Four Steps to Management Proficiency

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In my June 11 article, "What Does It Mean to Manage?" I presented a structure for making decisions. I described four key steps in the process: (1) collecting the relevant data, (2) analyzing the data to determine choices and their implications, (3) sorting the choices based on a value system, and (4) executing task assignments and milestones to achieve the best choice.

Using this framework, we can explore the skills needed to become proficient in each of these four steps. After some 40 years of being a professional consultant, making decisions for myself and others, I have come to the conclusion that step 3 is actually the most likely to create conflicts and failure. Although one might suspect that it is the easiest step, a careful examination shows that it is, in fact, the biggest obstacle and fraught with conflict. But before actually discussing how to sort choices I will digress and begin from a different place: professional diseases.

Bias and Identity

Neil Postman, a media theorist and cultural critic, articulated the obvious cliché: To a person with a pencil, everything looks like a text. To a person with a TV camera, everything looks like an image; and to a person with a computer, everything looks like data. After many decades of being active in a particular profession, the personalities of individuals usually change to match their activities. You become how you live because the way that you live literally changes your brain.

Although sweeping generalizations about people in various professions are mostly unfair and often inaccurate, stereotypes survive because there is often enough truth in these descriptions. Consider the following: Lawyers believe that there is no real truth, only debatable truth. Engineers believe that outcomes are predictable, because everything obeys the universal laws of cause and effect. Administrators believe in formal procedures without regard to exceptions, surprises and human sensibilities. Executives see people as cogs in a corporate machine that only serves to make profits. Entertainers believe in people as a source of adulation and wealth. Scientists believe that their models are actually reality. Economists believe that logic and rationality are the basis for all human behavior. Doctors believe that the quality of life is enhanced by the liberal use of drugs and surgery. Jokes about each of these professions have a grain of truth.

Individuals who have been active in a profession acquire subtle biases in the way that they see the world; and people who are immersed in an organization for decades adapt to the personality of that organization. Adapting to a value-laden environment, whether conscious or not, arises through repeated experiences. The linkage between bias and identity can is so strong that to challenge a bias is often perceived as an attack on identity.

Politics of Choice

  Now back to step (3): sorting choices when making a decision. Regardless of rational debate, people take their biases with them when considering the best outcome for a decision. Working with some 100 clients over the years, and having had complex interactions with an even larger number of professional individuals, I have noticed that people approach sorting choices based on their personal value system and private agendas. Everyone has their own concept for the meaning of life, which forms yet another bias.

  Some time ago I noticed that personality types, of which there are many, were a major contributor to value biases. Everyone loves to manipulate the work environment to create a "comfort zone" that matches their personality. Here is my incomplete list of types: leadership, pleasing others, visionary creativity, concrete reality, inventive novelty, reacting rather than asserting, comfortable with flexible responses, recognizing emotional nuances and working in well-defined situations. There is an equally long list of possible goals: creating social harmony, exercising power over others, achieving individual autonomy, nurturing others, creating community, accumulating wealth, achieving fame, trivializing complex situations, suppressing emotions and psychology, as well as my favorite: starting late in order to get an adrenalin high from the tension of being late.

  Now back to where we started with the task of sorting choices. With the variety in biases that arise from professional activities, personality differences and individual value systems we would not expect any two people to sort a range of choices in the same way. And from this arises the principle of politics, which is the process of sorting conflicts in values and resources. Beside the negative baggage associated with professional politicians, the process of conflict resolution is nothing more than politics. Even within a single individual, there is a political process. Humility is the key because there is no right answer in politics.

  It is sometime difficult to see conflicting values systems because public explanations are translated into "legitimate" arguments while hiding the real reason. At this point, we might think that harmonious consensus is hopeless. However, a skillful decision maker can often find compromises that satisfy conflicting values if he can read below the surface explanation to see the real criterion. People want an outcome that matches their comfort zone.

All Together Now

  To illustrate the process of creating a harmonious decision, I will examine a slightly contrived example of a design for a new studio. Let me also assume that there are many stakeholders who have a personal criterion for the attributes of the design. The stakeholders might include the following people: a risk-adverse engineer who hates uncertainty, a creative visionary who wants to create a design that is worthy of an article, an administrator who wants every milestone to be on time, a financial manager who wants the project to match the budget, a nurturing elder statesman who want the young

engineers in the group to make a contribution and a control freak who wants to control every aspect of the process. Some individuals have multiple attributes, flipping among them at unpredictable moments.

If you are charged with the responsibility of managing the project what would you do? The worst choice is to begin the process with a big meeting with all the stakeholders. Each of them will argue for a design approach that matches their comfort zone, and everyone will become anxious when they sense that someone else's values might be used. The best first step is to sit with each individual, one-on-one, to build a model of the individual's values. Then the manager goes away to invent a bunch of compromises, which he shares and discusses with each stakeholder, emphasizing that aspect of a compromise that matches the individual's values. The manager, tweaks and sorts the compromises, and continues to meet with each stakeholder, who comes to recognize that the design incorporates his perspective. Everyone is enfranchised. It is now time to have the big meeting, but all the stakeholders have been pre-sold on the compromise.

What might the final design process look like? Part of the design will use conventional approaches, which are low risk and easy to schedule. Another part, such as the ceiling acoustics might include the use of a new untested approach. The schedule is such that the studio is functional before it is complete. To save money, older equipment in storage would be the starting point, but with the expectation that the maintenance budget would cover gradual replacement. For those parts of the design that are very low risk, the mentor would assign tasks to the freshmen engineers. The control freak would be assigned the task of identifying risk and uncertainty.
This is clearly a made up example, but I have used this method for decades with great success: assign tasks so that they match the values and goals of each individual. To the extent that everyone is now functioning in his "comfort zone," the group will fuse into a happy team. The method really does work.

There are several critical properties of a successful decision maker. First, he or she must be a good listener: creating a deep model of each stakeholder, ignoring the surface explanation, and focusing on the hidden biases. Second, the decision maker must be an expert in his own biases in order to compensate for skewing the data and driving the conclusion to his own comfort zone. Thirdly, he must understand how to make everyone feel that he gained by the compromise.

On a final note, a decision maker must recognize the difference between authority and leadership. The former arises when the institution gives power to an individual to force a conclusion on others. The latter is measured only by the number of people who want to follow the leader. I have spent 4 decades focusing on the art of leadership without ever having had any authority. People without authority can, with suitable skills, also become great leaders. Someone with authority can make decisions using coercion or leadership. Smart organizations understand that the combination is more effective and rewarding than either by itself.