in Urdu) were mailed to increase the response rates. The overall response rate was 63%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Decision making is an essence of Administrator job, typically described as "Choosing among alternative". Extension administrators themselves rated the competencies they possessed the importance levels of these competences for their job performance. The data regarding their perception are shown in the Table 1.

Extension administrators (EAS) rated all seven competencies as having a high level of importance (mean score=4.24 to 4.48) for their job performance. Out of these competencies the top two competencies for the job performance for EAS as prescribed by themselves were, the ability to make decisions based on statistical results (M=4.48); the ability to interpret statistical data (M=4.41). The two competencies which received lowest rank order on the importance scale were: the ability to analyze statistical data (M=4.24); the ability to make effective decisions (M=4.28).

Perceptions of the Extension Administrators regarding the competencies they possessed ranged from a mean score of 2.69 to 3.07 on a five point scale. The competencies possessed by EAs at a higher level were: the ability to respond promptly to clients' requested (M=3.07): the ability to apply scientific methods in decision making (M=2.96). The competencies which received lowest rank order on the possessed level scale are: the ability to analyze statistical data (M=2.69) and the ability to interpret statistical data (M=2.87). These findings indicate that EAs are less competent in the application of statistical data supported by the findings of Hondale (1982), UNDP (1991) and Khan (2003). The data presented in Table 1 shows that EAs are chosen on the basis of their technical background rather than supervisory skills. Consequently they have to learn new skills on the job. May be EAs often make subjective decision rather than objective/scientific. Moreover, there is a need to conduct a qualitative study regarding how EAs make decision during their job. The findings of that qualitative study will help understand the decision making process of EAs in depth.

The discrepancy values (DVs) on the basis of difference between the importance levels of competencies for the job performance of EAS and the possessed levels of competencies were calculated. These differences were considered as training needs in the identified competencies. The data concerning these aspects presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Rank orders, means, and standard deviations of importance and possessed levels of competencies (decision making category)

Competency	Importance Level			Possessed Level		
The ability to ---	R*	M	SD	R	M	SD
Make decisions based on statistical results	1	4.48	0.73	3	2.93	0.80
Interpret statistical data	2	4.41	0.84	6	2.87	0.94
Respond promptly to clients' requests	3	4.39	0.57	1	3.07	0.83
Apply scientific methods in decision making	4	4.38	0.80	2	2.96	0.84
Solve problems efficiency	5	4.35	0.56	5	2.87	0.83
Make affective decisions	6	4.28	0.57	4	2.89	0.78
Analyze statistical data	7	4.24	0.90	7	2.69	0.90

*R=Rank, M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

Table 2. Rank orders of the training needs of extension administrators on the basis of differences between importance levels (IL) and possessed levels (PL) of competencies (decision making category)

Competency	IL	PL	Diff*	R
The ability to ---				
Make decisions based on statistical results	4.48	2.93	1.55	1
Analyze statistical data	4.24	2.69	1.55	2
Interpret statistical data	4.41	2.87	1.54	3
Solve problems efficiency	4.35	2.87	1.48	4
Apply scientific methods in decision making	4.28	2.96	1.42	5
Make affective decisions	4.28	2.89	1.39	6
Respond promptly to clients' requests	4.39	3.07	1.32	7

*Diff=Difference (IL-PL), R=Rank

The discrepancy values between the importance levels of competencies for the job performance of extension administrators and the levels of these competencies possessed by them were considered as training needs of EAs in these competencies. Out of 7 training needs of EAs, the most important (top two) were: (1) the ability to make decisions based on statistical results (DV=1.55) and (2) The ability to analyze statistical data (DV=1.55). The training needs with lowest impotence levels included: (1) the ability to respond promptly to client's requests (DV=1.2) and (2) and the ability to make affective decisions (DV=1.39)

The discrepancy values based on the mean perceptions of EAs were positive values for all competencies ranging from lowest values 1.32 to highest value 1.55. It means that EAs needed training in all seven competencies in "Decision Making" identified in Table 2.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from the data presented in the Table 2 indicate the training needs of EAs in the identified competency statements regarding Decision Making. According to Soubeiga (2005) scientific decision making consists of a range of analytical (typical quantitative) models and methods employed to support effective decision making. It advocates analyzing, investigation and recommending cost-effective solutions to real-world problems arising in government and non-government organizations. The scientific attitude towards decision making and problem solving is very rarely found in Pakistan epically in rural communities. However, it is very common among people of developed countries. The EAs who know the subject matter of Agronomy and other related aspects of agriculture need to be trained in scientific decision making process and procedure. The Focus Group Discussion concluded that this attitude can be developed through successive on-the-job critical discussions and informal in-service training sessions.

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