

Decision Implementation: Avoiding the Pitfalls

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In the real world of turning a decision into action, the final phase of the process, implementation, is actually two important steps:

- Implementing the chosen alternative
- Following up on (or evaluating) its implementation

Most decisions never get to the last step of follow-up and evaluation. This is the reason that many decisions are not as effective as the decision-makers and stakeholders had expected. Review and evaluation must be part of the implementation plan, but too often these components are left out in the urgency to execute the specific action or solution. Without a timeline, measurement methodology, and contingency, the evaluation of a decision's success is reduced to anecdotes and its failure to excuses.

For example, if I am managing a newly staffed department and find that I'm having difficulty meeting the demands for our services, the "programmed" decision in such cases is to add more staff. But after adding more people, I'm still not meeting requirements in proportion to the staff I hired. When asked why, I have no answer because I have no measures other than the assumption that more staff equates to more output. If I had simply quantified the productivity per staff before the additions, I may have discovered that adding people REDUCED the overall productivity per person. Now I have something to work with! I can evaluate the decision, reconsider the original plan, and present a contingent approach to the problem.

On a larger scale, the decision to go to war in Iraq was pondered and argued for months. And now, long after the decision was enacted, people and leaders all over the world still question the "implementation" and "success criteria." Can

coalition troops be in and out of Iraq in the time speculated at the costs estimated? Will Iraqi oil pay for rebuilding what the coalition and rising insurgency destroy? With a country so divided, who will be freed with democracy? Will a coalition presence or coalition-trained forces in Iraq truly reduce terrorism? The plan to implement the decision to go to war in Iraq needed evaluative measures and contingencies as metrics for success in meeting the goals.

Implementation is everything. The wisest, most well-considered decision amounts to nothing unless it is put to work in a manner by which it can demonstrate achievement of the goal or a solution to the problem. The lack metrics for evaluation is usually a sign that a decision implementation plan is incomplete – it doesn't include a timeline, measurement methodology, or contingency.

The best way to make sound judgment about the effectiveness or success of a decision is to establish reasonable goals and benchmarks as the outcome. Goals should be SMART goals (Bateman & Snell, 2003): Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. To create SMART goals, ask the following questions:

- What are the specific activities that will have to be completed in order to achieve a broad strategic objective?
- Who should be responsible for completing each specific activity identified?
- By what date must each activity be completed?

Every action required to meet the goal must have an owner – the person who will be accountable for the successful outcome or the contingency. Be aware of the things that will require time. Estimating the time and resources required to implement a decision is just as important as the decision itself. Decision-makers must have and apply good time management skills.

Speaking of time, another discipline of decision implementation is allowing enough time for the decision to take effect. Just as in the beginning of the process, the more impact and consequences of a decision, the more time should be devoted to realizing the outcome, whenever possible. In contrast, when it is evident over a period of time that a decision is not working, one should not let ego or pride (emotions!) get in the way of reconsidering other alternatives.

In addition to time, the other constraints that a decision implementation plan must consider are money, quality, personalities, and politics. Like time, money and quality should have influenced the evaluation of the alternatives that led to the final decision. The chosen alternative should always come with these measures for success – within a certain amount of time, under a particular cost, and meet the minimum expectation of the decision stakeholders. Personalities and politics may have also played a role in the final decision, but they are more susceptible to change and may take on another face during implementation. What must be kept in mind is that constraints can go back and forth between being absolute or practical (McConnell, 2000). For example, making a decision to buy a new home considering distance from work is applying a practical restraint. Making the decision based upon what you can afford is an absolute constraint.

Other pitfalls of implementation plans (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 2002) include:

Solution focus – being so focused on the solution that the plan, constraints, process and other factors and influences are overlooked until too late. My example above about the manager focusing more on hiring people rather than getting more productivity was a focus on the solution instead of the goal.

Premature evaluation – decisions take time to “ripple” through an organizations or situation. You’ve heard the adage “today’s problems are yesterday’s solutions.”

Optimism vs. realism – being overly optimistic can get in the way of SMART goals.

If it isn't broke, don't fix it – when a decision is made about a problem or opportunity that doesn't really exist, (i.e. technology for technology's sake, keeping up with the Joneses, political positioning) implementation results in an outcome that is negative or unsustainable.

Overlooking important constituencies – forgetting key stakeholders during implementation has detrimental effects because those who are not involved in the process, at any stage, will have difficulty embracing the solution.

Finally, one of the most important elements of an effective decision implementation is communication. Communication plans and/or access to information systems enable the decision-maker to always know if the selected alternative is meeting its planned objectives. Make sure these are in your plan!

References:

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- McConnell, C. R. (2000). The anatomy of a decision. *Health Care Manager*, 18(4), 63-74.