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Making Decisions

People expect their leaders to make decisions. That's what leadership is all about. Schools are no different. All school personnel respect a decisive leader (at least as long as the leader's decisions work out and are popular and painless). Firm decision making and strong leadership are synonymous in the mind of school employees and patrons.

Conversely, principals, superintendents, and other school administrators who have difficulty in making decisions are judged to be weak and ineffectual. No one respects a wishy-washy, vacillating leader. In fact, the most damning criticism of school leaders is that "they can't make up their minds."

The trouble is that making decisions isn't easy in today's rapidly changing school environments. There are too many confusing data. There are too many conflicting opinions. There are too many choices. There is too much gray and not enough black and white. There are few sure things.

To make matters even worse, wrong decisions can cost money, reputations, and even jobs. It's no wonder that many would-be leaders hedge, stonewall, and back away from decision making.

No one ever said it was easy to make decisions as a school leader. If it were, there would be lots more leaders and fewer followers. Of course, everyone has to make decisions in his or her everyday life. When you are a school leader, the difference is that your decisions affect many other people's lives, and everyone is watching while you make them (some hoping you will blow it). Nevertheless, if you want to be a leader, and not just a caretaker administrator, you have to make tough choices, solve real problems, make good decisions, and make those decisions in a timely manner.

Fortunately, there are some insider tips that can help any school leader make better, quicker, and easier decisions. This process starts by deciding what to decide.

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WHOSE DECISION IS IT?

Not all decisions properly belong to the leader. There's no rule that says everything has to be resolved at the top. If the leader has to make all the major decisions, there are too many useless lieutenants in the organization. No department, school, or school system can afford to wait around for the leader to decide every important issue.

The first step in effective decision making is to sort out whose decision it is to make. The person in charge doesn't have a monopoly on wisdom and certainly doesn't have time to make every minute decision. Why waste your time and your reputation over decisions you shouldn't be making in the first place? Any decision is more likely to be the right decision if the right person has made it. The trick is to know which decisions to make and which ones to delegate.

Whenever any leader makes decisions that should be made by someone else, time is wasted, inefficiencies occur, feelings are hurt, resentments crop up, the decisions are less enthusiastically received, and the results are often less than satisfactory. Some decisions just logically belong to other staff members.

Curriculum decisions should largely be made in the curriculum department and in the classroom. Most business decisions should be made in the business office. Some decisions should rightfully rest with the school board. A good leader learns when to pass the buck and when "the buck stops here."

The best way to determine and assign responsibility for decision making is to ask and answer these questions:

1. Who is closest to the problem or situation? (The best decisions are usually made closest to home.)
2. Who has the greatest expertise (i.e., background, skills, information, and know-how) to make the decision?
3. Who has time to gather the information and to weigh the consequences in order to make this decision?
4. Who can most easily make the decision in the shortest amount of time?
5. Who has the resources to implement the decision?
6. Who is most politically influential in this matter?
7. Who will ultimately be held accountable for the decision?

Unless the leader's name comes up as the answer to most of the questions, there's good reason to consider letting (or appointing) someone else

to do the deciding. Of course, it's always important to make it absolutely clear exactly who is expected to decide each issue.

In baseball, fielders sometimes let a ball drop because no one is sure who is supposed to catch it. Administrative teams can drop the ball too if signals are unclear. Whenever you delegate a decision, be sure the responsible party knows about it.

School personnel appreciate leaders who make decisions; but they appreciate even more leaders who empower others to make their own decisions within their appropriate areas of expertise and/or responsibility.

Naturally, there are some decisions that can't be sidestepped and clearly must be made by the leader in charge. These include the following:

- Decisions that are the most important and far-reaching for the leader's area of authority
- Decisions that are part of the job (in the job description)
- Decisions that only the leader can carry out
- Decisions that only the leader has the special information or expertise to make
- Decisions that everyone in the organization expects the leader to make

In addition to these guidelines, the following "rules" have helped many successful leaders determine which decisions to make, which decisions to leave for others, and which ones to avoid making altogether:

1. Never make a decision about matters you don't understand without getting help.
2. Never make a decision when you are angry.
3. Never make a decision just to show off.
4. Never make a decision that is illegal, violates your professional code of ethics (see Chapter 12), or is not in the best interests of the children.
5. Never make a decision for which others will get all the credit (or the blame).
6. Never make a decision just to punish or keep someone else from making it.
7. Never make a decision that feels wrong.

Using all of these guideposts can make it easier for administrators to decide what to decide. When the decision is clearly the leader's to make, it should be made on the basis of the best information and the best ideas available.

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WHERE DO GOOD IDEAS COME FROM?

Decisions shouldn't be made in a vacuum. Every leader needs a constant flow of new ideas in order to make decisions that are sound, timely, and relevant. Without a continuing supply of fresh ideas for solving problems and making decisions, no leader or school organization can maintain an edge.

The good news is that school leaders don't have to come up with all of the answers, solutions, and bright ideas by themselves. They do, however, need to be able to recognize good ideas when they see them and to access them when needed.

Knowing where to look for answers and new insights is the easy part. Good ideas can come from anywhere. Anyone in the organization, including students, can have a good idea sometimes, whereas no one (including the leader) has good ideas all the time.

Fortunately, good ideas are a plentiful and replenishable resource. The best administrators constantly keep their antennae tuned to pick up worthwhile ideas for improved decision making wherever they find them.

Part of being a successful leader is knowing how to (a) promote innovative thinking, (b) tap into staff and student creativity, (c) sort out those ideas that really work from those that merely sound good, and (d) incorporate good ideas into the decision-making process quickly and easily. This starts by developing a school culture that values employees' input and suggestions and makes it easy for staff members and students to be heard (see the form below).

The role of an effective leader is to create a climate that welcomes, supports, and rewards innovative thinking and problem solving. When this happens, any school can become an "idea factory" that consistently produces the creative thinking necessary to drive sound decision making.

If you want students, administrators, teachers, and other staff members to routinely come up with workable suggestions, solutions, answers, improvements, and new approaches, you have to trust them. Everyone in the organization should have permission to take risks. It has to be OK to fail, have a bad idea, or hold a minority opinion occasionally. The best administrators know that sometimes it even pays to celebrate mistakes and flawed decisions, as well as successes.

Other characteristics of a solution-oriented environment include the following:

- A "we-can" attitude has been established. There is an unspoken agreement that no problem is impossible to solve—difficult maybe; but not impossible.
- There is an open climate in which people at all levels really listen to each other.
- Solutions are not limited by turf boundaries.
- Individuals who have good ideas get credit for them. Leaders share both credit and blame.

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- Tough problem are assigned to those who know the most about the issues involved, not just to someone who has an official title.
- “Devil’s advocates” are built into the organization. Most intelligence agencies feature a subunit (“Red Team”) whose members’ job it is to act as contrarians and question all conclusions. All organizations, including schools, should have their own Red Team.
- Staff members, at all levels, have time to think.
- Problems are viewed as everyone’s business.
- Information is shared freely throughout the organization. No one (not even the leader—especially not the leader) hoards or rations out information.
- The culture encourages questions. (There are no dumb questions, only dumb answers.)
- No idea is crushed before it has a chance to fly.
- Decisions and actions are based on reality. People pay more attention to hard data than to wishful thinking.
- Brainstorming is a way of life, not an occasional event.
- Identifying and acknowledging problems is “in,” while denial and finger pointing are “out.”
- The staff includes a mix of left and right brainers.
- Teamwork is the norm.
- Work is fun.

When the leader applies an attitude of acceptance and promotes the solution-oriented characteristics above, the generation of new ideas for decision making can become a habit in any school setting.

It also pays to remember that some of the best solutions, ideas, and answers are stumbled across by chance or accident. Serendipity can be a form of inspiration. The germs of good ideas can be found anywhere. Sound decision making is often just a matter of paying attention.

When everyone in the organization is constantly challenged to look for and think about solutions and fresh approaches, there’s never a shortage of creative ideas to assist in decision making. One good idea follows another in a continuous stream. Creativity becomes routine, and decision making becomes a whole lot easier.

Some schools consistently come up with the best solutions and decisions. Others always seem to make poor choices and bad decisions. What makes the difference? Often, it’s a leader who knows how to solicit and sort through diverse input from a variety of sources.

INPUT: HOW TO GET IT, WHERE TO GET IT, AND WHEN TO IGNORE IT

Most decisions are only as good as the input upon which they are based. Getting valid and varied input, and making the most of it, are important parts of the decision-making process.

Effective leaders don't make decisions in isolation. When possible, they rely on input from others to help them determine appropriate courses of action. At the same time, there are limits to the use of such feedback. Just as not all decisions can or should be made by a leader acting alone, neither should all decisions be made entirely by plebiscites. The best leaders know when to get reliable input, how to get it, and how to use it.

Input is only valuable when those giving it feel comfortable with their leaders and feel free to express opinions honestly. The conditions conducive to obtaining open and honest input don't happen by accident. "Idea factories" are created by design, not by chance. Below are five additional ways to foster a climate that generates helpful input and guards against dishonest feedback at the same time:

1. Hire people who don't all think alike. (If all staff members always agree, some are useless.) To facilitate creative problem solving and enhance decision making, it often pays to have both left- and right-brain thinkers on the payroll.

2. Make it easy to get feedback, ideas, suggestions, and reactions to the top. Be accessible. Eliminate paper and procedural obstacles. Try reserving an e-mail address or hotline number exclusively for staff suggestions and ideas.

3. Hold brainstorming sessions when needed. (Be careful, however, to keep such sessions from deteriorating into "blame-storming" sessions. What are needed are answers, not excuses.) Involve everyone who has a stake in the final decision or outcome—including students.

4. Urge teachers and other staff members to bring back at least one "crazy idea" (solution) from every conference or seminar they attend.

5. Routinely challenge staff members by asking "What if?" and "Why don't we?" questions.

When effective school leaders need input to help in making an important decision, what they ask and how they ask depends largely on the nature and timing of the decision at hand.

The potential sources of input are usually plentiful and easily accessible. In most school settings, input can readily be solicited from subordinates, peers, coworkers, superiors, mentors, unions, professional organizations, and a variety of other personal and professional networks, as well as from individual students and student organizations. Through the Internet, it is now even possible to gather input worldwide. No school leader has to suffer from a shortage of advisors. The challenge is to pick the right sources and ask the right questions.

The more far-reaching a decision is, the more widespread the sources of input should be. A rule of thumb for many successful leaders is to seek input primarily from those who have some specific knowledge about the

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issue in question and who care enough about it to give it some thoughtful consideration. It's not always a good idea, however, to ask for advice from those who may benefit directly from or have a vital selfish interest in the final decision. It pays to consider the source of input. Only a very naïve (and usually short-lived) leader accepts all input at face value.

There are lots of ways to gather input for decision making. Which method is the most useful and practical depends on the significance, scope, and complexity of the decision and the timing involved. Methods of obtaining feedback range from very informal approaches to highly sophisticated opinion-gathering techniques. Some of the most widely used strategies include the following:

- Just listening to casual conversations (eavesdropping with a purpose) to pick up hints about existing attitudes and sentiments regarding the question under consideration (It pays to note what people aren't saying, as well as what they are saying.)
- Meeting with individuals and small groups to discuss the pros and cons of the issue
- Setting aside time to be available for anyone who cares enough or feels strongly enough to show up and share his or her views
- Employing formal focus groups to sample opinions or reactions
- Asking to receive advice by e-mail and/or voice mail
- Looking at what the school's suggestion box has to offer (Caution: Be wary of unsigned advice. On important issues, accountability is more important than anonymity.)
- Letting others (e.g., administrative assistants, secretaries, department heads) be your eyes and ears and report on the "buzz" within the organization
- Taking a survey or poll (It can be as simple as asking for a show of hands.)
- Requiring stakeholders to make forced choices between alternatives, to rank options or to rate ideas and proposals on a scale of 1-10
- Being open to receiving petitions from constituents
- Taking a nonbinding straw vote (Or putting the issue to a formal vote, which is never a wise move unless the leader is willing to be bound by the outcome.)

For most school leaders, gathering input or feedback is the easy part. The difficult part is sorting it out, interpreting it, and figuring out how to use it (if at all). There are times when it doesn't pay to seek input from any source.

Effective leaders refrain from soliciting input when

- There is insufficient time to get adequate feedback.
- The right decision is obvious and clear-cut.

- Others do not have enough background or information to provide meaningful input.
- There may be a conflict of interest for the potential sources of input.
- There's a strong likelihood that others will provide only the kind of input they think the leader wants to hear (good answers instead of real ones).
- The nature of the decision is such that it must be based solely on the leader's judgment.

There are also times when wise leaders largely ignore any input they've received from others and choose to decide the matter strictly on their own. These include situations where

- The input received is confusing, or there are too many conflicting opinions from which to discern any definitive direction.
- The leader knows something others do not or cannot know.
- The leader feels strongly that the direction indicated by the input received is wrong and is willing to accept responsibility for making a different decision.

When making a decision without the benefit of input from others, it sometimes helps to outline or write down alternative solutions, including the risks and ramifications involved. It can be as easy as preparing a simple "balance sheet" (see the template below) or doing some "decision mapping" by creating a paper trail tracing the possible outcomes of various courses of action under consideration.

When advice from others is sought, it's important to remember that input is only one factor in decision making. Gathering feedback is just a single step in the process. Sometimes, seeking input is merely an excuse to put off making a final decision.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING: AN OLD TOOL WITH NEW IMPORTANCE

Of course, input comes in many forms. Not all of it emanates from advisors, observers, or stakeholders. For school leaders, more and more decisions are based on the objective input of hard data—particularly test scores. Leaders in all fields have always engaged in data-driven decision making; but today's school officials are required to do it by law (e.g., No Child Left Behind legislation).

More than ever before, administrators are functioning in an age of accountability based on results-oriented standards and measured by test performance. Increasingly, all school leaders are responsible not just for what is done to and with students but for specific measurable outcomes.

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Decision-Making Balance Sheet

Suggested course of action:

Pros

Cons

Short Term

Short Term

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

5.

5.

Long Term

Long Term

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

5.

5.

Weighting Factors

- Important
- Somewhat important
- Very important

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Since the federal government, most state legislatures, and many local school districts have undertaken some form of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR), principals and superintendents are under enormous pressure to meet or exceed external standards, using test scores as evidence. The pressure to document achievement is so intense that some wags have suggested passage of new legislation—the “No Principal Left Behind” law. Obviously, data-driven decision making related to student achievement is a critical feature of the contemporary educational landscape.

The truth, however, is that basing decisions on hard data is nothing new for most school leaders. Good administrators and teachers have always used assessment results to drive differentiated instruction (diagnostic and prescriptive teaching) and linked professional development to improving results. What’s new is a movement to base administrative and instructional decisions almost exclusively on test scores.

Data-driven decision making is a valuable strategy for all leaders—especially school leaders. But it’s not enough. The challenge for today’s principals and superintendents is to use test results and other objective data as only one decision-making tool among many.

There is more to be learned than what is codified in government-adopted standards or measured by mandated tests. Effective leaders make the decisions required by the data, the new standards, and the current system of accountability. But they don’t stop there. Students are more than test scores. And there are valid sources of input that reach beyond available objective data, and decisions to make based on the information provided by these other sources.

Dealing with heightened accountability and relentless results-oriented scrutiny is a new kind of decision making for some administrators. Fortunately, the following guidelines can help any school leader make the most effective use of data-driven decision making:

- Respect the limitations of test scores or other objective data. Any set of data is merely a snapshot in time, while real learning is a moving picture. Try to base major decisions on patterns and trends, rather than on isolated results.
- Be sure you understand what the data are telling you. Initial evidence can be misleading and premature conclusions mistaken. For example, overall scores may be high, but a closer look may reveal significant achievement gaps between subgroups of students. Likewise, a low school ranking on test scores may not mean poor teaching, but may merely signify that a few too many students were absent on test day. Always break down data and look beneath the surface before making any firm decisions.
- Always gather a variety of data—not just the data required by government mandates. Some decisions require observation and anecdotal data, as well as test scores.

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- Don't base decisions just on negative data (low scores). Make choices based on evidence of strengths as well.
- Take action to reduce the pressure, paranoia, and tension associated with tests required to meet graduation standards. Schedule some stress relievers and strictly-for-fun activities during testing periods. You'll get better data and make better decisions as a result.
- Use hard data to decide how to help all individuals and groups of students to improve, not just to choose who to penalize and how much.

Basing decisions on objective data is here to stay. But as with most aspects of decision making, patience can often be a virtue and a leader's best friend.

PROCRASTINATION IS A DECISION—SOMETIMES, THE RIGHT ONE

Effective leaders understand that deciding not to decide is a decision in itself. Procrastination is often a sign of laziness, inefficiency, incompetence, or cowardice. Sometimes, however, procrastination can be a conscious tactical strategy employed by a shrewd decision maker.

There are conditions under which putting off making a decision is the right decision. Procrastination can be a valuable tool if you know how and when to use it.

The following are examples of occasions in which procrastination may be the right decision:

- Not all the important or relevant data are yet available.
- No good solution is immediately apparent, but things may get better with time so that, eventually, no decision will have to be made after all.
- More time to think or search for alternatives may prove helpful.
- Focusing on the decision at hand is distracting attention from more sensitive or controversial ones (using procrastination as a smoke-screen).
- Reinforcements are on the way, such as new money, new personnel, or new legislation.
- Allowing an "incubation" period may result in a better decision. (Sometimes, letting the subconscious mind work on a problem for a while yields a more creative solution.)
- Keeping people guessing about the outcome is stimulating interest and keeping everyone on their toes. (Anticipation can be energizing. When this happens, leaders may want to capitalize on the situation for a time.)

- There's a strong likelihood that pressure may dissipate and interested parties may lose interest over time, making the final decision easier to determine and implement.
- It's a lose-lose situation, and the leader wants to postpone the inevitable for as long as possible. ("Put off the evil time as long as you can."—Proverb).

Whenever a school leader determines that procrastination is the best decision for the moment, there are lots of ways to carry it out. The tools of procrastination are many and varied:

- Forming a committee or task force to study the issue (School personnel are notorious for this. If it's a particularly knotty problem, you can call it a "Blue Ribbon" Task Force. They take longer to deliberate.)
- Asking for more information, data, or input
- Conducting extensive background research
- Taking the matter "under advisement"
- Claiming that other issues have priority and must take precedent
- Seeking legal counsel
- Hiring a consultant
- Waiting for the legislature (or congress or the school board) to convene or adjourn
- Conducting lengthy surveys or opinion polls
- "Foot dragging"—performing every step of the decision-making process at a snail's pace

There are so many strategies for delaying decision making that procrastination can become an art form. Even when procrastination is the right thing to do, eventually a "real" decision will have to be made. At that point, the process is no secret.

REAL-WORLD STEPS IN DECISION MAKING

When it's time to "bite the bullet," there's no magic to decision making. Everyone follows essentially the same process. Effective leaders just do it better, quicker, and easier than most. Anyone, however, can improve with practice.

The "10 Classic Steps in Decision Making" are the following:

1. Acknowledge that a decision needs to be made, and identify the issues. (Take ownership of the problem.)
2. Define the limits of the issue or problem. (Gather data. Frame the questions.)

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3. Clarify the issues involved. (Sort out cause and effect. Name the parts of the problem.)
4. Search for solutions. (Try listing alternative remedies or courses of action. Develop a pool of possibilities.)
5. Narrow the list. (Screen the alternatives.)
6. Test the possibilities. (Send up trial balloons. Bounce ideas off others.)
7. Select the preferred solution.
8. Take action. (Try the solution.)
9. Evaluate the results.
10. Maintain the solution if it works. (Modify and adjust it if needed.)
If the chosen remedy doesn't work, repeat the process.

The shorthand version of this decision-making process is simply

What's wrong?	What are our choices?	Which one is best?	Let's do it!
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See the decision-making process graphic below for a detailed example of the process. The same steps apply to all decisions, great or small. The importance of the decision commonly determines how long it takes to work through the process. Making a snap decision, however, is almost always a mistake.

If time is short, effective leaders may speed up the steps; but they seldom skip or eliminate any. When stuck, it often pays to revisit the steps or to start over.

Even though all decision makers follow the same steps, the best share certain traits that enable them to use the process to their greatest advantage. Many people possess these same characteristics but often don't exercise or develop them to their full potential. The qualities that mark successful decision makers are the following:

- A capacity for clear thinking
- Open-mindedness
- The ability to make up their minds relatively quickly
- A good memory (for previous decisions, what has worked, and what has failed)
- A willingness to try new and varied approaches
- The ability to absorb many points of view
- A realistic understanding of "what's going on out there"

An Example of the Decision-Making Process

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| (1) Receive reports of violence on school grounds (Identify the problem and gather data.) | (2) Talk to victims, witnesses, teachers, student leaders, gang members, etc. | (3) Determine causes: Racism? Bullying? Gang turf battles? (Sort issues.) |
| (4) Identify solutions: Stiffer penalties? More security? Conflict resolution training? (List remedies.) | (5) What will the budget allow? What will the community support? (Narrow choices.) | (6) Bounce ideas off staff and students. (Test possibilities.) |
| (7) Conflict resolution training promises the best results (Choose.) | (8) Implement peer counselor training. (Act.) | (9) Monitor incidents of violence. (Evaluate.) |
| (10) Routinize conflict resolution training as an ongoing program. (Provide maintenance.) | | |

- Comfort with risk taking
- A willingness to trust their instincts
- Openness to giving credit to others for contributing to sound decisions

Administrators who want to become better decision makers are well advised to work on honing these traits. Welcoming and even seeking out new opportunities to make tough decisions is the first step.

INTUITIVE LEADERSHIP: WHEN TO TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

One secret that all effective school leaders learn is that not all decisions are (or can be) based on facts and tangible, verifiable data. Intuition can be a valuable aid to problem solving and decision making as well. Elvis Presley is credited with coming up with the admonition, "Trust your gut. It doesn't know how to lie." Elvis was right! Good decision makers put faith in their instincts.

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Not all decisions can be made simply by adding up the pluses and minuses. Sometimes, it pays to trust your hunches. They often have a way of working out. Smart decisions may come from the head, but right decisions often come from the heart. Effective leaders learn to listen to their feelings and are bold enough to follow their heart when it sends out strong messages.

“Does it feel right?” is an important question for decision makers who trust their instincts. Intuitive leaders develop a heightened awareness of circumstances, surroundings, events, and other people’s thoughts and feelings as well as their own. Often they pick up subliminal cues and clues that point to the right direction and that most other people miss. By using holistic (cognitive and instinctive) thinking, intuitive leaders also are frequently in a position to allow serendipity to work in their behalf.

Fortunately, intuitive leadership is learnable. (Watch little children. They use intuition all the time.) It’s mostly a matter of paying attention to your inner voice and unmasking your true feelings.

The best times to use intuition in decision making are when

- The facts don’t add up
- The process is moving along too slowly (or too quickly), and you feel uncomfortable about how it’s working out
- Everything seems right, but feels wrong
- There’s something about the pending decision that makes you feel vaguely guilty or uneasy

Intuition isn’t guesswork; neither is it infallible. It is simply a tool that effective leaders aren’t afraid to use to help make a decision when appropriate.

Whether decisions are based on intelligence, input, or intuition, not all of them are going to work out. Every leader sometimes makes a dumb decision. When this happens, the important thing is to accept blame without shame, learn the lessons that failure has to teach, and move on (see Chapter 7, *Dealing With Setbacks*).

Deciding stuff is what leaders do. The process is basically the same in all fields. What’s different for school leaders is that although they have many choices and decisions to make, they have only one standard to apply: What’s best for kids!