

A Dozen Ways to Enhance Your Decision Making

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Even the best secondary principals can improve their decision-making abilities, this author states. To that end a dozen practical suggestions, drawn from research and theory on problem solving and creative decision making, are offered on the following pages.

The complex demands and expectations placed upon school administrators by teachers, students, parents, boards of education, non-teaching personnel, and the community require many choices and cause many conflicts and dilemmas. Although intricate and varied roles define the secondary school principal's job, in the end it is the quality of the decisions made that determines the success or failure of an administrator's efforts.

Literally thousands of professional decisions, large and small, are required of the professional administrator each year. Because decision making is a learned skill, it can be developed and improved.

Described below are a dozen suggestions for improving one's ability to make effective decisions.

1. *How important is this decision?* Limitations of time and resources do not permit a thorough analysis of all decisions. Setting the time for an assembly is not as important as selecting a new science teacher. Questions which can help define the significance of a decision include:

- What are the consequences of a poor decision?
- What people are affected by this decision?
- How close is the deadline?
- Is the choice easily reversible?

2. *Define the decision precisely.* John Dewey suggested that a well-defined problem was half solved. Too often poor choices are the result of vaguely defined decisions. By specifying the needs to be met you are better able to set concrete objectives. The objective of your decision is the final result you seek to achieve through the decision-making process. What are your long-term goals? How does this objective relate to the long-term goals?

Decisions occur in sequence. Seeking a procedure to increase hall monitors is the product of previous choices; for example, decisions to decrease vandalism or truancy. The quality and consequences of previous decisions will shape the definition of succeeding choices.

3. *Brainstorm alternatives.* The more alternatives that are available, the greater the probability of finding high-quality options. Although it was originally developed as a group problem-solving technique, brainstorming can be used effectively by individuals to generate creative alternatives. The emphasis on generating as many ideas as possible and deferring evaluation of the quality is the central focus of brainstorming procedures.

The creative process of generating options is often stifled by dwelling upon assumed constraints and then seeking solutions which fit within those parameters. In response to a proposed solution how often have we heard immediate retorts of "the board will never approve," "it would cost too much," "it's never been done," or "our school is too big (or small) for that"? Many potentially fruitful ideas are squelched through premature evaluation before they are fully explored.

4. *Specify criteria.* After the options are generated careful evaluation is necessary using a set of clearly specified criteria. These are the objective standards by which the value of each alternative is weighed. The criteria are statements of the needs and values an acceptable solution must meet. Some criteria are “musts”; it is imperative that any acceptable solution meet these standards. Others are “wants”; they are desirable, yet flexible.

It is important to realistically differentiate between absolute “must” criteria and “wants” which reflect personal preferences, lest you find the alternatives severely restricted. Be careful to include easily overlooked criteria such as “peer approval” or “personal self-esteem.” Otherwise acceptable solutions often fail because hidden criteria are overlooked yet affect later implementation of the decision.

5. *Gather sufficient information.* No decision is better than the information upon which it is based. Although we seldom have the time or resources to gather every piece of relevant information overlooking readily available information greatly reduces problem-solving efficiency. Practice posing these questions to improve the information search:

- What are the facts I have?
- What else do I need to know?
- Whom can I ask?
- What should I ask?

Since an administrator must rely upon others for much of the information input, effective interpersonal communication skills are a valuable asset. This includes not only asking the necessary questions clearly and concisely, but also listening actively to clarify and verify the response.

Administrators who remain current in persistent problem areas through reading are going to have more knowledge to begin the decision-making process. Reading of the successful and unsuccessful options pursued by others enhances your ability to resolve similar problems in your school.

6. *Evaluating the alternatives.* The carefully selected criteria are applied to the available options. With the information obtained, the task here is to project the consequences of each alternative. Not all will meet your needs and objectives equally. A grid rating each option on all criteria often helps evaluate the adequacy of each alternative.

Perfect solutions are rare; seek to maximize the gains and minimize the losses. Which alternative offers the greatest advantages and the fewest disadvantages?

A note of caution: Don’t overlook “gut level” or intuitive feelings; they often reflect hidden or overlooked criteria. Attempt to identify and examine those anxieties and input into the decision process.

7. *Develop a plan of implementation.* A carefully drawn plan of action is vital to ensure the success of any decision. This involves sub-decisions regarding who needs to do what and how. Anticipating objections and consequences and sharing your decision process with affected people can pave way to smoother acceptance. If possible, minimize surprises by involving support personnel in the planning process. This may involve delegating some of the responsibility for implementation and reserving your role as a coordinator.

8. *Make a commitment.* A wise consumer might follow a careful decision analysis in selecting the best car to purchase, yet negate the process by failing to properly maintain the automobile after purchase. Good decisions succeed because effort is put into making them work. After selecting the most suitable candidate from 200 teacher applicants, support and guidance are essential to help that teacher fulfill the anticipated potential.

8. *Evaluate the decision.* It is periodically necessary to examine implemented decisions to determine whether they are meeting the intended objectives. Is a plan for reducing truancy or

vandalism working? If not, it may be time to re-enter the decision process. Additional information or new alternatives might make the previous decision obsolete. Also, a sound decision that was effective may now be unsatisfactory because the needs have changed. Declining enrollments and teacher surpluses reflect changing need patterns that might outdate previously viable decisions.

9. *Assume responsibility for the decision.* The most carefully made decisions sometimes fail for reasons beyond our control -- unavailable information, unforeseen consequences, even acts of nature. Administrators, like teachers and students, are only human. All humans have a right to make mistakes, but also a responsibility to learn from those mistakes, and to rectify them whenever possible. Defensive reactions to failures, such as "passing the buck" or rationalizing, will likely decrease acceptance of future decisions.

10. *Practice decision making.* The maxims for effective decision making described here must be honed and perfected through repeated practice. Conscious, critical analysis of many decisions is necessary to develop a smooth and efficient decision-making style. Breaking the rigid mental set which inhibits creative problem solving requires persistent self-confrontation in challenging one's assumptions. Initially it helps to record in writing the thought process, especially the alternatives and criteria.

12. *Know thyself.* An administrator does not have time to explore personal and professional values and needs at each decision point. The more you know about the goals and needs of the school, as well as your own values, needs, wants, and objectives, the more efficient the decision-making process; for the final measure of the effectiveness of any decision is how well it fulfills the needs of the given situation.

Conclusion

Effective and efficient decision making is a learned skill. It can be improved. Although no cookbook formula can guarantee success in all decisions, these dozen suggestions offer the potential to maximize the probability of productive and satisfactory decisions.

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