Models of Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Some models have been developed to help school leaders determine how and to what extent to involve followers in decision making. In this article, I discuss three of those models: the decision tree, the decision-making pattern choice model, and the synergistic decision making model.

Frequently groups, rather than individuals, make decisions in school organizations (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). How do leaders know when to involve followers in the decision making process? Models of decision making have been developed to help school leaders determine when, how, and to what extent to involve followers in the decision-making process. In this article, I describe three of the most popular and useful models of decision making: the decision tree, the decision-making pattern choice model, and the synergistic decision making model.

The Decision Tree: Road Map to Decision Making

Victor Vroom, Philip Yetton, and Arthur Jago (1998) have developed a model to help school leaders decide when and to what extent they should involve others in the decision-making process. First, the authors identify characteristics of a given problem situation using a series of seven questions. Second, they isolate five decision-making styles that represent a continuum from authoritarian to participatory decision-making approaches. Finally, they combine the key problem aspects with the appropriate decision-making style to determine the optimum decision approach a school leader should use in a given situation.

Characteristics of a Given Problem Situation

The key characteristics of a decision situation, according to the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model, are as follows:

1.   Is there a quality requirement such that one solution is likely to be more rational than others?

2.   Does a school leader have sufficient information to make a high-quality decision?
3.   Is the decision situation structured?
4.   Is acceptance of the decision by the school leader's followers critical to effective implementation of the decision?
5.   Is it reasonably certain that the decision would be accepted by followers if the school leader were to make it alone?
6.   Do the school leader's followers share the organizational goals to be achieved if the problem is solved?
7.   Is the preferred solution likely to cause conflict among the followers?

In other words, these key variables should determine the extent to which a school leader involves others in the decision process or makes the decision alone, without their input.

Decision-Making Styles

Five alternative decision-making styles, from which a school leader can choose, include the following:

1.   School leaders solve the problems or make the decision themselves, using information available at that time.
2.   School leaders obtain the necessary information from others, then decide on the solution to the problem themselves. They may or may not tell others what the problem is when they request information. The role played by others in making the decision is clearly one of providing the necessary information to school leaders, rather than generating or evaluating alternative solutions.
3.   School leaders share the problem with relevant others individually, getting their ideas and suggestions without bringing them together as a group. Then school leaders make the decision that may or may not reflect others' influence.
4.   School leaders share the problem with other members as a group, collectively obtaining their ideas and suggestions. Then they make the decision that may or may not reflect others' influence.
5.   School leaders share a problem with others as a group. School leaders and others together generate and evaluate alternatives and attempt to reach agreement [consensus] on a solution. School leaders do not try to influence the group to adopt their preferred solution, and they accept and implement any solution that has the support of the entire group (Vroom, Yetton, Yago, 1998).

Choosing the Appropriate Style

Vroom, Yetton, and Jago match the decision styles to the situation as determined by answers to the seven questions. By answering these questions, the preferred decision style for each type of problem is identified. Figure 1 depicts how the Vroom-Yetton-Jago model works.
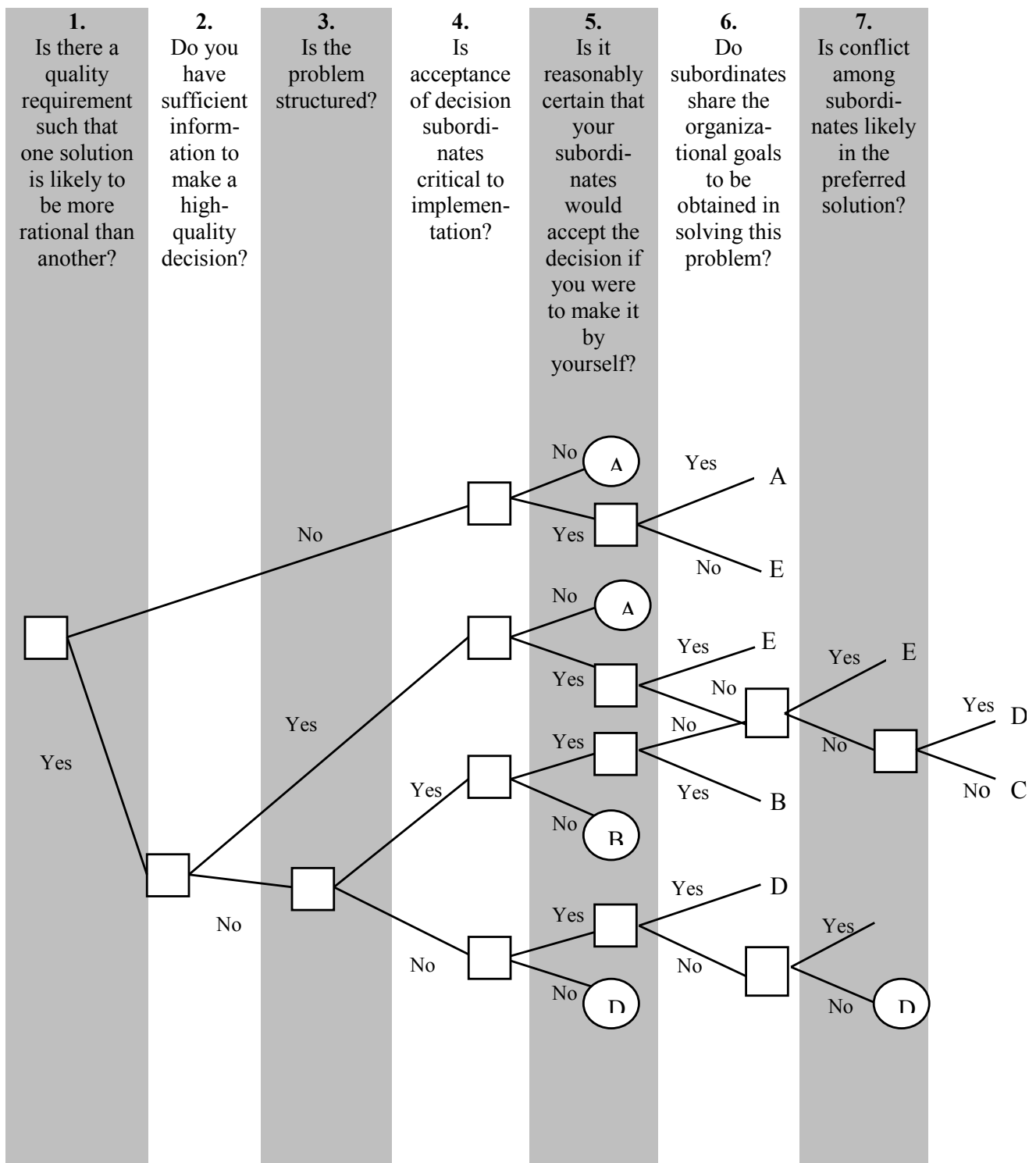
1. Is there a quality requirement such that one solution is likely to be more rational than another?	2. Do you have sufficient inform-ation to make a high-quality decision?	3. Is the problem structured?	4. Is acceptance of decision subordi-nates critical to implemen-tation?	5. Is it reasonably certain that your subordi-nates would accept the decision if you were to make it by yourself?	6. Do subordinates share the organiza-tional goals to be obtained in solving this problem?	7. Is conflict among subordi-nates likely in the preferred solution?

Figure 1. The decision tree.

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The flow chart provides the school leader with a step-by-step approach to determining the most appropriate style of decision making under a given set of circumstances. To see how the model works, start at the left-hand side and work toward the right. When you reach a letter, the letter corresponds to the optimum decision-making style to use.

The *Vroom-Yetton-Jago* model represents an important improvement over rational decision-making theory with implications for shared decision making. The authors have identified major decision strategies that are commonly used in making decisions, and they have established criteria for evaluating the success of the various strategies under a variety of situations. Moreover, they have developed an applied model for school leaders to use in selecting decision strategies, which improves the quality of decisions, acceptance of the decisions by others, and minimizes the time consumed in decision making.

The Decision Making-Pattern Choice Model

Another approach to shared decision making, which specifies circumstances under which participation should be used, was developed by Robert Tannenbaum and Warren Schmidt (2010). These authors posited seven different *decision making patterns*, ranging on a continuum from what they call "boss-centered decision making" to "subordinate-centered decision making." (See Figure 2.)
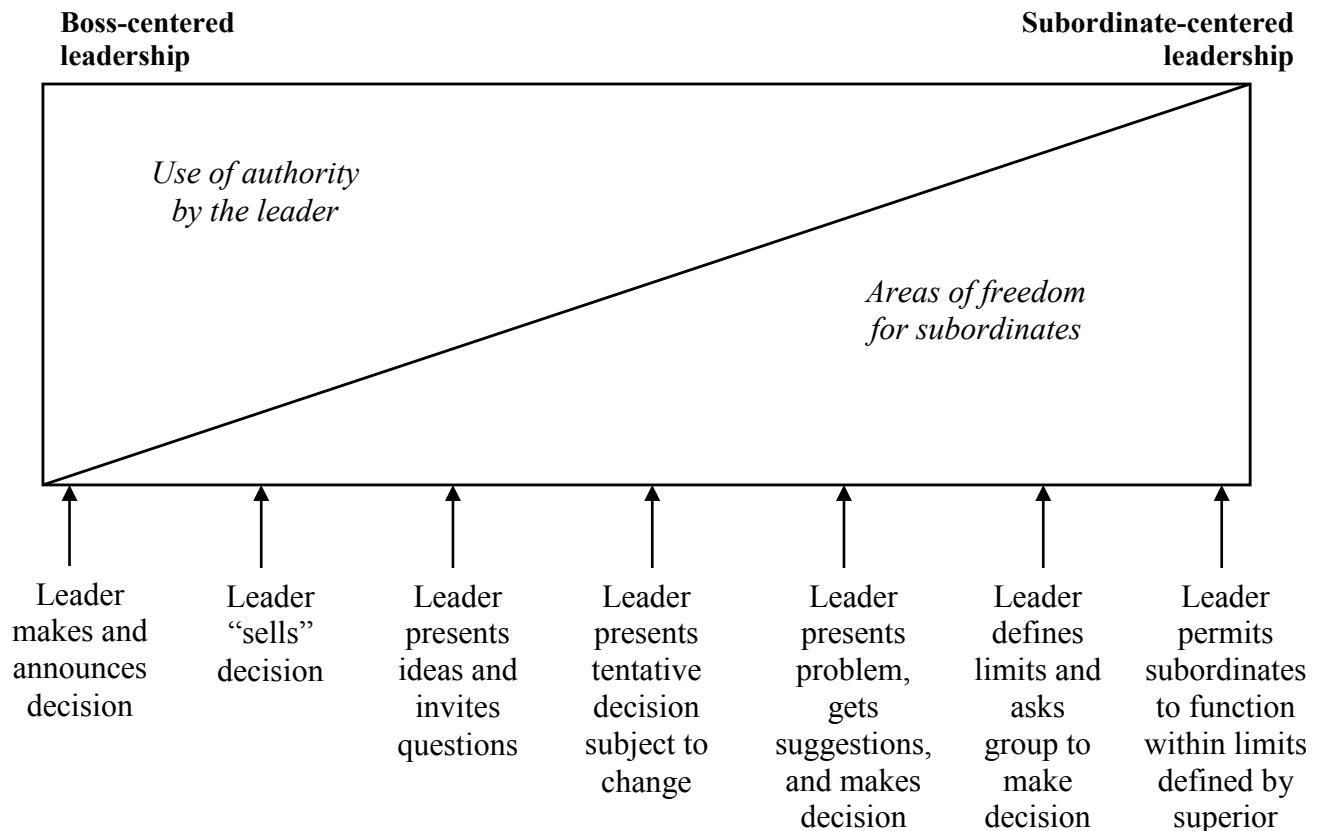
Figure 2. The decision making-pattern choice model.

The theme of this approach is that a wide range of factors determine whether or not directive decision making, shared decision making, or something in between is best. These factors fall into four broad categories: forces in the leader, forces in the subordinate, forces in the situation, and long-run goals and strategy.

Forces in the Leader

Some of the factors operating in the school leader's personality that influence the choices among the seven decision making patterns from which she must choose include the following:

1. ***The school leader's value system.*** How strongly does the leader feel that individuals should have a share in making the decisions that affect them? Or, how convinced is the leader that the official who is paid or chosen to assume responsibility should personally carry the burden of decision making? Also, what is the relative importance that the leader attaches to organizational efficiency and personal growth of staff members?
2. ***The school leader's confidence in the group members.*** Leaders differ in the amount of trust they have in other people generally. After considering the knowledge and competence of a group with respect to a problem, a leader may (justifiably or not) have more confidence in his own capabilities than in those of the group members.
3. ***The school leader's own leadership inclinations.*** Leaders differ in the manner (e.g., telling or team role) in which they seem to function more comfortably and naturally.
4. ***The school leader's feelings of security in an uncertain situation.*** The leader who releases control over the decision-making process reduces the predictability of the outcome. Leaders who have a greater need than others for predictability and stability are more likely to "tell" or "sell" than to "join."

Forces in the Group Members

Before deciding how to lead a certain group, the school administrator will also want to remember that each member, like herself, is influenced by many personality variables and expectations. Generally speaking, the leader can permit the group greater freedom if the following essential conditions exist:

1. Members have relatively high needs for independence.
2. Members have readiness to assume responsibility.
3. Members have a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity.
4. Members are interested in the problem and feel that it is important.
5. Members understand and identify with the goals of the school.
6. Members have the necessary knowledge and experience to deal with the problem.
7. Members expect to share in decision making.

Forces in the Situation

Two of the critical environmental pressures on the school leader are as follows:

1. ***The problem itself.*** Do the members have the kind of knowledge that is needed? Does the complexity of the problem require special experience or a one-person solution?
2. ***The pressure of time.*** The more the leader feels the need for an immediate decision, the more difficult it is to involve other people.

Long-Run Goals and Strategy

As the school leader works on daily problems, his choice of a decision making pattern is usually limited. But he may also begin to regard some of the forces mentioned as variables over which he has some control and to consider such long-range goals as the following:

1. Raising the level of member motivation.
2. Improving the quality of all decisions.
3. Developing teamwork and morale.
4. Furthering the individual development of members.
5. Increasing the readiness to accept change.

Generally, a fairly high degree of member-centered behavior is more likely to achieve these long-range purposes. But the successful school administrator can be characterized neither as a strong leader nor as a permissive one. Rather, she is one who is sensitive to the forces that influence her in a given situation and one who can accurately assess those that should influence her.

The Synergistic Decision Making Model

How can a school leader effectively put the resources of a group (or a team) to work on a problem? Getting several people together in one location and using each of their strengths to facilitate decision making is always a challenge to a leader. To accomplish this, the group must work smoothly in a team effort and not be dominated by one individual or factions within the group.

The key to creating the proper environment for shared decision making is shown in Figure 3 and is based to a great degree on effective communication skills (Nash, 2011). Following, I examine how each component of the model relates to each of the others when attempting shared decision making.
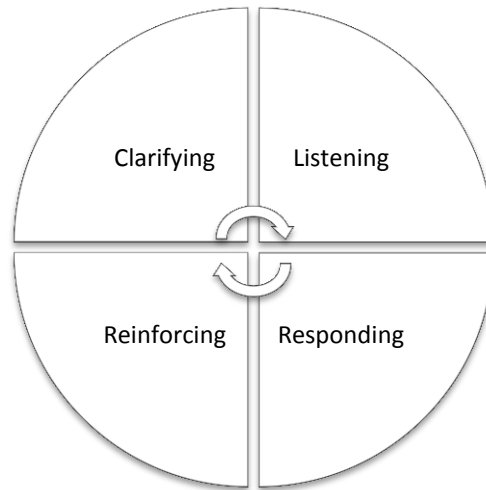
Figure 3. The synergistic decision making model.

Listening

Active listening is not an automatic, easy process, especially when feelings are sensitized and frustration is evident within the group. To effectively accomplish the task, however, a listener should do the following:

- Always respect another's feelings
- Never interrupt when another person is talking
- Never prejudge
- Always be considerate of someone else's remark
- Never let rank or authority influence a comment
- Always pay close attention to everything that is said

Responding

Answering a remark that has been addressed to a group member occasionally requires a high degree of skill and tact. An often overlooked fact in shared decision making is that an *improper* response (even when it is merely *perceived* that way) can reduce the effects of positive synergism. Accordingly, when responding, an individual should take care to do the following:

- Paraphrase the remark, when applicable.
- Never respond in a disparaging manner.
- Keep the other person's feelings in mind at all times.
- Avoid any type of premature judgment.
- Always assume that the other person has spoken with sincerity.
- Avoid having the "final say" in the matter.

Reinforcing

The skill of reinforcing should not be confused with being condescending. The key here is to build on the previous remark(s) so as to encourage more creative thinking for all individuals on the team. To induce the best type of synergistic effect when reinforcing, an individual should do the following:

- Create the proper climate for a non-threatening dialogue.
- Encourage free discussion by acknowledging appropriate remarks.
- Accept the other person's right to express themselves freely.
- Speak in a noncompetitive manner.
- Build on individual and group ideas.
- Encourage various viewpoints as they arise.

Clarifying

During the course of the decision-making process, there will usually be moments when a statement or remark made by another person needs clarification. Not to provide that clarification would be a serious mistake. What *is* important to the process is to get every possible confusing or unclear point clarified so that some type of judgment can be made about it. When attempting to clarify, an individual should always take care to do the following:

- Phrase the question in a neutral way.
- Never imply that a foolish question has been raised.
- Not show any impatience in either voice tone or body language.
- Deal specifically with the question being addressed.
- Not generalize about the other person's intentions.
- Don't assume that you always have the answer.

Clearly, there are a variety of problems in decision-making processes. Individuals and groups have various biases and personal goals that may lead to suboptimal decisions. A technique such as the *synergistic decision making approach* aims to minimize many of these problems by allowing individuals greater freedom of expression, and the group receives far less filtered information with which to make its decision. Thus, although not perfect, this technique can assist leaders in need of mechanisms to improve both the quality and the timeliness of decisions made by groups in schools.

Conclusion

Models of decision making have been developed to help school leaders determine when, how, and to what extent to involve followers in the decision-making process. Three of the most popular and useful models of decision making (the decision tree, decision-making pattern choice model, and synergistic decision making model) were discussed.

The Vroom-Yetton-Jago decision tree model of determining the level of group involvement in the decision-making process requires the leader to diagnose a problem situation and the effect participation will have on the quality of the decision, level of staff members acceptance, and the time available to make the decision.

Another approach to shared decision making, which specifies circumstances under which participation should be used, is Tannenbaum and Schmidt's decision making-pattern choice model. The model posits seven different decision making patterns ranging on a continuum from "boss-centered decision making" to "subordinate-centered decision making." Nash's synergistic decision making model is a technique for increasing the advantages and limiting the disadvantages of shared decision making.

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