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Better Decision Making the Gateway to Superior Solutions
By Avil Beckford, President

“Every great decision creates ripples--like a huge boulder dropped in a lake. The ripples merge, rebound off the banks in unforeseeable ways. The heavier the decision, the larger the waves, the more uncertain the consequences,” says Benjamin Disraeli.

Most of us can attest to making choices that were poorly thought out. And we all know of at least one person whose choices have had a devastating effect on their life and career. It is virtually impossible to rise to the executive ranks without solid decision making skills. Most employees know that the ability to make sound decisions is a critical skill that is required to succeed in any workplace. But many do not have that skill because they either have not been taught, or have not been given the opportunity to make their own decisions in the workplace.

Research has shown that decision making is among the critical employability skills employers seek. The Conference Board of Canada, an independent, not-for-profit applied research organization, developed the Employability Skills 2000+, which lists the critical skills that employees need to succeed in the

About The Author
Avil Beckford is an accomplished writer, researcher, and analyst with over 15 years experience. Her strong service orientation, dedication to learning and exploring new ways of improving her own life as well as the many she touches, has underpinned her success to date.
A published author, her new book, *Tales of People Who Get It* is a culmination of her life experience. It has often been said of Avil that her life informs her work. She has also created a companion workbook *Journey to Getting It*.
Avil’s many readers look forward to Ambeck Edge, her company’s regular e-Newsletter that is a rich resource for those interested in self-improvement, as well as those professionals who struggle with life issues.

workplace. These skills include communication, problem solving, positive attitudes and behaviours, adaptability, working with others, and science, technology and mathematics skills. See Table 1.

Decision-making, a step in the problem-solving process refers to identifying alternative solutions and choosing from among them. There are many decision making models available ranging from the simple to the complex where weights are assigned to each possible solution. However, for most workplace situations, a simple yet detailed process will suffice, while giving you more than the fundamentals.

During the research for my book *Tales of People Who Get It* I asked thirty-four highly notable individuals from Canada, the United States, Switzerland, Sweden, Jamaica and South Africa to “Describe a business challenge that you have had and how you resolved it” and “What lessons did you learn in the process?” Analyzing over 60

responses - including responses from other interviews I conducted - I noticed that even though I did not specifically ask about decision making, it was

mentioned frequently because it is an important aspect of the problem solving process.

Table 1: Conference Board of Canada Employability Skills 2000+

Fundamental Skills The skills needed as a base for further development	Personal Management Skills The personal skills, attitudes and behaviours that drive one's potential for growth	Teamwork Skills The skills and attributes needed to contribute productively
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate • Manage Information • Use Numbers • Think & Solve Problems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➢ assess situations and identify problems ➢ seek different points of view and evaluate them based on facts ➢ recognize the human, interpersonal, technical, scientific and mathematical dimensions of a problem ➢ identify the root cause of a problem ➢ be creative and innovative in exploring possible solutions ➢ readily use science, technology and mathematics as ways to think, gain and share knowledge, solve problems and make decisions ➢ evaluate solutions to make recommendations or decisions ➢ implement solutions ➢ check to see if a solution works, and act on opportunities for improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate Positive Attitudes & Behaviours • Be Responsible • Be Adaptable • Learn Continuously • Work Safely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work With Others • Participate in Projects & Tasks

Source: Conference Board of Canada

One of the reasons the role models profiled in my book have been so successful, is they are masters at problem solving and decision making, even though they do not use complex models and processes. The key is always to find a process that you are comfortable with so that you will use it whenever you need to. The responses from the interviewees on decision making reflect their thoughts and the activities they perform when making decisions. After analyzing the information, here are the learnings for better decision making, which are also applicable for problem solving. (Also see the *What Kind of Problem Solver Are You?* White Paper)

- Clearly define the situation
- Involve people who will be impacted by the decision early in the process, and listen to their views
- Do not alienate the people who will be impacted by the decision
- Recognize that everyone has their own issues and concern that they have to deal with
- Get detailed and reliable information and feedback from people who understand the situation and have different perspectives
- Conduct focus group interviews with stakeholders
- Look at best practices
- Extract the information that makes sense
- Strike the right balance between gathering facts and making the decision
- Brainstorm possible solutions with your colleagues
- Do not accept the way that things have been done
- Do not focus only on short-term costs but on long-term benefits
- Look at the pros and cons of the solutions
- Have foresight and look ahead when choosing a solution
- Formulate a multi-faceted solution for complex decisions
- Trust your instincts, if the decision does not feel right, re-evaluate it
- Make a decision even though it may not necessarily be popular with everyone
- Take action immediately after you decide on the solution
- Test the decision and rework the solution if necessary

Decision making is indeed teachable and learnable if you understand the process. The learnings garnered from the responses translate into the following simple steps to decision making:

Decision Making 101

1. Define the decision to be made
2. Collect information
3. Analyze the information
4. Develop possible solutions
5. Evaluate the quality of each solution
6. Choose a solution
7. Implement the decision
8. Test the decision (Did it do what it was supposed to do?)

From my extensive experience in research, the eight simple steps would translate into the following process, which will help you to become a better decision maker and a more valuable employee.

Anatomy of a Decision Making Process

Stage 1: Define the Decision

- State the decision to be made in your organization in clear and simple language and answer the following questions
 - a. How important is the decision?
 - b. How do decisions get made in your organization?
 - c. Why does the decision have to be made?
 - d. What is the impact of not deciding?
 - e. Who will be impacted by the decision, and how?
 - f. Who are your allies in the organization?
 - g. Is the decision permanent or reversible?
 - h. What are the desired outcomes of making the decision?
 - i. Is acceptance and support for the decision critical for its implementation?
 - j. How much time is available for making the decision?

Stage II: Gather Information

- Every decision is a response to a situation, what are the root causes of the situation?
 - a. Collect files, records and other relevant documents
 - b. Talk to stakeholders
 - c. Brainstorm with colleagues
 - d. Conduct focus group interviews
 - e. Look at best practices
- Read all the information gathered and evaluate the quality of them
 - a. How accurate is the information
 - b. Does it represent a diversity of points of view
 - c. Are there any biases
- Distil the facts pertinent to the decision to be made
- Restructure the definition of the decision if you have to
- Draw conclusions from the information gathered and identify possible solutions (Do not limit yourself to what has been done before but open yourself to new and better alternative solutions)

- Develop a set of decision criteria to judge the quality of each solution and assess its suitability

Stage III: Consider Solutions

- Use the set of decision criteria developed in Stage II to judge the quality of each solution and assess its suitability
 - a. State the advantages and disadvantages of each solution
 - b. State the costs, benefits and implication of implementing each option
 - c. Do not focus only on short-term costs but also look at long term benefits
 - d. State obstacles to each option and how they could be handled

Stage IV: Make a Decision

- Which option best serves the desired outcome stated in Stage I?
- Is the option consistent with the mission, goals and objectives of the organization
- Select the best option
- Explain your decision to those involved and impacted

Stage V: Implement the Decision

- Put the decision into action
- Does the decision feel right to you? Learn to trust your instincts

Stage VI: Test the Decision

- Did the decision resolve the situation?
- Are you comfortable with the decision?
- If no to the above, how can you rework the decision? Can you combine elements of the alternative solutions to form a hybrid solution?
- Go through the process again if you have to

Like with everything in life the more practice you get the more adept you become. By applying the process to your unique situation, in no time you will become a better decision maker. And the best part is that the process also works for your personal life.

For more ideas, and if you love stories, read the responses of the 34 people profiled in *Tales of People Who Get It* <http://stores.lulu.com/avilbeckford>

Be sure to check out Avil Beckford's website at <http://www.ambeck.com>

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