

Perfect your pivot, turn yourself into decision master

By Francie Dalton

A decision is pivotal if any of the following is true:

A significant degree of risk, exposure or uncertainty surrounds the decision. Failure in some form is a distinct possibility.

The decision is a catalyst or precursor, leading to “next steps” that result in some form of change.

Radial impacts will ensue from the decision, affecting perhaps the responsibilities of individuals, their careers, organizational structure, operations, internal policy or your reputation as a leader.

None of the choices includes a win/win with all options having some advantage. Indeed, decisions are considered pivotal when they are either win/lose, with considerable distance between the best possible and worst possible outcomes, or lose/lose, forcing a choice between equally negative outcomes.

How you manage pivotal decisions shapes you and your career, and it shapes the way others view you and your leadership. Pivotal decisions reveal your core values. They also set precedents, shaping the culture of the organization.

Failing to recognize the special nature of pivotal decisions increases the likelihood they will be reactionary or perfunctory, generating unintended consequences that are more severe, harder to endure, more expensive to remediate and difficult to recover from.

The fact that you did not intend the consequences is not mitigating; the fact that you are not sensitive to any resulting negative perceptions is not insulating. Mishandled pivotal decisions erode the credibility of your leadership — something that’s virtually impossible to rebuild.

Common circumstances where pivotal decisions are required include leadership transi-

tions, internal restructuring, threatened loss of key staff at crucial times, requests from key constituents that would cause significant cost overruns or substantial rework, and poisonous, divisive behaviors from people whose results or political connections are crucial to the organization.

The best time to confront pivotal decisions is before you have to.

However, you do have two alternatives: You can wait for situations to burst upon you without warning and then wing it; or, you can just accept that your organization will be in a perpetual damage control mode as you struggle to mitigate the results of unanticipated pivotal decisions.

Decision precision

Impractical as it may initially seem, it really is possible to anticipate pivotal decisions, prepare for them and lead your organization through them virtually before they ever happen.

Here’s a five-step process that will help you do so.

1. Imagine the toughest business scenarios you might face. These scenarios are reasonably predictable dilemmas that put you in highly vulnerable position. Think of all that you take for granted managerially and imagine losing it. Consider what would happen if your certainty about various aspects of your business proved unfounded. What if there were a significant difference of opinion between you and your boss regarding a major initiative? What about a particularly difficult associate? Identify at least two potentially calamitous scenarios.

2. Identify the indicators likely to precede each scenario. By compiling a list of the specific occurrences that indicate the scenario is becoming imminent, you’ll be more likely to recognize the indicators if they occur.

3. Walk through each scenario as though you were really facing the difficulty. What are your options and the predictable consequences of each option? Which option would you choose? Why? Be sure you can clearly articulate your reasons so you can speak with a conviction that will persuade key audiences.

4. Visualize the implementation of your chosen option. If such decisions cause you emotional anguish, realize that those are exactly the decisions senior executives should be making and you’re not alone in your discomfort. No honorable executive relishes the implementation of decisions that will be painful to others, but your feelings cannot determine the action you will take.

5. Identify the themes in your decision-making. For example, are you consistently benevolent? If so, you probably have earned an organization of mediocre performers. Are you often harsh? You’ve likely earned the resentment of your leadership. Do you “duck” all the incendiary issues? You’ve earned a lack of respect for your leadership. After you’ve discerned the style and quality of your leadership, determine what adjustments you need to make.

Learning how to anticipate pivotal decisions will deliver three tremendously useful outcomes to you: The process trains your brain to recognize precursors. This then accelerates your ability to act. And perhaps most importantly, anticipating pivotal decisions equips you to apply preventive measures instead of slugging your way through damage-control measures.

FRANCIE DALTON is founder and president of Dalton Alliances, Inc., a premier business consultancy specializing in the communication, management and behavioral sciences. Phone: 410/715-0484; web site: www.daltonalliances.com.