

DECISION MAKING IN THE WORKPLACE

Basic Premise: Clarity surrounding how decisions are made in the workplace is critical for workplace morale, participatory buy-in and full engagement in the conclusion/action reached by the decision. Without such clarity, the decision making process quickly becomes subsumed in power-wielding politics that frustrate and divide a working group.

Overview of decision making: Defined as *The act of reaching a conclusion or judgment* (duh!), the key of course is “the act.” Most authors outline in various ways the following **styles of decision making:**

- Autocratic – The leader defines the problem, diagnoses it, generates, evaluates & chooses among alternate solutions.
- Autocratic w/ group input – Same as above except that leader seeks group help in diagnoses & perhaps analyzing possible solutions.
- Individual Consultative Style – Selected leaders participate as in the former style.
- Group Consultative Style – Leader asks for help in defining the problem only.
- Group Decision Style – Leader defines the problem and the group participates in all the rest.
- Participative Style – The leader facilitates the entire process with the entire group.
- Leaderless Team – The group has no formal leader and a process leader emerges or is chosen by the group **for that particular problem.**

The leader must make **absolutely clear** which of the above **styles** is going to be used. When groups proceed as if the group decision style is in effect and the leader reverts to the autocratic w/ group input style, members of the group feel had and marginalized. In the workplace, this happens all too often. Hence, asking the leader to clarify the process upfront is an absolute necessity for responsible group members.

Also, the mode of how the group’s wishes will be decided is critical, to wit: Will the group use parliamentary procedure (i.e. *Robert’s Rules, Revised*) or will the group use consensus? Clarity on this is so important because they are fundamentally different processes. Parliamentary procedure is a process that relies upon advocacy. Consensus is a procedure that relies upon an

open-minded search for the best solution that all can endorse (albeit with different levels of enthusiasm). If consensus is to be utilized, some training on the method is critical. Consensus misused can be an undercover method to abuse power and manipulate a meeting. Using both procedures at the same time is impossible because of their fundamental differences.

Lessons Learned:

- Not every decision made will change the course of human events. Therefore, keep perspective and humor during the decision making process.
- Although it may seem counter-intuitive, sometimes the autocratic style is highly desirable. For example, when downsizing an organization, asking a group to come up with a solution (whereby peers are laid off) can breed distrust, anger and lead to endless meetings.
- When a group decision is reached, it must be articulated in writing and signed-off on by the group.
- Seek decisions that are the simplest possible and that do the least harm.
- Generally there are multiple plausible solutions to any challenge.
- Beware of going to the mat on a minor issue. (Choose your battles carefully.)
- Let subordinates make as many decisions as possible. It is the only way they learn, and it is the best way for them to own their work.
- If a decision is controversial, perhaps as a part of it stipulate that in 3 months the decision will be revisited and revised if necessary.
- Not making any decision is, in fact, a decision.
- When the autocratic w/ group input is used, the leader's listening skills must be clearly evident in order for that style to have merit.
- Beware of opinion polls to inform a decision. Very often when the decision is made, those polled never receive an explanation of why their (sage) advice was not followed. As such, they are inadvertently disenfranchised.

Exercises for self-study:

- What decision making style do you generally use? Is it, in your opinion, the most effective one?

- In your present experience, what style of decision making most captures your energy and commitment? Which style least captures your energy and commitment?
- Ask your work group about how effective a leader/manager you are in directing the decision making process. Ask also: “How could I do better?” You will learn a lot (and some of it you may not want to hear!).
- And of course, ½ hour for – well, this time let’s make it a glass of red wine – for your health!

References:

1. A very good article is from the CPA Journal and can be found at <http://www.nysscpa.org/cpajournal/old/15703015.htm>
Schwartz states that consensus is the most time-consuming for a group. I have found that **not** to be the case. Indeed, I consider consensus as the most effective and efficient method with a group of 25 or less. And, groups get much better with experience. Delegation of unilateral authority through consensus is a very powerful way to streamline decision making.
2. *Making Sense Out of Consensus*
3. *Levels of Consensus*
4. *Roberts Rules Cheat Sheet*
5. *The Basic Components of Consensus*

