

When making the “right” decision isn’t enough

One of the pressures faced by pastors, denominational leaders and local church leadership teams, stems from the need to make decisions which Sir Humphrey of *Yes Minister* fame could only describe as “courageous”. We seek God’s wisdom through prayer, receive advice from experts and carefully weigh up the options. Finally we bite the bullet and make the best choice we can under the circumstances. We believe we’ve made the “right” decision, but is that where our responsibility ends?

Some decisions send out ripples. Changing the colour of the church foyer is a ripple decision. A small number of people will be upset for a short period of time, but they will get over it and life will go on. Some decisions send out small waves. Others are like a tsunami whose waves wreak distress and suffering in the lives of many. Standing down the senior pastor is a tsunami decision. So too is a resolution to sell the church building and relocate. Elderly people who have worshipped in this building for decades may feel hurt, disillusioned and abandoned. These may be sound decisions, but they bring pain and sorrow to the lives of people who are much loved by God.

Making a good decision is necessary but not sufficient, because decisions have consequences. Making a good decision may fulfill the greatest commandment in the law. Loving God “with all your heart” does mean putting God first. But Jesus also said “And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” Decisions have consequences in the lives of people, and people matter to God. A good decision needs to be accompanied by a social impact study which asks the question “Who is going to be affected by the decisions we have made, and how can we care for them?” This is what happened after the Jerusalem Council. The apostles didn’t simply convey their decision by a letter. Instead the letter was accompanied by Paul and Barnabas and two others who “said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers”.

A responsible decision is a wise decision clothed in love and grace. In a fallen world it doesn’t mean that nobody will be hurt. But it does mean that every effort will be made to minimize hurt, and to care for those who are hurting. This care starts in the decision making process and continues on beyond the presentation of the decision. The following questions may provide a useful starting point in this process.

Caring for people in the decision making process

1. Have appropriate people been involved in the decision making process?

When a new system is being introduced or an existing protocol changed, it is vital to include end users in the decision making process. Not only will they provide valuable suggestions, it is more likely that they will own the decision themselves and be less likely to oppose its introduction.

2. Is it possible to conduct a trial before taking a final decision?

Sometimes it is possible to trial an innovation before a final decision to adopt the change. This provides several advantages. It allows the proposal to be fine tuned. It gives people more time to adjust to change. Those who initially oppose the proposal may be won over when they observe that it can work in practice.

3. Have we sounded out a small representative group regarding this decision?

Decision makers cannot necessarily predict the impact of their actions. Men may not know how a particular resolution will affect women. A young pastor may be unaware of the real situation of the elderly. Young people may be adversely affected by a decision into which they have had no input. For these reasons it may be beneficial to run a decision past a representative group before releasing it publicly. This may allow the decision to be modified, or it may change the way it is presented. It will also help to determine those people who will need to be cared for.

Caring for people in the presentation of the decision

1. *Have we carefully thought through the timing of announcing the decision?*

It may be that a small number of key players need to hear the decision some time before a public announcement. For example if an establishment is to be closed down, the staff need to hear directly from their supervisors rather than through a public announcement. Sometimes there are other events/situations which need to be taken into account. For example it would be unwise to announce a decision to decrease the mission budget on the morning a church member is welcomed back from the mission field.

2. *Have we carefully considered the way we will present this decision?*

Often the acceptance of a decision depends on the degree of respect held for the decision makers. Decisions are generally received well from those who have modeled wisdom, humility, prayerfulness and integrity over a long period of time.

A decision is usually better received if people understand the steps taken in coming to a conclusion. Confidence in the decision making process makes acceptance of the outcome more likely. Outline the steps which were taken to gather information – prayer, seeking advice, biblical principles etc.

Sometimes decision makers have to make a choice between alternatives which appear equally valid. People feel affirmed if they know that their personal preference has been carefully considered. Explain the reasons for coming to a final conclusion but acknowledge the difficulty of making this choice.

The choice of who presents a decision is important. Choose people who are respected and have good communication skills. Harmony is best maintained by those skilled in the art of gentle answers. To demonstrate that the decision is a group one it may help to have several leaders take part in the presentation.

Acknowledge the hurt which a decision will cause to some and express genuine regret. Allow time for questions and comments – give people permission to express their feelings. Respect comments and do not retaliate even if attacked.

Caring for people after the decision is presented

1. *Have we made a list of those who are likely to feel hurt/grief as a result of this decision?*

The decision making group will probably be able to come up with many names. The representative group involved in the decision making process may be able to add to the list. If possible make the list up over several days. It is likely that you will add further names as you observe people's response to the decision.

2. *Have we planned a way of caring for those people who will feel hurt/grief as a result of our decision?*

Sometimes hurting people need a forum to express their pain and know that they are heard by someone who cares. This may be appropriate in a group or it might need to happen individually. Grieving people need to know that the decision makers regret the hurt their decision has caused. Caring is costly in terms of time and resources, but it is worth it.