



Decision Making

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International Institute of Directors and Managers

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Introduction

When are Managers called on to make decisions? Some may answer “All day, every-day”. And it would be difficult to disagree with such a response. From the moment we start work, managers have to make decisions about “who” is going to do “what”, “when” they are going to do it and “how” they are going to do it.

Having decided this and having taken steps to implement it, things then often start to go wrong. As a result we have to make decisions aimed at overcoming problems. The solutions to problems aren't always black and white. There often isn't one solution but many.

To further complicate the issue, it is often going to be more difficult to put into practice decisions as opposed to making or formulating the decisions.

Therefore, if we are going to effectively address the topic of decision making, we have to cover:

1. The different types of decisions likely to be made (planning and problem solving decisions)
2. The process of formulating decisions, and
3. Implementing the decisions

Planning

Planning is a function of every manager at every level in every business. As a result, within every business there exist managers, making planning decisions, in varying degrees of detail and for differing reasons. Regardless of the rationale of the decisions, the inescapable conclusion is that these planning decisions, made by different managers, at different levels within the company structure, must be “locked in” and have a common purpose or goal.

Problems arise when:

1. A commonness of purpose does not exist
2. The detail of the planning decisions made is not in accord with the level or the position of the manager

The former of the above factors is the more obvious, the easier to detect and therefore the easier to solve. After all, if we don't know what we are supposed to be doing, the operations within our departments will fall apart relatively quickly. The solution to such a problem is obvious. We ask our immediate manager what it is they expect us (and therefore our department) to do. And we plan accordingly.

The latter of the above two factors is far less obvious and therefore much harder to detect and therefore solve. We need to accurately identify our “level” within the managerial framework and be aware of the appropriate detail we ought to give our plans. We need to exhibit appropriate levels of constraint or otherwise when formulating our planning decisions. If we don't, position and role “overlap” will increase as will confusion, hence decreasing the effectiveness of our decisions.

Levels of responsibility

All managers, regardless of their level of responsibility, need to answer the same key planning questions:

1. What do I want done?
2. How will it be done?
3. When will it be done?
4. Who will do it?

As we move up the management ladder, the answers to these questions will become more like company policies. Front-Line Managers on the other hand will answer the questions with much more detail.

For example in answering question 4, a senior manager may reply “the Marketing Department”. A front-line manager would give you a person's name.

Each company will have its own peculiarities which will bring with them variations from the norm as far as management structure and associated areas of responsibility are concerned. However, the following can be used as a “rule of thumb”.

LEVEL	SENIOR MANAGEMENT	MIDDLE MANAGEMENT	FRONT-LINE MANAGEMENT
Planning range	Monthly → Long range	Daily/Weekly → Monthly	Hourly → Daily/Weekly
Planning Issues/ Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting company objectives • Company structure • Departmental functions • Master schedule • Capital expenditure • Targeting of markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity planning for facilities, materials, people skills • Delegation of authority, responsibility • Inter-departmental liaison • Product / service range and emphasis • Departmental budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling work, people, materials • Allocation of work • Developing expectations for individuals • Individual training • Quality control • Machine, building maintenance • Backlog

This is not an exhaustive list of the type of planning decisions the different levels of management has to make, nor is meant to be a precise delineation. As mentioned though, we need to be mindful of our position in the management hierarchy, otherwise our planning decisions will be wayward, lacking in either detail or vision, overlap excessively with the decisions formulated by other personnel, leading to time-wastage and/or conflict.

When making planning decisions we have to ensure that:

1. They do not conflict with our superiors’ decisions, indeed, our decisions must serve to implement our superiors’ decisions, and
2. Our subordinates’ subsequent decisions and actions help fulfil our plans

FRONT-LINE MANAGERS	MIDDLE MANAGERS	SENIOR MANAGERS
Supervisors and Managers who have “workers” reporting directly to them.	Apart from personal assistants, have no workers reporting to them. Those that report to them are Front-line Managers. They are usually Section Managers or heads of relatively small sections.	Heads of relatively large departments, Line-executives (with two or more department heads reports to them) or more Senior Managers.

Staff involvement / Leadership

Having established the level of responsibility of our position, we should remind ourselves that it is only our responsibility to ensure the formulations of such planning decisions. We need not make the decisions on our own, we do after all, have several staff on whom we can rely for help in the decision-making process. But when is it appropriate to use our staff?

We need to consider three main factors, namely:

1. The staff themselves
2. Our preferred leadership style
3. The quality of communication

The staff's suitability for involvement in the planning process would depend on their ability in relation to their work skills, cognitive powers and seniority (ability), together with their willingness to do so.

Depending on our own characteristics such as personality and experience we may prefer to make decisions and then tell or sell our decisions to the staff. Alternatively we may prefer to involve the staff in discussion and debate prior to making decision or even feel comfortable delegating the responsibility for same to selected staff.

Cementing the relationship between the staff and managers is the preferred and prevalent communication style within the department as a whole (largely dependent on us) and as used between various individuals (more a reflection of the skills and personalities of the individuals).

The right degree of involvement of our staff in the decision making process would rely on the correct "matching" of the above three factors. And when are the manager's options as far as staff involvement goes? There are four broad categories, stemming from chosen management style, namely:

Telling

The manager could simply provide the staff with very specific instructions and plans and closely monitor their performance. The best match here would be very authoritative leader communicating on a one-way basis with very inexperienced or unskilled staff who lack initiative.

Selling

While still assuming an authoritative role in terms of making decisions themselves, the manager could utilise limited two-way communication by asking for questions from the inexperienced or unskilled staff, so as to ensure that the staff have a good understanding of and appreciate the rationale behind the manager's decisions.

Involving

Actively listening to and communicating with insecure but skilful staff, a manager interested in developing their subordinates, might encourage them to contribute to the decision-making.

Delegating

A manager, more interested in strategies as opposed to the methodology, may delegate. A necessary option when a manager is “developing” their staff. (*N.B: If a manager has the responsibility to formulate and implement planning at a certain level, then this responsibility cannot be abdicated. Failure to complete the job will still reflect on them. Delegation does not mean managers relinquish their responsibility.)

INVOLVING OTHERS	
Option/Category:	
Circumstances:	
Attributes of Manager:	
Attributes of Staff:	
Work situation:	
Advantages:	
Disadvantages:	
Examples:	

Making decisions and solving problems

Many managers will find numerous reasons for not making planning decisions. It might be that “I haven’t enough time” or “This area is too unpredictable” or “My people know what they are doing”. Whatever the reasons are, the result will be the same.

If you avoid making decisions today, you have created your first problem, which will multiply many times over.

The steps involved in making decisions, however, will be the same, regardless of whether they are planning decisions or decisions that have to be made as a result of problems arising from poor planning, poor implementation or variables which are beyond the control of the manager. The actual need to make a decision for many people is a problem in itself.

Personal skills

All of us have, to varying degrees, the skills of Knowledge, Logic, Judgement and Creativity.

Knowledge

When acquiring knowledge, we normally rely on either education or personal experience.

Our knowledge base is influenced by both the level of our education and the area or extent of specialisation. Solutions to specific or highly specialised problems may demand a certain education background. On-the-job training, constant communication with others and/or exposure over a period of time enables us to build on our experience. Past experience may allow us to arrive at a solution without having to follow an exhaustive path of option elimination. Conversely, experience may tend to cement certain beliefs within us, creating an inflexible attitude and a rigidity in our approach to problem solving.

Logic

We constantly absorb information, through all our senses, categorising and using it to reinforce previously held knowledge. This process is called logic. This process also allows us to reason and to determine the cause, effect and consequences of happenings within our environment.

Logic can be used to find a solution to problems by collecting facts and then arranging them in such a way that a pattern emerges which fits our requirements and can therefore be used as a solution.

While it is very useful to have a “logical mind”, sometimes all the facts are not available and a very logical, very methodical person may be incapable of proceeding.

Judgement

When we don’t have all the facts or we are presented with a number of equally good options, we can only assess the probability of an event occurring. In these situations we have to

exercise some judgement. That is not to say that judgement is guess-work. We exercise “sound judgement” when we call on all our knowledge, compare our present predicament to past experiences and try to establish what the similarities are. Having taken into account all the facts available, we then make a decision based on probability.

Creativity

Knowledge, logic and judgement allow us to solve problems and make decisions by using past experience and familiar patterns. When using creativity we have to disregard the past and approach the decision-making process from an entirely new direction.

Creativity breaks familiar patterns, is unpredictable, makes people feel uncomfortable and is therefore usually met with substantial resistance.

If we or our staff continually battle with the same problems or if there are no or very few solutions suggested for problems, then a creative approach should be tried.

Because of the unusual approach necessary for creative decision making and problem solving, it is very difficult to present a succinct methodology. Many people believe that it is a matter of developing a “feeling” for this sort of approach. A good example of a creative approach to problem solving is “Lateral Thinking”.

Ineffective decision-making

Not all of us have, or utilise effectively, the attributes previously mentioned. Sometimes we exhibit a healthy disregard for these skills that we should be utilising. At other times, additional factors may come to bear.

In order to overcome the effects of these factors we have to identify them and understand their causes. Then we can take steps to minimise their impact. These factors include:

Environment

Our ability to concentrate on the problem at hand can be impeded by environment factors such as heat, noise, activity, etc. For those of us who do not have an ability to “block out” these factors, steps to isolate oneself from such influences, need to be taken.

Lack of perseverance

Another common feature in ineffective problem solving is a lack of perseverance. For instance, young children rarely seem to try more than once to solve toy problems such as constructing jigsaws. Their perseverance usually improves with age as they develop a willingness to attempt tasks more than once. Within the normal limits of behaviour, however, some adults still exhibit a tendency to give up easily whereas others will not give up until the problem is solved.

Ineffective problem solvers give up quickly, pass the buck or will avoid the problem rather than try to solve it. When this characteristic is complicated by the introduction of one or more of the other factors which contribute to ineffective problem solving, the “problem” often wins out.

“Rut” mentality

An inability to generate alternatives is a common feature of poor problem solving. This is not to say that there is a failure to recognise the inadequacy of the present methodology. Alternative methods are just not forthcoming.

Irrational logic

Problem solving can be severely affected when logic of the “problem solvers” is biased or distorted by factors totally unrelated to the problem at hand. The causes of our bias may be many. For example, cultural prejudices and prejudices causing us to “enhance” the abilities of our friends while underestimating the abilities of our least liked colleagues.

A typical form of faulty or irrational logic is “rigid thinking”. Examples include people saying things such as “But we have always done it that way” or “It’s never been done that way before.” Difficulties arise when people are unable to deal with situations not previously experienced or which don’t fit past “patterns”. These same people find it difficult to adapt to changes in routine or procedure.

People who are too abstract in their thinking exhibit another type of irrational logic. “Ask them the time and you will receive a short history of the clock.” Often they fail to direct their thinking at the problem to be solved, but spend their efforts in unproductive areas. We often meet people who, as a greeting, ask about “your family, the weather and the football results”. Before you have answered, they will change subjects and ask about “work”, “politics”, etc., never staying on the one subject.

Failing to learn from experiences

Rather than make the same mistake twice, some of us make the same mistake several times! Previously failed solutions will not suddenly work just because they are tried again. If some of the circumstances have not changed, a solution which did not work last week will not work this week.

Impulsiveness

Children and teenagers often act impulsively. They fail to give any consideration to the possible consequences (just ask any parent). Many ineffective problem solvers also exhibit this tendency. The end result of this “spur of the moment” decision making can be much worse than the original situation. We need to think things through.

Lack of confidence

Quite often we are our own worst enemies. We convince ourselves that we cannot do something or that something cannot be achieved. Our prophecies become self-fulfilling and the problem will remain unsolved. We owe it to ourselves to maintain a positive frame of mind by congratulating ourselves and encouraging ourselves whenever we achieve the smallest objectives. Likewise, as managers we are responsible for maintaining the confidence of our staff.

INEFFECTIVE DECISIONS		
Description	Contributing factors	Solution

Decision making and problem solving steps

There are many approaches that have been developed to solve problems and to aid in decision making. Some approaches are very specific because of the technical nature of the situation or in deference to the personalities or companies involved. Following is an outline of one of the more common approaches:

1. Define the problem

Locate the problem and state it clearly. State it in a way that everyone involved has the same understanding and agrees that the problem is as defined. Ensure that the real problem is stated completely and not just the symptoms or part of the problem.

2. Define the objectives

Determine the minimum conditions or criteria the solution must fulfil in order to be satisfactory. State these criteria in terms of short-term, long-term and ultimate objectives. List the non-essential or desirable criteria for a successful solution.

3. Search for solutions

Invariably there will be more than one solution. The more complex the problem, the more options there will be. View the situation from as many perspectives as possible. Consult with as many people as is practical (certainly those directly affected by or involved in, the situation). Be as innovative as possible, think “laterally” and use techniques such as brainstorming.

4. Evaluate the solutions

Obtain all relevant facts concerning the ramifications of implementing such solutions. Establish to what extent the objectives will be met (i.e. essential and non-essential, short-term and long-term). Determine what side-effects are likely.

5. Select possible solutions

Select the solution that best fulfils the objectives. Eliminate all those that do not satisfy the essential objectives. Eliminate those that have unacceptable side-effects. (Is there a way of overcoming these?) Finally, eliminate those solutions that least satisfactorily fulfil the non-essential objectives.

6. Make the final selection

This can be the hardest part, especially when several solutions appear equally good or equally risky. Consult those you believe should be consulted. Once the decision is made, forget the alternatives and stick with the decision.

7. Implement the decision

Give feedback to those staff who gave you input originally. Outline the specific action plan. Ensure the relevant people know who is supposed to be doing what, how they are supposed to be doing it and when they need to do it.

8. Evaluate the decision

When implementing the decision, formulate and specify the accompanying assessment strategy. Make sure you know what information will be required to adequately assess the worth of the decision. Inform those who are going to collect it, how and when they will do it. Who is going to assess the success or otherwise? How will people be informed of the progress?

Obviously there is nothing magical about the above steps. We carry out modified versions of these on a daily basis, in all areas of our lives. However, when the issues are complex and difficult we need to formalise these steps, in much the same manner as has been outlined.

Decision-making techniques

Having established the steps associated with problem solving / decision-making, we need to bring this process to life. We do this by applying our own technique. Our technique will rely on several factors including our personality, the type of staff available, time constraints, etc.

Needless to say, some decisions will be harder than others to make. Depending on the circumstances there may not be one fully correct decision but several partially correct options available.

It is a fact of life in management that some of the information affecting the solution may not be available at the time when the problem is first considered. As a result incorrect decisions are made. Staff are asked to proceed with their tasks on the basis of these incorrect decisions. There is nothing wrong with this approach to management decisions provided that management is always alert to the possibility that change may be necessary and that there is a willingness to make the change quickly and pre-planning for quick changes, is done as a matter of course.

Implementing an incorrect decision and correcting same at a later date is often far less costly than any attempt to delay each step until all the facts are known. The key of course is to evaluate the cost and other likely consequences of implementing decisions, when all the facts aren't available. A lack of facts should not cause managerial paralysis. We have to evaluate our options and assess the probability of a favourable outcome. We have to use our judgement.

When responsible managers exercise a degree of judgement they do so being mindful of the fact that things could go wrong and, as mentioned, pre-plan for this or position themselves so as they, and their sections, can react quickly.

DECISION MAKING STAGES
BEFORE the decision is made
MAKING the decision
AFTER the decision

Supporting action

To this end, there are at least five kinds of action which managers have to consider when exercising “judgement”.

1. Anticipatory action
2. Preventative action
3. Temporary or stop-gap action
4. Ongoing corrective action
5. Live-with action

Anticipatory action

When implementing a plan, contingency measures should have already been developed. In order to fully prepare for contingencies, the person responsible needs to have informed the relevant staff of such contingencies and arranged for the necessary facilities and equipment to be available. Obviously contingency plans for unlikely, yet hazardous occurrences, such as fire and accidents need to be well drilled. In normal circumstances, the more facts unknown to managers at the time of making a decision, the more chance there is of something going wrong, the more important it is to be well prepared and have developed, contingency plans in the ready.

Preventative action

Sometimes it may be deemed necessary to systematically remove or at least reduce the possible causes responsible for problem developing. Machine maintenance and cross-skilling of staff are two examples of this. Preventative action lends itself to blanket solutions for moderate to low risk, yet inevitable situations.

Temporary or stop-gap action

It could be that in the planning stages or when a decision is being made regarding a problem, the indications are that extraordinary conditions are or may be experienced for a relatively short time. In this case a manager might implement an action meant to overcome the brief “inconvenience”. Alternatively, managers may be put in the position where they are not capable, for any number

of reasons, of addressing a problem. However, they may have devised or “stumbled across” a method of treating the symptoms. Rather than “close down” operations in order to search for a permanent solution, they decide to keep the wheels turning until more information or better informed personnel are available.

Ongoing corrective action

As a result of implanting “Stop-gap action” or because of only being able to partially address the symptoms of a problem it may be necessary for managers to monitor closely the goings-on of a particular activity. The point of which is to detect emerging facts or to ensure that the manifestations of the problem remains within acceptable parameters.

Alternatively, a solution which is expected to prove adequate, may take some time to become fully effective. During this introductory stage it may be necessary to closely monitor with ever-decreasing frequency or detail, the product or the output of certain staff or certain areas, making adjustments or providing advice so that the shortcomings are addressed.

Live-with action

For many managers this type of action is the hardest to adopt because it involves accepting compromises or second or third best. There are many reasons why this is hard to accept, including the associated uncertainty of not knowing whether or not they have done everything possible and the feeling of helplessness one experiences with the realisation that some factors are beyond one’s control.

Force field analysis

There are many problem solving and decision making processes which have been developed which can help us decide which of the above type of actions is necessary and/or appropriate. One of the more useful is called “Force Field analysis”. The following steps should be taken when utilising the Force Field model.

1. Be specific about the problem – use precise, measurable terms where possible
2. List all the possible factors affecting a problem
3. Group all those possible factors that cause a problem (Problem causing forces). Do not reject any suggestion
4. Group all those forces that can lessen the problem (Problem solving forces). List all suggestions
5. Delete from both lists, those factors over which you have no control
6. Using the remaining items, restate the problem
7. Implement some sort of action plan to eliminate the problem, aiming to reduce the causes of the problem and strengthen and enhance those factors solving the problem

FORCE FIELD WORKSHEET

Problem:

“CAUSING” FORCES

“SOLVING” FORCES

Restated problem:

Action plan:

When dealing with a problem or when formulating decision, if we find ourselves saying things such as “I don’t know where to start” or “what can I do about it?”, then this type of analysis is an excellent approach to take because it:

1. Breaks problems and situations into their smallest components. Looking at a component is far less daunting than considering the whole issue.
2. Helps clarify the problem. In many cases people confuse symptoms with the actual problem.
3. Encourages creativity. (Initially every thought and suggestion is listed).
4. Prevents unnecessary worry. Once we have physically written something down and deleted it because it is beyond our control, the “burden” of such factors is alleviated somewhat.
5. Encourages one to collect all the facts and to systematically review these thereby encouraging a logical approach to a problem, yet still proving to be an opportunity for lateral thinking.
6. Provides a good framework for staff involvement and promoting staff understanding of the “broad picture”.

Finally, if all the steps discussed are followed, we will feel much more relaxed about making decisions because we will have covered all the bases and ultimately we will expend far less nervous energy merely worrying about a decision.

Implementing decisions

Many times, managers devote considerable time and resources formulating decisions at the planning stage or subsequent problem solving stage, only to see the decision (and a correct one at that) fail because of poor implementation. Below is a check-list / action plan that, if followed, will increase the likelihood of successful decision implementation.

1. Negotiation

- Some things are not negotiable. Decisions must be in agreement with the objectives of the organisation as a whole.
- The best result will be obtained when commitment is obtained from the staff. After all, in most cases they will be responsible for implementing our decisions. Commitment will be easier to obtain if it can be demonstrated that our decision will ultimately help meet our staffs' needs and wants. Highlight the fact that there is "something in it" for them.
- Never use a plan or solution as a means of applying pressure. A decision should not be used to threaten employees. Any explanation of a solution should avoid the apportioning of blame. Staff attitudes can quickly deteriorate if they believe that their manager has been trying to "trap" them.

2. Communication

- The best way to be sure that the staff understand the implications a decision has for them, is to ask them to repeat "in their own words", what their involvement will be or how they will be affected.
- Bear in mind the knowledge level and experience of the staff. Excessively long and detailed explanations to experienced employees will cause boredom and resentment. On the other hand, a beginner might enjoy more detail.
- Avoid abrupt wording. Requesting that something be done lends itself to obtaining co-operation.
- The timing of our explanation and instruction is most important. If we interrupt busy employees, they won't pay much attention to what we're saying if it does not concern the particular job that they are doing. Likewise, most employees cease to think about work as they start to pack up, so if we approach them near the end of their shift or the end of their day, we are unlikely to make a lasting impression.
- When asking for input, do everything possible to make the employees comfortable and at ease. Encourage them by at least noting any suggestions. If appropriate have other employees discuss any proposals.

3. Relevancy of decisions

- Every plan and decision should be related to job performance. Be as specific as possible. Each employee should know where they “fit in” and how their role relates to the overall job plan and solution.
- Whenever possible, speak of a decision or solution in terms such as units of production, dollars or units of product sold, letters typed, reductions in reject rates, rework and so on. The more specific and measurable your targets and expected outcomes are, the more easily employees will relate to them.
- Staff will be better able to understand plans and decision if they are documented.

4. Monitoring

- There should be developed a practical and timely feedback system. Employees will then be provided with useful information about whether they are holding up “their end of the bargain” and how their efforts are helping the achievement of the overall objectives.
- Flexibility must exist. Plans and decisions must be able to be changed when circumstances change. Any documentation should be “working documentation”, reflecting the changes taking place in the work environment. This documentation should be readily available for yourself and others to write on. It should represent a set of working ideas.

5. Participation

- Decisions are more effective if participation is encouraged. “Involved” employees usually exhibit a greater degree of commitment. If they are permitted to participate in the formulation process, then they will already be focusing on the future. They will have taken the first step in ensuring that the future really does happen.

6. Double check

- Never attempt to implement a decision without giving it a thorough and complete review. Attempt to identify areas for improvement. This review procedure will help create a reputation for thoroughness. Again, involve your staff if it is possible.

IMPLEMENTING DECISIONS

1. Describe the decision in terms of what is involved and the situation which required it:
2. List the people involved, their position title and role in the decision process:
3. Describe how the decision was implemented, bearing in mind the aspects of Negotiation, Communication, Monitoring, Participation of and Relevancy to the Involved Parties and Double Checking:
4. How could the implementation have been improved? Again, consider the different aspects listed in the previous question:



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