

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions....

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by

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Much has been written about different problem solving methodologies. Whether they are comprised of four or ten steps, they usually encompass the following types of activities: identification of the problem, background information to understand why the problem even exists or what things have been done in the past to try to solve it, some type of generation of ideas and an associated grouping or discussion surrounding them, a decision, and then implementation. If the group implementing the solution is quality conscious, they'll also include some type of review to ensure the problem was effectively corrected.

When learning about these methodologies, however, not much thought or discussion is given to the decision steps of the process. And that is a key in determining whether the proposed fix will be implemented properly and sustain the test of time. There is no clear cut way to do this. Every problem and the respective team responsible for solving it have their own respective idiosyncrasies that require a different set of considerations. When choosing what type of decision making methodology to use, keep in mind the following factors: time constraints, complexity of decision, impact of implementation, competence/knowledge of team, and group support/commitment.

The type of decision making methodology should be determined prior to the meeting where the decision will be made. This will give those affected by the

decision a “heads-up” as to what role they will play. It will also help the facilitator to be better prepared for the meeting:

- ◆ ***Unilateral decisions*** are made by a leader without obtaining information from others. This method should be used when the decision must be made immediately, has no direct impact on the group, or is not important to the group
- ◆ ***Consultative decisions*** are made by a leader after obtaining the views of the people who are concerned with the issues to be decided. This method should be used when other people have information relative to the decision, and (a) the implementation of the decision requires minimum support or (b) considerations prevent the use of the consensus method.
- ◆ ***Consensus decisions*** are made by the group that will implement them. The leader has no more weight in making the decision than any other group member. Leaders shouldn't control the outcome nor offer their ideas until everyone else has had that opportunity. Issues are discussed until everyone's ideas are understood and there is a general agreement on how to proceed. This method is used when (a) the group has enough knowledge, competence, and experience to make a sound decision, (b) the decision has a large impact on many people, (c) discussion of opposing views is needed to gather essential data and to make a sound decision and (d) group support and commitment are essential to implementing the decision.

Before the Leader decides that he/she will make the final decision, the pros and cons of doing this should be weighed. On a positive note, decisions will be

made faster, since there will be less pressure to involve many people in the final decision and group conformity will be avoided. On the negative side, the Leader may make a decision based solely on his/her own attitudes and may ignore group opinions. In addition, there is more pressure on one single individual to make a sound decision.

The fact that smart individuals participate in a group doesn't necessarily mean that a smart decision will be produced. Groups need guidance regardless of who is participating. The benefits of a group decision include providing a broader range of knowledge, offering a wider range of alternatives, and enabling a better understanding of the issues. Furthermore, the group will be more likely to accept and effectively implement the decision.

However, the negative aspect of group decision making are those related to most group interactions: one person may dominate, social pressure may hold group members back, competition among team members may develop, or the group may accept the first positive solution and not look at other solutions.

There are many other issues to consider when working within a group. Most often group members are influenced by outside forces in the decisions that they make. They may sway toward the decisions of their peers in order to be "socially accepted". Some individuals are naturally aggressive or less compassionate. Some people may have the "I don't care attitude" while others care very much. The group's attitude can also determine the type of decision being made. Caution should be exercised to accept a decision that is set up to

fail (e.g. short timer's perspective) or one that is complacent (e.g. "everything is fine").

All of these behaviors influence the style, type, and level of consideration of a group member's decision. The leader/facilitator should take a quick inventory of attitudes and personalities to assure low levels of hostility and/or indecisiveness (e.g. illusion of invulnerability, self-censorship, high stress). These internal group factors can lead to poor decision making:

- ◆ The members of the group may like each other and do not want to cause conflict.
- ◆ The subject of discussion may be such a secret that progress cannot be discussed with outsiders.
- ◆ The decision may be of such importance that the group is under great pressure to decide.
- ◆ The leader may have stated up front his/her beliefs, making it hard for the group to state their own beliefs due to a fear of losing their job or reputation.

The group itself may exert pressures on its own members:

- ◆ A member may not express his/her true opinion out of fear of being ridiculed
- ◆ The group may pressure members who do not agree
- ◆ Group members may think they are invulnerable
- ◆ Stereotypes made by the group for people outside the group and for which decisions are being made can lead to tragic decisions.

One of the techniques to use when trying to arrive at a group decision includes never allowing the leader to state his/her opinion until all other participants have expressed their own opinions. And using a balloting system vs. a show of hands ensures anonymity and may reduce some of the outside influences

If a group decision is to be made, the process by which the group will make the decision should be considered:

- ◆ **Majority Rules-** This can be done easily and quickly by a simple hand count where the highest number “wins”. Some variations on this popular method include *preference patterns* (e.g. use of weighting system based on who is most impacted), *forced ranking* (e.g. each team member force ranks the choices, the numbers are added together, and an overall ranking from their sum is determined and is the “winner”), and multiple votes (e.g. each member given x votes and culls out their top choices, those with the highest sum of all “wins”)
- ◆ **Consensus-** This decision is made when the group accepts a decision but may not fully agree. This is essentially a compromise, an “I can live with this decision” mentality
- ◆ **Unanimity-** Everyone in the group fully agrees on the decision (e.g. jury)
- ◆ **Optimization-** The group picks the best alternative from a list of possible decisions/options (e.g. least worst)
- ◆ **Satisficing** -The group picks the first alternative that meets the decision makers’ minimum standard of satisfaction. This is a cross between leader and group decision making. The group picks the initial information and the leader makes the final decision.

When many options need to be narrowed down to one, a combination of methods may be used (e.g. reducing 12 choices to the top 3 by consensus and then picking the top choice by majority)

So, back to the problem solving methodology... Regardless of the method of how the problem is identified and options are provided for solving it, ultimately a decision must be made before any change can happen. Careful consideration on how the decision will be made will facilitate proper implementation.

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