

# Effective Versus Efficient Decisions: A Paradigm Shift

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## **Success or Failure**

Often what separates success from failure in the business world-- and in life-- is the ability to make good decisions in a timely fashion. Manager's careers are built on making good decisions, and each of our lives is improved when we make good decisions. And yet often we make decisions that lead us to less than optimal results. So why then don't we all make better decisions? With so much riding on the outcome, you'd believe each of us would get pretty good at decision making. It is not that we don't have practice making decisions-- we are constantly making decisions every moment we are awake-- decisions about what clothes to wear, which foods to eat, and these decisions start the moment we open our eyes in the morning-- or maybe even before then-- and continue until we go to sleep. So what does it take to make a good decision?

Does it take luck? Perhaps. Some people appear to be lucky, and as a result just seem to make decisions and fall into great situations-- maybe including promotions at work, investing in stock just before it took off and other apparently lucky situations. Sometimes luck is responsible, but in most instances, luck wasn't really what caused the positive result-- it was good decision-making.

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Perhaps good decisions come as a result of hard work. I think everyone would agree that good decisions take effort. But most of us take the time to labor over the decisions we make. Matter of fact, some of us ponder every aspect of making the decisions, maybe even over-working the decisions we make-- and spend a lot more time making the decision than we should. So hard work alone is not the answer. This article offers a different perspective on the topic of decision-making, examining the cultural roots of the process and also looking closely at the impact of family values on decision making.

### **Become more successful**

The goal of this article is to help people become more successful in whatever they pursue. The ideas put forth are not new, but arguably they are assembled in a new, somewhat unique way. Some will say that the ideas presented are radical, and unconventional, and others will see them as common sense. Both views are insightful and correct. Those who want to challenge the new perspectives offered will find much to challenge and resist. Everyone will find the processes offered somewhat threatening at first, even though conceptually they are very straight forward. Most importantly, however, everyone that opens themselves to the ideas presented will find that before they know it, they will in fact be more successful in their efforts-- whatever they pursue.

### **Our Own Worst Enemy**

It has often been said that a person is his or her own worst enemy. Perhaps when we look back over a recent event trying to understand where we went wrong, we see that it was almost as though we worked against ourselves for no apparent reason, causing the failure. When we want success as bad as we do, why do we sometimes appear to sabotage ourselves? We don't, or at least most of us don't, intentionally or even subconsciously work against our success. We do it for a much simpler reason-- one that lies in our cultural past. But in order to appreciate this reason, we first need to discuss what success is.

### **What is success?**

What is success to you? People have different definitions of success. However, simply stated, success is achieving your goals and aspirations. Everybody wants to be successful at something. Some want to be successful in their vocation or business, others seek success in their personal lives, or a combination of personal and work. In pursuit of success, people often spend many hours each day working hard toward this goal. With that much effort,

you'd imagine more people would reach their dreams of success. People say it is very important to be able to retire in their golden years and yet according to the Social Security Administration, fewer than six percent of all Americans can truly afford to retire and keep or maintain their income lifestyle when they reach retirement age. Statistics show that almost all Americans (over 90%) arrive in their golden years with less than ten thousand dollars saved. There must be a reason for this lack of results.

Intelligence or lack of it isn't the reason. Many intelligent people with college degrees and/or high IQs fail to be successful in reaching their desired status. Just look around you. And yet people with ordinary intelligence-- or even less-- make it to their "success." It doesn't appear that knowledge about a new process or invention assures success either. There are countless examples of how opportunity was not seized and how success escaped these lucky people. With so many failing to be successful-- people of all levels of intelligence and education-- this can't be the reason.

This lack of success as related to the effort expended seems to cut across every social strata, every industry and vocation, in all walks of life! That should tell you that there is a flaw in the basic premise from which everyone begins their quest for success. So where do we all begin?

### **How were we trained?**

Literally almost everyone in the United States (and many other countries) received the same basic training that inhibits success! This training began with our parents, was continued in school and was reinforced in the workplace. No one did this intentionally to impede our being successful. It was just the way it was done, and for the most part is still being done. Culturally it was and is the norm (in the U.S. and around the world). And because it is still culturally the norm, if you try to change-- to be successful-- there are those who will see your effort as a threat. In other words, if you try to be successful there are those around you that will sabotage your effort-- because they too are culturally trained to pursue success the way everyone else has been taught-- even if it means they too must suffer. However, if you want success, and are willing to break the paradigm-- to think outside the box-- success can *easily* be yours. All you must do is understand a few basic rules, definitions and processes.

### **Rule Number One: Everyone can be successful if they become effective decision-makers.**

What must you do to accomplish rule #1?

Success depends on making the right decision at the right time. As we have all heard, we are each managers of our own destiny. It

is through the choices we make that we end up where we do. The key is in understanding that there is a difference between focusing on efficient versus effective decision making.

To begin our understanding we must focus on the difference between the two basic definitions of these words and their impact on you. Again, the words we are speaking of are *efficient* and *effective*. Some people feel that the words are synonyms-- that they mean the same thing. They do not. The difference between these two words is the success you've been looking for! For they determine where you place your effort and what you do with your energy.

The definitions given here are not exactly those found in Webster's' dictionary, but for our purposes they work best.

EFFICIENT - To do things right. . .

EFFECTIVE - To do the right things.

Which one of these two words were you trained for? Yes, we do do both of these. But which one describes your actions most often? Which one drives your daily activity? Your answer may surprise you.

### Efficient

From birth you trained yourself and were trained by others to be efficient! You learned as an infant how to get your diaper changed *quickly*, how to get food *quickly* when you were hungry and how to *quickly* be comforted when you were frightened. What was important was how rapidly you had your needs met or at least how quickly you were distracted from what was bothering you. In short, you became an efficiency expert in getting your needs met. Intuitively perhaps you knew that you would be fed SOMETIME-- that was a given (especially when you got a little older)-- what you wanted was to be fed now!

Your parents guided you along this path. They reinforced this behavior of focusing on how quickly needs were met. Consequently, your parents gave you and even tracked your efficiency ratings-- which they still recall today. For example, your parents can recall: You spoke your first words when you were X months old; you walked at age X months; and so on. Your parents took great pride in when you "did these things right" and to this day they can recite your personal statistics as related to the normal age for such things. You were either fast or slow: a true efficiency rating.

Your school teachers continued this effort at making you an efficiency expert. They awarded efficiency ratings for displaying your knowledge-- you received an "A", "B" and so on for how well you "did things right" -- reinforcing your focus on becoming an efficiency expert. The better you became at meeting these efficiency standards, the higher your grade-point-average (GPA)

became. You quickly learned what it would take to get the "A". Most of us can remember a time when we told our parents that our teacher was wrong about how to do something. Our parents then asked us "Do you want to be right or do you want the "A"? So in this case, we needed to do things right according to the *current teacher* to gain the efficiency rating we wanted. And with each new teacher we learned what that teacher wanted from us for us to receive the "A". This trend also continued in the work place.

At work your performance appraisal further reflects this continuing effort to insure that you "do things right." If you get a high enough appraisal (rating)-- according to your supervisor-- you are in line for a pay raise, promotion or some other merit status. Everything we do is measured for efficiency (often called productively). We don't want to waste time or steps. If we do loose efficiency it is a loss of productivity... and profits. This statement is generally holds true, but not always.

Just because someone is doing things right (in the least amount of time) does not mean that he or she is doing the right thing. Far from it. Nearly everyone can remember being directed to do a task-- whether it was at home, school or the workplace-- that even at the time they were told to do it, they knew it was wrong. Maybe it was not so much wrong as not right. They knew what needed to be done, but when they tried tell the one who ordered the task performed (i.e. their boss), they were told to "don't think, just do it"! And they did. "Just do" as directed-- regardless. This someone followed the directions, completed the task exactly as directed, knowing it was all for not. And once again a high efficiency rating was achieved-- the task was done in less time than the manager expected. Unfortunately, it was the wrong task, or done in the wrong way, and had to be done over again. We have all learned this lesson. Don't think outside the box. Stick with the rules, policies, training, traditions and most important-- be efficient. Obtain the result we are trained for: To be judged a highly efficient contributor-- a hard worker. That may work satisfactorily for you, at least to get to the next pay level, or to get in the good graces of your boss. But is that really success? I don't think so. A cliché often heard is that what we need is someone who works with his/her head, not just his/her muscles. This points out what is needed.

Real success comes from being effective in solving problems. Thinking outside the question of "how to" to answer the larger questions of "why" and "what is it that really needs to be done". It isn't easy looking at the bigger issue. We are all trained to focus on the how questions: How should it be done? How can the process be improved? How can we do it in less time? ...with fewer people or resources? Not should it be done at all. We are told that we shouldn't question our superiors and to just follow orders.

Have you ever noticed that once you or your group or team figure out what the problem is, you solve it quickly. But up until that point everyone seems caught up in the details. In business this can be equated to what is called the typical "Tuesday morning committee meeting" that has gone on for weeks, if not months. The committee was formed to solve a problem, but no two people in the group can initially agree (sometimes never agree) on what the real problem is.

For example, some group members see the problem as a morale problem, or as an employee tardiness problem, others see it as a productivity problem, others yet see it as a quality problem, others see lack of sales as the problem. What is important to remember about these observations is that they are coming from trained efficiency experts in their specific area of expertise, training or involvement. So in truth, the people are correct in their assessment to a certain extent, but only marginally. Naturally these diagnosis are going to identify efficiency problems that are within the scope of the activities of the people making them. . And in that light they are *correct*. The problem probably does involve all of the concepts and issues they pointed out. But there is more to the problem.

### **Rule Two: Efficiency does not necessarily mean effective**

If we focused on the problems noted above, we could work individually on the employee's morale, or tardiness, productivity or other areas. We could put together programs that seek to improve morale, punish tardiness, foster productivity or increase sales. But if the areas addressed are just symptoms of the real problem--perhaps poor quality of management or poor planning-- the impact of the effort aimed at fixing these problems will result in less than the desired results. **The band-aide approach.** And probably whatever positive results are obtained will be a short term in duration. Therefore, our expertise at being efficiency experts "clouds" our ability to *effectively resolve* the real problems our organization faces.

This tells us that being efficient is necessarily going make us effective in our job. In other words, efficient is independent of being effective. We can fix the wrong things all day long and it won't fix the real problem. If we fine an employee \$10 for being tardy, it might cause him or her to be on time. But if there is an underlying cause for that person to not want to be at work early -- such as a culture clash between that person and other employees or the work environment is demeaning -- the fact that that person is fined for being tardy might almost seem minor to that person. They would rather be fined \$10 than to have to be there. Their dread of coming to work is being manifested through their late arrival to work. What if the tardiness problem is company wide? Charging everyone who arrives late \$10 isn't the solution. Unless

management fixes the underlying problem, their solution will merely be a "band-aide" fix. These types of problems keep reappearing and continually need management's attention.

In this discussion, we see that by trying to fix the efficiency problems we aren't necessarily effective. Yes, efficiency is important. Yes, efficiency is part of the problem. But what we need is "to do the right things", to be effective in our decision making--to fix the right things.

A further example will help to show this relationship. Let's assume that you work in an office that works eight to five daily. It is four-thirty when you return to your office. You look around. Your workspace is a mess. You look at the clock and decide to use the last half-hour to clean up your space. For the next twenty-five minutes, you file papers, put binders where they belong, sharpen pencils and sort through the huge pile on your desk. When you are all done you notice that you still have five minutes left before it is time to go home. You pull out a note pad to jot down a "to do list" of things that need to be done tomorrow. You feel good as you walk out of the building. Your desk is clean; you are organized for tomorrow.

The next morning as you enter your workspace, the phone rings. The next thing you know you look at the clock and it is four-thirty. You glance at your desk. It is a mess again. Your shoulders slump a little. Then you sit down and begin to organize and clean up your desk. At the point where you are just about finished, you uncover a note pad. It contains your "to do list". It is with a sinking feeling in your gut that you realize that you didn't "do" any of the items on your list. You spent the whole day putting out "forest fires", putting "band-aides" on problems-- all in a reactive mode. In short, you didn't do any of the items that needed to be done.

***If you do the right things, you are,  
therefore, doing things right.***

### **Rule Three: Being Effective is also Efficient**

Being effective requires that you are also efficient. It can be said that efficient is *part of* being effective. If you are doing the right things, you are, therefore, also doing things right.

### **How can you tell the difference between Efficiency and Effectiveness?**

There are several ways you can tell the difference between efficiency issues and effectiveness issues. First, if you can

*measure* the issue, it is an efficiency issue. As I said before, we are all efficiency experts from birth. This means that generally when we see a problem we see it in measurable terms. Sales are down by 20%; production is down by 14%; scrape material expense is up 11%; absenteeism is up 13%. All of these are efficiency issues. Something is causing all of these results. In other words, something is causing sales to be down 20%, something is causing each of the other factors to be off!

We have clichés to describe what is going on. If we just treat an efficiency issue, we intuitively know that is what we are doing--- we say we are "putting a band-aide on the problem." In other words, if we treat the symptom of the problem but don't fix the underlying problem, the problem comes back... and we then have to treat the problem again and again. Therefore, to restate where we are, if we can measure the problem it is an efficiency issue, and if we can measure the problem it is a symptom of the problem, not the root problem.

Have you ever noticed that once your work team identifies what the problem is-- and everyone agrees on what the problem is-- that it isn't very long before you solve the problem. Most of the time is spent arguing about which efficiency issue is the problem-- maybe 90% of the time. The last 10% is spend fixing the problem. Just remember, if you can measure it, it is a symptom of the problem, not the root problem. . Imagine if you could eliminate most of the time spent focusing -- "spinning your wheels" on the problem symptoms and instead spend it solving real problems. There is a simple way to insure this happens.

#### **Rule Four: List all of the symptoms**

Being as you are an efficiency expert, you will find it fairly easy to identify most, if not all of the symptoms that surround the problem. This is the first step. Make a list of every symptom that you can think of that tells you there is a problem. In addition to those I mentioned before, the list may include: the moral is down (people are not happy); reports are being filed late; different departments aren't getting along like they used to. Symptoms can also be much more serious to the well-being of the company-- such as lack of repeat orders, the aging of accounts receivable has increased by 10 days, or profit margins are down by 8%. Whatever the symptoms are, list them all. Once you have this list, you have a very powerful tool in your hands. Think of the list as a *complete* picture of the problem. Stated in another way, it is the *domain* (or shows the boundary) of the problem, meaning that that list is the *whole* problem. If we can think of one concept that covers all of the points mentioned in our list-- and fix it-- all of the symptoms on the list will generally go away!! That is leveraging you effort!

By formulating this single issue we are forcing ourselves to back away from the efficiency issues and look at the broader picture: being effective. Again, we have clichés that describe this situation-- "we can't see the forest for the trees" or we are "down in the trenches". The way to get out of the "trenches" is easy.

**Rule Five: Focus on one issue--**

*Write a simple sentence and phrase it as a question*

The issue statement is written as a question because a question demands an answer. It must be a simple sentence so that we are only trying to fix one issue at a time. It can not have any commas, or "and" or other modifiers. It must be one concept. There may be many issues that need our attention, but we want to fix one underlying problem at a time. Most organizations don't have too many "root" problems.

The question you write should be broad enough, as was stated before, that it covers all of your symptoms. That is to say that the question should cover-- be inclusive conceptually-- of all the symptoms you put on your list and "form an umbrella covering those ideas". If any one of the symptoms you listed isn't "covered" by your question, then you don't have the right question or the symptom in question is not relevant.

Chances are that the first question you form won't be the final question you end up with. This is a reiterative process. The more we delve into the analysis, the more closely we can define what the root problem is and isn't. Many times the first question you pose is still very close to the problem and therefore does not address all of the symptoms. This process makes you separate yourself-- distance yourself-- from the problem so that you can see all sides of the problem set.

Have you ever noticed that once you and your workers identify what the problem facing you is-- you are able to quickly fix it! It is just getting to the agreement on what the problem is that takes the time. Once you get good at this process, you will be much quicker at defining what the problem is.

Once you have formed your first issue statement, the next step is to understand the environment surrounding the problem. To do this we use a Situation Analysis.

**Rule Six: Perform a Situation Analysis (SWOTT)**

Think of a situation analysis as if you were taking a picture of the problem situation. You would step back away from the problem, making sure everything important is in your picture frame. Then you would focus on the problem-- the problem situation and click the shutter. In that instant you would be recording everything in your field of view-- important things,

unimportant things and everything else. What is important is that everything that is part of the problem be noted. The way we do that is fairly straight forward.

To understand the situation we look at all sides of the issue. We look at the STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES, THREATS AND TRENDS related to the situation and label them as such. The basic rule is that you can only call something only one name. In other words, if you list something as a strength it can not also be listed as an opportunity. Where ever it fits "best" is where you place it. It may have baggage that goes along with it-- so that even though you call it a strength, you feel a need to clarify your reasoning-- it still only goes under one label (strength).

Strengths are favorable situations/conditions that we can leverage in our favor. These are mainly internal to our situation

Weaknesses are situations/conditions that are unfavorable that impede the accomplishment of the actions we set out to achieve.

Opportunities, although mainly external to our situation, are situations/conditions that offer us the chance to improve.

Threats are situations beyond your (management's) control. It is important to note that if you define your problem as a departmental problem, the Threats could be *anywhere outside* of your department or your sphere of control. A key point to remember is that Threats, by definition, are outside of your direct control. Government regulations, competition and changes in technology within the industry are a few examples of Threats.

Trends are perhaps the most important element in performing your situation analysis because they bring the element of time into the picture. With time comes change. And any change in the environment is what we must contend with and proactively manage. One way to think of Trends is to use the engineering and math term of "slope". Something either has a positive, negative or static slope. So things are either getting better, getting worse or is about the same. Usually, however, it is the changes that cause us the problems. If they were the same as they used to be we would be happy. When something changes it usually stays the way it changed to until something causes it to change again. So Trends are very important because businesses tend to be very dynamic as the world changes rapidly around them.

*What if everything is all positive or all negative, but not somewhat balanced?*

If your SWOTT ends up with everything being all Strengths and Opportunities and does not include Weaknesses and Threats, your issue statement is too narrow. The opposite is also true-- if you end up with only Weaknesses and Threats, again, your issue statement is too narrow. In either case, re-work your issue statement making it broader. There are always pros and cons to any situation-- if you are looking at it objectively. By stepping further away from the problem-- to perhaps a slightly more general statement of the problem-- you will be able to see all sides of the problem clearer.

This "going broader" with your issue statement is not easy. Remember, our training as an efficiency expert is to focus in on problem-- not to back away and see the whole problem. So it may take several attempts before you get the scope you want in your issue statement.

*What if everything seems to be both positive and negative?*

In this case, your issue statement is too distant-- too removed-- from the problem. You need a tighter focus. So narrow your issue until you have a relatively balanced SWOTT. This does not mean that you will have an equal number, necessarily, but that you have a "relatively balance view of the situation".

The model assumes that in every situation that there are opposing forces. That is the situation that created the problem in the first place. These forces are out of balance. Your task is to understand all of the factors involved.

*Listing your key points under the various SWOTT headings.*

In order to make the process manageable, list your key points as bullets under your chosen heading-- such as:

#### STRENGTHS

- Strong corporate management team
- Excellent corporate reputation

Each bullet should be clear and concise and it must relate to the issue statement you have chosen. And as was stated before, each bullet must be conceptually covered by the issue statement you have presented. You could not have an issue that focuses on the problems in your billing department and state the bulleted items shown above. If they are relevant to the problem as you see it, then you must redo your issue statement to be inclusive of the items bulleted. They forces you widen or narrow the problem set to the correct size. Notice also, that this process is reiterative. You will undoubtedly think of items to bullet that are important that cause you to rethink your issue. Then you re-think and re-state your issue

statement and go through the SWOTT process again and perhaps again-- as you think through the problem and identify key concepts.

*List the bulleted concept only once*

There are some very important reasons to list a concept only once. The two most important reasons are to reduce prejudice and to minimize personal bias. How many different ways can you state something? In many cases the answer is: many ways. It can be stated as a strength, weakness and so on. This rule makes you choose the best location to place the concept. All of the concept's baggage can go along with it as it is posted in the strength section-- if that is where you choose to post it.

Discuss why you posted the concepts in a section (such as Strengths) in paragraph form after all of the bullets. Your task is to explain why each bullet relates to your chosen issue statement. You can choose to offer an explanation in general terms about all the strengths, or in specific terms about each bullet you have listed. The choice is yours, however, clearness of logic is of most importance.

*Choosing possible courses of action: Alternatives*

Your challenge is to use your understanding of the Situation-- as you have detailed in your SWOTT-- to do three tasks:

- *Maximize your Strengths and Opportunities*
- *Minimize your Weaknesses and Threats*
- *Consider the Trends*

If you do these tasks, you will be optimizing the utilization of all of your resources, and thereby you will not only be efficient, but effective as you pursue your course of action.

*The Status Quo alternative*

The Status Quo is always one alternative you must consider. Because if you don't make your recommendation for change, surely the organization is going to keep doing things the same. There is another, perhaps more important reason to consider this as an option-- organizations resist changing. There is a certain inertia with most organizations that prohibits the occurrence of change. We have all heard the expression "that's not the way we do it here" or "we've been successful for 50 years doing it this way, why

should we change now?" Therefore, the Status Quo really is an alternative we must consider.

### *Change "something" alternative*

This alternative assumes you have found something or some way that may be a better fit with your Situation. There are usually three to five possible alternatives that should be examined to see how well they fit with the Situation you have described. Regardless of the number of alternative solutions you examine, you discuss the one that "fits best" with your Situation last.

### **Recommendation**

The alternative that "fits best" with the Situation variables (SWOTT bullets) is your recommended course of action. In fact, it is the answer to the *Issue Statement* formed at the beginning of this process.

In order for this to be the recommended course of action, it must maximize the Strengths and Opportunities that lay within the Situation, and it must minimize the Weaknesses and Threats as best we can. And it must also consider the current Trends that can possibly impact our Situation. Notice I didn't say that it must eliminate the Weaknesses or Threats. Many times the best we can hope for is to minimize the impact of unfavorable factors in our situation. But by identifying these unfavorable factors, we can hopefully "work around them" and go on our way.

### *Does the recommended solution always work?*

The whole point of this model is to give you a decision making tool that *considers* everything we know about a given situation. If we fail to identify some major factor or the situation changes and we don't accommodate the changes-- and update our Situation (SWOTT)-- then the process won't necessarily give you the best solution to your stated problem (your Issue Statement). But otherwise, the solution offered is the best one-- given our understanding.

### *Is it possible that there is a better solution to my problem?*

Two people can look at the same data and interpret it differently. This model is not an exact scientific devise. It is a crafting tool that is intended to assist you in taking qualitative information (or quantitative information) and make sound decisions. Several people could examine the same situation using this model and come up with different recommendations, depending on how they interpret the information-- and all of the recommendations may be

valid. In other words, all of the solutions may work. Some may work better than others, but if they all considered the factors listed in the SWOTT, they all *should* work. If their logic is faulty or if they allow personal prejudice to sway them toward a course of action, then the recommendation may not prove successful.

*What if changes do occur in the Situation before we have a chance to act on our analysis?*

The process is intended to be reiterative. It is a living solution to the stated problem. Therefore, if the situation changes, simply start at the top of the process and add or delete concepts as they currently apply.

### **Success comes from decisive action**

All of the best analysis is wasted if the recommended course of action is not put into action. It takes confidence in your analysis to do what your recommendation states. Remember, you have analyzed everything known about the problem. At this point, nobody except you has put a microscope to the situation the way you just have. You considered everything you could. Be confident. It will work. And if you see other factors emerge as you start your implementation, plug them into your SWOTT and see if you need to adapt these issues. If so-- change how you plan on solving the problem. IT IS A LIVING DOCUMENT.

### **Summary & Conclusions**

This model is intended to help decision-makers focus on the root problems facing their organizations. The steps toward solving the organization's problems were clearly delineated. Obviously, an organization does not have just one problem. But as was discussed in the model, the process can be repeated as problematic symptoms emerge, What is not shown or described is the difficulty and frustration people have in changing their rational view of the world-- changing from being an efficiency expert to becoming and effectiveness expert. This change generally occurs slowly until finally the view is somehow different. The organization looks different. The events of the organization are now viewed with a slight distance separating the effectiveness expert from the symptoms and the daily turmoil. Band-Aid approaches are used much less often and productive use of resources increases. As a final result, the organization becomes focused on issues of greatest importance.

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