DECISIONS! DECISIONS! DECISIONS!

Some observations and guidelines for Volunteers and Staff on Decision-Making and Problem-Solving.

BERNARD M. KAPELL

Training Director, American Heart Association

As individuals, each one of us is always making decisions. We make at least a dozen, sometimes several dozen decisions a day. Many are in our personal lives; some are relatively major decisions, many are minor. We make them without measure in our work.

We may consider our personal decisions our most important ones, but very often the decisions we make on the job condition the kinds of decisions we must make in our personal lives. Notwithstanding the considerable differences between making personal decisions and decisions we make in our work-a-day life, the priniciples behind decision-making, per se, are the same in one's private life as they are in one's professional environment.

This article does not deal with personal decisions. It is concerned only with Decisions, Decision-Making and Problem-Solving in our work situation as volunteers and staff in the agency or organization with which we are associated.

Decisions, in a real sense, are prognostications about the future. What we have to realize is that when we think about the future we are no longer dealing with validated ascertainable facts. The process of forecasting evokes hesitation and doubts. It also generates controversy and often compromise. We begin to see half rights and half wrongs. We get caught up in much plodding work with only an occasional sudden brilliant insight to relieve the tedium. Often we are tempted to leave well enough alone. Sometimes we have an urge to rush in where angels fear to tread. And always we know that there is no certainty except in retrospect.

Since we cannot consult a Delphic Oracle, we must condition ourselves to think in terms of the future. Possible future obstacles must be foreseen. To make decisions in terms of existing conditions only is to face the problem of rushing from one crisis to another.

We live by a constant flow of day-to-day and moment-by-moment decisions. The ability to make wise decisions and to get them accepted requires a skill that can be equated with an indivdual's personal success and leadership qualities. The possession of this skill is frequently the barometer by which one can measure the volunteer's capability for the assumption of greater responsibility for a staff worker's promotional potential.

The professional literature is weighted down with interpretations of the decision-making process and how volunteers and staff make decisions that influence their own work situations and the activities of those with whom they interact on the job. We shall examine some aspects of this subject.

Decision-Making in the Organization

The core of the administrative process in an agency rests on making decisions and having them carried out. What decisions are made, and how they are made, determines the quality of the administration. *The most basic decisions an administrator or a supervisor makes are those related to Delegation, Assigning Responsibilities, and Giving Authority Commensurate with those Responsibilities.* These are all central to his ability to function efficiently and effectively.

The flow of decision-making places the responsibility for carrying out assignments on the person or persons who was employed or assigned to that job on the basis of training and/or experience. If delegation of responsibility is thoughtfully made, and if authority is likewise delegated, most of the operating decisions will be made at the operating level. There *is* a decision-making role for the Executive or Supervisor, but it is reserved for those problems where there is difficulty in interpretation, when unusual circumstances obtain, or where the nature of the decision is commensurate with his own responsibility and authority.

Decision-making and action are inevitably intertwined in all organizational behavior. The very reason for making a decision is to chart a course of action. Therefore, every volunteer and professional staff member may reinforce his decision-making skills if he has a better understanding of the process by which decisions are made.

Chester I. Barnard, in his book, *The Functions of the Executive,* made a perceptive and cogent statement on the decision-making process:

> "The fine art of executive decision consists in not deciding questions that are not now pertinent, in not deciding prematurely, in not making decisions that cannot be made effective, and in not making decisions that others should make."

We can transpose Mr. Barnard's statement into a set of positive precepts to chart our own style and manner in making and timing decisions:

> — Decisions should be made only if they are pertinent to the concern of the individual making the decision, and to the concern of the agency involved.
>
> — Make only those decisions that are now called for. If there is time, delay your decision; new facts may become available or circumstances may change.

— Make only those decisions on which effective action can be taken.

— Make the decisions which are your responsibility; if someone else is charged with responsibilty for making a particular decision, permit him to do so.

The Nature of a Decision

In a logical transaction let us now consider the question: *What is the nature of a decision?*

All behavior involves a conscious or an unconscious choice of certain actions, or decisions, as we call them. When a person follows one course of action he has rejected other courses of action. Every action is selected from a set of possible alternatives. Some choices are merely reflex actions; others call for study or deliberation. Some choice require a simple response; others call for a series of steps which calls for a plan or design.

The work of voluntary agencies, no less than the work of other organizations, involves decisions of many types, and demands continual choice-making. Ideally, volunteers or staff members are selected or appointed on the basis of established qualifications. Someone has made a judgment that the individual is capable of executing the responsibilities that go with the job. That individual either has the background and experience to make the choices — or decisions — that the job requires or can and should be trained to make them.

Making decisions is a joint process in any organization. Few decisions are really made by any one line in the hierarchy. Every decision is likely to affect many other people, and most decisions are based on what other people think and what they do. *The decision-making process is far more collaborative than is generally realized,* because decisions tend to build on previous decisions which have been effective or which have already started the course of action to meet the problem or situation with which the agency or organization is coping.

In the Voluntary Agency field good decisions are frequently joint decisions, because they are based on knowledge and opinions of several persons who are involved, and they are therefore more likely to be correct decisions because they combine the reflective thinking and judgment of more than one person. Decisions made on this basis are more likely to gain acceptance, and probably are therefore more effective. Every decision contains some element of the value-system of the decision-maker, but decisions should be based on the goals and objectives of the Department and the Agency or the Organization. What a person is trying to accomplish will influence what he decides to do — what course of action he selects.

The choice may be made from a number of goals or objectives. Occasionally, the decision-maker can reconcile two of these objectives but generally he has to select one over others. The possible effect on the agency's program must be taken into consideration, and at this point the volunteer or staff member may have to involve his supervisor. At this point the decision is appropriately shared at a higher level in the hierarchy.

Decisions are always inter-related. It is almost impossible to make one decision in an organization without affecting other decisions. For example, in making decisions about budgets the agency is undeniably greatly influencing not only its staff but also the people being served and the type and quality of the service which it will provide to the community.

Decisions in one Department or on one level of the agency almost invariably affect other Deparments and/or other levels.

Staff in positions of lesser responsibility, by their choice of alternatives, shape the decisons of their superiors. In some cases they may even help shape organizational policy.

Participative Decision-Making

Having introduced the values of joint decision-making, this is a good point in time to examine participative decision making in some detail. Behavioral scientists have stressed that wide participation in decision-making is both valid and desirable in all types of organizations. We believe this has high applicability to voluntary agencies, because in their very essence they work on a participative basis. Three basic reasons are easily identified:

— Participation involving volunteers and staff insures that the agency maintains its relevance to the community it serves. Participation stimulates the professional growth and improves the morale of both volunteer and staff.

— Participation utilizes each person's indvidual abilities and skills to a greater extent and thus achieves more significant input to the decision-making process.

Sometimes a conflict develops between the ideal of wide-spread participation and the need for a prompt and appropriate decision. It is postulated that the participative process can unduly delay needed decisions. Participation, like democracy, takes time, and some decisions must be made promptly to avoid more serious problems. Clearly, too, some participants lack the necessary experience and ability to share in making certain decisions. We must, therefore, recognize the negative factors and guard against them to make sure that they do not impede the positive values of participation in the decision-making process.

It is true that our decision-making must be reasonably prompt if our work is to be effective. However, the very purpose of many of our decisions is to assist staff members to develop professionally and to grow on the job. Thus the participative process is vital if the decision-making process is to be effective in furthering the goals and objectives of the agency.

Dr. Norman R. F. Maier, Professor of Psychology at Michigan University, and a well-known researcher in the field of human behavior, has taken a realistic look at participative decision-making and has developed a concept for appraising which decisions should be made by the participative process and which are more appropriately made by the "leader" — the supervisor, the administrator, the department head, etc.

According to Dr. Maier, decisions that require group acceptance should be made by the persons involved, if possible, and not by the supervisor — no matter how capable he may be. However, realities dictate that there are decisions which must be made where there is no place for group consensus; the person or persons possessing the relevant knowledge or specific factual information may be the most qualified to make that kind of decision, and this is the supervisor, at whatever level he may be.

Making effective decisions, therefore, depends upon the nature of the problem. Decisions that concern feelings and attitudes profit from group participation, whereas decisions that depend on objective facts requiring specialized knowledge can best be made by experts. The common error is either to assume that group decisions are superior to leader decisions regardless of the problem, or to assume that people who know the most should make all decisions for others.

Dr. Maier maintains that the first consideration in decision-making is to decide whether the success of the decision will depend primarily upon the support it receives or on how effectively the objective facts are obtained and utilized. This requires skill in diagnosis. In the event that both objectives are needed, either persuasion or discussion-leading skills will be essential. It follows, therefore, that we cannot entirely avoid the need for management skills in decision-making.

In summation, then, participative decision-making is critical to the effective functioning of a voluntary agency because it improves morale, stimulates professional growth, utilizes each staff member's abilities and skills, and maximizes the work output of the entire staff, meanwhile releasing the supervisor's time and ability for those decisions and functions which are correctly his.

Decision-Making as Problem-Solving

We will now consider decision-making as it relates to the problem-solving process. The ability to make a decision finds its greatest expression in the problem-solving process. A decision is not really a decision until it is expressed in action. The entire problem-solving process can be viewed as an exercise in decision-making — decision-making with a purpose. A problem-solver is one who makes a sequential series of decisions and is therefore a decision-maker. The several factors inherent in the process need to be followed. These become apparent as the problem-solving process is analyzed. For purposes of brevity, these factors are listed in a step-by-step order:

— Problems are not solved if they are not recognized, or if they are ignored. They do not go away of their own accord. One has to be aware that a problem exists.

— The problem must be defined, and this requires objective thinking. It will help uncover the real problem much more quickly. The actual problem is seldom that which is most apparent, and very often objective analysis is required to pinpoint it accurately. A person who permits his emotions and feelings to become involved risks becoming a part of the problem instead of being the problem-solver.

— The relative importance of the problem must be assessed, and a target date set for its solution. When that target date is reach the solver must make his decision on the basis of the information at hand, even if he realizes that he does not have all the facts. This is the risk he must take, because not to try for any solution may in effect create a bigger problem.

— The problem-solver must know the objectives which he is striving to attain in the solution of the problem. He must have a clear sense of what precisely has to be accomplished. He will then be in the position to establish standards against which he will measure the alternatives that he will have to consider.

— The problem-solver must attempt to acquire the most complete, meaningful, and relevant data that he can assemble to help him frame the alternatives. One simple, effective device for acquiring information is to learn the art of questioning. Learn to ask, "Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why?"

— Having assembled the relevant information, the problem-solver now subjects it to creative analysis. He translates this information into all the possible alternatives, no matter how unusual they may seem at first glance. Alternatives are not summarily dismissed.

— The competent problem-solver avoids jumping to obvious conclusions. Additional facts or a closer examination may establish that the obvious is not so obvious. He guards against stereotyped conclusions and personal biases or prejudices. He also makes sure that his current reactions are not unduly colored by the conclusions of a previous experience.

— The problem-solver helps himself in his task if he can examine all the options in the light of what might happen if each were exercised. A useful question for this kind of self-testing is, "What

could happen if such-and-such were done, and what could happen if thus-and-so were not done?"

— He is now ready to list all alternatives, including the alternative to do nothing. He is not satisfied with two or three alternative solutions, even if one or two look good. He continues his examination until he has uncovered the maximum number of alternatives. A good rule for any problem-solver is to list all the possible solutions before making a decision.

— These alternative solutions are now subject to critical analysis. It is at this point that many of the creative and theoretical opinions prove to be impractical. Under certain circumstances consideration should be given to consulting a qualified fellow-professional for his opinion and judgment. An interested listener may provide valuable feedback which will give the problem-solver additional insights.

— The next step is to make the decision, and the best solution is selected.

— The decision must now be implemented. What the problem-solver has done so far is to "make the decision" about what solution is best for meeting the problem. He must now put it into effect. Failure to act upon his decision is to have gone through an exercise of possible enlightenment but consequent frustration.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the impact of decision-making in our work lives, decision-making in an organization, the nature of a decision, and participative decision-making. It has also delineated the steps involved in decision-making as problem-solving. The intent was to present a brief overview of this skill area as it applies to our agency output.

Business leadership is very concerned with effective decision-making, because its profits depend upon sound decisions. Should not service-oriented agencies, not in the business sector, be equally concerned? A trust has been placed in our hands; good decision-making and problem-solving adds up to wiser expenditures of monies, more effective job performance and greater service to the people the agency serves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barnard, Chester I., *The Functions of the Executive.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1956, Chapter XII The Environment of Decision, pp. 185-199.

Johns, Ray, *Executive Responsibility.* New York, N.Y.: Associated Press 1954, Part III, Chapter 14, pp. 172-181.

Maier, Norman R. F., *Problem Solving Discussions and Conferences.* New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill 1963.

Maier, Norman R. F., *Psychology in Industry.* New York, N.Y.: Houghton-Mifflin 3rd Edition.

Newman, William H. and Summer, Charles E. Jr., *The Process of Management-Concepts, Behavior, and Practice.* Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1964, Part Three: Planning Elements of Decision-Making, pp. 253-341. Part Four: Planning: Decision-Making in an Enterprise, pp. 357-438.

Odiorne, George S., *Management Decisions — By Objectives.* Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall 1969.