

3.4 Decision-Making

Description:

This tool provides a step-by-step guide to effective decision-making.

How it can be used:

"We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run down."
(Aneurin Bevan)

Decisions are made all the time and range from very simple to very complex. Generally, difficult decisions involve issues related to:

- **Uncertainty** – many facts may not be known
- **Complexity** – there are several interrelated factors to consider
- **High-risk consequences** – the impact of the decision may be significant
- **Alternatives** – each comes with uncertainties and consequences
- **Interpersonal issues** – may be difficult to predict how other people will react

Given the challenges in complex decision-making, it is critical to use a concrete and effective process. Without a well-defined process, you risk making decisions that are based on insufficient information and analysis. If you base your decision-making on a strong foundation, generate good alternatives, evaluate these alternatives rigorously, and then check your decision making process, you will improve the quality of your decisions.

Quite simply, using a logical and organized decision making process will lead to better decisions. Follow the steps below to help you clearly and systematically seek effective answers when you make an important decision.

1. Define the problem (with input from yourself and others).

Ask yourself and others, the following questions:

- What can you see that causes you to think there's a problem?
- Where is it happening?
- How is it happening?
- When is it happening?
- With whom is it happening? (HINT: Don't jump to "Who is causing the problem?" When we're stressed, blaming is often one of our first reactions. To be an effective manager, you need to address issues more than people.)
- Why is it happening?
- Write down a five-sentence description of the problem in terms of "The following should be happening, but isn't ..." As much as possible, be specific in your description, including what is happening, where, how, with whom and why. (It may be helpful at this point to use a variety of research methods.)

If the problem still seems overwhelming, break it down by repeating the steps above until you have descriptions of several related problems. It helps a great deal to verify your problem analysis by conferring with a respected peer or leader. If you discover that you are looking at several related problems, then prioritize which ones you should address first.

Your role in the problem can greatly influence how you perceive the role of others. For example, if you're very stressed out, it'll probably look like others are, too, or, you may resort too quickly to blaming and reprimanding others. Or, if you are feeling guilty about your role in the problem, you may ignore the accountabilities of others.

2. Look at potential causes for the problem.

It's amazing how much you don't know about what you don't know. Therefore, in this phase, it's critical to get input from other people who notice the problem and who are affected by it.

- It's often useful to collect input from other individuals one at a time (at least at first). Otherwise, people tend to be inhibited about offering their impressions of the real causes of problems.
- Write down your opinions and what you've heard from others.
- Write down a description of the cause of the problem in terms of what is happening, where, when, how, with whom and why.

3. Identify alternatives to resolve the problem.

At this point, it's useful to keep others involved (unless you're facing a personal and/or employee performance problem). Brainstorm for solutions to the problem.

4. Select an approach to resolve the problem.

When selecting the best approach, consider which solution is most likely to solve the problem for the long term. The approach selected should be the most realistic to accomplish for now with minimal risk. It needs to be affordable and able to be accomplished within the time available.

5. Plan the implementation of the best solution (this is your action plan).

Carefully consider "What will the situation look like when the problem is solved?"

- What steps should be taken to implement the best solution to solving the problem? What systems or processes should be changed in your organization, for example, a new policy or procedure? Don't resort to solutions where someone is "just going to try harder".
- How will you know if the steps are being followed or not? (these are your indicators of the success of your plan)
- What resources will you need in terms of people, money and facilities?
- How much time will you need to implement the solution? Write a schedule that includes the start and stop times, and when you expect to see certain indicators of success.
- Who will primarily be responsible for ensuring implementation of the plan?
- Write down the answers to the above questions and consider this as part of your action plan.
- Communicate the plan to those who will be involved in implementing it and, at least, to your immediate supervisor.

6. Monitor implementation of the plan.

Monitor the indicators of success and ask these questions:

- Are you seeing what you would expect from the indicators?
- Will the plan be done according to schedule?
- If the plan is not being followed as expected, then consider: Was the plan realistic? Are there sufficient resources to accomplish the plan on schedule? Should more priority be placed on various aspects of the plan? Should the plan be changed?

7. Verify if the problem has been resolved.

Determine if the problem has been solved as a result of the implementation plan. In addition, you should consider:

- What changes should be made to avoid this type of problem in the future? Consider changes to policies and procedures, training, etc.
- What did you learn from solving this problem? Consider new knowledge, understanding and/or skills.
- Consider writing a brief memo that highlights the success of the problem solving effort, and what you learned as a result. Share it with your supervisor, peers and subordinates.