

Managing TIME WORK & FAMILY

FACT SHEET

Decision- Making

Decision-making is the process of selecting one course of action from several alternative actions. It involves using what you know (or can learn) to get what you need. In single-parent families, and families where both parents are employed, the environment in which decisions are made becomes very complex.

Developing your decision-making abilities can give you more freedom and control over your life, and increase your chances of being satisfied with your decisions. A skilled decision-maker develops more alternatives from which to choose, and has a better chance of achieving the goals desired.

The key factor in “making things happen” instead of just “letting things happen” is skilled decision-making.

How Are Decisions Made?

Do you give much attention to the way you make decisions? If not, you may make the wrong decisions.

There are three common ways that families and other groups reach decisions. These include:

1. Dominance/Submission (Win/Lose). One person dominates the situation and others give in as a decision is made. An example of this would be the decision about what to do for dinner. Mom is tired, doesn't want to cook, and really wants to go to a nice restaurant. The children all have busy evenings scheduled and don't want to go out to eat. Mom insists—creating a situation in which she wins and the children lose.

2. Conversion (sometimes Win/Win, sometimes Lose/Lose). Additional facts are presented so that one person persuades the others to his or her view, or gives up something to get something. In this situation, the children might discuss their reasons for not wanting to go out. They have soccer practice, have lots of homework, want to watch a good show on television, etc. After what seems like hours of “decision-making,” the family decides to go to a fast-food restaurant to grab something quick. They have all given up something to get something.

3. Integration (Win/Win). A blending of ideas develops when everyone can agree and support. In this example, the family discusses the alternatives, states individual views, and makes a decision based on the needs of everyone. They decide to work together. Mom orders a pizza (she wins because she does not have to cook dinner), while the kids make a salad to accompany dinner (the kids win because they will have time to get all of their other projects completed).

Steps in the Decision-making Process

The steps in the decision-making process are similar, regardless of whether the decision involves family and individual resource management, consumer purchases, or other situations requiring choices. Follow these steps:

1. Recognize the problem or opportunity. The decision-making process begins with recognizing the need for change. It might be helpful at this step to actually write down the problem as you see it. For example, the problem may be that the house is always a mess.

2. Analyze the situation. Once you recognize that there is a difference between “what is” and “what could be,” study the situation carefully to determine exactly what is causing the difference. Be as specific as possible. The cause of the above problem could be that the children do not put their things away, and mom and dad do not have time to keep the whole house picked up.

3. Consider your goals. The goals you choose are influenced by the values you have. Becoming more aware of your values and the priorities you put on them helps you see what is desired more clearly. Facts can be combined with values and emotions to reach the decision. A goal could be to keep the house picked up because the family values a home that is pleasant and clean looking.

4. Look for alternatives. Look for as many alternatives as possible to solve your problem—not just the obvious or habitual ones. Creative thinking, reading and talking to other people may help. If the decision is very important in human or economic terms, it will be worthwhile to spend more time and effort seeking alternatives.

Remember, your decision can only be as good as the alternatives that you identify. Some alternatives to solving the messy house problem could be:

- Everyone could be made responsible for taking care of their own belongings or their own messes. Clean-up could occur before bedtime or before leaving the house in the morning.
- Assignments could be made to different family members for different areas of the house.
- A cleaning person could be hired.

5. Consider the consequences. One of the key elements of the decision-making process is looking ahead to see “what might happen if I do this.” Sometimes it is possible to gather

information to help you predict. At other times, you must make predictions based only on what you already know.

Also, consider the use of resources.

- What resources are needed to carry out each alternative?
- How much time, money, knowledge or other resources are required?
- What must be given up?
- Which choice fits better with your values and goals?

Write down the answers to these questions to help you focus your thinking. In the messy house example, the family may like the first or second alternative best. Money that would have to be spent for a cleaning lady might be best used for other things.

6. Select the best alternative. Look realistically at the possible alternatives. Select the one that seems best for you in terms of your values, the goals you are working toward, and the resources you have. It is possible that none of the alternatives will be attractive to you.

If there is no best alternative, or none seems satisfactory, perhaps a new alternative can be created by compromising or combining some of the possibilities. Perhaps you settle on the first alternative as the solution to the problem of the messy house. You decide that each person needs to learn to be responsible for their belongings.

7. Act upon the decision. Making a decision does not end with choosing the best alternative. You must put your decision into action. The family must decide on a day to begin their plan for keeping the house picked up. There should be planned consequences if individuals do not fulfill their responsibilities.

8. Accept the responsibility. When you have made a decision, say to yourself, "The buck stops here." Accept both the responsibility for the decision and the consequences—without excuses. Plan to abide by your choice until changes or improvements can be made. Your ability and willingness to do this will help you realistically think about your decisions, and will provide a basis for improving them.

9. Evaluate the results. The outcome or results of decisions, especially major ones, should be evaluated to determine their effectiveness. Even habitual decisions need to be examined periodically to be sure they are sound and still suit the current situation.

Common Mistakes in Decision-making

Like many other skills, decision-making can be improved by study and practice. Some common mistakes which are often made by unskilled decision-makers include:

- You do not choose an action because you do not recognize the potential. You may not have given enough time to consider alternatives, and thus have not thought of the best ones.
- You choose an action even though the possible outcome is unknown. An example is putting all your savings into a possibly risky investment.
- You underestimate or overestimate the importance of certain information. For example, you highly value the fact that a used car you are considering for purchase has low mileage, but you underestimated the damage that occurred because the previous owners did not maintain the car.
- You neglect to make a choice because not everything can be predicted with certainty. An example is not purchasing a highly-needed second car because you cannot predict exactly which of several cars would provide the best future service.

Consciously going through the above decision-making steps can give you the practice you need to make well-thought-out decisions.

Additional Decision-making Tips

Some additional decision-making tips include:

- Take time to make decisions. Try not to make decisions immediately, as they are often unsatisfactory when made before enough information has been generated.
- Get the facts. Look at the situation in an unbiased way. Review your information clearly, and evaluate it objectively.
- Consider both emotions and facts.
- Avoid making excuses and rationalizations.
- Try not to make decisions when you are tired or under stress.
- Realize that few decisions are irreversible. As with other skills, practice and positive thinking lead to success.

Negotiating Good Decisions

Many times, decision-making involves more than one person in the family. The decision for a woman to return to paid employment was probably not made solely on her needs. Often it is necessary to negotiate in order to gain acceptance for our ideas. Negotiation takes place daily within your family, on the job

and in the community. Effective negotiation is also a skill that can be improved with practice. Using the following tips may help:

- Avoid hard-line decisions. Many people take a hard-line position which makes it difficult to reach an agreement. For example, a husband may tell his wife that she is going back to work. When this occurs, one person must win and the other person must lose. Dealing with your own interests, while considering the interests of other family members, is the basis for negotiating a satisfactory agreement.
- Separate the people from the problem. Many times people confuse the decision-to-be-made with the personal relationship. When people become angry on a personal level, it is very difficult to reach any kind of solution, even though the whole family might benefit from a good solution. When a "people problem" develops, it should be dealt with directly and independently, not as part of the decision that needs to be negotiated.

For example, you may be very angry with your teenage daughter for physically hurting a sibling during an argument. You think she should be mature enough not to act in that way. Deal with your anger first, and then as a family deal with effective ways of handling arguments.

- Understand how the other person feels. Try to understand the framework in which the other person is operating. If you were in his or her situation, what would your viewpoint be about the decision? When you look at the above situation through your daughter's eyes, you may remember how you felt as a teenager when siblings got on your nerves. You have certain ideas, feelings and fears about an issue. Others do not necessarily have the same ideas and fears as you. It is helpful to understand their viewpoint as well as your own.

Conclusion

If you approach decision-making as a process involving several steps, you will be more successful at it than if you make decisions lightly. Before choosing a solution, it is important to identify the problem and to think through alternatives and consequences as they relate to your family goals.

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