Just Make a Decision

Wayne Turk

How many times have you had to just sit there, waiting for someone to make a decision, and mentally urged them to "just decide so we can move ahead!"? Or are you the one who has trouble making a decision? It happens all the time. Remember: We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run over.

One of the most frustrating situations you can have is working with an indecisive manager, one who keeps postponing decisions in the hope that someone else will make that decision or that the problem will simply go away. We find people like that everywhere. Too often they are promoted by virtue of their seniority or technical skills and not by their ability to manage (or make decisions).

My wife had a boss who would not make a decision if it was difficult or controversial. It put pressure on those working for her and drove most of them nuts (not permanently crazy, luckily for me). Other than that, the boss

---

Turk *is a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, a defense contractor, and the author of* Common Sense Project Management. *He is a frequent contributor to* Defense AT&L.

was a pretty good one, but that one factor negated most of the good. It was a major reason that my wife found another job.

'Bad' Decisions

There are very few "bad" decisions. Yes, there are many wrong decisions, but not too many bad decisions. I define a "bad" decision as one with dire consequences—someone is hurt, someone is killed, the business goes bankrupt, or something similar, with strong and possibly permanent results. A poor decision or a wrong decision is one with less serious consequences. There are lots of those. We've all made them—accepting a job we were not suited for, hiring the wrong person, buying the more expensive car (or the sports car rather than the family sedan or van), voting for the wrong politician, and so forth. I am trying to stay away from too many examples in our personal lives and focus on business/management decisions, but everything in this article applies to your personal life, as well.

Risk is inherent in any business. If we based our decisions on random probability, 50 percent of all our decisions will be wrong. But that also means that the other 50 percent would be right. That's probably better than many of the TV meteorologists. (Or it seems that way, anyway). But if we make no decision, we have forfeited a 50 percent chance of success, even if we were just flipping a coin to determine our decision.

Another advantage of making prompt decisions is that if it turns out to be wrong, you can fix it and salvage the situation faster. To be able to make prompt decisions, we must let go of our need to always be right. Nobody is right all the time. There are too many factors not in our control. For example, what is right today may not be right next year when our country's economic conditions are different, the budget has changed, or the needs have shifted. Look at the history of the stock market as an example.

Let's look at it from a project-management standpoint. If you put off making decisions to do things you believe will help the project toward completion, you won't finish the project on time. You have to learn to be decisive, because there usually isn't just one choice that will work. You have probably heard the old saying that there are lots of ways to skin a cat. (Of course, that saying ignores the fact that the cats don't like any of them.) You won't always pick the perfect solution, but an 80 percent or even 60 percent solution is better than doing nothing. Be decisive. Make your decision, and then execute. If it doesn't work out, then try something else. Don't sit there and wring your hands, saying "Oh, woe is me. I made a mistake." Just chalk it up to experience, learn from it, and move on.

One thing about decision making is that you get better with practice. Every time you make a decision, any kind of decision, you learn something. Sure, it may be negative learning, but so what. The more decisions you make, the sharper your

decision-making faculty becomes. "Good decisions come from experience, and experience comes from bad decisions." I don't know who said it first, but they were right.

Get the Facts First

I don't want anyone to think they have to make every decision immediately. In most management (and personal) decisions, you have to get the facts first. You have to weigh the facts, the risks, and the possible results. Here are some decision-making steps that will help:

- Define the problem and the purpose of your decision.
- Identify the criteria for the needed decision, considering any goals, objectives or specific desired outcomes, as well as costs, resources available, and importance.
- Weight the criteria, deciding the relative importance of each.
- Generate alternatives that might accomplish your various goals.
- Rate each alternative on each criterion, assessing the extent to which each action would accomplish each goal and the costs/resources required.
- Determine the best alternative action with the resources available.

Following those steps doesn't mean you have to take a long time to make your decision. You want to be quick, but not so quick that you do something dumb. Just don't waste an inordinate amount of time. Time is money. Remember that "no decision" is actually a decision in itself. Taking no action is a decision and sometimes the right one. (I am full of clichés.)

Other Tips

The following are tips from a number of different sources. I would like to give credit to the originators, but there is so much overlap that I am not sure who they are (or in some cases, where I found the tips). I have also done some editing to include personal thoughts and experiences.

Be confident. Keep telling yourself that you are decisive and making the best decisions possible with the information you have.

Don't be afraid. There are two parts to this: (1) Don't be afraid to make a decision. The biggest cause for indecisiveness is fear of the consequences. When making an important decision, don't let fear of the consequences overwhelm you. (2) If you make a wrong decision, don't be afraid to change it. Learn to embrace failure as a way to learn.

Don't lean on your preconceptions. Forget about your preconceptions and fixed ideas about things. Clarity is extremely important for taking a good decision, so keep an open mind. This is a great way to put things into perspective and make the best decisions. That is also why you want to gather the facts and talk to your people about their ideas.

Be instinctual. Some decisions, no matter how much you think them over, don't seem to have good results. The longer you think about them, the more problems and obstacles you'll find in your path. This is when you have to rely on your natural instincts to guide you through.

Consider the outcomes. Look at the possible outcomes. Try look look at both the short-term and long-term. Do a cost/benefit analysis. Try to pick the best outcome with the least cost. Consider the tradeoffs. Sometimes it may be that the benefits of one choice outweigh the costs or vice versa. Also keep in mind the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Take a step back. Even if you can only see a limited set of options, don't stop there. Expand the possibilities by considering your hidden assumptions and creatively brainstorm other solutions with your people, your peers or even your boss.

Set a time limit. Force yourself to make decisions under tight deadlines. You don't always need a lot of time to make sound decisions; you just think you do. But again, don't rush yourself so much that you don't take the facts and consequences into consideration.

Think out loud or brainstorm with others. It is an old process, but a pretty good one. Grab some paper. Clearly define the question at the top of the page, write down the options and assumptions, followed by any other thoughts or concerns. Just dump all the ideas and thoughts on to the paper as they come up. Don't edit; just write them all down. Then go back and look at it all more deeply.

Be prepared to screw up. You are going to make mistakes. We all do. Sometimes life takes us into directions that we wish we had never gone. What's done is done and you should keep it that way. Look at it as a life experience, as a step up in your progression toward a complete life, and a way to learn.

Conclusion

Much of this article sounds contradictory. Some of it does to me, and I wrote it. But what I am really trying to say here is to move forward. Be decisive. Take action (and that action may be no action if it is the best option). Learn from your mistakes and your successes.

Keep in mind circumstances change. That is why you have to look at the available information, consider the consequences, list your options and decide. Yes. Use the input from others, but as the project manager you have the final say. Being decisive will also make your people happy. They would rather you make a poor decision than to be indecisive.

Having the responsibility for making decisions is why managers make the big bucks (even if those bucks aren't really that big sometimes). As the Nike ads said, "Just do it!"

---

*The author can be reached at **rwturk@aol.com.***