

Make-Up Your Mind -- Improving Your Decision-Making Skills¹

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Effective decision-making means that you can "make things happen," instead of just "letting things happen." Decision-making is required in every activity. It is involved in a variety of situations and problems, from the very simple to the very complex. Making decisions which direct and guide events and actions into a planned course, rather than letting events fall to chance, is one of the marks of a good manager.

Developing the Art of Decision-Making

Everyone, young or old, can learn to improve their decision-making skills. Making a decision is not something you do from habit — it requires conscious thought. Life consists of a series of decisions. Every decision we make is different from all others because we have had one more experience. Most decisions are made in a series — you do something and then do something else. Often, making one decision does not settle anything. Instead, it gets you into the position to make another.

Family decisions give each person an opportunity to voice opinions on matters that affect work and family living. If the older children are a part of the decision-making team, they will be more understanding of family goals and problems. Through this experience, they will learn and be able to help the family make better decisions.

Making a decision involves making a choice and selecting from among alternatives. All decisions carry with them some dissatisfactions and conflicts. The bad must be accepted along with the good. Successful decision-making means making a choice that has enough of the important satisfactions in it to outweigh the less important dissatisfactions.

The Decision-Making Process

The steps in making and implementing decisions as they apply to family and individual resource management decisions are:

1. Recognize the problem.

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The decision-making process starts by recognizing that a problem exists: something has to be changed in the situation and there are possibilities for improvement. Big problems must often be broken down into smaller, easier to deal with, components.

2. Analyze the problem.

Once the problem is identified, study it carefully to find exactly what is causing it. Again, be as specific as possible.

3. Consider your goals.

Consider the goal or goals you want to reach. The goals you choose are influenced by the values you have — what is important to you. Becoming more aware of your values and the priorities you place on them will help you see more clearly what is desired.

4. Look for alternatives.

Think and look for as many practical alternatives as possible. In most situations it is not feasible to explore all the possibilities because of time and expense. However, try to look for more possibilities than the obvious or habitual ones. If the decision is very important — in either human or financial terms — it will be worthwhile to spend more time and effort in looking for a solution or making a choice.

Analyze the resources each alternative course of action will require. How does the time, money, skill, energy, or other resource needed compare with the resources you presently have? Does one alternative require fewer of your scarce resources? You must also compare the expected benefits from your selection. It doesn't always make sense to choose the cheapest product or the lowest cost activity, if the results will also be lower in quality.

5. Select the best alternative.

After looking carefully at each alternative, select the best one. Keep in mind the values that are important to you, the goals you are working toward, and the resources you have to work with. It is possible that none of the

seemingly available alternatives will be acceptable. If there is no one best alternative, or none at all which seems satisfactory, perhaps a new alternative can be created by compromise, or by combining some of the possible ideas you have. Occasionally, you must make a decision to postpone action in order to seek more information, but don't put off making any decision just because you don't have a perfect answer.

6. Put your decision into action.

Making a decision doesn't end with choosing the best alternative. You must put your decision into action. Usually people carry out their own decisions. Sometimes, however, group action by members of the family, or other groups, must be generated. If everyone involved has had a share in making the decision, they will usually be more willing to help implement it.

Many, perhaps most, decisions do not directly solve a problem. They simply put you in a position to make additional decisions, which move you closer to your goal. One central decision (such as moving to a new town) involves a large number of additional decisions, such as choosing among housing alternatives, transportation methods, religious and community affiliations.

Another decision-making pattern is the chain-linkage pattern, more commonly known as "one thing leads to another." Each decision is directly dependent on a previous choice in this model.

7. Accept the responsibility.

After you make a decision, you need to accept the responsibility and consequences for making it. You need to be willing to live with it, or else take the lead in making another decision for changing directions. Most decisions are made without having all the information you'd like and all the resources you really need. Don't be afraid to make a decision just because you may have to revise it...that's part of the process.

8. Evaluate your results.

The outcome, or result of your decisions, should be evaluated regularly to determine its effectiveness.

Use habits to reduce time in decision-making. For instance, you don't need to spend a great deal of time deciding which toothpaste to buy. Lots of purchasing decisions, and some management decisions, can be made on a routine basis until your situation changes.

Improve Your Decision-Making

You can improve your ability as a decision maker if you:

- Become aware of your own and your family's values, the conditions which support these values, and the choices which are available. Study situations carefully, so you can recognize more clearly the cause and effect of actions. Decisions which create conflicts are hard to carry out.
- Develop sensitivity to the individual responses of persons affected by the decision. Personalities differ, and a good manager is aware of the kind and amount of impact on individual persons as a consequence of a decision.
- Be objective in viewing the problem that demands decisions. Try to avoid making decisions when you are upset, tired, or under great stress. Be objective and specific. Focus on solving the problem, not on your emotions.

Follow these guidelines.

- If a decision is reversible, make up your mind quickly. Practice making quick decisions when the outcome involves only small changes.
- If a decision is not reversible, allow time to thoroughly consider all alternatives. "Sleep on it."

Decisions About Resources

Decision-making in resource management focuses on two general areas of concern — resource development and resource allocation. Where the kinds of resources available to the individual or family are inadequate to assure goal achievement, decisions about how additional resources can be achieved are necessary. Where many goals are being pursued, and the resources for achieving them are limited in amount, quality, or kind, decisions about how to allocate or distribute the available resources among the goals are required. These decisions can be:

- **Social decisions.** Social decisions are the selection and ordering of goals by priority, decisions about which of the available resources are relevant for the given family situation, and the general roles to be played by family members. Social decisions involve conflicts among goals, values, or standards which require mediation and integration if the family is to be able to work together as a group.
- **Allocative decisions.** A search for the most productive ways to distribute relevant resources among their alternative uses involves allocative decisions. This is where the basic concepts of economics come into play in the making of decisions. When goals have been established and resources are limited, the decisions which have to do with allocating the existing resources among these goals are economic decisions.
- **Technical decisions.** This is the answering of the what, when, who, how and why questions in relation to getting a given task, or a whole cluster of tasks, done harmoniously and efficiently. Once resources have been committed to the achievement of a specific goal, deciding on the best way to use those resources is a technical decision.
- **Coordination-interaction decisions.** These are decisions such as:
 - What are the best means of communicating within the family?

- What information is necessary for making family decisions and how will new information be obtained?
- What are the criteria by which evaluation takes place?
- What are the responsibilities of family members in the process of making family decisions? and
- What are the ways of motivating family members to play their respective roles?

These categories of decisions show how interrelated and interdependent decisions can be made. Consider the mother who has a job outside her home. She has certain standards she wants to maintain in the smoothness of operation and appearance of the home. She also believes that her children should learn some of the basic home management skills, although they are not highly motivated in doing so at this particular time.

If this mother is to reach a satisfactory level of management, she and her family will be involved in many managerial decisions. They will need to decide such things as what makes a smooth-running household, what limitations are placed on the traditional home manager role when she works outside the home, and what adjustments must be made. They also need to decide the timing of routine household work and meal preparation, what responsibility each family member assumes, who supervises the children, and what to do in emergencies.

Each stage of the family life cycle has its own particular problems which require managerial decisions.

Decision-Making in Action

1. Identify the problem which needs to be solved.
2. Decide on the goal you want to achieve.
3. How will you determine when your task is completed to your satisfaction? In other words, what is your standard for this goal?

4. What resources will you need to reach this goal?
5. What alternatives do you have to reach your goal?
6. Which alternative offers you the best course of action? Why?
7. In what order would it be best to organize your actions?
8. Do you need to make any revisions? If so, explain.
9. Carry out your plan. Keep a record of the decisions needed to keep your plans moving toward a goal.