

Decisive Leadership

By Joe Whitefield

Five years ago I began writing a regular feature in Facilities Manager on leadership within facilities organizations on somewhat of an experimental basis. Intending to be timely and relevant, the topics have varied widely from publication to publication. With that said, this month's article is my last submission for Facilities Manager as I move on to other endeavors. I would like to thank the APPA staff for their masterful editing and support of this effort. I would also like to thank the readers, both frequent and occasional, for your interest and feedback. It is my hope that a particular article, or even a single point within an article, has helped you in some small way as a leader. I know that I have benefited greatly from researching topics, talking to colleagues, and writing the articles. Continued success to you and all. —J.W.

One of the great responsibilities of a leader is decision making. How well does this idea reconcile with the notion of leaders being judged by results or outcomes? I contend that results

come from actions, and every action is initiated by a decision or series of decisions. So, in that respect, decision making may be the most important responsibility of them all.

If it stands to reason that positive results stem from good decisions, then people should desire to be good at making decisions. So good leaders make good decisions because they are good at decision making. Confused? Hopefully not. To explain, I want to review some elements of the decision-making process and look for clues that

could lead to better decisions. To do that, we are going to concentrate on the processes that occur specifically before the decision is made and after the decision is implemented.

PRE-DECISION EVALUATION

When considering the decision-making process, let's start at the pre-decision phase. This is the time *prior* to the decision itself, where the choices to be made and the consequences of those choices are being contemplated. In short, this is when all of the possible options are identified and evaluated. This phase should include considering the options that are favorable, mediocre, poor, and possibly disastrous. Two points to emphasize here are that the list of options should be 1) complete and 2) limited. It should be complete in the sense that all of the possible options should be identified for proper evaluation.

How many times have you looked back on a hasty decision only to realize that a better option was actually available but was overlooked? Likewise, the list should be limited—but only in the sense that it should not be cluttered with nonviable options. Once an option is considered nonviable it should be discarded before it becomes a distraction and a time waster. If driving on the left side of the road is illegal, it's probably best not to spend any time on that “non-option” when considering traffic improvements.

The central activity in the pre-decision phase is to quantify the cost and benefits of each option in terms of overall value and trade-offs. Only then can the options be compared and ranked for their fit with well-established goals and priorities. Good decisions are really the best-fit options. Few decisions are perfect, since they invariably involve some sort of trade-off. However, good decisions are those that bring many more benefits than the available alternatives.



Another important aspect of decision making involves evaluating options with incomplete information or unknowns. Decisions with all the information available and known outcomes are really just computations. Real-world decisions require missing information and little guarantee of outcomes. In other words, they're risky. Risks are actually part of the evaluation process and should be considered along with the trade-offs. Organizations need to consider risk aversion when establishing their goals and priorities.

POST-DECISION SUPPORT

Once a decision is made, the process is not over. In fact, many good decisions can ultimately fail because of poor implementation or lack of needed support following implementation. So the questions at this stage are: 1) Have you identified the level of support required for success? and 2) Are you providing it?

Some of the most important evaluations and decisions any organization can make involve the hiring of personnel. Of course everyone wants to make the right decision in this situation, and to ensure that, the pre-decision phase should include all of the elements described above. But what happens when a person has been hired and issues arise? Often, the first thought is to challenge the hiring decision. After all, this was obviously not the right person or there would not be any difficulties. Before that conclusion can be reached, however, you should consider the activities being done to support the person and encourage their success. Have they been given the tools they need for the job? Do they understand the job requirements? If not, the support problem is being disguised as a poor hiring decision.

I believe that post-decision support is vastly underestimated in most organizations today. Too often, it is assumed that the decision itself will automatically produce the desired results. When we shortchange the effort required to make something work, the results will suffer. Work has to be completed, details have to be addressed, and relationships have to be nurtured. I have previously highlighted Angela Duckworth's fine work in this area in her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. The will, discipline, and patience required to stick with something and see it through are essential to success in

challenging situations. Supporting a decision is so important to its success that the level of effort involved in that support should become a factor in the cost/benefit analysis before any decision is made. It should be thought of, perhaps, as part of the "total cost of ownership" of that decision. Insufficient support is the cause of many failed organizational initiatives.

In summary, decision making is a great responsibility for leaders. It is a critical measure of the effectiveness of one's leadership. Good decisions result from good personal judgment and skillfully managing the decision-making process. For important decisions, the process should include both a thoughtful pre-decision evaluation of the choices and commitment to post-decision support. Hopefully, using this process will help you make the right decisions and encourage you as you work to *make* those decisions right. ☛

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