

Project Decision Making - Is it as easy as it sounds?

We all understand that undertaking projects will necessitate making decisions. So what's all the fuss about? Is project decision making any different than any other organisational decision making?

What is a decision anyway?

As the world of work becomes more complicated the environment that we deliver projects in becomes commensurately more complex. Multi lingual/multi cultural project teams are now common. Geographically distributed project teams are hardly remarked on any more. Materials and equipment is sourced from wherever is most cost effective, the case for a local supplier has to be well defended to succeed.

All this complexity puts pressure on the project decision making processes. Project Managers and project team members are faced with decisions they are not sure they can make. Questions they might ask are:

- Who can make this decision?
 - Perhaps I'll just ask someone I'm most comfortable with
 - If there's no-one handy I might make it myself - after all, I know what's best
- Can it wait a bit until I'm clearer about what is needed?
 - If I wait long enough it might go away
 - Something is bound to come along and clear things up
 - You never know, we might catch up
 - I still don't know all the facts
- How can I get agreement?
 - Do I really have to tell people?
 - Can I keep it quiet for a bit?
 - What if it upsets my team?
- What if I get a decision I can't live with?
 - 'If Mum says no, can I ask Dad?'
 - Maybe I'll just pretend I didn't ask

Types of project decisions

In projects we are faced with decisions constantly. It might be helpful to loosely categorise them. Typical decisions might be:

- Design/Technical decisions - subject to argument between technically minded individuals who are sometimes, but not always, subject matter experts
- Resource/cost decisions - rely on modelling to determine the best skill match and most cost effective solutions
- Political/Stakeholder decisions - influenced by relationships and power structures
- Policy decisions - potential to impact on 'the way we do things'
- Time/cost decisions - critical to the timelines when organisations have to allocate cash
- Risk appetite decisions - what risk are we willing to take on, and who is responsible



Attributes of good decisions

Whatever the type of decision there are some basic attributes of a good one

A good decision is one that is:

- made by the right people
- made in the right timeframe
- made in the right context
- captured and communicated to the right people
- **IMPLEMENTED**

Obstacles to good decision making

- Fear of failure
- Lack of process
- Inability to generate options and ideas
- Procrastination
- Laziness
- Fear of upsetting people
- Human memory is limited - Can be influenced by:
 - recent performance
 - personal viewpoints
 - relationships
 - significant past events

Decision Communication

- Determine consultation required
- Determine communication required
- Because people need to belong
- Successful implementation depends on:
 - Commitment from staff
 - Understanding
 - Sense of involvement in the decision

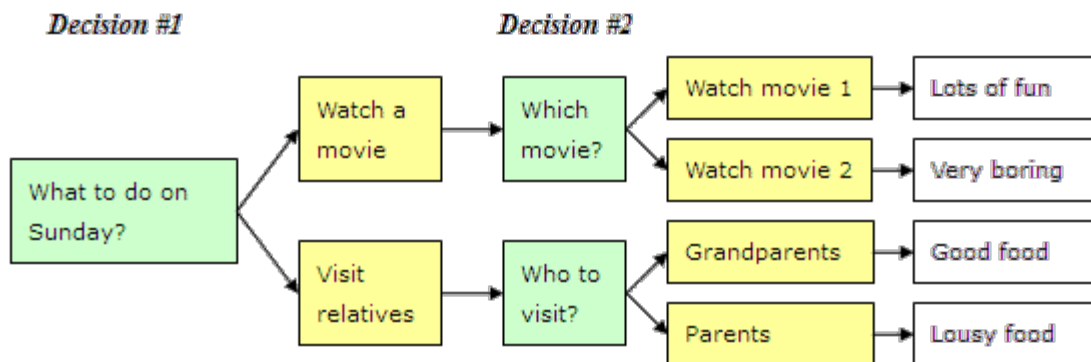
Note: This is independent of staff agreement

Tools for those who get stuck

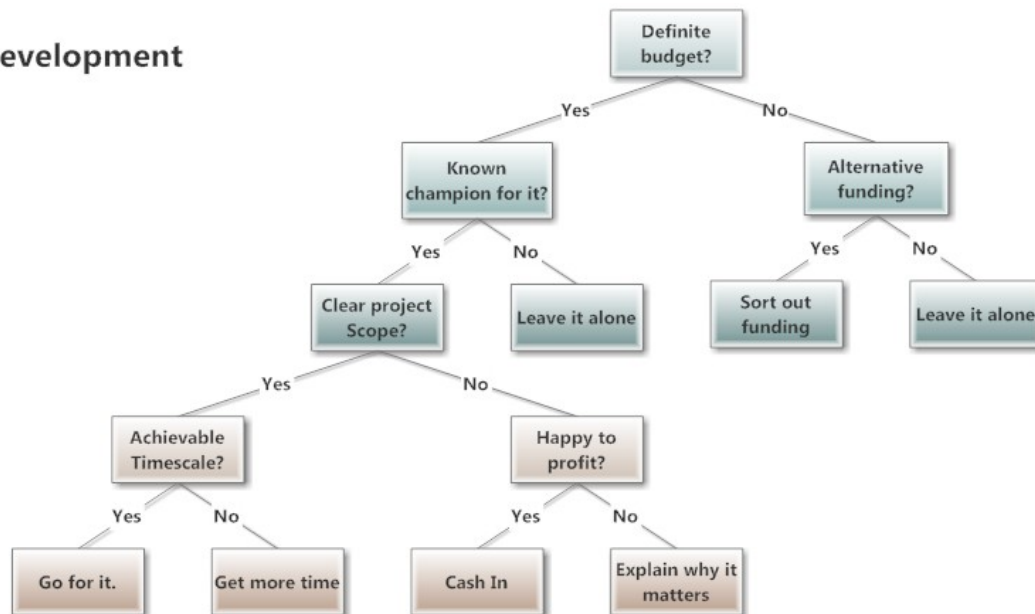
- Option Generating
 - a. 5 Whys
 - b. Brainstorming
 - c. Mind mapping
- Project Policy Paper

- a. A brief document for decision makers - typically includes:
 - b. The Decision Statement: What is the problem?
 - c. The Background: What is the context?
 - d. The Impact: How important is this issue?
 - e. The Options: including the implications
 - f. The recommendation
 - g. Timeline for implementation
- Decision charts and pro's and cons

Some samples



Project Development



- Procrastination

Decision making procrastination may relate to:

- A belief that you will know more at some future date

- A belief that you will be better able to deal with a disappointing decision when you are in a better frame of mind
- An optimistic view of decision making timelines

Ask yourself :

- what is the timeline in which this decision is needed for the project to achieve success?
- Will I be likely to have more information within that timeline?

Project Management Process

Most organisations have well developed operational and strategic decision making processes, usually through chains of command, management authorities, committees and boards of management . When projects are established, decision making can be problematic if structures and authorities are not established early on.

- Define and communicate the decision management processes early - don't wait for problems
- Brief your decision makers - unless they have good experience, it won't hurt to give them information about their role and what the project needs
- Provide good information and as discussed above - don't risk poor quality or untimely decisions by assuming everyone knows what the issue is
- Make it clear when you need the decision - don't assume it's obvious, even when it is
- Try to get the right people involved - if you possibly can, make sure you get the right people

Culture and its influence

Whatever decision making process you establish, organisational culture will have an influence on how it works. The two dichotomies of organisational culture apply here as everywhere else.

Control versus Freedom - are team members empowered to make decisions or most decision making escalated to the top.

Collectivist versus Individualist - is it critical that everyone agrees and buys in to the decision, or is it more important that someone makes it and we all get on with our work.

These cultural factors will determine whether the chosen approach will be Authority, Majority or Consensus

Authority decisions are made by an individual or small group with organisational authority to make them. A good decision maker, making decisions from a well briefed position, can be a great resource for a project - decisions are likely to be timely, straightforward and someone is willing to take responsibility. This is very effective if you can secure the right individuals for you decision making process. A poor authority decision maker can be ameliorated somewhat by being brought into a structured process.

kneeDeep

Majority decisions are simply resolve a decision making process in favour of numbers there is no reason to expect that the solution is the best possible, and in some cases there is evidence that those opposed may sabotage. The only benefit to this approach is that it moves things along.

Consensus decisions will usually require everyone to come to agreement. This can be time consuming and frustrating, particularly if everyone in the group doesn't step up to the need to be actively engaged and open minded. When it is done well, there may well be innovation and a high level of commitment to implementation which more than rewards the extra effort involved.