

EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKERS MUST BE CRITICAL THINKERS

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Organizational leaders make decisions everyday, which is what they get paid to do. They get evaluated on the quality of those decisions and their decisions impact others either intentionally or unintentionally. An illustration of this was in a recent edition of the New York Times when it reported on President Obama's plan to widen United States involvement in Afghanistan. The article pointed out how this "offered a glimpse into how the current president makes decisions."

The paper reported that the president's advisers agreed that the primary goal of the U.S. in the region should be narrow — taking aim at Al Qaeda, as opposed to nation-building. The commanders in the field wanted a firmer and long-term commitment of more combat troops. Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pressed for an additional 4,000 troops to be sent to Afghanistan — but only to serve as trainers. Vice President Biden warned against getting into a political and military quagmire. Finally the President's announced decision was a compromise that reflected the various perspectives between his military and political advisors.

It will take sometime before the full impact of President Obama's decision is known. However, Professor Paul Nutt (Why Decisions Fail) of Ohio State University has studied many organizational decisions and why they didn't work out as planned. He notes that two out of every three decisions use "failure prone practices." Also, poor decision are made because of a "rush to judgment" resulting in premature commitments and "wrong-headed investments" often to carry out and support "an idea someone is wedded to, trying to show it will work."

Nutt, in his book “Why Decisions Fail,” explains that leaders can get ensnared by traps that arise from:

- failure to uncover concerns and reconcile competing claims
- overlooking people's interests and commitments
- leaving expectations vague
- limiting the search for remedies
- misusing evaluations
- ignoring ethical questions
- failing to reflect on results to learn what works and what does not.

In order to make good decisions organizational leaders have to work at becoming “critical thinkers.” No person is naturally a critical thinker because, according to the Foundation for Critical Thinking website, “. . . everyone is subject to episodes of undisciplined or irrational thought.” As a result, development of critical thinking skills is a life long process.

According to The Foundation for Critical Thinking (www.criticalthinking.org), a well cultivated critical thinker will:

- 1) raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely;
- 2) gather and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively comes to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- 3) think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
- 4) communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems.

The first step in being an effective decision maker is to figure out the goals for the decision making process. Professor Nutt says believes you need a clear direction for the decision process. This mean being able to address: “Where the decision is going? What is it meant to accomplish – in other words what are the

expected results.” Also throughout the process you must continually re-articulate your goals and purposes.

You need good information to make a good decision. So the second step is to seek out and uncover the stakeholders’ concerns. This requires hearing opposing concepts and fully understanding each party’s concerns and ultimately finding a common theme in making a diagnosis of the problem.

The third step is carefully analyzing the information you receive constructing solid inferences. Then you figure out your options and evaluate the pros and cons for each. Next you can adopt a strategic approach and follow through on your strategy to address the problem. Lastly, one needs to monitor results and when necessary change the strategy based on sound evaluation.

Being an effective critical thinking decision maker requires working the process while being aware of the traps and pitfalls described above. Most of all, one must strive to ensure the process adheres to the universal intellectual standards of: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth and logic.

Critical thinking as well as decision making is a very human activity and as such it will never be perfect. Throughout the decision making process you need to keep in mind that a critical thinker understands that as humans we can not totally eliminate our bias. Although we must be aware of our own biases; factoring them into our consideration. We live in a complex and fast-changing world and even the best process can not anticipate every contingency and possibility, but using critical think to derive a decision will certainly make it a better decision.

References

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