



Fact Sheet

Decision Making



Decision making is the process of selecting one course of action from several alternative actions. It involves using what you know, (or can learn) to get what you need. If you are in a situation where many legitimate and worthwhile demands are being made on your time, the decision-making process becomes very complex.

Developing your decision-making abilities can give you more freedom and control over your life, and increase your chances of being satisfied with your decisions. A skilled decision-maker develops more alternatives from which to choose, and has a better chance of achieving the goals desired.

The key factor in making things happen “instead of just letting things happen” is skilled decision-making.

How Are Decisions Made?

Do you give much attention to the way you make decisions? If not, you may make the decisions that do not bring the most satisfying results.

There are three common ways that individuals and groups reach decisions. These include:

- 1. Dominance/Submission (Win/Lose).** One person dominates the situation and others give in as a decision is made. An example of this would be the decision about what kind of monthly program to plan for the next meeting of a group of professional people. A number of participants at the planning meeting feel the group is due for some entertainment, and one of them is a member of a Barbershop Quartet which has just won a regional contest. The chairperson feels a speaker on a the latest hot topic is more appropriate. The chairperson insists — creating a situation in which one person wins and the rest of the group loses.
- 2. Conversion (sometimes Win/Win, sometimes Lose/Lose).** Additional facts are presented so that one person persuades the others to his or her view, or gives up something to get something. In this situation, the members who want an evening’s entertainment explain that they have heard complaints about burn-out among members of the group. They feel it’s about time to give the group a reward for the hard work they’ve done to date, and at the same time showcase one of their own members who has been successful. The chairperson doesn’t want to let momentum slide on the hot issue of the day. After what seems like hours of “decision-making,” the group finally decides to combine their ideas. They are all willing to give up something to get something and make a choice.
- 3. Integration (Win/Win).** A blending of ideas develops when everyone can agree and support. In this example, the group discusses the alternatives, states individual views, and makes a decision based on the needs of everyone. They decide to work together. The chairperson arranges to keep the speaker’s time short, so he can be followed on the program by the prize-winning quartet.

Steps in the Decision-Making Process

The steps in the decision-making process are similar, regardless of whether the decision involves group or individual resource management, consumer purchases, leisure activities, or other situations requiring choices. The example here involves considering choices about balancing time use to include community or volunteer works and other high priority goals. Follow these steps:

- 1. Recognize the problem or opportunity.** The decision-making process begins with recognizing the need for change. It might be helpful at this step to actually write down the problem as you see it. For example, the problem may be that your committee paperwork has spilled over into your living area: your dining room table is functioning as a desk, and you can't find a chair to sit on because the "must-read" periodicals you've acquired in regard to your committee activities needed a place to rest. In other words, your house is a mess.
- 2. Analyze the situation.** Once you recognize that there is a difference between "what is" and "what could be," study the situation carefully to determine exactly what is causing the difference. Be as specific as possible. The cause of the above problem could be that you are not as organized as you thought you could be, that you are over-extended in what you have agreed to do, or that you don't have a proper place to do paper work.
- 3. Consider your goals.** The goals you choose are influenced by the values you have. Becoming more aware of your values, and the priorities you put on them helps you see more clearly what is desired. Facts can be combined with values and emotions to reach the decision. You really want to do as much as you can to help your community. But you feel your house is closing in on you. A goal could be to limit your outside activities to only those that affect you most directly, such as involvement in the local library. But if your community is suddenly facing suburban sprawl, and you hate sprawl and want to join the group that is fighting it, you may have to rearrange your priorities for a while.
- 4. Look for alternatives.** Look for as many alternatives as possible to solve your problem — not just the obvious or habitual ones. Creative thinking, reading and talking to other people may help. If the decision is very important in human or economic terms, it will be worthwhile to spend more time and effort seeking alternatives.

Remember, your decision can only be as good as the alternatives that you identify. Some alternatives to solving the messy house problem could be:

- Blocks of time could be allocated specifically to clean up, and sort out, before bedtime, or before leaving the house in the morning.
- Different sections of the house could be spruced up on different days.
- A cleaning service could be hired.

- 5. Consider the consequences.** One of the key elements of the decision-making process is looking ahead to see "what might happen if I do this." Sometimes it is possible to gather information to help you predict. At other times, you must make predictions based only on what you already know.

Also, consider the use of resources.

- What resources are needed to carry out each alternative?
- How much time, money, knowledge or other resources are required?
- What must be given up?
- Which choice fits better with your values and goals?

Write down the answers to these questions to help you focus your thinking. In the messy house example, you may like the first or second alternative best. Money that would have to be spent for a cleaning service might be best used for other things.

6. Select the best alternative. Look realistically at the possible alternatives.

Select the one that seems best for you in terms of your values, the goals you are working toward, and the resources you have. It is possible that none of the alternatives will be attractive to you.

If there is no best alternative, or none seems satisfactory, perhaps a new alternative can be created by compromising or combining some of the possibilities. Perhaps you combine the first two alternatives as the solution to the problem of your cluttered house, or lower your standards and resolve to live with the clutter for a time.

7. Act upon the decision. Making a decision does not end with choosing the best alternative. You must put your decision into action. You must decide which day to begin your plan for keeping the clutter at a minimum, and which order to follow in tackling the tasks. This choice then becomes a clear goal with an action plan.

8. Accept the responsibility. When you have made a decision, say to yourself, “the buck stops here.” Accept both the responsibility for the decision and the consequences — without excuses. Plan to abide by your choice until changes or improvements can be made. Your ability and willingness to do this will help you realistically think about your decisions, and will provide a basis for improving them.

9. Evaluate the results. The outcome or results of decisions, especially major ones, should be evaluated to determine their effectiveness. Even habitual decisions need to be examined periodically to be sure they are sound and still suit the current situation.

Common Mistakes in Decision Making

Like many other skills, decision making can be improved by study and practice. Some common mistakes which are often made by unskilled decision makers include:

- You do not choose an action because you do not recognize the potential. You may not have taken enough time to consider alternatives, and thus have not thought of the best ones.
- You choose an action even though the possible outcome is unknown. You decide to become committee chair of a committee, not knowing how much work is involved.

- You underestimate or overestimate the importance of certain information. For example, you highly value the fact that a used utility vehicle you are considering for purchase for a youth organization has low mileage, but you underestimated the damage that occurred because the previous owners did not maintain the vehicle properly.
- You neglect to make a choice because not everything can be predicted with certainty. An example is deciding not to order a highly-needed second phone line because you cannot predict exactly how much you plan on using your new computer's modem for e-mail and internet service.

Consciously going through the above decision-making steps can give you the practice you need to make well-thought-out decisions.

Additional Decision-Making Tips:

- Take time to make decisions. Try not to make decisions immediately, as they are often unsatisfactory when made before enough information has been generated.
- Get the facts. Look at the situation in an unbiased way. Review your information clearly, and evaluate it objectively.
- Consider both emotions and facts. Avoid making excuses and rationalizations.
- Try to avoid making decisions when you are tired or under stress.
- Realize that few decisions are irreversible. As with other skills, practice and positive thinking lead to success.

Negotiating Good Decisions

In organizations, as in families and other groups, decision-making always involves more than one person. Often it is necessary to negotiate in order to gain acceptance for our ideas. Negotiation takes place daily in the community, and in every aspect of your life. Effective negotiation is a skill that can be improved with practice. Using the following tips may help:

- Avoid hard-line decisions. Many people take a hard-line position which makes it difficult to reach an agreement. For example, a committee chairperson may inform the members of the committee that a good friend, who happens to be an advocate of an unpopular issue, is going to present that point of view at the meeting. When this occurs, one group must win and the other group must lose. Dealing with your own interests, while considering the interests of others, is the basis for negotiating a satisfactory agreement.
- Separate the people from the problem. Many times people confuse the decision-to-be-made with the personal relationship. When people become angry on a personal level, it is very difficult to reach any kind of solution. When a "people problem" develops, it should be dealt with directly and independently, not as part of the decision that needs to be negotiated.
- For example, you may be very angry with the committee chairperson for independently selecting a controversial speaker. You think someone in a leadership position should have been more sensitive to the sentiments of other members of the group. Deal with your anger first, and then as an organization deal with effective ways of handling arguments in the future.

- Understand how the other person feels. Try to understand the framework in which the other person is operating. If you were in his or her situation, what would your viewpoint be about the decision? When you look at the above situation through the committee chair's eyes, you may remember how you felt about a favorite teacher of yours who had many detractors you felt just "didn't understand." You have certain ideas, feelings and fears about an issue. Others do not necessarily have the same ideas and fears as you. It is helpful to understand their viewpoint as well as your own.

Conclusion

If you approach decision-making as a process involving several steps, you will be more successful at it than if you make decisions lightly. Before choosing a solution, it is important to identify the problem and to think through alternatives and consequences as they relate to your family goals.

Adapted from:

Groups — How They Decide. Kansas Family Community Leadership Resource Notebook Manhattan, Kansas Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service and Kansas Association for Family and Community Education, 1993.

Walker, Doris "Katey". *Improving Decision-Making Skills*. Manhattan, Kansas: Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service, MF-873, 1987.