Bright Ideas
Supporting Organizational Excellence & Innovation

Policies, procedures and job descriptions

Maintaining a good fit

Even though January is a few months off, many of us think of September as the start of the new year. Along with back-to-school shopping, this is a good time to make sure your organization has everything it needs for a fresh start after summer vacations.

Children and organizations both grow over time; just as children outgrow clothes, organizations outgrow policies, procedures and job descriptions. The traditional pencil case of my youth got new technology each school year—pencils, erasers (especially erasers), paper and, eventually, a protractor and compass. For organizations, technology that once worked well may no longer be up to the task.

Rules that work

Policies and procedures are the oil that makes an organization run smoothly. While a mission sets the direction of the organization, the policies set the boundaries for how it will fulfill that mission. Policies are guidelines for decision making by members of the organization at all levels. They create consistency and set limits so that people know what is expected and what is allowed. Too much time explaining a rule or correcting errors is a sure sign that rules are unclear and need rewriting. If more than one person is in charge, individual variations in understanding or differences in priorities result in vague rules being applied unevenly—or unfairly.

No matter how detailed, a rule can never cover every scenario.

A good policy includes a statement of purpose and the boundaries for decisions. It recognizes that no matter how detailed, a rule will never be able to cover every possible scenario. The statement of purpose outlines the intention and principles that should govern decisions. For example, a conflict of interest policy typically indicates that the interests of the organization must outweigh the interests of individuals (i.e., board members, staff, their family and friends) in decisions that affect the welfare of the organization.

Boundaries are the applicable limits or lines of authority. For example, some decisions must be approved by a supervisor or the board. Most conflict of interest policies require that the individual who stands to benefit directly or indirectly from a decision declare the conflict and refrain from participating in the decision-making process.

Most policies are written—or rewritten—because someone lacked the common sense to figure out how to behave appropriately. My personal favourite was when we had to rewrite the parking pass policy to specify that the pass had to be placed face up on the dashboard, because people were wondering why they got a parking ticket when they had a parking pass...in their glove compartment.

In all fairness, some policies, such as those for conflict of interest, benefit from examples that illustrate the common types of situations that would be a problem and those that would not. If examples are included, the policy will require a state-

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ment indicating that the examples are not a complete list of infractions. Before committing these to print, it is important for those in charge to discuss the policy and scenarios to be sure everyone is on the same page. Otherwise, variations in understanding and priorities will continue to be problems.

Steps to success

Just as policies are guidelines for decision making, procedures are guidelines for action. They ensure that everything that needs to be done gets done—and done by the most appropriate person. They say

- Who takes action
- What action is taken
- Where appropriate, the order and timing of the action

Procedures should use concrete action words that you can picture. For instance, "manages" is not a good action word for a procedure because one can picture a variety of different behaviours that fit that term. If more than one mental picture is possible, try to find wording that leads to a single interpretation.

Likewise, procedure steps should be stated in an active rather than passive way. For instance, a procedure for service requests should not start with someone "receiving" the request. Either the client should "send the request" or the insider should "read the request." Like "manages," "processes the request" is unhelpful to someone not already in the know.

Finally, check procedures for efficiency. Who needs to be involved in the action or approval process? How can technology be used to flag the need for action or speed the flow of the process? Are forms clear and succinct? Do they make sense to those who must use them? Are they accessible to those who need them? This is a good opportunity to engage those who are affected by the rules and procedures, whether they are other board members, staff, members or clients. The end result may be less red tape and more real accountability.

Descriptions that fit

Without occasional review, job descriptions get stretched out of shape until even "other duties as required" leaves gaping holes. On boards, one person may take on a role that fits best with another job title because of individual skill sets (and sometimes access to technology or software). Staff with the same position and job description may end up with radically different-looking days because of extra responsibilities.

Organizations often struggle with the dilemma of desiring a uniform job description for those who share the same job title, but needing to give individuals add-on responsibilities not shared by others with that title. These add-ons may be special projects, committee work or things-that-need-doing-and-are-nobody's-job. The simplest solution is to create a uniform basic job description shared by all in the same position as "Part A," and create a "Part B" of each job description that is specific to the individual. Consider also whether individuals' add-ons are equal in responsibility, time commitment and required expertise. Where they are not, expectations for efficiency or profitability should be adjusted accordingly. Some add-ons may even be compensated differently (e.g., those with responsibilities normally carried out by someone higher in the hierarchy).

Finally, just as procedures require the steps to complete a task, job descriptions (particularly the add-ons) require a how-to manual for the purposes of succession planning. If a person retires, leaves for a new job or is out of commission for a long time, someone else needs to take on what the person did. If the directions were only in the person's head, much time will be lost reconstructing or reinventing the wheel. While someone taking over that role should be given the flexibility to carry out tasks differently, it should be with the benefit of knowing how it was done before.

From Where I Sit

Managing vs. micromanaging

I was made aware long ago of my willingness to micro-manage competent people and have worked hard to kick the habit. (Only my husband can now tell if I've succeeded and he's not talking on pain of having to do his own cooking forever after.)

Well-constructed policies, procedures and job descriptions make it possible to manage without micro-managing because they tell people the key principles and the limits within which they work to meet organizational outcomes. They give the ideal balance of freedom for Gen Xers and direction for Millennials.