

Decision Theory

Many theorists accept the idea that administration and decision making are almost the same, or at least that decision-making is the most critical aspect of administration. If any theory is involved, it is that decision-making is the heart of administration. The task of “deciding” pervades the entire administrative organization quite as much as the task of “doing-indeed, it is integrally tied up with the latter. A general theory of administration must include principles of organization that will insure correct decision-making, just as it must include principles that will insure effective action.

Griffiths, influenced by Barnard and Simon, took the position that decision making was central to administration in that it was more important than other functions and that other administrative functions can be best interpreted in terms of the process of decision making. Basic to Griffith’s theory were four assumptions about administration:

1. Administration is a generalized type of behavior to be found in all human organizations.
2. Administration is the process of directing and controlling life in a social organization.
3. The specific function of administration is to develop and regulate the decision-making process in the most effective manner possible.
4. The administrator works with groups or with individuals with a group referent, not with individuals as such.

Most decisions within organizations are based on one or more previous decisions (i.e. they are sequential). Two types of organizations are viewed as affecting decisions: the formal and the informal. The form of the formal organization is seen as a function of the decision-making process. Informal organizations (dynamic structures representing special interests and subject to continual revision) serve to alter the decision-making process of the formal organization.

Griffiths identified three occasions when an administrator makes a decision:

1. when given an authoritative communication from a superior
2. when a case has been referred from a subordinate
3. at the personal initiative of the administrator

The literature is full of references to decision making. Most frequently writers have given attention to the following:

1. definition of decision making
2. classes and types of decisions
3. sources and stages of decision making
4. steps in the decision-making process

1. Definition of Decision Making

The decision-making process has been defined as a judgment made relative to a state of affairs that influences the course of action that follows-and the acts necessary to put the decision into effect.

2. Classes and Types of Decisions

First, decisions should be classified as to ends or means. Second, decisions should be classified as relating to intentions or actualities. Looking at the two concepts in relation to each other, decisions in education may be classified as relating to goals (intended ends), procedural designs (intended means), attainments (actual ends), or procedures in use (actual means). Within this context there are four types of educational decisions:

1. planning decisions to determine goals
2. structuring decisions, which specify means to achieve goals
3. implementing decisions, which refer to carrying through on plans (i.e. actual means)
4. recycling decisions, which focus on actual attainments in relation to intended ends at a given point in time

3. Sources and Stages of Decision Making

Stufflebeam and six associates advanced a theory of decision-making that was linked directly to educational evaluation. The position taken was that decision making is a four-stage process:

1. becoming aware that there is need for a decision
2. designing the situation
3. selecting an alternative
4. taking action in terms of the selected alternative

They also identified three major sources for becoming aware of the need for a decision:

1. decision situations that have been identified and decision-making responsibilities fixed well in advance. (There are programmed situations that can be anticipated by the logical nature of the organization)
2. unmet needs or unsolved problems (An evaluation system for monitoring is important in this instance)
3. opportunities, representing the difference between the present state of affairs and what desirable better state could be achieved if a change was made

4. Steps in the Decision-Making Process

Griffiths conceived the decision-making process as a sequential process culminating in decisions, which lead to action, and consisting of the following steps:

1. recognize, define and limit the problem
2. analyze and evaluate the problem
3. establish criteria by which a selected solution may be judged
4. collect data
5. identify alternative solutions or decisions
6. evaluate alternative solutions in light of the established criteria
7. select one alternative solution and put it into effect (pilot it)
8. evaluate the decision in action and provide feedback
9. modify the decision in terms of the feedback and finalize it

Remember that decision making on questions of broad educational policy must take into consideration the following four components:

1. the participants in the process
2. the organizational level at which decisions are made
3. the influences that play on those involved
4. the logic of the decision making (i.e. the kinds of considerations involved)