

Help! I Need to Make a Decision!

Many people who come to my office say they have a difficult time making decisions. I have developed a process to help my clients master this skill. I recommend that people follow these four steps:

1. Identify the *real* issue. For example, you are trying to decide which movie to see, but you are having a hard time agreeing. As you talk about it, you realize that the real issue is that you simply want some time to be together in a quiet place where you can talk. Going to a movie does not address this issue.
2. Identify the available options. In the above example, the options might include going to a quiet restaurant, taking a drive, or walking on the beach.
3. Evaluate the available options. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. Evaluate how well each option addresses the real issue.
4. Implement the decision. Make a choice and carry it out.

Even though most people make dozens of important and complex judgments every day, few of us have actually been trained to make good decisions. We started making basic decisions when we were young children, and we continue to follow the same simple process as we get older, even though the issues have become much more complicated.

We learned to make decisions by watching our parents and learning in school. Mostly we learned by trial and error. Our first decisions were pretty simple—to choose pizza or hamburgers, to play softball or soccer, to wear the pink headband or the blue one. These decisions pretty much boiled down to choosing between X and Y.

According to the authors of *Smart Choices: A Practical Guide to Making Better Decisions* (see Reading List), most of us continue to choose between X and Y without making certain that we are addressing the real problem in the first place.

A second common mistake is rushing into a decision, hurrying to get it over with. We rarely step back from the decision and view it in a broader context. While it is more difficult and time-consuming, it is better to take your time and be sure you are seeing the big picture and the key issues.

Strategies for Making Better Decisions

Here are some decision-making tips:

1. Take your time making important decisions. Some situations require a deliberate and careful decision-making process.
2. Once the decision has been made, carry it out without hesitation.
3. If you can, delegate decisions to those who will carry them out. Authors Heller and Hindle (*Essential Manager's Manual*) advise managers always to be on the lookout for ways to push the decision-making process down a level. If you are making decisions for your family, consider how you can involve your kids in the process.
4. Making decisions requires both intuition and logic. It's important to trust your gut, but be sure you are thinking logically.

5. Unless the situation is pretty straightforward, it is a good idea to generate as many ideas as you can. Learn the principles of brainstorming (see box) and throw lots of options into the hopper.
6. Look at the issues from different points of view. How do they look to the different groups they might affect? For example, if a teacher asks his students to wear Native American clothing tomorrow, will the kids' parents have the time to help them prepare on such short notice?
7. Consider the immediate and long-term implications of each solution, including its impact on other people.
8. Consider the worst- and best-case scenarios, as well as the possibilities in between.

Deciding Yourself versus Involving Others

Involving others in your decision-making process helps you avoid the tendency to rush into a decision, hurrying to get it over with. When you take the time to consult others, you force yourself to step back from the situation and see it in a broader context. While it is more difficult and time-consuming, getting the advice and support of others can help you produce better decisions.

Consider these points when seeking *advice*:

1. Determine whom to involve in the process. If it's a simple, low-risk decision, you may not need to involve any one else.
2. If you do ask others for advice and suggestions, be prepared to respond to their input.
3. Determine who will need to approve your decision, and get that approval.

Consider these points when seeking *support*:

1. Think about who might resist your decision, and have a plan to manage that resistance. For example, you want to allow your daughter to have her friends sleep over on a weeknight during the summer, but you expect your husband will object because he has to get up for work the next day and doesn't want his sleep disturbed. Think about how you could plan the evening in a way to avoid disturbing your husband.
2. Identify ways to increase the chances that your decision will be supported. In the sleepover example, you could ask the girls' friends to bring sleeping bags, and set up the basement for them to sleep in.
3. If your decision presents any risks, look for ways to minimize them.

Make This Work for You

Rules of Brainstorming

1. Write down the question you are addressing. For example, "Where shall we go on vacation?"
2. Think of as many ideas as you can.
3. Write down every idea, no matter how wild it seems.
4. No one is allowed to judge or evaluate any of the ideas in any way. This includes making faces, rolling eyes, and sighing.
5. The goal is to think of as many ideas as you can. Quantity is more important than quality.
6. After everyone is finished suggesting ideas, take a break.

7. After the break, discuss the ideas and edit the list. A solution will emerge.

Identify a situation in your life right now. Be sure to choose something important and challenging. Apply the steps we have been exploring to this situation.

1. Describe the situation.
2. What is the real issue here?
3. List the pros and cons of each option.
4. What do you need to consider when seeking *advice*?
5. What do you need to consider when seeking *support*?
6. What are the best options?
7. Who needs to be involved?
8. What should be delegated? To whom?
9. What resources would need to be secured?
10. What steps need to be planned, and what is their timing?