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David Alan Dolph

University of Dayton, ddolph1@udayton.edu

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Problem-Solving Tips for School Business Officials

Solving complex problems made easier with a framework of action.

By David Dolph, Ph.D.



School business officials must be able to analyze problems and develop effective solutions. Arriving at solutions involves identifying the relative importance of the problem, what is known additional information is required, who is involved, what's at risk, and the ultimate goal.

Most problems are easily resolved based on policy, experience, and knowledge of school business. However, some problems are more complex. School business officials

don't always have all the information they need, aren't familiar with the personnel involved, or are faced with conflicting priorities.

A handbook on data-based decision making (Kowalski 2009) offers a basic format involving three steps:

1. Develop and understand alternative choices, demands, and constraints related to the situation at hand.
2. Evaluate available choices in light of constraints and demands.

3. Select the best option available in relation to the problem.

SBOs can draw from a variety of decision-making models, including the following.

Models of Decision Making

Below is a summary of models—for more on decision-making models, see *School Business Affairs'* series on effective decision making.

Normative/Rational Model

Normative models are based on the idea that decision making is an orderly, logical, and linear process whereby informed and rational decision makers choose from options to make the right decisions (Owen 2001). The model assumes decisions are made in orderly and rational environments.

The benefit of the normative model is that it points toward goals and objectives, guidelines for implementation, and evaluation criteria.

Normative models also emphasize the importance of carefully identifying and analyzing problems. SBOs should clarify problems, prioritizing their relative importance in relation to organizational goals, vision, and objectives, and finally test and evaluate cause and effect relationships when applying various solutions.

Understanding problems requires knowledge and perspective from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. For example, SBOs may gather qualitative data from



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maintenance personnel regarding equipment or the quality of contractors' work. They may compare data on school personnel accomplishing a complicated project with outside vendors completing the job.

Bounded Rationality Model

A second model of decision-making is the bounded rationality approach, which recognizes the realities of problems and decisions in a less-than-perfect world (Simon 2009). Bounded rationality models acknowledge that not all information related to problems may be known or ascertainable, that not all alternatives can be anticipated, and that not every consequence may be predictable.

This approach, unlike the ideal conceptual approach of normative/rational models, recognizes that variables such as time constraints, emotions, limited resources, and personalities may affect problems and solutions. Under this approach, decisions are made in less-than-ideal circumstances, but resulting in the best possible solution.

In all likelihood, this model is a more accurate representation of problem solving in school systems.

Participatory Model

A third model looks at decision-making from a participatory rather

than individual approach (Gorton & Snowden 1993). This model considers whether it is best to involve others in decision making. Often, involving others in problem solving leads to better alternatives and solutions. The negative side of this approach is that it is often more time consuming, and SBOs will sometimes have to make decisions on their own

Steps in Process

Regardless of the model used, some steps are common to all three approaches. Gorton and Snowden (1993) suggest seven steps for decision making.

First, define the scope of the situation. SBOs must gather as much information as possible, seeking additional input and data if needed.

The second step is to identify viable options to solve the problem. Whenever possible, SBOs and their teams should take time to think through an array of potential solutions. Inexperienced SBOs may rush to conclusions in an effort to appear decisive. Yet, not taking time to consider as many alternatives as possible is a mistake. On the other hand, SBOs should not suffer from the "paralysis of analysis." Delaying important decisions leads to unsuccessful results, and loss of credibility. SBOs must find balance between

making a timely decision and taking too much time.

The third step in problem solving is evaluating options, taking into account the people involved, the relative importance of the problem, and the timeline required. SBOs also should consider consequences of the various solutions. The potential for unintended consequences is always present; however, this can be mitigated to a degree by taking time, communicating, and involving others in decision making.

The fourth step is selecting the best solution. SBOs should consider the reasonableness of options, whether they address organizational goals and objectives, and how people in the district and community are likely to react. If SBOs have carefully addressed the first three steps, the best choice for problem solutions is often fairly obvious. If not, SBOs may wish to consider revisiting the first three steps to try to identify better potential solutions.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh steps are not only associated with decision making, but are also included in discussions regarding change. The fifth step identifies decisions requiring stakeholder agreement bound by time restraints. The sixth is the actual implementation of decisions. The seventh step is evaluating results of decisions and making adjustments

for further improvement. Steps five, six, and seven are critical to the overall process of solving problems.

Recommendations

Need to make a decision or solve a problem? Consider the following principles:

- Thoroughly analyze the nature of the problem.
- Understand and acknowledge unusual or infrequent problems that require more time to solve.
- Consider timeframes within which decisions must be made
- Develop as many alternative solutions or options as possible.
- Determine whether decisions should be made by an individual or groups.
- Recognize that when others are involved, more time is usually required to achieve satisfactory decisions.
- Acknowledge possible constraints such as limited resources, conflicting values, and high levels of emotion.

- Recognize unintended consequences.
- Consider how decisions are likely to be received by those affected.
- Conduct a capacity analysis verifying that chosen options can be implemented based on resources and personnel available.
- Make sure everyone affected by the decision is informed in a timely manner.
- Neither rush to conclusions nor suffer from the “paralysis of analysis.”
- If you cannot resolve an issue, retrace the steps.

The Essence of Leadership

Solving problems is the essence of leadership. Having a thorough understanding of various approaches to the critical leadership task of decision making is imperative for success. Decisions regarding personnel, capital expenditures, safety issues, and negotiations are but a few of the many topics that SBOs face in the course of their careers. SBOs

can have a firmer grasp on how to approach and resolve problems by applying decision making skills outlined here

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David Dolph, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and chair of the Department of Educational Administration in the School of Education and Health Sciences at the University of Dayton (Ohio). Email: ddolph1@udayton.edu

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