

Maximizing Project Success

November Column: Decisions! Decisions! Decisions!

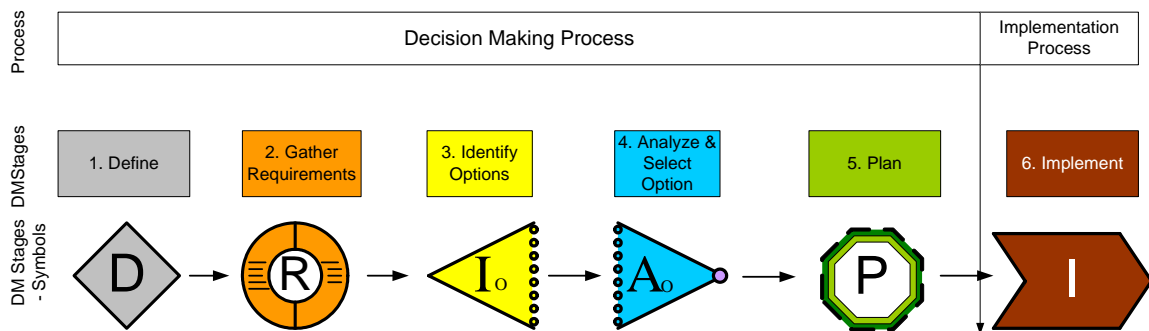
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What do project managers and project teams do more than anything else? My guess is they make decisions – decisions about scope, decisions about resources, decisions about customers and stakeholders. The fact is we make decisions all day long. What route to take to work? Should I stay late and finish up a task or go home on time for a change? Who will take Sally to her soccer game? Of course these are examples of relatively minor decisions, ones we can make them without really thinking. Unfortunately, we tend to make major decisions without “thinking” as well. That doesn’t mean we don’t actually think. We just aren’t conscious of the process we use to make our decisions.

Using an unconscious process is alright if you’re making a decision on your own and if that decision has minor implications. But allowing each person to use his or her own unconscious thinking process within a group setting when an important decision needs to be made just leads to conflict and chaos. You arrive at one decision; I arrive at another. We argue over who is right. Neither of us can adequately explain the process that lead to our decision, and both feel they’ve got the right answer. Now we’re in conflict.

In the current era of managing collaboratively, more and more decisions are made by teams. That means the team has to reach consensus and that’s much easier to do if you follow a structured, collaborative decision making process, like the one developed by Martin Training illustrated below.



Each stage contains a set of steps that the team works through together. At the end of each stage consensus is reached before moving onto the next stage. This almost guarantees that you’ll have consensus at the point where you’ve reached a decision (after Stage 4). Along the way you will have created understanding and buy-in which helps to assure support for getting the decision implemented.

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Here are the stages of the decision making process:

1. Define – Define what decision needs to be made. Define the goal you’re trying to reach. Define the customer and stakeholders of the decision. Define the impact of the decision on the customer and stakeholders.
2. Requirements – What are the requirements for a solution? Are there any solutions that are out of bounds?
3. Identify Options – What are all of the possible decision options? Brainstorm the possibilities.
4. Analyze Options – Using analysis tools, determine the best possible option based on the requirements from stage two.
5. Plan – Create a plan for implementing the decision. If the decision has a major impact on the customer or the organization, then it’s probably a project and will require a complete project plan for implementation. It may also require selling the solution. One benefit of using a structured, visible decision making process is that you can document the steps you went through to reach your decision which helps you to communicate why this is the best option available.
6. Implement – Implement the plan.

This may seem like a laborious process and it would be if you used it to decide whether or not to stay late at work. But it’s worth the time invested if you’re deciding which software package to roll out across a department or company. When there is anything significant at stake in a decision, then it’s worth the time to think it through carefully, with participation from the people who must implement the decision. The next time you need to have your team make a decision, pay attention to what process you use. Is it visible to everyone? Does it create consensus along the way? Can it be easily documented so others can review the group’s thinking? If so, you’re probably doing a good job at decision making already. If not, you might want to try a more visible, structured approach.

Paula Martin is the CEO of Martin Training Associates, a management training and consulting firm. The Martin Training decision making process is part of its new workshop called, Effective Meeting Management. For more information call 866-922-3122.