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Decision Making: A Linear Process

by Dorothy W. Hewes

People mutter "Ooh, decisions, decisions!" even at the neighborhood pizza parlor. Everybody seems to be inundated with choices and alternatives. We obviously can't take the recommendation of that philosopher of baseball, Yogi Bera, "When faced with a fork in the road, take it." Results may be disastrous if we merely choose the road less traveled, as poet Robert Frost suggested.

Decision making has only become a popular research topic during the past 30 years. Psychologists study choices made by human and animal subjects. Statisticians develop intricate mathematical evaluations and sociologists analyze the behavior of organizations. Business management books usually focus upon ways to maximize corporate profits and minimize their losses.

All of this has had little relevance for preschool directors who juggle the roles of resource allocators, disturbance handlers, curriculum coordinators, parental advisors, and balancers of relatively small budgets. Like any other executives, however, their managerial competence is usually judged by their decision-making abilities.

Flow Chart — Decision Processing, a composite taken from several professional disciplines, was designed to help directors recognize that there is a linear system with flexibility. Since problem solving goes on constantly, this basic sequence applies to all types of decisions, whether they deal with ordering construction paper or with spending half a million dollars for a major renovation project.

Following this step-by-step process of "rational decision-making" may appear to be rigid, but recently introduced "chaos theory" supports the creative manipulation of ideas within each of the boxes on the linear chart. This means that the dynamics of problem solving can balance interactions between creative and artistic ideas, as well as utilitarian and pragmatic considerations. Directors who are torn between being business managers and caring educators can find reassurance in chaos theory, since it justifies making decisions that are based upon more than a "bottom line" consideration.

The director's handling of decisions, whether they are crisis situations, emerging problems, or plans for the future, depends upon the center's basic *philosophy* and *objectives*. The philosophy, which should be a written statement, includes beliefs, concepts, and attitudes that have

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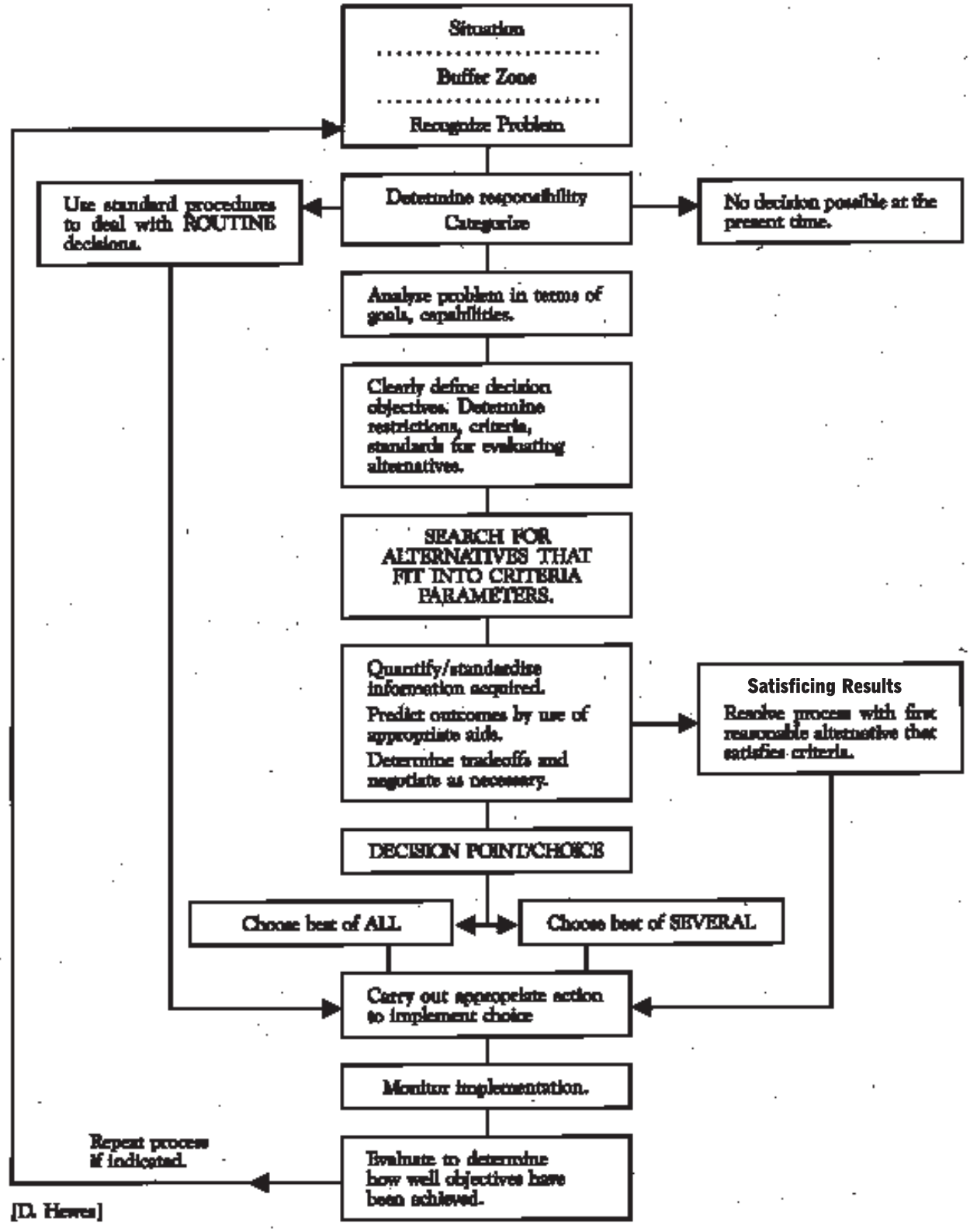
FLOW CHART — DECISION PROCESSING



[D. Hewes]

been agreed upon by all concerned individuals. Objectives are specific accomplishments that advance your program toward a specified condition within a given period. They provide a pre-established framework which is unique to your center.

As an illustration of how the chart functions, begin with the top box and visualize some *situation* in your own center which requires a decision. To reach this point, you will already have gone through the *buffer* zone, which filters out problems we don't want to deal with. While the *director's personality* influences the way all steps in the sequence are carried out, it seems to be particularly vital when penetrating the buffer zone. The challenge is to appropriately *recognize the problem* and realize when action is needed.

Determining responsibility may be easy. In some cases, you simply phone the minister or the delegate agency supervisor and say, "You have a problem. How would you like to deal with it?" If you are the decision maker, however, you need to *categorize* the situation so that it can be dealt with efficiently.

You also determine who will be involved with the decision process. If the center has a participative management style, you will assume that all available talent will be found and used. Staff may help plan the new playground design; but members of the community or parent organization may be involved, and the children themselves can contribute.

Some decisions will be emergencies that allow no time for discussion. Others involve delicate personal situations that should not be shared. Beyond this, there is the recognition that you are expected to be in charge and that others should not be overly burdened with helping you do your job.

Alternatives at this point help you cope with the "administrivia" and "information inundation" that preschool directors encounter. Some situations call for *routine* decisions that follow established policies and procedures. For example, if a child has head lice, you or a staff member will *carry out appropriate action*, *monitor* and *evaluate* it in a routine manner, and *repeat the process if indicated*. With well-established policies and procedures, everyone will know what to do and will feel confident — and you will gain time for other matters. Teachers will know which decisions they are empowered to make, and how to follow through on them.

Other cases go into that dead-end box on the other side of the chart, since *no decision is possible at the present time*. Perhaps you lack the authority, the funding, or the requisite information, but a decision to make no decision is still a decision.

Moving to the next box, *analyze the problem in terms of goals and capabilities*. Briefly describe the problem as you see it. Identify the precipitating factor and write down a title for the process to help anchor yourself to this particular sequence. Will you need an outside consultant, perhaps an attorney or a licensing supervisor?

Next, *clearly define your objectives* as they relate to this situation. How will this affect the program goals and priorities? Who or what will be affected by this decision? Who or what is precipitating the need for a decision? How much time or effort should go into this solution? Where does this situation stand in the context of past and future decisions? Cost is a major consideration in many decisions. Perhaps there is an aesthetic component, as there would be if the decision involves painting classroom walls or buying a climbing structure. At this point, you might emphasize the utilitarian and pragmatic aspects of the problem.

As you *search for alternatives that fit into your criteria parameters*, feel free to consider unique ideas. Remember that the flow chart boxes permit "brain storming" models of problem solving. Psychologists have found that brain activity is increased by creative thinking. Even *intuition* is becoming recognized as a legitimate aspect of decision making. (Have you ever found yourself saying, "I can't put my finger on it, but I just have a hunch . . ."?) One reassuring aspect at this point is the "utility factor" which allows consideration of intangible qualities that justify added expense or energy costs only because they are important to those making the decision.

The next step is to *quantify and standardize the information that has been acquired* and to *predict outcomes by use of appropriate aids*. If you plan a major purchase, construct a chart showing suppliers, costs, special features, and other attributes or potential problems. Think beyond that item, also. Climbing equipment may require excavation of soil and purchase of an alternative softer surface. A new refrigerator with an ice maker may need an expensive water line connection.

If you are considering a change in enrollment policies or staff or other long-term financial matters, there are impressive computer programs that can project alternatives far into the future. What a computer cannot do is to consider the social/psychological impact of these alternatives. As you finish this step, you will need to *determine tradeoffs and negotiate as necessary*.

The chart shows a *satisficing route* that occurs when the choice is the first alternative that is minimally

satisfactory after a haphazard overview. Its advantage is obvious, since sometimes it is not worth the time and effort to go through the longer process. The test is whether the satisficing choice falls above or below the minimal cutoff point. The most flawed aspect of this often-used route is that vital considerations may not have been considered.

Included in satisficing decision making are "incrementalism" and "muddling through" — with each small choice being "good enough" but producing significant alterations through time. This strategy may be used by managers who need to demonstrate that they have accomplished something. Sometimes it is used by procrastinators who just can't bring themselves to face big decisions. Sometimes it is a way to get around situations that would violate the philosophy and goals of the center while avoiding actual confrontations. Without even being conscious of the process, directors may learn to survive by making satisficing decisions and moving on.

However, following the linear chart brings you to the *decision point* where you must make a *choice*. Since alternatives often begin to appear even more attractive, you will appreciate the careful work done earlier in the sequence and say, "This is IT!" with confidence. In some cases, if there are only a few possible alternatives, you will *choose the best of several*. Herbert Simon received the Nobel Prize in 1978 for his concept of *limited rationality*. He assured managers that they should not feel guilty for restricting their considerations of alternatives.

The final stages are obvious. You will *carry out appropriate action to implement your choice* and then *monitor the implementation*. If this was a major decision, keep the records summarizing the search for alternatives to use when you *evaluate to determine how well the objectives have been achieved*. There is nothing wrong with admitting that this particular situation has not worked out well, and with *repeating the process, if necessary*. Someone once pointed out that directors become successful through wise decisions, but that they learned to make those wise decisions through making poor decisions. Successfully coping with problems is one reason preschool directors find their work a fascinating challenge. Awareness of the sequential linear process of rational decision-making can help you meet that challenge more effectively.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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