

Creating Master Decision Makers



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"Knowing the right questions to ask helps managers find the right answers and make the right decisions."

Ask any coach of a successful sports team what makes his or her team a winner, and high on the list of answers will inevitably be one factor: depth—having players on the team who, up and down the lineup, can step in, step up, and get the job done when called on. The same is true of organizations, whatever their size. Having a management team whose members, from top to bottom, are adept at making decisions is crucial for reaching an organization's full potential. The decision-making capabilities of a management team almost always have a direct effect on profits, sales, the ability to execute agendas and strategies, and thus the overall success of an organization.

Education, knowledge, and experience alone do not make a manager a good decision maker. It doesn't just happen; it takes hard work and a willingness to learn from others and take risks. Decision making is like any other skill; the more you practice and use it, the better a decision maker you will become.

Companies can increase their decision-making depth by establish-

ing creative decision-making groups. Consisting of department heads and up-and-coming managers from different divisions, these groups can help managers get to know themselves as decision makers, develop better problem-solving tools, and acquire the intuition, insights, and skills needed to become master decision makers. Group members can work together face to face, by teleconference, or virtually through the Internet.

Creative decision-making groups can help managers examine themselves and learn how they typically react in a variety of situations. Managers can ascertain the way they tend to make decisions—whether they favor a fast, cut-and-dried approach, for instance, or whether they stay with the plan at all costs or prefer looking at a problem from several angles and keeping their options open. Some managers want to gather as much information as possible in order to find the best solution and will take their time doing it. Other managers use creativity to examine all options and take the approach that nothing is written in stone. In general, decisions that are primarily emotional responses are

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not likely to adequately address problems and lead to positive results. Effective decision makers do not allow their emotions to control their decisions. They understand their emotions and have learned to recognize how those emotions affect their decision making. Knowing how they react in different situations, they don't let their gut reactions overly influence the decisions they make. Creative decision-making groups that provide feedback can help managers gain insights into how they react emotionally in different situations. Such groups can also make managers aware of any bad decision-making habits they may have, such as not using the right information, conducting inadequate evaluations, having tunnel vision, making incorrect calculations, and not taking the right steps to fully understand the problem.

There are a variety of decision-making styles available to managers. After getting to know and understand themselves as decision makers, managers can evaluate which decisionmaking style is best to use to solve a given problem. For example, some problems call for a flexible approach, whereas others require a decisive approach. A creative decision-

making group allows managers to view the different styles that other group members display and how those styles are used to make decisions. This can help managers to better understand the decision-making process and gain insight into the specific styles that are best for solving specific types of problems, and vice versa. For example, if a manager prefers an analytical style, he or she might learn that applying that style to an essentially simple problem is likely to result in getting bogged down and taking more time than necessary to make the decision.

Once managers are able to assess which styles are best suited for solving different types of problems, they can choose the style that will best achieve the solution to the problem at hand, then organize and manage the decision-making process until they reach the desired outcome. As managers progress in their careers and take on more responsibilities, the problems they face become more complex and challenging. Managers who do not adjust their style and keep making decisions the way they always have in the past inevitably risk putting their careers in jeopardy. To ascertain which decisionmaking style to use in a specific situation, it is

important to fully understand the problem. One technique that can be used effectively in creative decision-making groups is framing the problem. Groups can choose a problem, and group members can then discuss their personal interpretations of it and the reasons why they reached those conclusions.

Different managers tend to interpret the same problem in different ways. One manager might view a problem in terms of what can be gained, whereas another might view the same problem in terms of what can be lost. Another important factor is whether a manager tends to present problems in a positive or negative frame. Experience matters too. In most cases a junior manager's view of a problem will be far different from a senior executive's view. Each manager's interpretation will affect how he or she perceives, evaluates, and approaches solving a problem. An individual's personality can also affect how he or she sees, evaluates, and approaches a problem.

After framing the problem the next step is finding out what information is needed to solve the problem and how to obtain this information. Decision making is

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not an exact science, and when managers are not aware of all the resources available to them, they may make forecasts based on incomplete information.

Creative decision-making groups can help managers develop the synergies needed to access information and insights from other managers, which leads to better decisions. In organizations with entrenched silos, where managers are isolated from one another, the free flow of information is prevented, hindering managers from making the best decisions. Effective decision makers do not have tunnel vision as they gather and use information. They know not only what information they need but also how to obtain, evaluate, and use that information. Creative decision-making groups provide in-depth insights into what other department managers deem to be important information. There will be times when managers believe they are using the right style, framing the problem correctly, and obtaining the right information, and yet they still don't reach a satisfactory outcome. Creative decisionmaking groups can help managers dig a little deeper to discover and remove decision-making obstacles. These groups can use brainstorming, for exam-

ple, as an effective tool for unlocking the imagination. It can also be a great way to develop problem-solving skills and come up with creative solutions. In brainstorming sessions, managers can discuss problems, ask questions, and open themselves up to being more creative in their decision making. Group brainstorming can be a powerful way to keep an organization in touch with the problems that the organization, the industry, and the general business environment currently face or might face in the future. Using this technique can keep a management team and its organization ahead of the curve and provide an edge over the competition. Brainstorming can supply valuable insights, reveal opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed, and help managers develop creative thinking to solve problems.

Brainstorming sessions allow managers to take risks they might not normally be willing to take and help give them the vision to seize opportunities. Being able to consistently make the right decisions is not easy. However, knowing the right questions to ask helps managers find the right answers and make the right decisions. Learning to ask the appropriate questions takes practice. Some examples of

important questions that need to be answered are: How will my decision affect other departments? Will my decision make the organization more competitive? Will it allow each department to be more productive and more profitable? How will my decision affect my team and the future of the organization?

If an organization lacks decision-making depth in its management teams, it may be prevented from reaching its growth and profitability goals. With globalization, hypercompetition, and shorter product cycles, problems are more complex than ever before. Creative decision-making groups can provide the understanding and insights that allow managers to become strong problem solvers who approach decision making in a way that helps their organizations reach their full potential.