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***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## **ANALYSIS-PARALYSIS**

Decisions are choices. Either you either accept or reject something and and it moves you in a specific direction. The antithesis of decision is indecision. It is when an individual or an organization fails to act or to reject a course of action. When that happens they stay in sort of a state of suspended animation.

The term for this is analysis-paralysis. It's when a fire department or an individual faces a problem, and chooses not to select any specific direction for a variety of reasons, but mostly because they lack confidence in themselves to act. One of the excuses is that people won't decide because they don't have enough facts. Then, when they are given more facts they are still afraid to make the decision because the information raises more questions. Then they ask for more facts. It's a vicious circle

Analysis-paralysis is a debilitating process because it often brings an organization almost to a standstill. It also results in missed opportunities and reduces the credibility of an organization due to its inability to respond to change.

Admittedly, rushing to judgment is equally dangerous. One phenomenon that's witnessed in some organizations is called the "ready - fire - aim" syndrome. This occurs when individuals rush to judgment quickly because they believe that the decision is more important than the consequences. Rushing to judgment doesn't result so much in missed opportunities as it does back tracking. Often mistakes are made that result in having to go back and revisit decisions time and time again. A lot of rush to judgment situations are created when people try to solve symptoms for problems, but fail to solve the fundamental cause of the problem.

What kind of decision processes are we trying to achieve in our organizations? Shouldn't we have a balance between the details we need to make effective decisions and the demand for action in a timely fashion? For purposes of this column I'd like to define decisions into basically two generic categories. The first of these I would refer to as being those decisions that are important but not critical. The second are those decisions that are critical but unclear.

There is a concept called the Pareto principal that defines the boundary lines between the two of these. Pareto's concept was that about eighty percent of anything results in about twenty percent of the output. Conversely, he hypothesized that twenty percent of anything results in eighty percent of the consequences. We translate this back to my last paragraph we can see that many of the decisions we make are extremely important to make but they are not critical at the time. They are just merely decisions that have to be made in order to implement processes into moving an



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organization along. The same concept essentially says that there are certain decisions that are very critical that we must make and we must make them right in order for us not to have consequences in the long run.

I have used the Pareto principal in analyzing decision making and have come up with two observations of my own. The first of these is that the tougher a decision is to make the smaller the number of people should be that are involved in actually making it. Relatively important, but not critical decisions can often be shared, delegated, even participative management techniques can be used to arrive at conclusions. However, really critical questions often come down to ownership by the person who ultimately has the responsibility to perform them. The principal here is that when there are decisions to be made that affects an awful lot of people but not with a great deal of consequence then you're well advised to use as many people as possible to develop the decision. But, when the ultimate responsibility rests on an individual's shoulders, it is important that they own that decision.

How in the world can we tell the difference? Earlier on in the column I mentioned the fact we need to balance the details with a demand for action. Therein lies one of the first clues. If a decision has a large number of details, but there's no immediate clamor for the decision to be made, then it likely falls into a broad generic type of problem that can be shared and resolved. On the other hand, when there are details totally lacking and there's a crisis deadline that must be met then it's time to move into the Pareto twenty percent phenomena.

This leads me to my second clue regarding the distinction. One of the first things to look for in any decision process is the deadline that applies. The second thing to look for is the consequences of failure. If you have something that is coming at you real fast and that the consequences are very severe then it's time to apply a personal decision making process. Alternatively, if the deadline is a long time off in the future and there's an overwhelming amount of details associated with it then it's time for you to apply as much pressure as you can to do some things to assure that it is a good decision.

The first of these is to make sure that adequate research is conducted of available facts. Secondly to assure that adequate evaluation is conducted of all those facts to make sure that you have not omitted important details. Thirdly that you take the time to test the decision before you implement it, but that you do not delay making the decision simply because you do not know everything

We started the column off with the idea of analysis-paralysis. Unfortunately, many decisions that fall into our second category i.e., critical and consequential, are treated as if they are issues that can be debated forever. This is where analysis-paralysis gets it start.



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There are many ways you can get into trouble by not dealing with very important decisions in a timely fashion. The first is to underestimate the consequences of failure to act. The second is to assume that if you do not act that the problem will go away, because normally it doesn't". The third is to allow people to provide you with information they think you want to hear instead of information that you really need to hear. This is a form of perverse loyalty that can get you into a lot of trouble.

The appropriate strategy for almost all decision making processes has a couple of steps to it. The first is that no matter what kind of problem you are attempting to solve you need to clearly define the problem. Often people attempt to solve the symptoms of a problem and never get to the root of it. Problem definition consists of looking carefully at the causes of the problem instead of the consequences initially.

The second step of effective problem solving is to collect as much information as you possibly can in an appropriate time frame to support the resolution of the problem. Faulty research in this area often results in inaccurate information being provided to the decision makers. Accuracy is far more important in this area than experience. Unfortunately, many times people face decision making processes and start to base decisions on previous assumptions which were erroneous. Mentioned earlier was the fact that one of the ways you can get into trouble also is by having people tell you what they think you want to hear instead of what you need to hear. This is where this phenomenon plays itself out most frequently, by people repeating assumptions from past experiences.

Missed directed input is a form of loyalty or betrayal, depending on how you look at it. Those individuals who are attempting to provide you with accurate information are very valuable. If they do their very level best to give you the best information even when they give you information contradictory to your own point of view are truly the most loyal. Those individuals who look for clues from you as to what to say and how to say it essentially might be looked upon as being on your team, but they are more sycophant than they are supporter.

Once again I will invoke the Pareto principal as a concept to aid in decision making. The tougher the decision is and the closer the deadline it is the more important that you use the information you have available instead of relying on what you do not have. If eighty percent of the facts are present the other twenty percent may take more time to collect than they are really worth. The significance of that is that frequently individuals will start delaying a decision because they haven't got the last final detail to make it work. That is not an appropriate strategy when you have a decision to make that is of severe consequence. That last detail may be unimportant in relationship to the consequences of failing to act.



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Digressing back just a few paragraphs, one of the other points that needs to be made here is that the dissenters needs to be listened to in intense decision making processes. An individual who gives you the best advice is an individual who may often tell you something you don't want to hear. The degree to which you discount them or have them isolated from decision process increases your personable vulnerability in making tough decisions.

Equally important is to avoid what I call the "last spoken word" syndrome. Quite frankly, when people are engaged in tough decision making processes there's often an exchange of dialogue among the team members that is directed to the person who must make that decision with an emphasis on whoever speaks last is the person who is in the right. The implication is that the most authoritative speak last and determine the direction of the decision. Therefore, most important concept to remember here is that the last person who must talk is the person who must make the decision. It is appropriate, if not altogether essential, that when you're making a tough decision that you reiterate what you know before you actually declare what the decision is that will be forthcoming.

As I examine the notes to prepare this column I was recalling the fact that there is a distinct difference in the fire service between the fire ground decisions we make and the administrative decisions we make. I believe that most of us are very comfortable with judgments made on the fire ground because we realize that the conditions are changing so rapidly that often a faulty decision will be obscured by the events overtaking it. This is very much responsible for the development of a rush to judgment approach in the remainder of fire service decision making processes. Unfortunately, it's counterproductive.

The decisions we make in the fire house are not fire ground decisions. They are decisions that affect the credibility of our organization both internally in the area of labor relations and externally in terms of public relations. A well thought out decision making process that allows for an appropriate balance between the information that's needed to make an accurate decision and the need to meet certain kinds of time frames, so that people do not feel that analysis-paralysis has taken over are very much a part of the fabric of a fire chiefs administration.

Decision making can be a trip-wire that can mar the credibility of an individual and it can actually shape the perception of the organization. The use of various techniques to make decisions in a department can fall somewhere in the use of the breed of principal are far more useful than those that are on the opposite extreme ends of the spectrum, i.e., analysis-paralysis or rush to judgment.

John Foster Dulles once was quoted as saying "the measure of a mans' importance is not whether they're working on difficult problems in society, but whether they're still working on the same problem they had last year." Decision making is intended to allow us to move on.



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Any organization that is paralyzed is immobilized. And if an individual or an organization is immobilized they're vulnerable.