Leadership Skills - Making Decisions

When people think about the characteristics that make a leader stand out, one trait that most frequently comes to mind is decisiveness. Successful leaders are not envisioned as individuals that are unable to commit to strategic plans or that appear unclear and uncertain. Instead, leaders are viewed as people who are able to quickly arrive at their decisions and communicate company goals to others effectively.

Leaders often have to make challenging decisions that may include what direction to move the company in or whether to keep an employee, reposition them or let them go. Great leaders are able to balance emotion with reason and make decisions that are beneficial to themselves, their employees, their customers, and their organizations. Making good decisions in difficult situations is a significant challenge because these types of decisions involve change, uncertainty, stress, and sometimes the unfavorable reactions of others.

When it comes to decision making, great leaders possess another skill, they have the ability to know when to move quickly and proceed with only the information that is currently and readily available. In many circumstances, there is no time to gather additional information with which to influence a serious decision. On the other hand, leaders must also be capable of pursuing additional information when necessary and know when enough data has been gathered to move forward. Sometimes, too much data can be paralyzing and take attention away from the big picture or core points.

Tips for Wise Decision-Making

As a manager, you will be faced with important decisions that may impact the future of the company. This may seem stressful, but keep these tips in mind and you’ll find yourself making wiser decisions in no time:

▲ Define, as specifically as possible, what the decision is that needs to be made. Is this really your decision or someone else’s? Do you really need to make a decision? (If you do not have at least two options, there is no decision to be made.) When does the decision need to be made? Why is this decision important to you?

▲ Brainstorm, and write down as many alternatives as you can think of. Be sure to use your resources (experienced friends and family, the Internet, etc.) to find out more about the implications of each option.

▲ Visualize the outcome of each alternative. Do you feel more satisfied with one outcome than with the others?

▲ Do a reality check. Cross off those alternatives that most likely will not occur.

▲ Once you have made your decision, get moving on it. Worrying or second-guessing yourself will only cause stress. You have done your very best. Remember, no decision is set in stone.

Common Decision-Making Mistakes

Have you ever tried to learn ten new things all at once? If you have, you know that it is very easy to become overwhelmed and end up learning very little at all. That is because of the way the brain works. Our brains screen and categorize information so that we can understand the world around us without being overwhelmed by it. We get into trouble when we fail to realize that many of the perceptions we hold are based on what society (i.e., parents, teachers, the church, all institutions, etc.) teach us, not what we actually know to be true. Here are some common mistakes leaders encounter when trying to make a decision:

▲ Relying too much on expert information. Oftentimes, people have a tendency to place too much emphasis on what experts say. Remember, experts are only human and have their own set of biases and prejudices just like the rest of us. By seeking information from a lot of different sources, you will get much better information than if you focused all of your energy on only one source.

▲ Overestimating the value of information received from others. People have a tendency to overestimate the value of certain individuals in our society and
underestimate the value of others. For instance, experts, authority figures, parents, high status groups, people who seem to have it all together, and people we respect have a way of swaying our opinion based simply on the fact that we believe they know more than we do. When you find yourself doing this, ask yourself: Do they know as much about this problem as I do? Are their values the same as mine? Have they had any personal experiences with a problem like mine? In other words, keep their opinions in perspective.

▲ Underestimating the value of information received from others. Whether we realize it or not, we also have a tendency to discount information we receive from individuals such as children, low status groups, women (yes, believe it!), the elderly, homemakers, blue-collar workers, artists, etc. This is unfortunate since many times these groups can paint a good picture of the other side of your problem. In other words, these groups may use entirely different values and perceptions in their answers to your questions. The result is a larger perspective of what the issues really are. Just make a note that if you find yourself discounting the information you receive from anyone, make sure you ask yourself why.

▲ Only hearing what you want to hear or seeing what you want to see. Try this exercise. Ask a friend to look around them and make note of everything that is green. Now, have them close their eyes. Once their eyes are closed, ask them to tell you what around them is red. Almost everyone you ask will not be able to tell you what was red because they were focusing on what was green. Our perceptions work the same way. If we have expectations or biases that we are not aware of, we tend to see what we want to see. Likewise, if someone tries to tell us something we do not want to hear, we simply do not hear them. This is a common mistake that many people make. The key is to be aware of your own prejudices and expectations while at the same time staying open to everything that comes your way.

▲ Not listening to your feelings or gut reactions. Have you ever made a decision only to have it be followed by a major stomach ache or headache? This is your body talking to you. Our brains are constantly taking in more information than we can consciously process. All of this extra information gets buried in our subconscious. Although we may not be able to retrieve this information, our body stores it for us until it is needed. In moments when we need to make a decision, our bodies provide clues to the answer through feelings or gut reactions. Unfortunately, our society teaches us to ignore these feelings, but by tuning into your intuition, you will find that you will make much better decisions in the long run.