

# Managers Letter

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## Decision Making: Issues, Options and Actions

***“It appears to be a human tendency to seek solutions even before the problems are understood.”*** HRF Maier and LR Hoffman — *Group Problem-Solving Process: Studies of a Valence Model*

**by Sharon Marks**

***“If a spouse decides what the family is to have for dinner, the decision is autocratic. If husband and wife both decide, it’s minority rule; if the family votes, it’s majority rule; if there are no leftovers, the decision was by consensus.”*** Deborah Harrington-Mackin — *Team Building Tool Kit: A Tool Kit to Renew and Refuel Your Workplace Teams*

Decision making is a process that we engage in countless times every day. We are often unaware of the process because “it’s just one more thing to take care of.” Many decisions are not well made, have little chance of achieving support and are even less likely to resolve the issues at hand. And yet, we keep doing the same things the same way each time we have to make a decision. What do we need to do differently? A new approach to decision making may be worth consideration.

***Issues, Options and Actions*** — This three-tiered approach enables people to ask themselves exactly what issue needs a decision, how many options can be generated to solve it and what action will be the final result. Let’s look at each of these tiers.

### The Issue

The biggest challenge is deciding what needs to be “fixed.”

***“The perception of a problem is always relative. Your headache feels terrific to the druggist.”***

— R. Arnett, President, Ramona Enterprises, Inc.

The issue that needs to be decided is often lost in the rush to make the decision. We want to fix things, quickly and with minimum fuss. That’s how we often end up taking the first option that comes to mind, keeping our fingers crossed that the resulting actions will provide the outcome we need.



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If a project has slipped its schedule, often the issue that gets decided becomes not what caused the delay, but what are the best steps to get it back on track. However, if we consider that the schedule may be off because of inadequate resources, then the decision might be: do we hire

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more people or extend the deadline? We need to look at the pieces of the issue itself in order to understand how the issue came about in the first place.

When an employee is not being successful in his position, people might say: “We’ve got to get rid of this person!” But is the decision really related to the employee’s status? Is it about the match of the employee’s skills and the assigned tasks, or is it about hiring practices that need to be updated? The employee who ends up not performing well may be a result of poor managerial interviewing techniques rather than a failure in the employee. Is the real decision to provide better training for our managers, or to have personnel handle all interviews? Until the issue to be decided is clear, we have no direction in which to move.

One of the easiest methods for bringing the real issue to the surface is to ask yourself, “What would this issue look like if it were resolved perfectly?” Then backtrack and list what would make the resolution of that project schedule or that employee perfect and what would interfere with that perfection.

It's always easy to lay blame or say who is causing a problem. The skill in effective decision making is to think about what the actual issue is and what decision is needed to help resolve the issue in a meaningful and long-lasting way. Once the issue is identified, we can develop a variety of options for dealing with it.

## The Options

**The more choices, the better the solution.**

***"Nothing is more dangerous than an idea, when it is the only one you have."***

— *Emilie Chartier, French philosopher*

Making a decision, especially under tight time constraints, often means stopping at the first idea offered. However, if the decision maker gathers as many ideas as possible, he has a richer pool from which to "cut and paste" the best of each option in order to provide the best possible outcome.

Multiple options provide the decision maker with more than one point of view. This helps her to clearly understand the issue and thus enhances her ability to select the best of several options to come up with a workable, long-term solution.

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In selecting the option(s) from which a decision needs to be made, it's important to think about what makes an option, or part of an option, most appropriate. In other words, what criteria do these options meet? Are they concrete, measurable, quantifiable, and if so, can these criteria be transferred to the actions that will result? When faced with a decision, you want to be sure of what the decision will give you. Will taking Option A increase revenues by 16% over a five year period? What about Option B? Will it increase revenues by 10% over a three year period?

## The Actions

**The actions taken indicate support for, or resistance to, a decision.**

***"The value of an idea lies in the using of it."***

— *Thomas Edison*

The work, preparation, research, discussions and brainstorming that lead to a decision are only valuable if they have a chance to come to life. That means implementing the decision and its related actions. Getting to implementation is what all decisions are about.

We need to ask ourselves two questions: "What's wrong?" and "What can we do to fix it?" Decisions may include redefining tasks and roles. They may require a higher level of commitment, and decisions that serve us well, must be open to review.

Decision making does not end with the actions taken, but rather with an evaluation of those actions. We want to know not only if we did what we said we would, but how successful we were in doing it.

Evaluating the success of the selected option and the degree of implementation of the action means revisiting the criteria to see if we achieved what was targeted. Do we use it again in a similar situation?

Decisions are really about identifying issues, generating options and taking action. And, good decisions are about honoring the choices we make.

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