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# Leading Change Through 360o Decision-making: Six Steps for Making Meaningful and Sustained Decisions

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## Academic Leadership Journal

Slumped at her desk poring over the disappointing bond results, Dr. Whitten, early in her first year as superintendent, began to question the decision behind considering such a proposition. She wondered aloud, “How could the patrons of the community not vote to approve this building project?” The Meadowville School District was in the midst of a population explosion, which equated to the state’s largest student growth rate. Currently, more than 500 students are taught in mobile classrooms throughout the district, and student population is projected to continue to grow at a rate of six to seven hundred students per year for the next seven to ten years. What went wrong in the last election and, more importantly, how can she make better decisions? Decisions that operate on reliable information and can ensure a different outcome for the next proposal?

Further reflection caused Dr. Whitten to regret that she had not spent more time talking with key stakeholders and other administrators in the district who understood its culture. Looking back the only goal was to pass the bond election and increase classroom space—a worthy goal, but a myopic strategy. A second decision made with little input from faculty or key constituents was the decision to suspend block scheduling at the middle and high school centers. Dr. Whitten looked at manpower costs and test results and determined that the scheduling program was not sustainable. This decision, while not tightly coupled to the bond issue, created voter reprisal from the community and faculty. The decision model was flawed initially. Her decisions will have to be more calculated and organized by clear steps in a process.

The purpose of this article is to examine a comprehensive strategy for making sound, definitive, and informed decisions. Dr. Whitten’s case offers but one cogent narrative that demonstrates random, ill-conceived decision-making. As with many failures, however, there is much to be learned. Dr. Whitten’s failure provides such rewards after considering her flawed judgment. Her initial decision to run a hasty bond issue is examined here through a 360° decision-making loop that builds on each step in the process.

### 360 Degree Decision-Making

School leaders succeed or struggle based on the decisions they make every day. All too often decisions can be made in a vacuum guided by traditions, ideology or both. Administrators who look beyond the narrow borders of ideology and authority in making decisions enlighten, stretch, and motivate their many stakeholders. Blind spots too often either limit or corrupt decisions. Schools and school districts waste valuable man-hours, budget, and political capital when decisions are made with a narrow perspective. Bazerman and Chugh (2009) describe such restrictive approaches as “bounded awareness” (p.58). With blinders well placed decision makers plow through complex issues with limited or fragmented information. Too many times educational leaders, much as Dr. Whitten, are willing to make decisions that are bounded by ego, mistrust of advisors, or prevailing wisdom. Such are the limitations to decision making that are hard to countenance (Dalton, 2006). The cost can be high in both

treasure and reputation. Political capital (Bolman & Deal, 2008) wagered on ill informed and conceptually flawed decisions may never be reclaimed.

Dr. Whitten is an example of a superintendent who is new to her position and begins her tenure with the district's need for more classrooms as a priority. She approaches the decision from a structuralist frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008), using positional authority to generate strategy, purpose, and solution. Positional authority structured by the organizational chart provides a clear and unabated linear track, starting with decision A, and moving directly to decision B. As a new superintendent Dr. Whitten bypassed critical communications with other administrators, teachers, and community members. Whether mistrust, miscalculation, or ego, it is clear from Dr. Whitten's experience that a different decision-making approach must be considered.

### A Proactive Model for Making Better Decisions

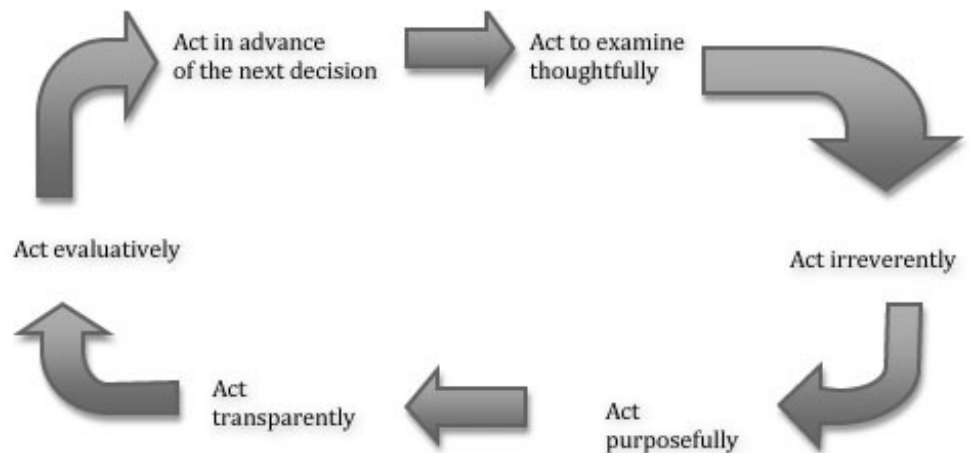
Dr. Whitten now understands that making decisions in isolation with limited information leads to suspicion, conflict, and often failure. Six operational strategies taken from current research (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bazerman and Dolly, 2009; Dalton, 2006; and Arendt, Priem, & Nendorfor, 2005) are critical for robust, comprehensive decision making: 1) Act in advance of the next decision; 2) Act to examine thoughtfully; 3) Act irreverently; 4) Act purposefully; 5) Act transparently; 6) Act evaluatively. These strategies operate in concert. Excluding one strategy seriously flaws the next. Figure 1 demonstrates the 360° nature of the decision model that continues thinking into the next set of problems that may flow from the original decision. Administrators must act with courage and discipline as they work through this decision model.

Figure 1. 360° Decision Loop

Act in Advance of the Next Decision

Many problems are not resolved as though they were disconnected from other issues. Schumacher (1992) explains, "Divergent problems cannot be killed; they cannot be solved in the sense of establishing a correct formula" (p.123). Many

problems, in fact, demonstrate interconnectedness that lead to other problems (Pauchant 1992 & Grint, 2005). Such interconnectedness must be anticipated and contingencies considered. No organization is an island immune from key decisions that become complex and public. The savvy administrator recognizes that resolving one problem may well lead to the next and then the next. Simply passing a bond issue to build more buildings may resolve the problem of overcrowded classrooms, but staffing, redistribution of resources and building maintenance emerge as other considerations that will demand attention.



Managing decisions with an eye to future consequences assures that leaders will not be ambushed by unanticipated problems hiding in the weeds. Further, they create a capacity to meet challenges with confidence, consolidate leadership, and maintain order over chaos.

### Act to Examine Thoughtfully

Next, school administrators must approach problems thoughtfully. The immediacy of any decision can at times be difficult to discern (Dalton, 2006). If a problem and approaches for dealing with it can be deferred, the administrator buys more time to collect information, assess a variety of possible solutions, and consider contingencies for related problems. Time often presents alternatives for action that may not present themselves under the narrow spotlight of rigid compressed timelines. Dalton cautions that making ill informed snap decisions may find occasional success, however, if such decisions show poor resolve and little positive change they will become a burden to leadership. A succession of poor decisions reveals detachment from issues and confused thinking that loses loyalty among stakeholders.

Taking over a new superintendency, Dr. Whitten knew schools were overcrowded and makeshift classrooms in trailers were only a temporary solution. She attacked this problem with immediacy, driving through the decision, putting together a quick bond issue before the voters. Despite the evident need, the ill devised isolated decision placing a bond issue on the ballot didn't work. She must now reevaluate her decision, build coalitions and better understand the culture she has entered. All three will require time that is now in her favor. Now she must begin to understand and possibly challenge the district's long held traditions and assumptions.

### Act Irreverently

After providing appropriate time for decision making, school leaders must prepare themselves for inquiring irreverently toward the organizational culture. They must challenge the system's ecology, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies, places where faculty and staff have become accustomed and comfortable (Bush, 2005; Bolman and Deal, 2007). Proposing unilateral change without carefully considering counter options and their agents, sets a trap for leaders who ignore or marginalize them (Bazerman and Chugh, 2009 & Mitroff and Linstone, 1993). Examining and listening to those who might resist change does not translate into capitulation to any argument that makes the appeal, "Well, it's always been done that way". Rational well reasoned proposals that justify the decision for reform and even provoke new ways of thinking can build supportive coalitions for change. Mitroff and Linstone Caution that failure to "zero in on the critical assumptions or key premises that underlie complex issues" leads to shortsighted and ill conceived understanding of problems.

Dr. Whitten's decision made poorly formed assumptions based only on the crowded classroom conditions in the district. Certainly the obvious need for more classrooms informed her decision. Unfortunately, a contributing factor to the bond issue failure resulted from another decision she had made, eliminating block scheduling in the junior high and high schools. Faculty valued the scheduling configuration and believed that it was a benefit to their students. Parents were also concerned that the superintendent would dismantle a program they had grown accustomed to for what seemed like personal bias. Opposition to the bond issue grew from this tightly formed coalition. While dropping the block-scheduling program does not seem connected to the school expansion issue it constituted a

backlash to any other initiative the new superintendent proposed. Both decisions by Dr. Whitten were poorly conceived and were the result of not questioning the schools' ecology, which left future decisions vulnerable to skeptics.

### Act Purposefully

Once evidence behind decisions moves through discussion, challenge, and revision the time arrives for acting purposefully. How school administrators make decisions offers insight to their core values as professionals. The decision making process used by administrators also impacts how others in the organization view them (Dalton, 2006). Are they viewed as tyrant, autocrat, collegial, or indecisive? Deliberative decisions by leaders who pull reason and purpose from chaos (Wheatly, 2006) is viewed by followers as a leader who engages the issues and wrestles with complex problems. Such a leader is someone followers can count on to protecting the organization from reactionary self-serving influence—a leader worth hearing and worth following.

Many among the faculty, staff, and community in Dr. Whitten's district have formed coalitions that question her decisions regardless of their legitimacy. Because Dr. Whitten was making all the decisions, stakeholders were left behind wondering if they had any real stake in the district's direction. Dr. Whitten will need to place more faith in her advisors and become more involved with the district's culture to now demonstrate that her decisions are less unilateral and more collaborative. Here is where she must act purposefully to clarify goals and collaboratively set the direction for meeting those goals.

### Act Transparently

The actions above allow for the next step in strong decision-making, transparency. Openly Sharing information with a wide constituency, involving a diversity of voices in the decision, challenging ideas, traditions, and norms, and presenting a unified coalition holds off suspicions that information is being withheld. District stakeholders have information that can be overlooked. Individual members within and outside the organization must be recognized as potential contributors to decisions because of the information that may have to share. Structures such as councils, morning coffee clubs, book reads or other social gatherings are good ways to open conversation, offer ideas and expertise.

Meeting routinely with organizations both informal and formal is critical to building transparency. Dr. Whitten needs to become transparent and share her thinking as well as hearing voices of concern regarding any proposed change. She is obligated to explain clearly and succinctly the district's need for more classrooms. She must explain where the recourses can be found and how future resources will be allocated. She has to tell a compelling story to all the stakeholders about their role in the district's growth and renewal. She must also clearly articulate shifting from a block schedule to a more traditional schedule at the secondary level. Block Scheduling, in the end, may be the pivotal concern to address with transparency. If her decisions are to have traction she must address every concern and every question with transparency.

### Act Evaluatively

Finally, decisions once implemented must be evaluated. Initiatives resulting from steps taken above in making the right decisions require evaluation. Evaluation focuses on progress and

success. Administrators must have shared with stakeholders the measurement for success and reasonable timelines for demonstrating incremental achievements. Without such tools and clarity of purpose, a potentially good decision can become a frustrating exercise, quickly decaying from cynicism and disgust.

Dr. Whitten is obligated evaluate the progress of her decisions after rethinking her approach to making decisions. Dr. Whitten can assess the ultimate compromise for continuing or dropping the block scheduling plan through conversation with committed faculty and other key coalitions. Often such open conversations test the acceptance or rejection of potential change. Frank and courageous conversations serve as measures of potency for decisions. Her bond initiative with a successful vote is certainly one measure of success. At this juncture Dr. Whitten must now loop back to the first step and anticipate the next problem that will require her decision-making skills.

### Conclusion

Within the context of the, educational leaders are able to more clearly develop decisions by acting on six basic decision-making steps: 1) Act in advance of the next decision; 2) Act to examine thoughtfully; 3) Act irreverently; 4) Act purposefully; 5) Act transparently; 6) Act evaluatively. These steps work together to make a decision loop which prepares the administrator for the challenges that may result from the first decision. These six steps are crucial to effective school leadership and balance the prevailing stance, be it structural or human resource.

School leaders face complex problems daily. Random or myopic approaches for deciding how to manage complex problems are ripe with challenges. Dr. Whitten's well-intended decision to propose a bond initiative was conceived by a unilateral approach contextualized by a suspicious, and anxious constituency. Leaders truly rise and fall on how they handle decisions. The steps outlined here provide a map for navigating difficult decisions and developing meaningful solutions.

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