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Dear Reader:

The big problem with making decisions is not the decision itself, but what happens afterwards. Decisions are able to generate enthusiasm, focus, and certainty but also frustration, anger, disenchantment, aggressive or passive reactions. Who can feel comfortable making a decision in the face of such a wide spectrum of possible consequences? In this issue we present a process to improve the quality of decisions and to ease their implementation. Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy

Editor

Quote of the Month

"Walk slowly at a relaxed pace and you won't stumble."

Tao-Te Ching



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MAKING IMPLEMENTABLE DECISIONS

by Isabel Rimanoczy and Tony Pearson

Decision-making is about making choices, and if we think of it that way, it covers almost everything we do during the day. Most decisions are short-term and functional, like organizing our day by doing a priority list, or making a phone call. Many don't take much thought, like choosing from a menu or deciding what route we take when driving. Some have a more significant impact in the mid- or long- term, like deciding to apply for a job, starting a diet, dropping out of a course. And then there are those decisions which reach beyond the personal, which have impact on others besides ourselves, and which, indeed, require others for the successful implementation of the decision

It is all too easy to ignore both the impact of our decisions on others, as well as the importance of others in their successful implementation. As a consequence, we don't anticipate problems in the implementation, and plans might not be carried out as we expect. Worse, we often fail to assess **why** this happens. In so doing, we overlook the wide range of emotions experienced by people involved in our "sound" decision: frustration, anger, disagreement, and resentment at the fact that we didn't involve them in getting their input, ownership or buy-in.

Moreover, when we fail to specifically ask for the opinions of all who are engaged in the decision-making process, we court further disaster by interpreting silence as consent, assume that everyone buys into the decision just because they have not voiced their disagreement. But experience shows that people do not voice objections for a variety of different reasons:

- they are still thinking;
- they haven't fully understood the proposal;
- they want to see if others have objections before they state theirs;
- they are intimidated because of the person who made the suggestion (it can be a strong leader, an authority, a friend, a strong advocator, someone they don't want get into conflict with, etc.);
- they aren't aware that a decision is being made;
- they don't think they are expected to agree or give their opinion;
- they believe the decision is the responsibility of others;
- they have doubts but don't feel comfortable raising them;
- they need clarification before giving an opinion;
- they feel they missed an explanation so they refrain from participating;
- they have already expressed their thoughts in that meeting, or they did it before and do not consider their views were taken into account.

All these reasons may lie behind the silence, a silence with potentially dangerous impact on the implementation of decisions reached. The danger lies in the fact that those who failed to express their views at the time of the decision, could express them later during the implementation of the decision. This might end up postponing implementation, blocking it, or reducing the motivation of the silent ones to execute the decision.

For those types of decisions, that is, decisions that need others for their successful implementation, we have a process that is called **The Fist Five**.^[1]

WHAT IS THE FIST FIVE?

The Fist Five is a decision-making process based on consensus, where everybody is able to express his/her thoughts about a decision using a simultaneous voting process.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

1. Announce that a decision is about to be made and that you will introduce a process designed to get everyone's input.
2. The person who wishes to make a proposal on which he wants the group's approval, makes a statement which clearly establishes the essence of the proposal.

Example:

- "I propose that we hire a new PR advisor."

Example of a question that is NOT correctly phrased:

- "Should we, or should we not, hire a new PR advisor?"

3. Give the group half a minute to reflect if necessary and then ask them to demonstrate the **degree** to which each person agrees with the proposed statement, by holding up a number of fingers from zero to five, on the count of "Three".

The scale is the following:



FIST - I can't live with the decision; I will block it or leave the group



ONE - I don't like it but I won't block it; Don't count on me for a lot of energy



TWO - I'm not excited by the decision; but I will do some work to support it.



THREE - I think the decision is okay; I will get involved.



FOUR - I think the decision is good; I will work hard to support it.



FIVE - I think the decision is great; I may leave the group if it is not made.

By using this method to visually test the potential for consensus, all can see where everyone else is on the decision continuum.

4. The next step is for the 'owner' of the proposal to ask the people on opposite ends of the scale (those at the lower end who gave it a fist or a one, and those at the upper end who held up four or five fingers) to express what is behind their thinking. This simple procedure permits the whole group to hear arguments that, often, have not been voiced before. The reasons that people don't speak their mind are complex, and can range from feeling intimidated to underestimating their contribution. This process is particularly helpful in allowing introverted participants the air time to make their point. The value lies in uncovering and bringing in new information and novel perspectives that can enrich the decision and validate the process.
5. For example one member may have voted with a 2 because he already had hired a PR person in the past with poor results. The rest of the team may not be aware of this history. So then the team can explore why the former experience was unsatisfying, in order to learn from it and avoid making the same mistakes twice.
6. Sometimes a person is opposed to a decision and does not know exactly why; that is, he/she cannot give a good rationale, and for example says "I just don't think this is the right decision". A way to help the person explore his/her thoughts, which may even be unconscious for

him/her, is to ask "What has to be true for you to accept this decision?" In this way, the person can think and contribute some more information.

BENEFITS

The Fist Five provides positive ownership for decisions; it encourages a healthy dialogue and it allows issues to surface and to be aired. Because it is announced, people become aware that a decision is about to be made and this forces those involved in the decision to understand clearly what the proposal is, and to make their own views explicit.


Participants in the decision are given time to reflect, which helps them to ponder fully the pros and cons of the proposal to be decided, and then, because the voting is simultaneous, the decision makers are not influenced by the votes of others. Further, the voting system allows for a full range of acceptance (from total acceptance to total rejection) and thus permits the voicing of smaller objections which might otherwise not be heard at the time of the decision-making, but which might be raised later, negatively impacting implementation of the decision.

As people are asked to express what is behind their vote, new information is brought into the room to be considered and discussed. Not only is the decision usually a more informed one, but the process typically engenders increased respect among participants, and increased commitment towards fulfillment of the decision.

Finally, no decision is made until the objections are resolved, and the issue is ready for implementation.

FINAL REMARKS

This process may be more time-consuming than a simple majority vote, but it enriches the decision and ultimately makes the implementation easier. The team will come to a new consensus or make a different and better decision.

Finally, a good decision process is the one that best serves the purpose and the context of the issue in question. When the implementation is easy or doesn't require big commitment from others, a simple majority may be the best way to go. But for decisions that are more complex, we have found that the Fist Five process deepens understanding and commitment for a successful implementation. 

[1] Adapted from The Leader-Coach Handbook, LIM 2004.



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