The Councillor as Decision-maker

The Councillor as Decision-maker

Handbook 3

Training for Elected Leadership

ISTANBUL, 1996 – "THE CITY SUMMIT"

**UN-HABITAT
United
Nations
Human
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Programme**

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Councillor as
Decision-maker**

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FOREWORD

As shown by results of training needs assessments conducted by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), training needs of local government elected officials (councillors), or of local politicians, appear among the most urgent world-wide and, at the same time, the least attended areas of capacity-building for local development and municipal management.

In the last few years, a number of countries as varied as Nepal and Poland or Uganda and Paraguay have embarked for the first time in several decades, and in some cases for the first time ever, on a process of electing their councillors and mayors. Training needs of local-government elected officials are also at the top of the agenda in established municipal democracies such as Ecuador, India, and the United States of America.

To respond to these needs, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) has developed and tested a series of training handbooks to assist councillors to represent the citizens, provide civic leadership and effectively work with central government and with the management, technical, and professional staff in local authorities and other local institutions. The handbooks cover policy and decision making, communication, negotiation and leadership, attending, managing and conducting meetings, councillors' enabling and facilitating activities, financial management and other related needs.

This handbook, *The Councillor as Decision-Maker*, is one of the series of 12 and is intended for use primarily by trainers in national training institutions for local government or training units within local governments themselves. As an additional assistance for trainers using these handbooks, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) has published a companion *Trainer's Guide for Training of Elected Officials* containing trainer's notes and information prepared exclusively for the benefit of these trainers in planning workshops for local elected officials based on the handbooks.

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It is expected that this training handbook will contribute greatly to strengthening the capacity of local governments through the introduction of good Leadership leadership practices, one of the major objectives of the 1996 United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, Habitat II.

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I wish to thank Dr. Fred Fisher and Mr. David W. Tees for preparing this and other handbooks in the series in collaboration with the staff of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) Training Section within the Centre's training programmes supported by the Government of the Netherlands. I also wish to acknowledge the contribution of the trainers and local-government officials in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Kenya, Lithuania, Romania and Uganda who assisted in the field testing of these training materials.

Dr. Wally N'Dow
Assistant Secretary-General
United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat)

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About the hat

The hat worn by the figure to the right and shown on the pages to come was selected to symbolize the councillor role featured in this handbook.

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Training for Elected Leadership

Woven Straw sombrero
of Mexican campesinos

WHERE TO FIND IT IN THIS HANDBOOK

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HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This training handbook on THE COUNCILLOR AS DECISION-MAKER, like other handbooks in the series, can be used in several ways.

Self-study

The essay that opens this handbook is intended for self-instruction. All you need is a quiet place to think, some time, and something to write with. For best results, we encourage you to write down your answers to the questions raised from time to time in the essay. The learning value of the information is multiplied many times for the reader who takes the time to do this.

Workshop training

The trainer's notes and exercise materials in this handbook are intended for use by experienced trainers in a training workshop for councillors from different local governments. We have included various types of learning activities and formats to provide trainers with considerable flexibility in adapting a workshop to the specific needs of participating councillors. It has been our intention in developing this handbook to encourage you to incorporate your own experiences as a trainer to heighten the learning value of these training materials for participating councillors.

As a trainer, you may decide to use the materials in the handbook in the exact order and manner presented. If you prefer, however, you may rearrange or modify the materials as needed to meet the objectives of a particular training situation. You may choose to offer three hours of training by using key exercises and activities included in maker the handbook. Or you may take advantage of the many materials in the handbook supplemented by content of your own to extend the length of the programme to a full day.

This handbook is one of 12 in a series for training in elected leadership. You might decide or be requested to provide a workshop that requires you to use more than one or all of these handbooks over a longer period of time. While each handbook can be used independently of the others, their use in sequence can provide a power unified learning experience for participating councillors.

These materials also can be used, preferably the assistance of an experienced trainer/facilitator, to improve the performance of councillors who serve together on the same governing body. When training councillors who serve together, we believe the facilitator must be prepared to organize the training activities in this handbook in different ways. There may be occasions where you, as facilitator, will choose to add new activities depending on the situation and the characteristics of the group. We hope in situations like these you will view this handbook as a "tool kit" containing many optional training ideas to be mixed and matched, modified or abandoned, as suggested by the situation.

You have many options to choose from with these training handbooks. We hope you take full advantage of them.

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PART I
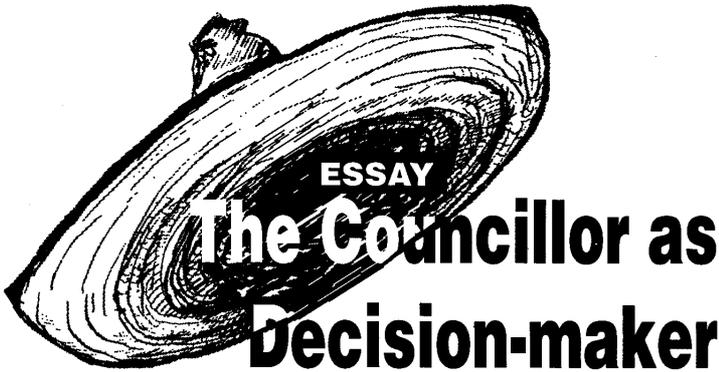
ESSAY
The Councillor as Decision-maker

Essay

Definition

The councillor in the role of DECISION-MAKER makes up his or her mind when there is an option or choice.

Summary

In this essay, we will explore some of the implications of decision-making for an elected councillor. For example, we'll look at ways groups make decisions, the various stages in the decision process, blocks and barriers to effective decision-making and how to improve your own decision-making skills as well as those of the council.

Reflection

When I think of my role as a decision-maker on the council, the following things come to mind:

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Concepts and Ideas

Trying to define the Decision-maker was, for some reason, a difficult task. Perhaps it's because we couldn't make up our minds. The definition we've given your role as a decision-maker seems to ignore the decisions made by committees, groups, organizations, and communities although these kinds of decisions are very important to the elected official. But even group decisions require individual decisions by those involved. In council, for example, those who abstain from voting on certain issues are, in fact, deciding not to vote, which is a deliberate decision on their part.

What do we do about the absence of a decision which, in many cases, is also a decision? Deciding not to decide can be a very decisive moment as all of you know who have sat in the councillor's seat. Avoidance and delay are very real decision making ploys, strategies, or responses. They are also decisions even if they are decisions not to do anything about the issue or problem at hand. Sometimes they are the best kinds of decisions. Think about the deliberations of your own council. Have there been times when you were unable to come to a decision as a corporate body and later realized that it was a good decision not to decide? The business of decision making can be very complicated.

Be rational!

How many times have you heard this admonition as a member of council? Probably often because our formal institutions put a high premium on rational judgements and decisions. There is a widely shared concept in many societies that, although we are fallible human beings, we ought to strive toward an ideal of rationality, particularly with respect to decision-making in formal organizations.

The roots of rationality run deep and cut across political and cultural boundaries. This centuries-old practice can be traced back to the initiation of highly Decision. organized, bureaucratic civilizations in many parts of the world. It reached its zenith maker of legitimacy in the last century with the emergence of the "age of rationality." Since rationality is still the modus operandi in our formal institutions, like elected councils, we will look at some of the characteristics of this approach to decision-making.

The rational decision-making process, as it is described by many authors, includes the following steps:

- Problem identification
- Problem analysis
- Alternative generation
- Consequence consideration
- Deciding

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It's a good model and provides the kind of direction and rigour that helps us make effective decisions most of the time. But, there are some aspects of this model that can benefit from a bit of discussion. Let's take them one step at a time.

Problem identification

Identifying, or finding, the problem to be addressed is not always easy. This is the first problem with the rational approach to decision-making. What might seem like a problem to you, as a councillor, may not seem like a problem to your constituents, or even your fellow councillors. Problem finding, particularly as a local elected councillor, should be linked closely with opportunity finding. Problem-solving suggests something is wrong that needs to be fixed. Finding opportunities and taking advantage of them is much more positive. While both have a role in your decision making responsibilities, tapping opportunities may be more stimulating and even more productive in the long run. Here are some other distinctions between these two generators of decision-making events.

Problems are often oriented toward maintenance (fix it, solve it, get on with it). By contrast, opportunities are focused on development. Opportunities are often problematic. They always involve some risk and uncertainty. Is it feasible? Will it work? If it works, will there be any benefits? Problems, on the other hand, may become risky only if they aren't solved.

Opportunities live in the future and the risks must be calculated against a future that is not always predictable. Problems have a historical past that can usually be examined. The results of solving a problem, or not solving it, are often more predictable.

When we are exploring opportunities, the question most often asked is, What if" When we are problem-solving, the question is, "Why?"

With problems you seek solutions; with opportunities, the search is for maker benefits. As a councillor, you can, more often than not, ignore opportunities. It's much harder to turn your back on problems.

> *Opportunities come but do not linger.*
>
> *- Nepali proverb*

Essay

Awareness and vision

While identifying problems and opportunities is seen as the first step in the rational decision-making process, we believe there is something that precedes this. It's not a step, necessarily, but more like an attitude or a mind set - a way of looking at things. We're talking about the need to be aware and to have vision. Like problems and opportunities, awareness and vision lend themselves to description by contrast.

Awareness is seeing "what is." Vision is seeing what "can be." Awareness is more tactical, short-term and specific. Vision is longer term and strategic in its perspective.

Awareness looks at the details; vision paints the "big picture."

Awareness involves convergent thinking (focusing in). Vision is at its best when our thoughts diverge from the beaten path.

Awareness is often intense, involving constant scanning of the environment for clues. Vision comes to us best when we transcend our immediate environment.

Awareness is more rational, or left-brain oriented, in its application of the thinking process. Vision is more prone to tap our intuitive instincts which are controlled by the right-half of our brain. While both thought processes are important to each of these councillor skills and behaviours (i.e., being aware and being visionary), we would argue they are also two very different attributes.

Both vision and awareness are valuable leadership skills. Each requires its own set of tools, and combined, they define our perceptions of reality. They also provide the foundation upon which we make decisions about solving problems and taking advantage of opportunities.

To recap our discussion thus far, decision-making is based on a process of maker thinking often associated with (a) rationality and (b) problem-solving. But, problem solving is only half of the challenge when it comes to being a councillor. You must also be looking for opportunities for your community. This requires not only awareness about what is happening in your community but a vision about what can be. Sometimes it is important to allow rationality to give way to intuition and even fantasy at times; to stop asking "why?" and ask, "what if?

The discussion about awareness and vision also conveys insights into two decision-making patterns, those associated with reactive and pro-active thinking. Proactive decisions are based on future conditions that may not be totally understood. Reactive decisions are based on current and past information and insights. Both are important to the council's effectiveness. As a councillor it is important to understand how your council makes decisions.

Are you and your colleagues inclined to be more pro-active or reactive in your decision-making processes? We suspect the answer is reactive because you have inherited such a backlog of problems from previous councils. Nevertheless, the skills in being pro-active as decision-makers are important even when dealing with long-standing problems. Pro-activity tends to help you seek out new and innovative solutions.

Reflection

Take a few moments and think about how you approach your responsibilities as a councillor. Are you more inclined to be problem-oriented or opportunity oriented? For example, are you generally optimistic about the local government and ability to cope with community issues, or are you more pessimistic? Are your concern about what the council should be doing focused more on immediate problems or on future plans?

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Problems, symptoms and solutions

One of the most common problems in making problem-solving decisions is the tendency to "solve" symptoms of the real problem and not the real problem. Symptom-solving, unfortunately, often leaves the real problem yet to be solved. If, for example, your street department continues to patch "potholes" on a street that has an inadequate base, or foundation, the department may be confronted with an endless job with no lasting consequences. It may also expend more resources over time on patching material and labour than it would cost to totally rebuild the street and eliminate the problem for years to come. The only problem, you say, is the lack of necessary funds to do it. And, influential motorists are complaining to the street committee members that something must be done! While it may be necessary to "fix" symptoms, councils should be aware of the opportunity costs involved.

Another common decision-making shortfall that can be traced back to the identification of the problem is the tendency to identify a solution to the problem as the problem. Your council might be saying, for example: "We need to buy a bulldozer and a grader to fix the dirt roads in our district." Is this the problem, or a solution to the problem? Once council has decided that the lack of equipment is the problem, they have ruled out all other options for fixing their dirt streets. Overlooked are other options like labour-based maintenance, contracting the maintenance out to a local contractor, or organizing the work to be done by neighborhood groups.

In other words, it is important when making decisions to solve problems, to ask yourself if you are really just chasing symptoms or promoting pet solutions. Rarely do either of these options have beneficial, long-term consequences. One way to overcome this common "dilemma" is to talk to your problem.

Talk to your problem

One of the best ways we know of to be sure you're focused on the problem and not a symptom or solution is to "talk to your problem"- to ask a lot of questions. It is also an effective way to begin the problem-analysis phase of the decision-making process. To be a good decision-maker, you need to be clear what you are making decisions about. In the case of decisions to solve problems, we find the following questions helpful.

- What is the problem we are trying to solve? (The answer may not be so obvious.)

- Why is this a problem?

- Who are the stakeholders in the problem? Who, besides us councillors, would like to see it solved? (They may also be part of the future solution.)

- Where is it a problem? (Only in my part of the municipality, or all over?)

- When is it a problem? (For example, is it seasonal or does it only happen on Monday?)

- How long has it been a problem? (If it's a long-standing problem, this may say something about the ability or the will of previous councils to solve it.)

- What would happen if the council didn't do anything to solve the problem? (This may be the most important question. If you speculate that nothing would happen, it may not be that serious).

Further analysis

The set of questions just presented is an excellent way to get into problem or opportunity analysis. By answering these questions, you will not only gain information and insights that you will need to solve the problem (or tap the opportunity), you may very well decide that you don't want to, or need to, solve the problem at this time. In this case, the analysis has already led you to a conclusion, hopefully a logical one that you and others can live with.

If you've gone through this series of inquiries and still want to pursue the problem, one of the best ways we've found to analyse the situation further is to look at the forces that keep the problem from being solved and the forces that could be mobilized to solve it. There is a theory of problem-solving that states that any situation is kept in a state of quasi-stationary equilibrium by the driving and restraining forces in the field surrounding the situation (a force field). By adding more force to the driving forces or by diminishing or removing the restraining forces, it is possible to bring about the changes you desire. It's a simple exercise in problem analysis that works.

Once you have analysed the problem, or opportunity, to your satisfaction (remembering that you will probably never have all the data or information you want maker to make your decision), it is time to think about the options, or alternatives, you might have available to make your final decision. The force-field analysis is often helpful in surfacing options. For example, the best option may be one that removes one or more of the restraining forces and increases a driving force which has already been proved beneficial. As this suggests, the best option may include more than one sub-option or tactic as part of your overall strategy.

Quality and acceptance

Two dimensions are relevant in assessing the potential effectiveness of your decision. These are: (a) the quality of the decision, and (b) its acceptance by those who either have to execute it or will be affected by it. Both of these will have an impact on the final outcome, which also needs to be considered as you move towards a final decision. The quality of the decision will depend on a number of factors. These factors could include, for example:

- **Goal focus**: Will the decision we made (the options we decided upon) achieve the goal (or solve the problem) to our satisfaction?

- **Resource availability**: Do we have the resources to carry out the decision?

- **Timing**: Is the timing right? In government (politics), timing can be everything.

- **Feasibility**: Is the decision feasible to implement? Sometimes we have all the other criteria secured, but when it comes right down to it, the decision isn't feasible from an implementation point of view. Sometimes the reason or reasons are totally irrational.

- **Adequacy**: Is the decision adequate to achieve your goal (solve the problem)? For example, you have just had two flat tires on a lorry that is carrying a load of perishable goods to market. You decide to send your co-worker off immediately to get one of the tires repaired. It's feasible, the timing is right, presumably there are resources to fix the tire, but the decision certainly isn't adequate given the fact that you have two flat tires. There may be other criteria that will help you determine whether or not the quality of your decision is satisfactory. It depends on what your decision is about. Don't hesitate to tailor the decision criteria to meet your needs.

- **Quality** is a major factor in manufacturing circles these days, and it has a specific meaning, associated with the quality of the organization's product. Since decisions regarding policies, community programmes, and the allocation of public resources are the products of councils, it may be useful to look at the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement to see how quality is described.

One publication summarized the term "quality" as it relates to TQM in two statements:

- Conformance to specifications - quality is defined by the relative absence of defects.

- Meeting customer requirements - quality is measured by the degree of customer satisfaction with a product's characteristics and features. [1]

These are difficult qualifications to meet in the public sector. Yet, they provide food for thought to those who strive to improve the quality of public services and products.

The other dimension that we suggest be used to determine the effectiveness of your decision-making is its acceptance by those who (a) are responsible for its implementation, and (b) those who must live with its consequences. It is common knowledge that involvement in the decision process by those who will be affected by a decision is important to develop understanding about the decision and why it is being made as well as to gain commitment to it. These two outcomes are reason enough to make all of us think seriously about who we should involve whenever we make decisions that affect others.

The quality aspect of the decision is largely objective and follows the dictates of the rational school of thinking. Acceptance, on the other hand, is more subjective, falling into the arena of behavioural change. Sometimes these characteristics are in conflict.

Consequences

One other consideration to be pondered on the road to decision-making is the possible consequences of your decisions. Because you operate in the public arena, there are often many different kinds of consequences of the decisions you make. They can be either positive or negative, and it's important to think about both sets of consequences when moving toward a final decision. Consequences also can be short term and long-term. Again, these are important to consider. Finally, consequences fall into the following categories: economic, social, environmental, cultural and political. Fortunately, not all decisions have all these consequences or we would be hard-pressed to get any decisions made in the public service.

In an environment of scarce resources, it is important to consider what maker economists call the "opportunity costs" of your decisions. Implicit in every decision to expend scarce resources on a particular activity or facility is a decision not to use those same resources to address some other problem. For example, what are the opportunity costs if your council decides to spend scarce funds on a heart transplant centre at the university hospital rather than an AIDS prevention educational programme. Another way to think about these decisions is in terms of their long-term costs and potential benefits. The benefit and substantial costs of saving a few lives through heart transplants must be weighed against other programmes that may preserve life for many at a small investment per capita. In other words, what are the opportunity costs of your funding decisions?

If you follow these steps, and precede them with awareness and vision, you should be able to improve your decision-making abilities considerably. Find the real problem or opportunity and analyse it carefully. Determine the available options.

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Choose one and consider the consequences of implementing it. Get the acceptance of those who will be responsible for implementation and those who will be affected. Then decide. If you follow this process r decisions should be successful.

What about group decision-making?

As councillors, you work as a member of the municipal council and make your most important decisions as a member of that group. Much of what has been discussed so far can apply to either individual or group decision-making. What we want to do now is focus on the phenomena of group decision-making. Many years ago, behavioural scientists started to conduct research on interpersonal relationships and group behaviour by watching, recording, and analysing these interactions. Out of this research came insights about human behaviour that can help us be more effective in our interactions with each other. Here are some of the findings on group decision making as related by Edgar Schein in his classic book *Process Consultation*. Schein describes the following ways that groups make decisions.

Decision by lack of response (what he and others have labeled the "Plop"). This is when someone suggests an idea and nobody responds to it. Schein says that by not responding, the group has made a decision not to support the idea or the contributor. We've all been victims of the "Plop."

Decision by formal authority or self-authorization. This type of decision-making is common in councils where the mayor or chairperson has been given certain authority to make certain decisions on behalf of the group.

Decision by minority. Have you ever felt "railroaded" into a decision by someone else? Probably, since it happens frequently when individuals get together to make decisions. "Does anyone object? - Okay, let's go ahead." or similar comments by the person in charge, or even a self-appointed leader, often obligates you to a decision that few have a commitment to.

Decision by majority rule: voting and/or polling. This is the common method of decision-making by most legislative groups around the world. The problem with this accepted and efficient way of coming to a decision is the fact that it often divides the group and leaves those who are in the minority uncommitted to the decision.

Decision by consensus. While this can be time-consuming, it is one of the most effective ways to make decisions because it builds commitment into implementing the decision. Decision by consensus is not an unheard of means of decision-making by community leaders. In fact, some of you who are reading this may be saying, "So what's new? Our people have been making decisions by consensus for generations." When the Europeans, who were exploring the North American continent in the 17th century, came across the Algonquin Indians, they were puzzled by their political norms. They saw no visible means of leadership or government within this community. The Algonquins simply had a different concept of authority and relied upon such processes as consensus building and facilitative leadership to "govern" community life.

Consensus is a process where communication is sufficiently open and supportive to make everyone feel they have an opportunity to influence the decision. Consensus is not the same as unanimity. There may still be differences of opinion, b these differences have been heard, and those who hold them are prepared to support the decision.

Decision by unanimous consent. In this case, everyone agrees on the course of action to be taken. [2]

Reflection

Stop for a moment and review each of the different ways groups make decisions. Can you think of a situation where your council used this approach? If so, what were the consequences? If you could make this decision again, would you want to decide in a different way?

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A note of caution

Group decision-makers are sometimes the victims of something called "groupthink." Groupthink is the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action. City councils can sometimes fall into the groupthink trap when they begin to emphasize group cohesiveness at the expense of independent critical thinking. Here are some symptoms of groupthink as it might be exhibited by your council.

First, when you and your colleagues are faced with a decision, you are inclined to limit your discussions to one or two alternatives without investigating the range of possibilities that may be available.

Secondly, you seldom seek to re-examine a decision made by the majority even when new evidence is presented that the decision may have serious risks or drawbacks not originally considered.

Thirdly, the council doesn't ask for the advice of staff or outside experts who might be able to provide more accurate information on potential gains or losses.

Fourthly, the council members show positive interest in facts and opinions that support what they have decided to do and ignore those that do not.

Jerry Harvey, a psychologist who specializes in organizational behaviour, provides a slightly different perspective on the problem of groupthink. Harvey contends that people who work closely together, like city councils, have a tendency to collude in taking actions or making decisions that none of them really agree with. Consequently, they produce results they later come to regret. According to Harvey, this might happen to you as a councillor when: [3]

- You are faced with making a decision on a situation that you have serious doubts on but think that other councillors favour it;

- You can act on faulty assumptions about what the other councillors want to do and even express support for the unwanted action to avoid criticism as a team player rather than communicate your true feelings and beliefs;

- The council, on the basis of invalid or inaccurate information, makes a collective decision that is contrary to what you really wanted to do which, in turn, leads to counter-productive results;

- You and other members experience frustration, even anger, when this happens and begin to blame each other for what has happened.

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Many councils around the world work through the committee system. There are good reasons for using such a system, particularly if your council is large in number. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to arrive at decisions in a large group, at least decisions that are timely and efficient. Nevertheless, there is a troublesome aspect of government by committee. There is a tendency to "rubberstamp" the other committee's recommendations so they will support our committee's decisions and recommendations. This is just another variation of the groupthink problem we've been discussing.

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Essay

Take a moment right now and think about the committee process in your council and how decisions are made by various committees and confirmed by the even whole council. Are you satisfied that good decisions are being made through this process? If not, what might you do to improve your council's decision-making processes?

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Other decision traps

A recent book, _Decision Traps_, outlines 10 barriers to "brilliant decision-making." It might be useful to tuck these in your council notebook to refer to time to time. Here are the 10 most dangerous decision-making traps as seen by the authors of a book by the same name. **(4)**

Plunging in: when you begin to reach conclusions without much forethought about what you are doing or what the consequences will be.

Frame blindness: when you create a mental framework that takes you off in the wrong direction, to solve the wrong problem, or to overlook obvious options.

Lack of frame control: failing to define the problem, or situation, in more ways than one or being unduly influenced by the frames of others.

Overconfidence in your own judgement: and your own assumptions and opinions.

Shortsighted shortcuts: such things as trusting the most convenient information available or using convenient "rules of thumb."

Shooting from the hip: acting and deciding so quickly that none has a chance to follow any systematic procedure for making the decision.

Group failure: things like "groupthink' and trusting that the group will make a good decision.

Fooling yourself about feedback: like failing to hear what others are saying or misinterpreting the evidences of past outcomes.

Not keeping track: failing to track and analyse the results of your past efforts and using them to decide for the future.

Failure to audit your decision process: when you don't take time to stop and talk openly about how you're making decisions and whether you are having the success you want in the process.

> *Never take two paths; the pelvis will collapse.*
>
> *- Masai proverb*

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Making decisions in uncertainty

Councils are often required to make decisions in the midst of great uncertainty and with an absence of reliable data and information. The initial reaction to a poorly understood problem or situation is, more often than not, to avoid it. While this behaviour, on the part of public officials, is often chastised by the community, it is not necessarily irresponsible. We tend to avoid that with which we are unprepared to cope with any degree of certainty.

The next level of decision-making by not making a decision is delay. This is also a common response in highly uncertain situations. Delay, like the avoidance of decision-making, is normal and probably wise in conditions of great ambiguity. However, like avoiding a decision, this strategy will no doubt be misinterpreted by your constituents as another sign of weakness.

The next most adopted tactic, when faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, is to give a limited response, going for a decision that shows concern but limits commitment.

These coping mechanisms, which one could characterize as decision less decisions, are often wise in the face of great uncertainty. On the other hand, they may be positions taken automatically even when there is an absence of ambiguity and uncertainty. When this happens, you have abdicated your leadership responsibilities.

> *While we consider when to begin, it becomes too late.*
>
> *- Latin proverb*

Key points

- Deciding not to decide can be a very decisive moment.

- Rational decision-making is an important process, but it's not the whole story when it comes to making a decision.

- Identifying the problem may be the most difficult and important stage in decision-making and problem-solving. So, talk to your problem.

- Don't focus all your time and energies on solving problems. Take time out to take advantage of some opportunities as well.

- Awareness and vision are the critical first steps to decision-making.

- Quality and acceptance are key dimensions in assessing the decisions you are about to make.

Essay

- If those who are part of the problem have not been consulted about the decision to do something about it, they may not be willing to support the solution.

- There are a number of ways to make group decisions. None are wrong, but some are better than others, although this too depends on what the decision is all about.

- "Groupthink" is a virus that can debilitate your council in its ability to make decisions.

- Managing agreement in a group is a lot more difficult than managing conflict.

- There are some decision less decisions that are useful when you are faced with deciding in the midst of uncertainty and ambiguity.

References

(1) The Ernest and Young Quality Improvement Consulting Group, Total Quality maker (Homewood, IL, Irwin, 1990), p.4.

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The Councillor as Decision-maker

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PART II

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WORKSHOP

The Councillor as Decision-maker

OVERVIEW

Purpose

The performance of elected leaders is judged by the decisions they make. Better decisions can mean improved government performance and a more positive image of local government and those who govern.

This workshop is designed to provide participants with an understanding of the decision-making process and to explore the various styles and methods use by those with decision-making responsibilities. Councillors who complete the workshop mill be able to identify blocks to good council decision-making and to plan and implement strategies to avoid or remove them.

Contents

A brief description of each learning activity is shown below with an approximation of the amount of time required. If you wish to change the order, omit something, or to add training material of your own, feel free to do so.

3.1 **Warm-up exercise**

Participants individually choose which of five types of decision-making they prefer in their councillor roles. The pros and cons of each preference are then discussed in plenary session. (45 minutes)

3.2 **Trainer presentation**

Brief presentation on council decision-making. Draw on material from the essay to cover how decisions are made, stages in the process, barriers to decision-making, and how council members can be more effective decision-makers. (30 minutes)

3.3. **Exercise: good and bad decisions**

In groups of five to seven, participants are asked to list characteristics of Councils that make good and bad decisions. Encourage participants to think creatively about ways to improve council decision-making performance. (120 minutes)

3.4 Simulation: the allocation decision

Participants take part in a decision-making simulation involving a council budget session where several citizen groups are competing for a large grant of money received recently by the council. Allow time for three presentations, council deliberation, and discussion of the decision outcome. (120 minutes)

3.5 Case study: a central bus park for Rumai

In small groups of five to seven, participants read a case containing a problem that might face any city council. Each group is asked to read the case, reach a decision, and answer questions about the approach they followed in arriving at the decision. Observers are assigned to each group to monitor the process actually followed. (60 minutes)

3.6 Skill transfer exercise

Participants reflect privately and, then, share with others what they intend to do after the workshop with what they have learned about decision-making at the workshop. Encourage personal commitments to change. (45 minutes)

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3.1 *Warm-up Exercise*: DECISION PREFERENCES CHECKLIST

Time required: 45 minutes

Objective

This exercise is a way for workshop participants to identify which of five common styles of decision-making they tend to rely on most often in their councillor roles. As you can see from reading the checklist, the styles vary from doing nothing at all (a decision of no decision) to the well-known "knee jerk" reaction (ready, fire, aim).

Have participants complete the exercise before presenting them with concept information on decision-making. This is important. The value of the exercise is to get a true picture of how participants see themselves actually behaving, not how they think they should be behaving.

Process

Ask participants to complete the Decision Preferences Checklist working alone. Give them about 15 minutes to complete the task. Explain that there are no good or bad preferences and that any of the five might be an appropriate response to a particular problem or opportunity.

When participants have completed their checklists, call out each preference Decision- by name and ask for a show of hands from participants who selected each preference as the one on which they most often rely. Record the results on newsprint.

Initiate a discussion by asking what sorts of situations might call for a particular decision-making preference. Ask participants to give examples from their own council experience as recorded on the worksheets. Keep the process moving briskly to stay on schedule.

DECISION PREFERENCES CHECKLIST

The following statements describe six typical decision-making preferences employed by councillors the world over. Read the six preferences. Identify the one you tend to rely on the most in your role as a councillor Mark your preference with a checkmark in the box.

❏ I am patient and wait since many problems resolve themselves without a decision being made.

❏ I do something immediately. Most of the time the decision I make is the right one.

❏ I get as much information as possible about the problem and its cause before doing anything.

❏ I discuss at length with others if there is need for a decision at all and what the decision is about.

❏ I make an effort to get the concurrence of everyone involved before doing anything.

❏ I follow the lead of the majority or others whose opinions I respect.

Describe in the space below a situation where you, as a councillor, had to make a decision. Describe the decision you made and the decision preference you used to make it.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Were you satisfied with the outcome? Explain. How would you handle it next time (what would be your decision preference)?

_____

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3.2 TRAINER PRESENTATION

Time required: 30 minutes

Objective

This presentation is to provide participants with ideas and perspectives on the decision-maker role and a conceptual foundation they can use for the individual and group exercises included in this workshop.

Process

Prepare the presentation based on information from the preceding essay on the decision-maker-role. Emphasize how decisions are made, stages in the process, barriers to decision-making and how council members can be more effective decision-makers.

Outlined information on note cards may help you cover the information systematically and stay on schedule. Ask questions from time to time during the presentation as a check on participant comprehension and to hold their attention. Augment the presentation with visual aids including pre-printed newsprint sheets and overhead transparencies as a further aid to comprehension.

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3.3 *Exercise*: GOOD AND BAD DECISIONS

Time required: 90-120 minutes

Objective

This exercise is to encourage workshop participants to reflect on their own experience with council decision-making and to share these experiences in a group setting. Further, the exercise provides an opportunity for participants to think creatively about what might be done to overcome weaknesses in their own council decision-making. Normally, this exercise is used after the presentation and discussion on council decision-making (see the preceding essay and the handbooks introductory materials).

Process

You can introduce this exercise by saying that anyone with experience as a councillor has seen the council make some good decisions and some bad ones. In the heat of the moment, however, those involved in the decision rarely take the time to reflect thoughtfully on the decision and how it was made.

Write two questions in large letters on a sheet of newsprint:

1.   What are some characteristics of councils that make good decisions?

2.   What are some characteristics of councils that make bad decisions?

Divide the group into two smaller groups of about equal size. Assign the first question to one of the groups and the second question to the other. A worksheet on the next page may be helpful to participants in making individual lists of characteristics. Ask each small group to compile a list of characteristics on newsprint and return with their results in 20 - 30 minutes.

When both groups have completed the task, reconvene the total group and ask a spokes person from each group to take about five minutes to report the group's results. Allow a few minutes at the end of each presentation for discussion.

Good Decisions   **Bad Decisions**

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

_____   _____

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With the lists of good and bad council decision- making characteristics taped to the wall of the room, write on a clean newsprint sheet the following question:

> What can I do to improve the decision-making performance of the council on which I serve?

Ask participants to think of ways that this might be done and to write them down (see worksheet on the next page). Suggest to participants that they refer to the two lists for ideas. After about five minutes, collect improvement ideas from participants in round-robin fashion and record them on newsprint. As time permits, discuss the results of this activity and focus the discussion on those ideas which have the most merit and how they might be implemented.

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Workshop

Exercise

What can I do...

_____

_____

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What have I learned from other councillors about good and bad council decisions?

_____

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3.4 *Simulation*: THE ALLOCATION DECISION

Time required: 120 minutes

Objective

This exercise is to provide an opportunity for participants to learn about decision-making while engaged in the process of making a decision. Simulations are strong aids to learning. They place participants into hypothetical situations that resemble what they are likely to experience in real life. Because they are just simulations, participants can put themselves into the roles assigned to them and act out the real-life situations using new behaviours and techniques. Participating in a simulation is much like having a dream - an experience so vivid that you can't get it out of your mind even after waking up.

Process

Divide the group into four smaller groups with one of these groups composed of five members. Give each group a copy of the situation and role descriptions. Note: If possible, distribute handout materials (based on the situation described below) in advance of the workshop to give participants a chance to become familiar with the situation and their roles,

You may either appoint participants to play the town council member roles (five members) or ask for volunteers. At any rate, participants should be found for the role of council chairperson and each of the other (four) councillor roles. You may select names for each of the councillors or ask role-playing participants to use their own names.

Assign the remaining participants to groups 1, 2, or 3. From each of these three groups, select one person as an observer. When all remaining participants have been assigned roles, ask those who are members of the three groups to go to their assigned rooms to develop a plan of action for "selling" the council on their proposal. Ask them to complete the task in 45 minutes. Suggest that they choose one of the group to serve as its spokesperson. Explain that the council has a very crowded agenda and that each group will have only five minutes to make its presentation.

While the three groups are deliberating, have those participants who are playing councillor roles arrange the chairs and tables in the training room into a town council room as shown on the next page.
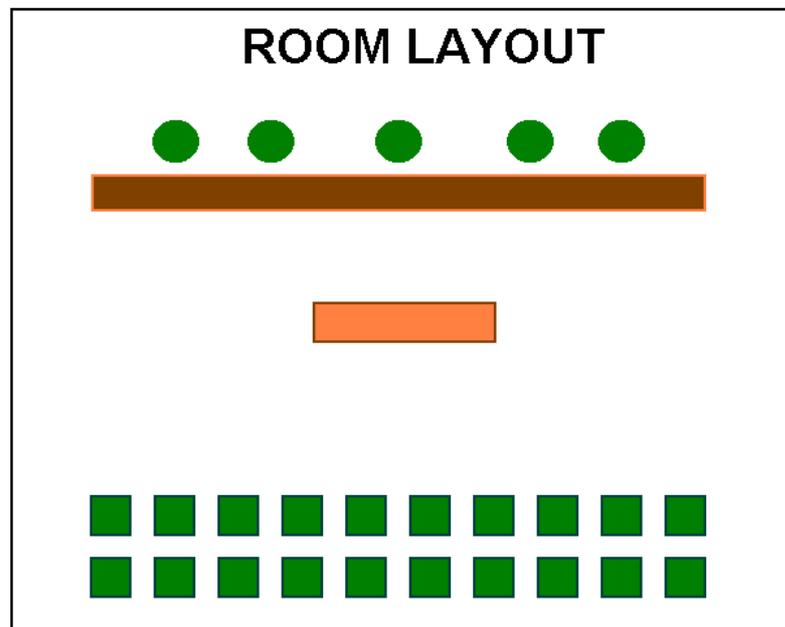
With council members seated, the presentations are made in turn. Other than the three observers, allow only members of groups that are presenting or have already presented to be present in the council room. In other words, no group should be permitted to hear another group's presentation until after it has made its own.

After all presentations are made, council members begin their deliberations as the three observers listen, watch, and record their comments.

Call time after 15 minutes whether a decision has been reached or not. Ask for reports from the three observers and comments from each of the council members and group leaders. Focus the ensuing discussion on the process used by the council to arrive at a decision and its effectiveness.

ROOM LAYOUT

Councillors at front of room seated behind tables placed end-to-end. A smaller table placed at centre for use by citizens who wish to make presentations to the council. Squares at the back of the room represent citizens after they have made their presentations.

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THE ALLOCATION DECISION

The situation

A wealthy merchant and resident of San Pedro has died and left a large sum of money to the town. The sum is US$50,000 (or the equivalent amount in another currency) to be made available to the town council in five annual installments of US$10,000 each. The merchant has stipulated that the money is to be allocated for some worthwhile public purpose at the discretion of the town council. However, should the council fail to allocate the money or delay its decision beyond the next council meeting, the offer will be withdrawn irrevocably.

Three community groups have declared an intent to submit proposals for use of the money. The task before the council is to hear each of the three proposals and to choose one of the community groups as the recipient.

Description of San Pedro

San Pedro is a commercial town within a developing country. The central government is in the process of implementing a decentralization plan that will affect local government in San Pedro. The town is governed by a town council of five members, each representing a separate district. Councillors are elected for two year terms by obtaining a simple majority of the votes cast at an election in their respective districts.

Councillor

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The Council Chairperson. You are Council Chairperson, elected from one of San Pedro's non-industrial districts. You were voted as Chairperson by your fellow councillors on a vote of 4 to 1. You are widely respected for your leadership skills and ability to arrange compromises between warring factions on your council.

Your council's task today is to decide which of three community groups will receive the finds from the merchant's gift to the community. You have arranged for the leaders of each community group to present that group's case for the funds and for the council to discuss the merits of each proposal. Your objective is to ensure that:

1. The funds are not lost owing to the council's failure to reach a decision;
2. Reach a consensus on the best use of the funds; and
3. Maintain the council's reputation as reasonable, fair, and concerned with the best interests of the community overall.**Two pro-business councillors**. San Pedro is a mill town. The town's economy depends in large measure on several plants that process agricultural products. As councillors, the two of you share a common interest. Both of you represent districts which are home for plant employees. Many of your constituents have lost their jobs owing to the recent closing of a jute mill, one of the town's principal employers. Your constituents would benefit most directly from a vocational training centre which one of

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Two pro-social service councillors. Not all of the town's problems are economic. The industrial character of San Pedro has produced many social problems as well. A by-product of unemployment has been the departure of many non-working males for more promising areas of the country, leaving wives and small children behind to fend for themselves. Moreover, lacking in adequate health facilities, the community is vulnerable to the rapid spread of many infectious diseases including the dreaded AIDS virus. As councillors, each of you has long championed the cause of the poor and the disinfranchised of San Pedro. Both of you are on record supporting more funds for health care and the needs of indigent children. You intend to support either the day-care centre or the health programme depending upon which of the two proposals is presented to the council in the most convincing manner.

Community group roles

Group No. 1. You represent a private company formed with the backing of local businesses to retrain workers for other employment in town. The corporation has acquired space from one of the plants and is seeking funds to operate a vocational training centre. Your main concern is the high rate of unemployment in the community. You believe your company can help reduce joblessness. But you need a supplemental source of funds for several years to sustain your efforts to put people back to work.

Group No. 2. You are an activist group with strong support in the non-industrial areas of San Pedro. You are supported by public health and medical groups in the area and are seeking funds to underwrite a new programme aimed at preventing the spread of diseases, and especially AIDS, through education in the face of a growing epidemic. You feel your organization most deserves the funds because of the urgency of the health problems facing the community.

Group No. 3. You are a church-based group with strong support from every religious denomination in the community as well as the public schools. Your organization is the principal provider of services to the most disadvantaged in the community, and, owing to its non-profit status, is dependent totally on outside funds. You need funds to open and operate a day-care centre in a low-income neighbourhood for the benefit of marginally employed, single parents with many small children. The centre would care for small children while their parents were working. As heads of their households, single parents are responsible alone for the welfare of their children. If they do not work, these parents cannot feed their children. However, these parents cannot afford to pay for housekeepers to care for their children while they are working. You see the centre as the answer for this chronic community need.

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OBSERVER WORKSHEET

1.   Did the council make a decision? (check one)

     ❏ Yes   ❏ No

2.   If "no," why not?

     _____

     _____

     _____

3.   If "yes," how was a decision made? (*check one*)

     ❏ Decision not to respond to ideas suggested by others.

     ❏ Decision made by the council chairperson on behalf of the council.

     ❏ Decision made by two or three of the stronger members of the council.

     ❏ Decision by majority vote.

     ❏ Decision made by consensus (general commitment to go along and support a particular course of action that is not necessarily everyone's Councillor as first choice).

     ❏ Decision by unanimous consent.

4.   In making the decision, was there a tendency of councillors to be nice to one another at the expense of critical thinking? (*check one*)

     ❏ Yes   ❏ No

     3.5 Case Study: A CENTRAL BUS PARK FOR RUMAI

Time required: 60 minutes

Objective

This exercise is to give participants practice in looking at problems objectively, considering a variety of solutions for the situation stated in the case. While cases are only an approximation of reality, they can help to give workshop participants a taste of real-life decision-making without the usual responsibilities and risks.

An objective of the case method is learning by discussion. You can facilitate this process by initiating and guiding discussions and by encouraging even the most reticent participants to express themselves. Subject matter mastery is also important. You can help others to learn by reading carefully and forming some conclusions of your own about the case. Be prepared to help participants

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An objective of the case method is learning by discussion. You can facilitate this process by initiating and guiding discussions and by encouraging even the most reticent participants to express themselves. Subject matter mastery is also important. You can help others to learn by reading carefully and forming some conclusions of your own about the case. Be prepared to help participants relate the situation in the case to the body of knowledge about decision-making discussed earlier in the workshop.

Process

Begin the exercise by giving a copy of the case, *A Central Bus Park for Rumai*, to each workshop participant and ask them to read the case. Divide the group into three discussion groups. Send each group off for about 40 minutes to answer the five questions at the end of the case.

At the end of 40 minutes, reconvene the small groups and ask for written maker reports from each group on newsprint. Guide a discussion comparing each small group's results. Guide the discussion to increasingly higher levels of abstraction in order to address the underlying issues in the case for council decision-making.

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A CENTRAL BUS PARK FOR RUMAI

For many years it has been the practice of area bus companies serving the city of Rumai to encourage their drivers to drop off and pick up passengers anywhere along the city streets. The practice has been a great convenience for shoppers and office workers who use the bus to commute into the city each day from nearby villages.

Recently the City Council has received complaints from local merchants about bus service. According to the merchants, noisy "touts," who are competing for customers, and the indiscriminate dumping or collection of passengers at and between street corners is resulting in excessive noise, littering, and overcrowding in front of their business establishments. They claim these practices are bad for business and demand that the City Council do something about it.

Responsive to the wishes of area merchants, councillors are considering a proposal to designate an area near the centre of the city as a bus park. The successful operation of such a park in a neighboring country has convinced the council of the feasibility of this idea for Rumai. Once established, arriving and departing passengers would be required to meet their buses at the bus park at scheduled times rather than wait for them on the city's street corners. Noisy crowds waiting for buses and bus drivers holding up traffic while competing loudly for riders would become a thing of the past.

The Rumai City Council has never before taken a stand for or against the passenger loading and unloading practices of area bus companies. The absence of an official position by the council has always been interpreted by bus company owners as council sanction for their passenger-handling practices. They are shocked and dismayed by the council's thinking. The situation is further maker complicated by the involvement of wealthy expatriates from neighbouring countries who have invested heavily in the area bus companies that would be affected by the council's bus park idea. These investors fear that the council's idea would make buses less accessible to riders and that this would jeopardise their learnings. They want the council to stay out of the bus business in Rumai and are prepared to make a fight of it if necessary.

Questions

1.   What is the decision problem? (*Define it precisely*.)

2.   What steps should the council follow to solve the problem?

3.   What are the alternatives and probable consequences at each step?

4.   Given the conclusion reached in the previous questions, how should the decision problem be addressed by the council?

5.   What are the implications of this case for council decision-making as discussed in this workshop?

3.6   SKILL TRANSFER EXERCISE

Time required:30-45 minutes

Objective

This exercise is to help participants transfer the learning experiences of the workshop into their real-world activities as elected officials. The focus of this exercise is on raising expectations, engaging in realistic planning, and making personal commitments. Most of the work is done on a personal basis with some interpersonal sharing.

> *Between knowing and doing there is a wide chasm.*

It is generally agreed that the purpose of training is to improve the way people do things by showing them a better way. In fact, the success of a training experience can be measured by the amount of personal growth and change that takes place both during training and after the training is over.

Training rarely has the impact on workshop participants that trainers hope it will have, particularly after an exposure of only a few hours. The exhilaration of the moment fades quickly when the trainee is confronted with old work habits and of work associates who have not shared the training experience.

On the other hand, commitments to learning and change made at the close of a workshop can help participants overcome learning resistance in themselves and in the work environment. A trainer can help learners make a successful transition from the world of learning to the world of doing through a few simple planning exercises. Think about it this way. The time taken to encourage learning transfer could be the difference between a brief exposure to some interesting ideas and a life-changing experience.

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Process

Spend at least half an hour at the end of the workshop to focus the attention of participants on important learnings and encourage them to continue experimenting with these learnings in their council activities. Begin by giving participants about 15 minutes to work independently on a simple learning transfer questionnaire.

When participants have completed the questionnaire, ask them to share quickly with the group two or three things they intend to do differently in their council roles as decision-makers to close the workshop.

Take a few minutes to reflect on the role of the decision-maker, the new ideas you encountered in this workshop, and how you feel about them. Then, in the space below, write a sentence or two to describe something interesting you have learned about yourself during this workshop.

A LEARNING TRANSFER QUESTIONNAIRE

Take a few minutes to reflect on the role of the decision-maker, the new ideas you encountered in this workshop, and how you feel about them. Then, in the space below, write a sentence or two to describe something interesting you have learned about yourself during this workshop.

_____

_____

_____

Based on what you have learned about yourself and the many possibilities for change presented by this workshop, what two or three things do you intend to do differently in your council role as decision-maker?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Finally, what obstacles in yourself or in your work environment do you expect to experience during your efforts to implement these changes? What will you do to remove or minimize these obstacles?

Obstacle	Action to remove the obstacle
1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____

If you can learn it, you can do it.