PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION MAKING

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Much of what managers do is solve problems and make decisions. Decision-making is a key role of a manager and leader. Some managers find this to be one of the most difficult tasks to perform. They have a fear of failure, and procrastinate mainly because they have a lack of a structured approach. One of two things usually happens, they either put off making the decision in the hopes that someone else will bail them out, or even worse, make a decision using a knee jerk reaction.

It is best to think of making a decision, as drawing a line between two points. If you can't draw a straight line between the two points, then that decision should most likely be rejected. When the line goes off into tangents, there might not be a realistic link between the proposed action and outcome.

New managers often try to solve problems and make decisions by reacting to them before they fully understand all of the possible factors. They feel that the quickness of a decision is more important than the long-term outcome. There are times when a quick decision is needed, such as dealing with a violent act in the workplace. However, most decisions are not needed immediately and you do in fact have the time to make the right decision. That is the key, making the right decision. Just be careful to not let decisions accumulate, or else you will have a backlog of both small and complex decisions to make. You need to find the perfect balance of knowing when to make quick and easy decisions on the fly, and when to take time with the complex decisions. Define the problem or need before you make the decision. Ask yourself, and others if needed, the following who, what, when, where, how and why type of questions. In lesson 9 we will discuss cost-benefit and task management tools, however, here are 12 steps to follow to use as a guideline when making important decisions:

1.   Who should make the decision? First of all, you might be looking at a problem or need that is not your decision to make. Be sure you are not stepping on anyone's toes, even though your heart is in the right place. If you are the one to make the decision, go to the next step.

2.   What makes you think there is a problem, or why the need? Before you can start to make any decisions, you need to be absolutely clear the problem or need is valid. Make sure you consider those who will be affected by the decision. Talk to

some key staff members to make sure you and your staff fully understands the nature of the problem or need. You want people who will speak up, are efficient, take necessary risks, have somewhat opposing views, and are strongly motivated. There are times when it seems like the problem or need comes at you like "the sky is falling," but when you take the time to truly investigate the problem or need, you might find it is overly exaggerated. This happens quite often as emotions take over logic. For instance, is it one person complaining about a particular situation or does everyone feels the same way? Is there a common complaint from your customers or just one or two disgruntled people who will never be happy? Is there a common trend or is it just speculation? Do you really need to invest in a new database or can you work with what you've got? Dig deep to find if there is a true problem, and then start on finding ways to improve. You don't want to fix something that is not broke. If you indeed suspect there is a problem, follow steps 3 through 12.

3.   Where is the problem or need? Is it internal or external? Is it in your department or somewhere else? Is it only in certain areas of your network? Is it one employee or the whole group? You need to know where the problem or need lies before you can begin to make the right decision to fix or buy.

4.   When is it happening or needed? Is it certain parts of the day? Is it when there is over usage? Is it when shifts overlap? Is it always at the end of the month? Is it every time there is a new software release? By pinpointing when the problem happens, it helps greatly in detecting the root cause of the issue.

5.   What is causing the problem or need? Is the problem process related? A lack of training? Old and slow computers causing longer handle times, which in turn is affecting customer satisfaction? Are there not enough employees to handle the amount of calls? Is it a design or engineering flaw? Is it quality control issues? You need to get with key staff members to truly determine the root cause of the issue. Determining you have a problem is useless if you, or another department, cannot find the cause.

6.   How complex is the problem or need? The more complex the problem or need, the deeper you will have to dig. Don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board until you are fully confident with the choices you have made.

7.   What is the urgency and how should you prioritize? Some problems are more important than others. You would not want to work on a complex minor issue when you have an easy major issue that should be dealt with immediately.