

A short course in decision making

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooey, AS

How do you turn around a company with a \$285 million loss in fiscal 1997, to post \$89 million in profits for the 1st 6 months of 1998? **By focusing, teaching and applying the basics of business in making and then implementing decisions that truly served the company and their customers.** Creative decisions that tackled real problems that were strangling Bay Networks and their staff of 6000. I read an article in Fast Company that profiled David House and wanted to share his views and actions that produced this result.

Let's review some of the fundamentals of business and service, as discussed by CEO David House, of Canadian Telecommunications giant Nortel, who led the change in attitudes.

"People are hungry for ideas and direction. There are no winners on a losing team and no losers on a winning team." Says David House. **"Our decisions aren't perfect. But, it wasn't important to get things perfect. It was important to get things done."**

And get things done he did! House was able to free up resources and personnel by cutting thru the red tape and bureaucracy that 'had' bogged down and overloaded the engineering focus on new products -far too many to support, produce or ship. This in itself made big changes in the focus and function of the company. Can you do that in your company? Why not?

David House sought to create an 'instant' culture to help focus on the fundamentals of business. "How do you make decisions? How do you disagree openly? And how do you focus on what's important?" David defined culture as, **"What people fall back on when there are no instructions. It gives you rules for when there are no rules, and provides a common language for moving forward."** Training our staff provides this culture to fall back on.

To do that, David personally created and taught 4 programs to teach the principles and practices he'd learned over the past 22 years at Intel. His courses focused on helping his staff set priorities, allocate resources and get things done. He personally taught Bay Network's management team. They were challenged to personally pass on this information by teaching the programs to their 6000 staff. Their results reflected his wise decision to focus on the basics of business - taking care of the customers.

His **"Decision Making"** course focused on making good decisions - that were informed, timely, aligned with the companies policies and goals, and scaled to fit the scope and resources of the company. Do you find yourself bogged down in the decision process when you should be moving into the action process?

His **"Straight Talk"** program provided a direct, timely way to resolve conflict. This could be critical to your ability to get things done by working effectively with your teammates and management.

He also did a program on "**Managing for Results**" and another of "**Effective Meetings**". I'd think, based on my past experience, both of these would prove invaluable to any team or company wanting to effectively use their time or service their clientele.

Here are a few notes on David's take on "Decision Making" for your consideration.

- **"Wait until the last minute - but not a minute later"**

David feels the best decisions are the just-in-time decisions that factor in changing situations and market shifts. But don't use this model as an excuse to make decisions or procrastinate. Keep doing your homework, and keep your research and materials current.

He suggests making the decision as late as possible - but make it in time before you have to take action. A fine line between success and missing the wave.

- **"Don't be afraid to argue"**

"As long as conflict is resolved quickly," says David; "It's good for an organization." Real leaders deal with conflict head on, taking individual feeling seriously, but moving on past those individual feelings. David suggests one way to effectively move through this process is to agree on "What the question is?" Agree on the wording and make sure it's recorded in writing so everyone can refer to it during the process. Unproductive disagreements often revolve around divergent ideas on "what is" actually being decided.

- **"Make the RIGHT decision, not the best decision"**

"People can spend months debating the 'best' decision," shares David, "without actually arriving at 'any' decision." Each time you make a decision, you take a risk. But risk is a fundamental part of progress and business survival. Life is too short. In every problem or path chosen, 8 out of 10 decisions will work to some degree. Choose one and get going.

- **"Disagree - and then commit."**

David teaches, "Not everyone gets a chance to decide, but everyone should have a chance to be heard." He says the most vigorous debates often yield the most productive, creative thinking. He goes further to state he feels, "fully supporting decisions that have been properly made is a condition of employment." A firm stand, and one that bears serious consideration on both parts of the equation: the consultative, creative process of making the decision; and the action process of implementing it by the team.

These lessons from David House can have an impact on the way we live and do business:

- **In how we value and effectively use our time personally and professionally.**

Being able to effectively focus on the question at hand, and move into deciding and implementing a plan of action might spell the difference between success and failure. It might also result in freedom to fully use our time, and in creating time to spend with the important people in our life.

- **In how we service our clientele and continue to position ourselves to meet and exceed their changing needs in an increasingly global market.**

Being able to make the decisions that affect how we do business, and what we offer to our current and prospective clients is the touchstone of business survival and growth.

- **In how we view and tackle the problems and challenges in our lives and businesses.**

In business and life, we face challenges and confront problems and obstacles requiring choices and actions based on those choices. Being able to cut through the "analysis paralysis" could be the secret to a fulfilled life and a productive business career.

Lessons like these from David House, who faced challenges I hope you never face, can be very effective if properly anchored and applied. I would challenge you to digest this information, and see where it applies to you, your clients, and your company personally.

- How can you change the ways you and your staff make decisions?
- How can you make changes that affect the way you respond to your clients and their needs?
- How can you make changes that empower and equip your staff to make decisions quickly and fairly on site and in front of your clients?
- How can you make changes to encourage feedback and find out about problems before they become business killers?
- How can you apply this business based technique to 'real-life' situations or at home?

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