

BUSINESS
RESEARCH
YEARBOOK

Global Business Perspectives

Volume VII, 2000

Editors:

Jerry Biberman, University of Scranton

&

Abbass Alkhafaji, Slippery Rock University

A publication of the International Academy of Business Disciplines

I A B D

Copyright 2000 by the
International Academy of Business Disciplines

McNaughton & Gunn Inc.
Saline, Michigan 48176

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Co-published by arrangement with the
International Academy of Business Disciplines

ISBN 1-889754-04-8

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences--Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

MANAGERIAL DECISIVENESS IN THE CAREER COUNSELING PROCESS

Barlow Soper, Louisiana Tech University
C. W. Von Bergen, Southeastern Oklahoma State University

ABSTRACT

Managers fill many roles in organizations. One role receiving increased attention is that of career counseling. It is argued that the decisiveness often expected of managers may be counter-productive in their role as career counselor and that sometimes it is appropriate, useful, and effective to express uncertainty about career decisions--often behaviorally observed by the "I don't know" response.

I. INTRODUCTION

Being a leader is an important managerial role. But it is not the only role that managers assume. Mintzberg (1971), for example, has identified ten distinct roles that are enacted by most managers. These ten roles fall into three categories: interpersonal roles, informational roles, and decisional roles.

Interpersonal roles arise directly from formal authority and refer to the relationship between the manager and others. Managers also have important informational roles. Most observational studies find that managers spend a great deal of time giving and receiving information. In decisional roles, managers act upon information and initiate the development of projects and assemble necessary resources. Managers in this role become activists, focusing on results and making things happen. Managers are required to take action and give direction to subordinates. To do this managers must be decisive.

To be decisive, managers must make choices and take action--the ability to act is critical. Some decisions are so routine as to be unnoticed; others have serious consequences. Either way, managers who do not make choices and act on them are considered indecisive. They surrender authority and cannot effectively manage (Fandt, 1994).

II. DECISIVENESS SKILLS REQUIRED OF MANAGERS

Decisiveness includes not only the ability to make decisions, but the ability to assert a point of view, to determine a course of action when time is of the essence, and to withstand opposition. Decisiveness can be divided into five categories of behavior: (1) taking initiative--managers often must identify urgent issues, choose courses of action, improvise when necessary, state decisions firmly, and respond to matters that require resolution; (2) giving opinions--asserting a point of view even when it is in conflict with the opinions of others, along with

the ability to challenge decisions and actions with which one disagrees, as well as firmly supporting those with which one concurs; (3) making rapid decisions--reaching conclusions quickly, making choices without undue delay and vacillation, and taking action with minimal hesitancy; (4) defending decisions when challenged--knowing how to take a stand, carefully evaluating other possibilities, examining information, supporting their decisions with facts, and answering opposing arguments; and (5) taking risks to achieve results--trying new and uncertain actions and challenging ongoing procedures, sometimes going against the odds to accomplish objectives. In summary, to be decisive is to display a range of definite, assertive behaviors.

III. THE MANAGER AS CAREER COUNSELOR

In most managerial contexts, decisiveness is a valued skill. However, one area in which decisiveness can be a liability is in the career advising/counseling process. Hill (1985) reports that over the past decade attitude surveys of employees at a major oil company show that lack of career counseling is a predominant concern at all levels of the organization.

To meet this concern career development in the workplace is receiving more thought and attention (Herr & Cramer, 1992; Levine, 1985; Portwood & Granrose, 1986). Increasingly, managers are required to perform career counselor activities as part of their jobs. As career counselors, managers are asked to assist employees do a number of things, such as: (1) identify career-related skills, interests, and values; (2) find a variety of career options; (3) evaluate appropriateness of various options; and (4) design/plan strategies to achieve agreed-upon career goals (Merman & McLaughlin, 1982).

To a significant degree the importance of rational decision-making and logical problem solving has been stressed in the career counseling process (Borgen, Layton, Veenhuizen, & Jackson, 1985) with the goal of reaching an optimal choice (or choices) among possible alternatives. Many of these career, decision-making models stress rational thought processes based on objective data (Hershenson & Roth, 1966). This process fits with the positive characteristics of decisiveness considered beneficial to managers. That is, make quick, reasonably certain, objective decisions with employee assistance, based on a set of logical propositions.

Yet, constantly changing economic realities make certainty-gear (i.e., rational, logical) approaches to career decision-making unrealistic (Baumgardner, 1977). The most common problem associated with rational, objectivity decision theories is the assumption that people, data, things, and ideas remain constant. What is needed is a career counseling framework for managers that helps employees accept uncertainty while suggesting that changing one's mind is an adaptive trait (Gelaté, 1989). Indeed, managers may need a broader view of the decision-making process, one that more realistically addresses the constant

presence of uncertainty. Miller (1995) makes a strong case for acknowledging uncertainty in career counseling and discusses the idea that career choice uncertainty, the dreaded "I don't know" response, is normal, acceptable, and even a necessary part of the process.

Admitting lack of knowledge is particularly difficult for managers who view such action as "wishy-washy," imperfect, or wrong and who commonly prize decisiveness and certainty. Most are taught from childhood to reply affirmatively to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Clearly, those who answer specifically to such a question are treated differently, and usually more positively, than those who do not. Somehow, notes Krumboltz (1992), the "I don't know" response has garnered very little payoff from our environment. Instead, it is frequently met with dismay or disappointment, if not outright resentment. Krumboltz (1992) concludes that there exists an inherent assumption in much of the literature on career choice that being uncertain is a negative state to be avoided.

Being uncertain and being plagued by doubts is commonplace, however, even after the decision is made. Recent research (Herr & Cramer, 1992) finds that individuals change entire career fields an average of three times in their lives and the probability that individuals in the same company will remain in the same career path is becoming increasingly rare. Given the fact that people are living longer, productive lives and taking on new job functions following formal retirement, we might expect even more career changes to become the norm. Thus, the apparently self-confident declaration of a career goal at any age must almost certainly be accompanied by some inner doubts about what this commitment means for the future (Krumboltz, 1992).

Certainty over making the right career choice should not be a goal of career counseling. What must be a desired outcome is employees' recognition of the inevitable uncertainty of the career process (Baumgardner, 1977) and likely sources of career conflict, and using that uncertainty to their advantage. When employees utter, "I don't know," perhaps managers ought to encourage them to listen to their hesitant response, their inner voice, in order to better determine what to do next (Wrenn, 1990).

Whenever employees believe they cannot make up their minds, they should not be judged; instead, they should be encouraged to take another step and another step and wait for or seek out more information. It is important to remember that one cannot leapfrog over uncertainty and waiting/processing periods, jumping directly to certainty and choice (Miller-Tiedeman, 1988).

Perhaps, the best final decision may be, in actuality, a definite maybe (Gelate, 1989), keeping one's options open. Accepting uncertainty is a valid step in the change process--possibly far preferable to stating goals that may or may not be attainable and ultimately ones that could lead to greater frustration and

unhappiness (Krumboltz, 1992).

When uncertain about the future, an appropriate strategy is to not force the issue. Initiate a plan at the moment, such as making a list of all the uncertainties, or talking to someone who could offer a fresh perspective (Miller-Tiedeman, 1988). It is sometimes okay simply to let time pass and see what develops.

Managers' career counseling activities are most effective when they continually reflect the idea that employee uncertainty about career choice--often behaviorally indicated by the "I don't know" response--is not bad, but instead genuine, honest, and realistic given an extraordinarily complex situation. Thus, it is critical that managers: (1) communicate the "OKayness" of uncertainty; (2) encourage employees to perceive uncertainty as positive (i.e., develop a healthy attitude about uncertainty); (3) support and stimulate any and all ethical behavior that may result in greater awareness of self and increased knowledge of the world of work; and (4) not rush the employees into premature decisions.

Managers can discuss with employees the possibilities of keeping options open, of psychologically trying alternatives by asking "what if" questions, and of accepting the statement, "I still don't know for sure," as legitimate. Basically, as long as employees perceive uncertainty as normal, natural, and acceptable step in the decision process, they will progress in decision-making and do so with their eyes open, receptive to unanticipated future experiences, and they will ultimately define their own unique career paths. Being decisive in this situation is NOT the answer.

REFERENCES

- Baumgardner, Steve R. "Vocational Planning: The Great Swindle." Personnel and Guidance Journal, 56, 1977, 17-22.
- Borgen, Fred H., Layton, Wilbur L., Veenhuizen, Deborah L., and Jackson, D. Jeff. "Vocational Behavior and Career Development, 1984: A Review." Journal of Vocational Behavior, 27, 1985, 218-269.
- Fandt, Paul M. Management Skills: Practice and Experience. Minneapolis, MN: West, 1994.
- Gelate, H. B. "Positive Uncertainty: A New Decision-Making Framework for Counseling." Journal of Counseling Psychology, 36, 1989, 252-256.
- Herr, Edwin L., and Sandra H. Cramer. Career Guidance and Counseling Through the Lifespan: Systematic Approaches (4th ed.). New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Hershenson, David B., and Roth, Robert M. (1966). "A Decisional Process Model of Vocational Development." Journal of Counseling Psychology, 13, 1966, 368-370.
- Hill, Nathan C. "Career Counseling: What Employees Should Do and Expect." Personnel, 62, 1985, 41.
- Krumboltz, John D. "The Wisdom of Indecision." Journal of Vocational

Behavior, 41, 1992, 239-244.

Levine, Hubert Z. "Consensus on Career Planning." Personnel, 62, 1985, 67-72.

Merman, S. K., and McLaughlin, J. E. "Unleashing Human Potential: The Role of the Career Counselor in Industry." Paper presented to the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, August 1982.

Miller, Mark J. "A Case for Uncertainty in Career Counseling." Counseling and Values, 39, 1995, 162-168.

Miller-Tiedeman, Anna. "Personal Observations on Life Directions." Journal of Counseling and Development, 66, 1988, 487-488.

Mintzberg, Henry. "Managerial Work: Analysis from Observation." Management Science, 1971, 97-110.

Portwood, James D., and Granrose, Cherlyn S. (1986). "Organizational Career Management Programs: What's Available? What's Effective?" Human Resource Planning, 9, 1986, 107-119.

Wrenn, C. Gilbert. "From Counselor toward Becoming a Person: Some Suggestions." Journal of Counseling and Development, 68, 1990, 586.