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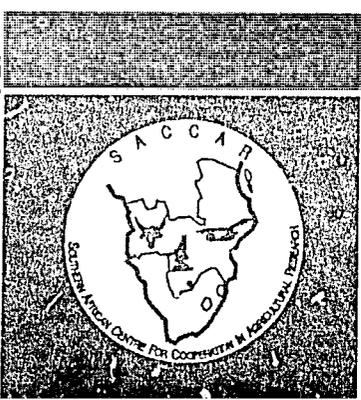
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Author:

Luka O. Abe

Project Coordinator

SADCC/ISNAR In-Service Agricultural
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AGROVOC Descriptors:

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SOCIALIZATION OF STAFF IN NARS

Luka O. Abe

Young researchers, joining a national agricultural research system (NARS) in their early careers, may face difficulties in the workplace unless a well-structured program of orientation and induction is laid out for them as they enter into the organization. Indeed, the working methods of the NARS and the culture of research may be bewildering, and a nightmare for the uninitiated researcher. In the SADCC NARS, the majority of staff joining the organization do so after their BSc training, and most of these undertake postgraduate education, usually abroad, before returning to work for the NARS. Both new recruits in a NARS and the researcher who has been in training away from the country need to undergo socialization in their entry or re-entry into the organization.

Definition

What then, is socialization? What is the rationale and justification for such a seemingly simple process? After all, since most staff are recruited within the country, they should have no difficulty adjusting to their environment! But this is not always the case. Socialization may be viewed as a process by which new staff, recruits or individuals, joining an institution are made to become productive members of the organization in the most efficient and effective way. It involves being initiated into the culture and introduced to the business contexts of the organization.

NARS Culture and Business Contexts in Socialization

In the NARS, the most critical elements of the business context are strategy for agricultural research, the generation of production technology, and the transfer of the technology to users, with primary emphasis on increased agricultural productivity and national development as the ultimate goals. The purview of the NARS embodies the goals and mandate of the institute, the resources at its disposal, the stakeholders and competitors (especially for resources), and the key changes the institution faces. On the other hand, elaboration of the culture to new staff should include an introduction to norms and values of the NARS with respect to how it organizes its research, how staff are ex-

pected to be treated, what behaviors are rewarded, and how conflicts are resolved. Specifically, the new staff's consciousness raising will stress, inter alia, their personal role in the NARS strategy and how to adapt to it, the professional culture, organizational politics, training benefits, reward systems (salaries and other benefits), the teamwork approach in research, the rituals, and the use of NARS information and communication systems. The net gain to the institution in having an effective socialization system is the maximization of the commitment of young researchers to the NARS workforce.

The vision elaborated in the strategic plan of an organization is often difficult to explain to new staff, since the concept may be elusive and managers, themselves, may have some trouble expressing it. Nonetheless, effective socialization attempts to accomplish this. New staff must be assisted in understanding the organization's culture, as well as knowing its people, organizational needs, and operational strategy. The research culture is complex, and the skills and resources required to make it function are diverse, as is the environment in which it operates. Young researchers are immediately faced with challenges in the form of the organization's clients: resource-poor farmers, extension agents, private-sector organizations, government institutions, and industry. The connections are not always easy to discern.

Young recruits are not expected to assimilate everything in a short period. It is hoped that through proper communication mechanisms, they can develop an appreciation of the diverse elements of the organization in the shortest time possible. The speed with which this occurs obviously depends upon their previous experience — whether they have worked in a NARS before, their level of education, their disciplinary background, etc.

Rationale for Socialization

Why should a NARS pay particular attention to its socialization process? The problem derives from the backgrounds of the recruits; the integration of individuals with varied backgrounds presents an interesting and challenging perspective to NARS. It is important to understand the unique-

ness of the research enterprise to fully appreciate the dimensions of the problem. Most of these have to do with critical issues in the early career of researchers.

- Research results are required immediately, yet the process can be slow. Young researchers may interpret this as meaning that they should generate rapid results, and 'quick fixes,' but they will be frustrated when confronted with the daunting challenge of conducting research whose results, in order to be productive, must not only address clients' problems, but must also be carried out in the most cost-effective way. It is difficult even for some of the more experienced researchers to comprehend this, let alone try to explain it to the young researcher.

Take the case of the recruit who joins the NARS to work within the plant breeding unit. The group is researching new varieties of maize which are resistant to a maize streak virus and stemborers.

How does one explain to the young researcher that the fruits of such results may not be realized for five years or more?

- Closely connected to this is the fact that the time horizons in our world are much more likely to be either very short or very long. In other words, different processes or activities have different periods of completion. These two considerations may lead to serious frustration and disillusionment unless a young researcher becomes fully aware of them.
- The issue of supervision for young researchers keeps cropping up as a serious concern. In the SADCC NARS, most researchers are young (average age below 37), and about 40% of the researchers have a BSc, 45% have a MSc, and about 15% have a PhD. This means highly experienced research leadership is at a premium. Furthermore, the more experienced, highly trained individuals spend more than 20% of their time in administration. Effective supervision of young staff is therefore difficult to achieve. This problem should be confronted and either solved or explained to the new recruit to avoid frustration. Later in this paper, we explore a way of dealing with this problem.
- Related to the issue of supervision is feedback, so critical in the early career of a young researcher. The success of coaching and counselling by the experienced supervisor is determined by the quality and quantity of feedback the individual receives from the supervisor. Otherwise, young recruits will feel they are working in a vacuum and will become angry and frustrated.

Consider the case of Charles, 25 years old, officer-in-charge of a research station in a remote part of the country. Shortly after graduating from the university with a BSc in agriculture, Charles was sent to head this station, having spent just three weeks at headquarters. The station is conducting research in irrigated rice. Charles is one of the research officers, the other two having joined a year after him. Charles is an entomologist; the other two are an agronomist and an agricultural engineer. They are expected to do adaptive trials on new releases from IRRRI rice varieties. How is it possible for Charles to effectively supervise and coach these two?

- New staff become anxious about promotion and career development in the NARS as soon as they are made aware of the structure and organization of the institution and of their role in the institution and the reporting system. All aspects of performance management need to be fully explained to new staff, and their connection with career advancement, if any, also needs to be explained.

Management of the Socialization Process in NARS

- How do we manage the socialization process? The early stage of socialization begins before new staff enters the NARS; in fact, it starts at the university. Unfortunately for many of the NARS staff, this may not be the case, as they may not have had much choice in their placement in research. Some have literally found themselves, by fortune or luck, in the research branch of the ministry. Socialization plays a crucial role in helping such individuals establish themselves in their careers.

Consider the case of Felix, who, after graduating with a BA in agricultural economics, found himself on the streets without a job. After one year, Felix visited the public service commission of country X, and was told there was a position available in the ministry of agriculture's research department. The position was for an agricultural economist to work with the farming systems research (FSR) group. Felix had never heard of FSR, but inquired about the position from the director of agricultural research. He was promptly hired, although he had attained only a second- (lower-) class degree, hardly a competitive level for research qualification.

From the above discourse, it is clear that socialization forms part of the recruitment and selection process. It is the stage of entry into the organization. Figure 1 depicts this, representing the ideal model of the recruitment process; it may vary considerably from the practice in your NARS. Arnold and Feldman (1985) describe three levels of socialization as 'getting in,' 'breaking in,' and 'settling in.' These levels correspond to the adjustment cycle shown in figure 2 for integrating individuals into an organization. It is vital to identify the behavior of recruits, taking appropriate measures either to reinforce or redress behaviors. The learning and adapting process is continuous, but supervisors or other persons designated to oversee this process should be alert and responsive if they are to carry out successful socialization. NARS managers will need to devise a system of signposts or indicators to measure their success. These may include the dependability and commitment of the recruit, a high degree of satisfaction and job involvement in general, a feeling of mutual acceptance, internal work motivation, etc.

Can you identify the three levels and their stages in your socialization process? How do you tackle each level as an HRM manager in the NARS? Cite examples of problems and solutions in your discussion.

Tactics in Socialization

In managing the socialization process in NARS, what tactics could we adopt? For each of the phases, NARS managers must devise mechanisms or approaches that will not only motivate and inspire recruits, but also see them through their research careers. This means conjuring up an environment of creativity and productivity in the first instance. Some of the tactics NARS managers could deploy are described below.

Take the case of a recruit who joins the NARS and is asked by his supervisor in the first week to travel with technicians to collect soil samples from various farmers' fields in the country. The analysis of the samples is done by the technicians, while the young researcher simply watches or spends his time in the library. This continues for several months before the supervisor assigns him a specific job to undertake a literature search for a paper he is to present at the regional symposium on land and water management.

What is the problem with this approach?

- As this may be the first serious encounter with productive research and development for recruits, their first impression may determine how quickly they will be assimilated and able to accept and realize their role in the organization. It is therefore vital that their first job or assignment in the organization be challenging but not insurmountable.
- Researchers often require very specific skills or use specialized methodologies for both laboratory and field studies. Unless the new recruits have done research before, it is unlikely that they will have acquired these requisite skills. The provision of relevant training in a timely way is crucial for successful and rapid socialization. Experienced researchers and technicians are often better at providing this in-service training, or coaching, of recruits. But this will not happen unless a well-structured program is laid out to accomplish this; it should be a continuous process guided by needs.
- Some NARS will arrange orientation for recruits, such as a session with the training officer on their first day to plan a program of visits and discussions with immediate supervisors and staff in the research program, the administrative or personnel officer to discuss standard operating procedures (SOP), and the director of research, head of station, and various physical facilities at the station. Rarely are recruits provided with the NARS research plans, annual report (it is usually too old or no extra copies are available), or even program work plans and their job descriptions.

Both the NARS culture and business contexts need to be explicitly explained to the recruit. There is therefore a need to design a tightly planned, well-focused but relaxed orientation program. Young researchers are often curious and anxious to get on but need strong guidance and leadership.

- It is not always possible to place recruits in work groups with strong research leadership in most of our NARS, as most of the researchers are often young and lack solid experience. However, where possible, work groups must be cohesive and assimilative, with high morale and supportive supervision. The NARS need to train managers in aspects of supervisory leadership that promote organizational effectiveness.
- As stated earlier, the research environment should be creative. Rigidity, overregulation, and demand for overconformity to organizational norms stifle productivity. Flexibility in management with the correct balance of bottom-up, top-down decision-making processes is especially critical for the planning, programming, and implementation of research. Recruits are easily socialized in an environment that is seen as thriving in a collec-

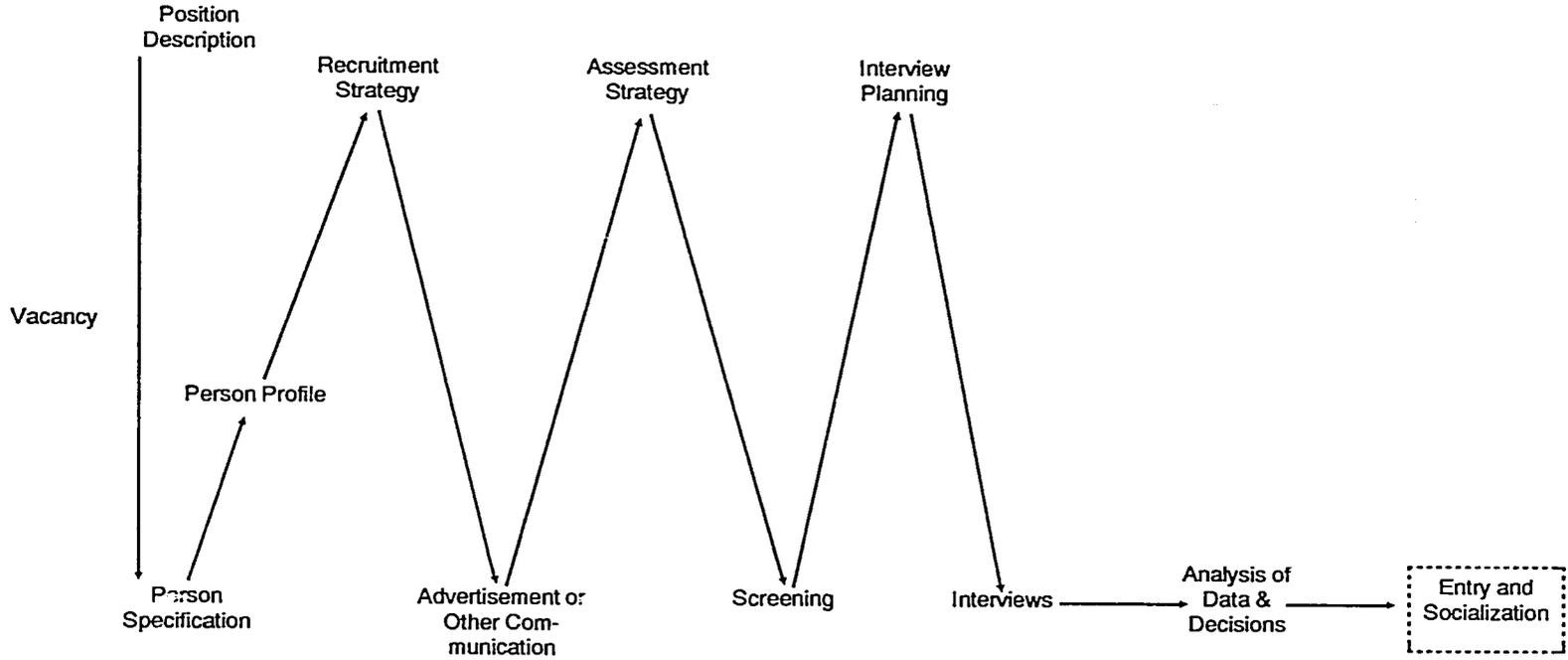


Figure 1. Recruitment and selection.

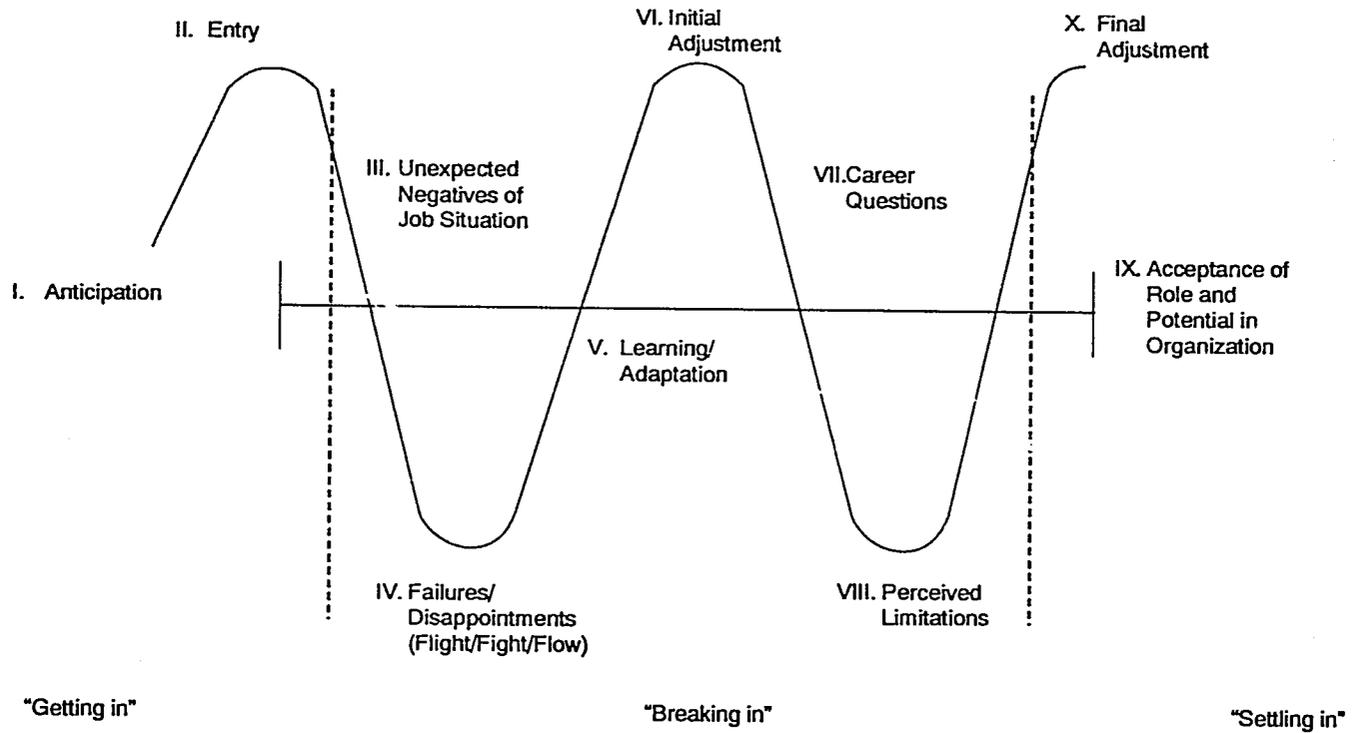


Figure 2. Adjustment cycle of organizational integration

You have research stations in five natural regions of the country. Your NARS is conducting commodity research in maize in four of the natural regions. Maize is one of five commodities; the others are wheat, sorghum, livestock and pastures, and agroforestry. You have a recruit fresh from the university with a BSc in agriculture. He is to be placed at one of the research institutes (stations) to work as part of a research team conducting on-farm trials on maize. The team consists of a senior researcher with a PhD in plant breeding, an economist (with an MSc), and an agronomist (with a PhD). The agronomist is a foreign expert and it is the wish of your NARS to train and develop the young recruit to replace the foreign expert in the program within three to four years.

You are being requested to design and implement an orientation program for the individual. How do you proceed? How would you handle that for staff who have been on overseas training for four years? Would you use a similar approach?

tive teamwork approach, where goals, targets, and standards are set in a consultative manner.

Constraints in Socialization

In a NARS or research program where there is high turnover or a continuous flow of recruits, the task of socialization may be daunting and time-intensive for the NARS manager. Furthermore, socialization may require stretching the training department's budget if funds are not allocated. But as explained, it is an extremely important function in the NARS and efforts and resources must be devoted to it if an effective job is to be done.

What are some of your own frustrations?

How do you resolve these?

Discuss.

References

Arnold, J. M. and D. C. Feldman. 1986. *Organizational Behavior*. McGraw-Hill Series in Management. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.