

Decisive Problem Solving: A Key Leadership Practice

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Decisive problem solving is integral to effective leadership. This is an important competency for leaders and policy makers to have when facing problematic situations, challenges and issues. After considering some relevant literature, a practical definition of decisive problem solving is offered and a practice-oriented framework is presented. Key skill components of effective decisive problem solving are integrated in this framework. The application value and implications of the approach for practicing, researching and teaching leadership decisive problem solving are offered; and some challenges are discussed. This article focuses on the practical aspects of decisive problem solving with the intent of enhancing leaders' effectiveness in this critical practice area.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations and their stakeholders are the beneficiaries when leaders display decisive problem solving. A leader's competence in decisively solving problems helps drive leadership effectiveness and organizational success. The behavioral practice of decisive problem solving is a key area for managerial leaders to competently execute in their action roles as an influencer of people and situations (Kerns & Ko, 2014).¹ Influence skills, including decisive problem solving, are "people skills" that cut across the key action roles that a leader needs to competently perform. Decisive problem solving is involved in, for example, setting a clear strategic direction, formulating policies, focusing people on relevant and important areas of performance, and coordinating and linking resources, especially key stakeholders.

The literature offers many models for problem-solving and decision making (Robbins & Judge, 2016; Buchanan & O'Connell, 2006). In most of these formulations the idea of targeting problem areas and reaching a decision about what to do are present (Akdere, 2011; Sanders, 1999). Frequently, the topic of problem solving and decision making are treated separately using more linear rational approaches (Bazerman & Moore, 2008; Kahneman, 2003). However, in practice, problem solving, decision making and decisiveness interact. With this in mind, the current article focuses on this interaction in defining decisive problem solving.

Decisive problem solving is operationally defined in this article as reaching a desired outcome using the appropriate amount of quality information which is transferred to actionable knowledge and plans of action within a reasonable timeframe. This definition is supported by a practice-oriented framework developed to help practitioners address important problematic situations, challenges and issues. The definition underscores the need for effective leaders to have a track record of successfully achieving targeted results/desired outcomes based on quality information. Decisiveness comes into play when the informed decision is made within an agreed upon time period or otherwise reasonably expected

timeframe. In short, the decisive problem-solving leader generally makes good decisions that are based on the right amount of quality information which is converted to actionable knowledge and plans of action within reasonable periods of time.

More broadly the concept of managerial performance competencies has been extensively reviewed and numerous taxonomies have been published. These indexes have all included the managerial leader practice of decision making and problem solving (Tett, Guterman, Bleier & Murphy, 2000; Yulk, 2012; Kerns & Ko, 2014). While the labels and language used to refer to decision making and problem solving practices studied within these taxonomies vary, the underscoring of leadership decisive problem-solving as a key people-oriented influence practice area is consistent across these more academically oriented studies.

Applied research has also highlighted the importance of decisive problem-solving skills to enhancing leadership effectiveness. For example, Levesque and Walker (2007) report on how decision making, in particular, impacts organizational innovation. Tan and Shen (2000) underscore how vital decision making processes are in making strategic decisions. Decisive problem-solving skills are important to organizational processes and outcomes and impact individuals, groups and organizations across functional work areas (Akdere, 2011).

The extant applied business and economic literature addresses a variety of important areas relating to decision making and problem solving. Larson (2014), for example, offers an extensive review of psychological pricing principles that relate to leader and policy makers' decision making. This work extends the topic of pricing decisions beyond traditional economic models as a way of potentially enhancing performance. Interestingly, Cobb (2016) connects an executive's background and discipline orientation to how decision making takes place relating to the structuring of employment relationships. Parker and Fogarty (2012) explore how auditor perceptual biases relate to the process of acquiring and evaluating evidence when making decisions during the auditing process. Heathcote, Perri, and Violante (2010) examine the impact public policy decision making has on income inequality at a societal level.

In addition, ethical judgments have been analyzed to examine their impact on employee behavior relating to making financial decisions (Abdullah, Sulong & Said, 2014). In the field of information technology, IT leaders have been found to display key competencies that include leadership and risk management which relates to decision making and problem solving (Chun, Griffy-Brown & Koepfel, 2014). The relationship of managerial leadership uncertainty (Laisasikorn & Rompho, 2014) as well as the potential connection of decision making to significant strategic considerations relating to setbacks in the financial services sector are areas of interest also being explored in the applied literature (Gilbert, 2014).

A leader can benefit by having a practice-oriented framework and approach to decisive problem-solving. The framework and associated operational definition of decisive problem-solving offered in this article support managerial leaders in their efforts to solve problems and make decisions. In concert with calls for theory and conceptualization in behavioral science to include facts and observations gleaned from the real-world of practice, the author has developed an approach to enhance decisive problem-solving (Locke, 2007; Locke & Cooper, 2000). While innumerable books, articles, seminars, classes and coaching proliferate focusing on improvement of any number of different components of problem-solving and decision making, there is little available that integrates key components of decisive problem-solving into one integrated set of specific actions to positively impact decisive problem-solving among leaders in organizational settings. The intent of this article is to offer one integrated practice-oriented framework for decisive problem solving, to help seasoned professionals and emerging leaders enhance their decisive problem solving effectiveness, and to serve as a catalyst for teachers and applied researchers to help those they serve become decisive problem-solvers.

PRACTICE – ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

Substantial opportunities exist for practitioners, researchers and teachers to utilize knowledge about problem-solving, decision making and decisiveness. The framework offered here applies this knowledge

by building upon observations and experience in working with a broad range of managerial leaders across diverse settings.² Based on fieldwork, applied research and consulting, together with relevant literature reviews, over the past 30 years the author has made the following observations about decisive problem-solving applied to organizational leaders:

1. Problem-solving and decision making is pervasive in workplace settings (Mintzberg, 2013; Buchanan & O'Connor, 2006; Yates, 2003).
2. There are no widely accepted, theoretical models/frameworks that fully delineate and integrate the behavioral actions that are fundamental to the practice of decisive problem-solving, leaving the practitioner without integrated evidence-based, practical guidance.
3. The practice of leader decisive problem-solving is a dynamic process which includes:
 - Asking the right questions (Rausch, 2003).
 - Focusing on what is important and what you can influence (Kerns, 2008).
 - Balancing challenges with resources for high performance with high well-being (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2014; Swenson, Rhoads & Whitlark, 2014; Sheard & Kakabadse, 2007; Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012).
 - Converting information to knowledge based plans of action with appropriate speed (Donate & Sanchez de Pablo, 2015; Kownatzki, Walter, Floyd & Lechner, 2013).
 - Striving to increase predictability/certainty and agreement among key stakeholders in the decision making process (Stacey, 1996).
 - Aligning and actively engaging others purposefully and meaningfully (Labovitz & Rosansky, 2012; Kerns, 2013; Kerns, 2014).
 - Evaluating, recognizing successes as well as setbacks, and adapting to change are essential (Kerns, 2015; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006; Worley, Williams & Lawler, 2014).
4. While many of the skills associated with the concept of decisive problem-solving have been studied separately, in practice they are highly interactive and need to be considered in a more integrated and dynamic way.
5. Decisive problem-solving is considered a key managerial leadership practice contained within a broader sphere of interpersonal influence competency (Kerns & Ko, 2014).
6. The perception of a leader's decisiveness is connected to the amount of time taken to make a decision and to the appropriate quantity of quality information used in making a decision. (Roets & Van Hiel, 2007; Ulrich, 2015).
7. Striving for perfection and excessive conscientiousness as well as other behavioral dimensions on which individual leaders differ can impede the process of decisive problem solving (Kerns, 2015; Ben-Shahar, 2009; Santos, Ferreira & Goncalves, 2014; Weissman, 1976; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).
8. Organizational leaders can better index how well they are doing in practicing decisive problem-solving by using practical assessment tools to index their effectiveness (Kerns, 2015).
9. Situational context and time perspectives are important influences on the decisive problem solving process (Kerns, 2015; Kerns, 2012; Westaby, Probst & Lee, 2010).

Based on the above observations and study of the topic of decisive problem-solving and leadership, with the perspectives of an organizational development consultant, industrial-organizational psychologist, business professor/scholar and practitioner who has served on the workplace firing line, over the years the author has developed an integrated framework to help emerging and seasoned managerial leaders enhance their competency as decisive problem-solvers.³ This framework, depicted below in Figure 1, has been applied in many settings including work organizations, executive education classrooms and applied research projects. The model is practitioner friendly and conceptually tied to relevant literature relating to the study of leadership, decision making, problem solving, decisiveness, and interpersonal influence.

This proven framework integrates seven key components of decisive problem-solving to more fully examine the dynamics relating to the practice: questioning, transferring information to actionable knowledge, framing solutions, balancing resources, increasing clarity and agreement, aligning and

engaging, and evaluating, recognizing, and adapting. Much has been written about each of these components separately; however, all of the components are integral. Decisive problem solving is unlikely to be effective if a leader does not focus on all of the components in his or her decision making; the components need to be integrated into one coherent framework. The framework presented in Figure 1 addresses the need for a holistic, integrated, practical approach to decisive problem-solving.

FIGURE 1
PRACTICE-ORIENTED DECISIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING FRAMEWORK

Questioning and Gathering Information	→	Transferring, Prioritizing and Targeting	→	Framing Solutions, Action Planning and Timeframe Setting	→	Balancing Resources	→	Increasing Clarity and Agreement	→	Aligning and Engaging	→	Evaluating, Recognizing and Adapting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking the right questions to key stakeholders. • Defining the problem/issue context/spheres of influence. • Skillfully questioning. • Effectively listening. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferring quality information to actionable knowledge. • Targeting the real problem, • Focusing on what is most important. • Focusing on what you can influence. • Establishing desired outcomes. • Setting priorities. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulating/ Framing solutions to solve problem/ issue. • Developing targeted action plans. • Setting realistic timeframe(s) to make decisions and execute plans of actions to achieve desired results. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying key challenges/ demands • Identifying resources. • Striving to balance demands with resources. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Striving to increase certainty and clarity among key stakeholders. • Striving to increase the level of agreement among key stakeholders. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aligning key stakeholders with action plans, timeframes and desired results. • Managing engagement among key stakeholders in executing action plans and achieving desired results within expected time period. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review results (process and outcome). • Savor success. • Confront and learn from setbacks. • Adapt/make changes to optimize desired outcomes

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In the framework, the seven components are presented in the sequential order; however, the components are inter-related and in practice are dynamic and interactive. The discussion below describes the components and the interplay among them.

Component I: Questioning and Gathering Information

The first component of the framework focuses on the leader’s behavioral skills in questioning and listening in order to gather information to help define the real problem/issue being faced. This involves the leader asking the right key stakeholders the right questions that will shed light on the underlying dynamics and connect with the right spheres of influence relating to the problem area. It is helpful to

consider specific elements of situational context or spheres of influence when formulating questions and select which key stakeholders to engage in the issues. The quality of the key stakeholders' thoughtful consideration and resourcefulness in offering information will greatly determine the quality of information brought to the problem solving situation. Four situational context areas to review for decisive problem solving questioning include (Kerns, 2015):

- Core Identity. For example, to what extent does the problem/issue connect with our core purpose, values and/or guiding principles as an organization?
- Internal Environment. For example, to what extent does the problem/issue reside inside of our organization's operations? (Specific areas to target in questioning in this sphere of influence include strategic direction, culture, cross-functional linkages, human capital and structure/systems/processes.)
- Transactional Environment. For example, to what extent does the problem/issue center around our transactions with customers, suppliers, competitors, and/or other stakeholders in close contact with our organization?
- Extended External Environment. For example, to what extent does the problem/issue relate to such external domains as laws/regulations, technological innovation, economy, demographic changes, etc.?

Equally important is for the leader to listen to key stakeholder answers to gain a better understanding of the perceptions and perspective held by those being questioned. Gathering information and gaining a fuller understanding on topics connected to situational context or spheres of influence helps the leader better define problems and issues. For example, effective targeted questioning combined with good listening skills can help determine whether an issue/problem is associated with an organization's internal operating environment and/or with the transactional sphere of influence as previously defined.

It is also important for a leader to consider the time perspective being used in his/her questioning (Ulrich, 2015). Asking questions and gathering information using a balanced time perspective is desirable. Kerns (2012) indicates that time perspective may help enhance performance and well-being in organizational settings. A leader's orientation – toward the past, present, and/or future – affects his or her preferences and performance and likely influences the type of questions he or she presents to key stakeholders. With this in mind, leaders can benefit by asking questions which connect to the past, present and future. By doing this, a more comprehensive perspective can be brought to the problem area under consideration. We can, indeed, learn from past successes and setbacks, benefit from exploring current circumstances and project the possibilities for the future.

Component II: Transferring, Prioritizing and Targeting

The information gathered through skillful questioning and listening needs to be transferred into actionable knowledge, prioritized and targeted on the real problem. This process is advanced when the leader can focus on what is most important regarding the circumstances surrounding the problem and help others to do the same. It is equally important for the leader to identify areas for potential action planning that he or she as well as other key stakeholders most influence. For example, a CEO likely has more influence over changing his or her strategic direction than attempting to influence extended external environment factors such as the economy and interest rates.

The skill of finding the intersection of high importance and high influence when transferring information to actionable knowledge, prioritizing and targeting areas to address is important. This strategy helps focus attention on the things that really matter. It also helps set the stage for considering solutions, targeted action planning and timeframe setting to address the problem situation. Leaders who are able to focus on what is most important and what they can most influence advance their decisive problem solving skills.

Component III: Framing Solutions, Action Planning and Timeframe Setting

This component addresses what the desired outcome will look like, and how and when these results are expected to be achieved. It is in this phase of the framework where the quality information gleaned in Component I and transferred into actionable knowledge in Component II is brought to bear to formulate solutions and action plans in order to solve the problems being faced. At this point in the process, expected resolution dates are established or reasonable time frameworks for reaching the desired outcome(s) are set.

This component relates to three critical dimensions associated with decisive problem solving. First, the framing of effective solutions depends on the quality of information gathered in an appropriate quantity (Component I). Second, solutions and associated action plans need to focus on what is most important and what can be most influenced by the leader and key stakeholders as was also indicated under Component II. Third, decisive problem solvers achieve the desired outcome within a reasonable and/or specified timeframe. Taken together these three dimensions, (quality information, actionable knowledge and time, along with achieving the desired outcome) are integral to the operational definition of decisive problem solving offered in this article.

Component IV: Balancing Resources

Closely connected to action planning is the process of considering what resources will be needed, and at what levels, to achieve the desired outcome. Component III addressed three critical resources as previously noted i.e. information, actionable knowledge, and time. Three other important resources are people, money and capital assets.

It is essential for the leader to effectively balance the challenges/demands faced in addressing the problem with the resources available, especially relating to people. This is particularly important since performance, well-being and engagement at work demand that individuals and groups have the right balance between the challenge they are presented with and the resource pool that they have to address these demands (Kerns, 2014; Sheard & Kakabadse, 2007; Bakker, et al, 2014).

Component V: Increasing Clarity and Agreement

In route to reaching desired outcomes, decisive problem solving leaders are able to increase the level of certainty and agreement among key stakeholders. The level of certainty about what is going on in the problem situation and how to proceed becomes clearer as the leader progresses through components I through V in the framework. Effective questioning, and focusing on what is important and can be influenced, helps to frame solutions, and action plans and timeframes which guide the balancing of challenges/demands with the available resources.

Along with increased clarity, enhancing the level of agreement among key stakeholders around defining the problem and how to proceed to resolution are important. The decisive problem solver, if needed, is able to help key stakeholders move from a confused/unclear state to a more simplified/clear understanding of the problem situation (Stacey, 1996). As the process of decisively solving problems, issues, and challenges unfolds, the effective leader facilitates increased agreement and certainty among key stakeholders to a level that moves the problematic situation toward achieving the desired outcome.

Component VI: Aligning and Engaging

With clarity and agreement among key stakeholders at sufficient strength regarding the desired outcome action plan and timeframe, there needs to be alignment and active engagement among individuals and groups who will be responsible for execution. Alignment can be especially challenging when linkages of internal cross functional groups and stakeholders who are outside of the internal environment of an organization are required (Dutta, 2012; Labovitz & Rosansky, 2012). The managerial leader wanting to enhance alignments and foster engagement is encouraged to consider taking the following actions (Kerns, 2014):

- Model key engagement behaviors such as positive energy and dedication.
- Show interest in key stakeholders.

- Manage work and job demands while recognizing and optimizing personal and job related resources.
- Encourage matching skill levels with important and relevant challenges associated with solving the problem situation.
- Align individuals, groups and the organization on action plans and critical success factors to achieve the desired outcomes.

Component VII: Evaluating, Recognizing and Adapting

Evaluating the extent to which the desired outcome and milestones along the way were achieved is essential. The key metric for the individual leader over time is how often does he or she achieve and/or facilitate the achievement of the desired outcome when striving to resolve problematic situations. What is the ratio of decisions made to the achievement of desired outcomes? A decisive problem solver reaches the desired solution using the appropriate amount of quality information that generates knowledgeable action plans which are executed within an expected or reasonable period of time.

It is also important during the decisive problem solving process that successes are savored and setbacks are appropriately addressed. Setbacks should be viewed as learning opportunities and springboards to make real time changes and adaptations in the future to enhance the achievement of desired outcomes.

With an understanding of the various components of the decisive problem-solving framework, and the interplay among them, a discussion of the application value of the framework, and how relevant tools for targeting specific areas for improvement might be integrated into the framework, follows.

APPLICATION VALUE AND IMPLICATIONS

Work relating to enhancing decisive problem-solving for managerial leaders has application value and implications for practitioners, researchers and teachers. All three groups contribute to the growth and development of emerging and practicing leaders. Practitioners can benefit from having practical frameworks and tools to help them better manage their own decisive problem-solving. A discussion of the application value and implications of the proffered framework across practice, research and teaching domains follows.

Practice Domain

The decisive problem-solving framework described above can serve as a practical roadmap for productive conversations and action learning. While the components are broken down for clarity and discussion purposes, in practice, the seven component framework is an integrated and interactive whole. To help operationalize the framework, various behavioral skill areas provide opportunities to increase the effectiveness of decisive problem-solving within the various components of the framework. A managerial leader, independently or in consultation with others, can consider the following fifteen behavioral skill areas, each of which alone are integral to the decisive problem solving process, and identify the areas which he/she should target for improvement when striving to become a decisive problem solver:

- Looking at situational context and spheres of influence with perspective.
- Targeting the right problems, challenges and issues.
- Asking the right primary questions of the key stakeholders who most readily can provide quality information and answers.
- Focusing on the most important things.
- Focusing on things you can most influence.
- Balancing challenges/demands with resources.
- Framing solutions, action planning and setting timeframes.
- Setting priorities proactively.
- Transferring the appropriate amount of quality information to actionable knowledge.

- Increasing certainty and agreement among key stakeholders.
- Managing key alignments.
- Managing for full engagement.
- Measuring and reviewing how and what you are accomplishing.
- Recognizing success, setbacks and adapting.
- Tracking the ratio of decisions made to the achievement of desired outcomes.

The above checklist of behavioral skill areas represents a springboard for conversations with managerial leaders about their decisive problem-solving and areas of improvement within the context of the overall framework. Discussing these skill areas can lead to more sophisticated forms of assessment, including, for example 360° surveying which utilize Likert type scales. Managerial leaders may also address the behavioral skills noted on this checklist with reports when coaching them to enhance their decisive problem-solving.

The skill checklist has been adapted for use in the selection of key executives by the author and his colleagues. Behavioral skill areas are used in behavioral based selection interviews with candidates wherein they are probed about their skills in decisive problem-solving. Also, the work being done relating to situational judgment testing and scenario-based training has been applied by the author when probing key executives for their awareness of and skills at assessing different behaviors found in the fifteen behavioral skill areas. This work is aligned with applied studies reporting that requirements for effective problem-solving and decision making skills can be enhanced by using situational judgment testing (Rockstuhl, Ang, & Ng, 2015; Fritzsche, Stagl, Salas & Burke, 2006).

Each of the fifteen behavioral skills noted above can be aligned with the appropriate component in the framework, allowing the managerial leader to focus on improving concrete real-world skills which play significant roles in the framework to enhance decisive problem-solving. The author and his colleagues frequently provide clients with an expanded version of Figure 1 wherein the fifteen behavioral skills are appropriately integrated into the framework.

Research Domain

The focus of this article is on providing practicing managerial leaders with additional perspective and understanding to support decisive problem-solving. Several areas, however, could benefit from additional research. Given the paucity of evidence based frameworks for practitioners to review and consider, it would be of interest to further examine additional practice-oriented frameworks intended to enhance practitioner decisive problem-solving. This work would be especially valuable if these frameworks would integrate practices into a practical and coherent whole.

The design, development and formal evaluation of assessment tools associated with practitioner oriented frameworks like the one offered here is an opportunity for additional research. This work on assessment tools will be most helpful if the tools were part of an integrated configuration of practices nested within a broader framework, which contributes to achieving desired organizational results/outcomes. This line of research could likely benefit by using practice oriented assessment methodologies like the Linkage Research Model (LRM) which was introduced by Jack Wiley and his colleagues (Wiley & Campbell, 2006). Kerns (2002) provides a practical description and application of this approach.

Individual differences may likely play a role in leader efficacy in decisive problem-solving (Kerns, 2015; Judge & Long, 2012). For example, personality facets and skill levels needed for focusing on practices embedded in a framework for decisive problem-solving vary among individual leaders (Levasseur, 2013). The work being done relating to indecision underscores, for example, how individual differences come into play when considering the dynamics associated with decisiveness and conscientiousness (Denis, Dompierre, Langley & Rouleau, 2011). It would be important to know how other interpersonal influence practices interact with one's effectiveness at decisively solving problems. For instance, field work by the author and his colleagues has shown that individuals high in

perfectionistic tendencies and those who are overly conscientious when gathering information may not solve problems decisively because they tend to spend excessive time attempting to shape a “perfect” solution. Empirically investigating how decisive problem-solving is related to other key managerial leader interpersonal influence practices seems useful. The author is currently exploring the relationship between leader approaches to managing and negotiating conflicts and decisive problem solving (Kerns, 2016).

Conger (2013) as well as Yu (2010) remind us of the importance of studying the alignment of workplace behavioral skills with areas that are taught and developed in business schools. Further study of the alignment between what we focus on in external leadership development programs, including decisive problem-solving and decision making, and what leaders actually do in the workplace, seems especially valuable. Indeed, increased alignment may help decrease the alarmingly high incidence of managerial leadership ineffectiveness and/or incompetence (Kaiser & Craig, 2014; Aasland, Skogstad, Notelares, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2010).

Finally, the relationship between the amount of time taken to reach a decision and the amount of information needed needs to be more fully explored. It would be especially interesting to know, given our global economy, whether there are cross-cultural differences in the dynamic interplay between information needed and time taken to reach a decision. This research could have practical implications for global leaders who need to solve problems and negotiate with individuals, groups and organizations across diverse cultures. The work of House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges and Sullyde Luque (2014) may provide useful methods to organize this research. This type of applied research could advance our knowledge about how to most effectively apply decisive problem solving frameworks and strategies globally.

Teaching Domain

The teaching of managerial leadership could be advanced by offering practical frameworks and tools to both emerging and experienced practitioners seeking to enhance their effectiveness. The author has imported some of the applications used in organizational settings to the business school classroom when facilitating the learning of frameworks and practices associated with decisive problem-solving.

Application of the decisive problem-solving framework offered in this article has been advanced by using experiential exercises in the business classroom setting to help learners better understand and utilize this framework. For instance, this learning process often includes having adult learners enrolled in MBA leadership related classes identify how the nine cross cultural dimensions offered by House et al. (2014) might influence their approach to decisive problem-solving. Learners are asked to identify two cultures across the globe using the taxonomy offered by House and his associates – one that most aligns with their preferences relating to time and information and one that is less connected to their preferences along these two factors. Students share their perceptions relating to the two cultures. Learners with experience with specific cultural clusters are asked to share things that they believe are important for organizational leaders to know about decision making and problem solving when interfacing with people in that specific culture. Typically, a rich and informative exchange takes place during these sessions which helps students more fully recognize the challenges encountered when conducting business and engaging in decision making situations around the globe. This experiential activity is aligned with work being done to help leaders be more effective across diverse global cultures (Caputo & Crandall, 2012).

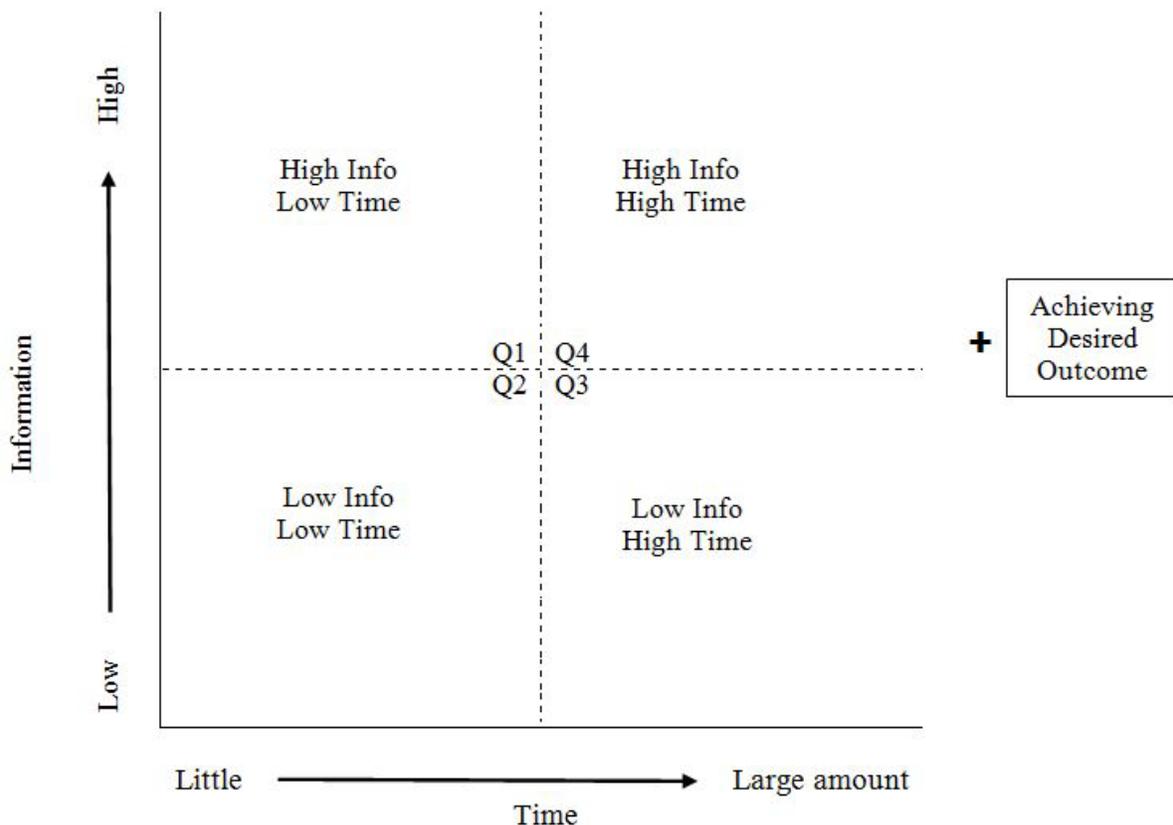
Another valuable exercise is for students to practice applying specific tools that help enhance performance relative to the components in the framework. A “Just Right Questioning” activity, for example, can be introduced to enhance questioning and information gathering skills (Component I). This activity involves a learner generating questions that help glean information about the four spheres of influence previously noted. After the learner generates between five to ten questions per sphere of influence his or her performance is reviewed and coaching is received from the teacher and fellow learners (who use relevant elements from the framework as a reference). The post-coaching quality of the questions typically shows significant improvement. This activity is sometimes modified to focus on helping the learner strengthen his or her listening skills by practicing paraphrasing answers offered by fellow learners. This approach seems to help students enhance both their questioning and listening skills.

Also, to help students become more proficient in evaluating and rating problem areas in terms of importance and whether or not they can influence the problematic situation (Component II), the skill of asking open-ended questions is introduced. The teacher typically offers students some “just right” questions gleaned from experts in the field (Marquardt, 2014; Browne & Keeley, 2011; Rausch, 2003).

Another helpful activity in applying the framework involves students brainstorming and developing practical ways for a leader to track decisions made to desired outcomes achieved to produce a decisive problem solving ratio. While the focus of measurement is on the workplace, learners frequently extend this activity to other areas of their life. These discussions typically relate to organizational well-being and work-life balance and how increased skill in decisive problem-solving can enhance one’s overall quality of life. This activity is in response to the call for workplace assessments to be applied in business classrooms (Yu, 2010).

Another experiential assessment activity that the author has imported to the executive MBA classroom from his work with leaders in the field involves having students plot their preferences regarding managing time and information when making decisions. Learners are presented with a graphic displayed in Figure 2 and asked to indicate which quadrant they typically operate in when making decisions.

FIGURE 2
DECISIVE PROBLEM SOLVING: THE TIME – INFORMATION MATRIX



Decisive problem solving involves reaching the desired outcome with the right amount of quality information within a reasonable timeframe.

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This activity facilitates students to think about the role that time and information gathering play in decisive problem solving. On a personal level they get to engage in reflection and discussion about how these two resources are related to decisive problem solving. Typically, at first, learners hold the perception that quicker decisions (Q1 and Q2) indicate greater decisiveness than do responses falling in Q3 and Q4. Perceptions regarding decisiveness often shift, however, when the concepts of achieving an agreed upon desired result and situational context are introduced. Learners come to realize that the amount of time taken and information gathered depends on a variety of situational variables. In the end, the discussion typically concludes with students connecting the matrix to the operational definition of decisive problem solving used in the article i.e. reaching a desired outcome using the appropriate amount of quality information which is transferred to actionable knowledge and plans of action within a reasonable or set period of time. (It is stressed during this experiential exercise that the time – information matrix is not intended to be an empirically tested and validated assessment tool but is introduced as a springboard for discussion and reflection on the topic of decisive problem solving as a key managerial leadership practice.)

Another impactful way to assist students with the framework is to have effective leaders review the model with students and indicate how they apply it in their efforts to be decisive problem solvers. The lessons learned by the successful executive while striving to be a decisive problem solver have proven to be impactful teaching moments that spark learning. The impact on learners has been especially impactful in sessions where decisive problem-solving leaders have shared their decisions to achieving desired outcome ratios as well as their performance against the 15-item behavioral checklist previously noted.

SOME CHALLENGES

Putting the decisive problem solving framework into practice presents a variety of challenges. Managerial leaders need a practical methodology to measure how well they are doing as a decisive problem solver. Although there is a paucity of methodologically sound practice oriented models that effectively integrate key decisive problem-solving components, the author encourages emerging and experienced organizational leaders to consider using the Linkage Research Model (LRM) to help measure effectiveness (Wiley, 2010; Brooks, Wiley & Hause, 2006; Wiley & Campbell, 2006). This approach can systematically help a leader and his/her organization focus on a variety of practice areas including decisive problem-solving. Organizational leaders are challenged, in general, to find and adopt practical frameworks which integrate key decisive problem-solving skill components and are supported by straight forward approaches to assessing decisive problem-solving.

Closely associated with the previously noted challenge is the need for practicing managerial leaders, leadership developers and applied researchers to consider how other interpersonal influence practices may interact with a leader's decisive problem-solving. Other practice areas such as conscientiousness, high-impact communicating, and self-awareness likely influence a leader's decisive problem-solving effectiveness. Knowing how certain interpersonal influence practices may relate to decisive problem solving would be valuable. This would expand our knowledge of how leader individual differences are revealed in applied settings.

Problem solving takes place in changing contexts, requiring the leader to be flexible in seeking to be a decisive problem solver, especially when working to solve problems with diverse target audiences. Global leaders, for example, who show flexibility when problem solving and negotiating with key stakeholders across diverse cultures, will likely be more effective in decisive problem solving situations. Indeed, the author's field experience indicates that the more behaviorally flexible an organizational leader is in applying this framework across changing contexts, the more likely he/she will be in achieving decisive problem solving effectiveness. This field study evidence aligns with other observations found in relevant literature (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006; Worley et al, 2014).

Another challenge for developers of leaders would be to ensure that they are offering frameworks and tools that align with workplace practice needs of an organization. This alignment of interventions will help ensure value-added outcomes. In addition, this strengthened alignment between workplace needs and

developmental offerings will likely help emerging and experienced leaders achieve greater upward mobility in their careers (Laud & Johnson, 2012). Since decision making and problem solving are well recognized leadership practices, it seems especially important that related developmental activities be delivered using real world practitioner friendly frameworks and tools.

A final challenge for managerial leaders applying this framework is for them to consider how the use of information technologies can support their efforts at practicing decisive problem solving. This challenge may be especially daunting for leaders who are less conversant with information technologies. Technology assisted data gathering and information management technologies can, however, help a managerial leader more quickly obtain quality information which is a key component in moving toward achieving desired outcomes (Arndt & Harkins, 2012). Technology and information systems can also help a leader assess resource allocations and convert information into actionable knowledge. Widmier, Jackson and McCabe (2002), for example, discuss how technology can be employed in a sales force management setting to enhance performance and increase employee productivity. Being able to leverage technology and information systems to assist in implementing the current framework will likely offer a competitive advantage to leaders striving to enhance their decisive problem solving skills.

Focusing on the challenges of assessing the effectiveness of frameworks, the impacts of other interpersonal influence practices on decisive problem-solving, behavioral flexibility, key alignments and technology/information systems influences will enhance our understanding and execution of this key area of managerial leadership practice. Moving forward, additional challenges for practitioners, applied researchers, and teachers will emerge. This important practice area will, if executed effectively, likely contribute to enhancing a leader's overall effectiveness across diverse organizational settings as well as boost the achievement of desired results.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The development and application of frameworks and tools to help managerial leaders more effectively understand and execute as a decisive problem solver will be beneficial to advancing the practice and study of leadership. In turn, it will also likely contribute to achieving desired results while creating greater value for key stakeholders. With a systematic approach that builds upon practice oriented frameworks and tools, additional resources can be developed and applied to help leaders become decisive problem solvers in organizational settings. As this work moves forward there will be a need for assessment methodologies, additional integrated practice oriented frameworks, and the identification of best practices to help managerial leaders enhance their decisive problem solving effectiveness. These and related efforts will likely advance our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics associated with decisive problem solving.

END NOTES

1. A debate comparing and contrasting management and leadership has occurred over more than thirty years. In this article the terms managerial leadership, leader, management and leadership are used synonymously.
2. This system of managerial leadership strives to provide practitioners, applied researchers and teachers with an integrated approach to viewing and understanding leadership. The system brings together several streams of leadership study and research that have been offered over the past 100 years. A key practice in this model relates to a leader's decisive problem solving. A better understanding and management of decisive problem solving can help advance the practice, study and teaching of leadership which is the focus on the current article. It is beyond the scope of the current presentation to review and discuss the other system dimensions and related practices.
3. In developing leader performance enhancing frameworks and tools, the author and his colleagues utilize the following set of criteria. The framework and tools need to:
 - Add value in an organization
 - Have face validity for practitioners
 - Be relevant to practitioner's daily work

- Be evidence based in practice and/or research
- Be practical to implement in an organizational operating environment
- Be coachable/teachable

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