

Decision Making — A Necessary Process

GEORGE W. PORTER

Business, civic, religious, family and other groups have many things in common. However, when the operation of these units are examined, one item seems to stand out above all. This operations item deals with the way each group is able to answer or render decisions to the questions or problems which they encounter. It might be said then that the success of the group depends upon the method and process of rendering decisions.

It has come to be an established premise that successful people are able to make decisions which bring about growth and advancement either for themselves or for the enterprise they represent. Those who are unable to make successful decisions do not advance either within or outside of their respective enterprises. With this in mind, people who want to help others develop their inherent abilities to think and to grow should have a desire to look at the process of decision making.

We might ask ourselves a few questions then. Is the process of decision making a simple or difficult one? What

factors should be considered? Wherein lie the difficulties, if any? Can the process be developed?

Process

In examining the entire process, this author sees a definite pattern in decision making and divides it into four main categories:

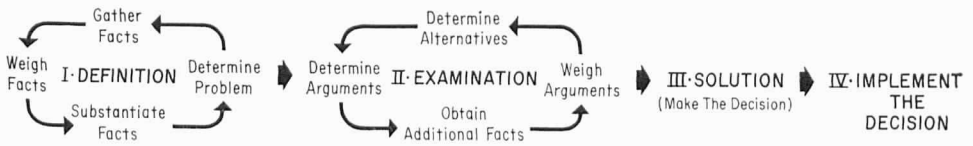
1. Definition
2. Evaluation
3. Solution
4. Implementation

Each of these categories may be subdivided into areas or spheres of activity as follows (Figure 1):

1. Definition
Gather and weigh facts and determine problem.
2. Examination
Look for alternatives and examine further need for material to substantiate arguments for decision.
3. Solution
Make a decision based on collected material.

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Figure 1. Illustration of Process of Decision Making



4. Implementation

Put decision into practice and follow through to assure it as correct.

Definition

To understand the problem requiring a decision, it is imperative that a clear understanding of the facts surrounding the situation is present. This means that the situation must be examined objectively to determine the necessary facts for two reasons: To determine if there is a problem, and to determine what it is.

This raises the question then as to what are facts? Are there differences in types of facts? How much weight should be placed on the various types of facts? Answers to these questions are pertinent to defining the problem which is to be decided.

A fact is something that a person can see, hear, feel or smell. It is something that cannot be disputed. It is an actual happening—a truth that cannot be disputed. For example:

A man might say, "I am wearing shoes" which is a fact. He knows this is an undisputed fact because he sees them and feels them on his feet. However, he could not say positively that his wife has shoes on in the other room and out of his sight even though she was wearing them when she was in the same room with him just a few minutes before. (She could have slipped off her shoes the minute she left. She could be in process of changing shoes, etc.)

Let's take another example and see what facts we could derive from the situation:

A person approaches a friend's house and rings the front door bell. The lights are on in the house. Music can be heard as well as voices. A car is in the garage and the front door is locked.

Can we say from these statements it is a fact that:

- The lights are on in the house?
- Music is being played?
- The people's car is in the garage?
- People are talking in the house?
- The front door is locked?
- The people are home?
- The people are alive?
- The bell rings?
- etc.

Some of these points may be facts while others are those things we may infer to be true. We do not know for sure. For example:

We can infer that the people are home since all outward indications point this way. We can even hear their voices. However, it might be that what we are hearing is a tape-recording of their voices and not them personally.

Therefore, what we infer, or our inferences, might lead us into making incorrect conclusions since they are not based totally on fact. On the other hand, based on past experiences of normal life and on what we know, the chances are good that the inferences may properly lead us to the conclusion that

the people are home. There are some doubts present and the only answer, of course, would be in seeing the people in their house.

Let's look one step further. If we noticed a car in their garage, but we have never seen their car nor know their license plate number we might, in this case, only assume it is theirs. However, in this instance we do not have any facts to go on and the basis we are going to make our decision on is pure guess or assumption. We must look not only at what facts we have but also what type of facts they are.

It becomes apparent then that there are "degrees" of factuality on which we make decisions:

Pure facts—reality or undisputed truths.

Inferences—based on surrounding facts or may be based on assumptions.

Assumptions—not based on any fact or inference but based purely on intuition or guess.

As we look at the difficulties surrounding a problem we find that we must not only be careful to try to obtain as many of the pertinent "facts" to the case as possible, but also we must mentally weigh the degree of factuality of each before making a decision. Many decisions must be based on inferences or assumptions. It is when decisions are predicated on assumptions or inferences and are treated as facts that trouble in the form of wrong decisions comes about. If, however, we base our decisions on inferences or assumptions and recognize them for what they are; then, we pre-

pare ourselves for any difficulties which may arise therefrom.

The recognition of the differences between facts, inferences and assumptions is an important aspect of decision making. The recognition of the differentiations between these three is a skill that can be learned and improved upon. The "Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Test," Form Am,¹ can be used in training courses to stimulate thinking along these lines or to measure the effectiveness of a person's ability to recognize differences between these three most important factors in arriving at decisions for problem solving.

It was developed to measure critical thinking ability—in other words to measure the ability to reason analytically and logically. This ability requires a basic desire for supporting evidence and skill in sizing up situations, examining data, probing doubtful areas and arriving at sound conclusions.

Based on the facts that have been gathered about a situation, the relative importance of the facts, and whether the facts can be substantiated, a clear understanding of the actual problem on which a decision must be given can be derived. It is not always apparent exactly what the problem is. It is only after the facts are gathered and weighed that the real problem can be determined.

Evaluation

Once the problem has been defined, the second step of examining and evaluating the decisions that might be made in solving the problem may be entered into.

1. Can be obtained from World Book Company, Tarrytown-on-Hudson, New York.

The first step in this process is to look for alternatives in arriving at a decision.

This area of "looking for alternatives," calls for creative ideas from any and all sources as to different ways of meeting the problem. The "brainstorming" method of engaging in creative thinking is one way of arriving at a list of ideas.

"Brainstorming,"² as used here, means the process of having a group of people look at a problem with the idea of trying to get as many ideas of ways of solving the problem as possible. During the collection of ideas no evaluation of the ideas takes place. Evaluation takes place later. All that is of interest in a brainstorm session is the number of ideas generated.

After the ideas have been accumulated, they have to be critically analyzed to determine those that are workable and can be used. From this step come the main ideas which in turn may become the alternatives under consideration for adoption. For example:

Plaster falls from the ceiling of a room. The problem is how to fix the ceiling. One decision might be to replace the plaster. However, alternatives might be to put up plaster board covering the old ceiling; another would be to put up acoustic tiles; or still another would be to put up a plywood ceiling and paint it; etc.

With all of the alternatives in mind, the next step would be to look at the arguments, pro and con, for each successive alternative. For example:

In the problem of the ceiling, we would outline the pros and cons on each alternative using the following method:

Alternative No. 1: Replace the plaster with plaster.

Pro

In keeping with original room.
Would only have to repair, not entirely replace.
Cheaper.
etc.

Con

Conducts sound.
May have to have lathing replaced.
Will need further patching in future.
Subject to cracking.
etc.

It is in this step in our decision making process that we find a real danger—that of jumping to conclusions. This takes place when a decision is made using one alternative without examining the pros and cons of others. In these cases answers to the question as to what may reasonably be expected if we take a particular action may not work out as anticipated. However, in examining the alternatives and the factors which work for or against them, it is not unusual to find it necessary to obtain additional facts in order to properly weigh the arguments for or against the particular alternative.

In assigning weights to the various arguments, the positive and negative consequences must be examined in the light of:

- the probability of occurrence.
- the degree of pertinence or importance to the problem.

An argument that is to be considered as an alternate decision must have some

2. "Brainstorming" by Chas. Clark, Doubleday Publishing Company.

degree of assurance to occur. For example:

One of the alternatives to getting a particular problem solved might be that some one could leave the person \$50,000 which would solve not one but all their problems. This would be desirable and very pertinent to the problem but is very improbable to occur.

If the probability of occurrence with the adoption of the alternative is small then the usefulness of the alternative is correspondingly diminished in its strength for its adoption.

In other words, the argument for the alternative can be either a strong or a weak one. To be considered strong, it must be both important and directly related to the problem.

Weak arguments on the other hand may not be directly related to the problem although they may be of great general importance, or they may be of minor importance or of even a trivial nature. Whatever the relative strength is, the person responsible for the final decision must be able to recognize them in their true perspective.

The other weight which should be examined is whether the alternative is really pertinent or important to the problem. For example:

If in making a choice of a person to do secretarial work, one of the aptitudes of an applicant shows her to be a good cook, it would have to be weighed very lightly in comparison with other qualifications of the applicant since it is not really pertinent to the problem.

When all alternatives have been weighed and any necessary additional facts have been accumulated and all the information that can reasonably be gathered has been summarized a decision can usually be decided on with as rea-

sonable a degree of accuracy of results as is possible.

Solution

From what has been outlined in the "Definition" and "Evaluation" steps a decision must be reached. This should take place after all alternatives have been carefully considered and one of them has been selected for activation. However, at times, a second choice may be made to assure action taking place even if the first decision does not work out as anticipated.

It is in the area of making the decision that the choice of action must be taken by some one.

This is not to say that a decision should always be made by an individual. Quite the contrary. Very often after all the facts are in, it is far better to have a decision reached by group action than by an individual. Where the group process is used there is usually a strong group motivation to make the solution work. On the other hand, where an individual makes the decision, there may be resistance to its implementation. However, the pros and cons of the dynamics of group motivations is another subject altogether and much has been written on this subject.

Regardless of the method of reaching a decision, group or individual, it is in this final area of decision making that the responsibility for the choice of action must be taken by someone.

This means that it is imperative to define the problem adequately; evaluate the facts surrounding it; and to weigh all the alternatives before reaching a definite conclusion.

Implementation

Once a choice of action is decided upon it must be activated to be of any use. Weighing facts, evaluating alternatives, making the decision all are to no avail if action is not taken. Therefore, the decision must be acted upon if the process is to be of value. Here is where motivation for its success must be present.

In addition, in order to determine the success or failure of the decision arrived at it is necessary that it be followed up. This necessitates determining not only if the method of solving the problem is being followed but also if the intent of the solution is present. The presence of both are important for adjustments can be made in either in order that the desired results can be eventually derived.

General

From the foregoing, it is apparent that the process of successful decision making is not a simple one. It entails a great deal more than intuition or guess work. It involves understanding the degree of facts which surround the case in question. It further involves both creativity and critical thinking in arriving at a sound decision.

As the entire process is examined, there are some points of danger or difficulties which should be reiterated in conclusion.

The first one has its effect on the manner we arrive at tentative or alternate solutions to the problem by looking at the facts surrounding the problem and understanding the differences between fact, inferences and assumptions.

The second is the difficulty of looking at possible solutions to the problem and trying to determine as many different ways of solving the problem as possible. This calls for creative thinking on the part of the problem solvers. Without imagination this step in the overall process does not offer much unless others are called in to assist in gathering ideas.

The third difficulty lies in the critical analysis of the various possible decisions in order to arrive at one which is to be used.

However, even though difficulties exist in the overall process, it is a process that not only can be learned but also can be continually improved. Like other necessary functions of both successful people and successful enterprises it takes thought, work, and personal motivation to insure its success.

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