

The importance of framing in group decision-making contexts

Here are two fictional stories based on real meetings I've witnessed recently:

Scenario 1: A school board allocated technology funds for a principal to purchase staff laptops, smart boards, and document cameras. Through a series of events, the principal instead used the funds to purchase a fancy light system for the gym floor. At the following school board meeting, School Board Member A asked the principal why he redirected the funds. Here's what ensued next:

Principal: I had to since the other technology items weren't available from the vendor, and I didn't want the funds to expire. Besides, the gym system will improve student morale!

School Board Member B: I agree! Quit hassling him, A. Not everything can be instruction, instruction, instruction.

School Board Member C: Well, instruction is our primary charge.

School Board Member D: But not our only charge! The lights will put on a great show for everyone who comes to our games.

School Board Member E: But lights won't raise our test scores!

School Board Member A: Okay, everyone. This isn't a discussion about whether we should support academics or other priorities. We allocated funds for specific purchases: laptops, smart boards, and document cameras. Now we have a gym lighting system. Whether that system is good or bad is beside the point. I'm concerned about whether we have proper procedures to ensure funds are spent as the board intends.

That dramatically shifted the conversation, and protocols were reiterated.

Scenario 2: Another school board is considering a claims docket. Claims dockets are typically among the final steps in a lengthy procurement process: Board members confirm they've received goods or services, then issue payment. This particular docket included two buses for \$1 million each.

School Board Member A: This is outrageous! Given our limited finances, it's unacceptable to pay \$1 million for each of two buses!

School Board Member B: That's a good point, A, but two years too late. This board already voted to purchase the buses. We now have them. The decision in front of us is whether to pay for buses sitting in our parking lot, not whether we should have bought them in the first place.

The board unanimously approved the claims docket.

These scenarios illustrate the importance of framing a decision, especially in group decision-making contexts.

Framing is simply defining clearly what the problem, opportunity, or choice point is. It sounds straightforward, but often proves remarkably difficult.

In a previous email, I discussed making sure you're solving the right problem. The scenarios above present a related challenge: sidetracking.

In Scenario 1, the question was whether proper procedures existed to ensure funds were spent as the board intended. The conversation drifted toward an entirely different question: Should schools spend exclusively on academics or also invest in other priorities?

In Scenario 2, one board member wanted to debate whether the buses were worth \$1 million. But that decision had already been made. The decision currently before the board was whether to pay for buses it had already purchased and received.

Here's the important part: The sidetracked questions weren't necessarily bad questions. They just weren't the decisions in front of the group.

It's perfectly acceptable to discuss multiple decisions. But do so intentionally. In Scenario 2, someone could have said: "There are two decisions here. First, should we pay for the buses we've already received? Then, let's discuss our transportation strategy moving forward."

There's also great power in framing a decision. If you're the decision-maker, use that power responsibly. If you're not, pay attention to how others are framing the choice. Sometimes frames drift for natural reasons. Other times, people may deliberately sidetrack a decision for more sinister or manipulative reasons. Regardless, framing isn't entirely neutral. That's all the more reason to be particularly cognizant of decision frames.

John Dewey is often credited with saying, "A problem well-put is half-solved." Getting the frame right gives you a tremendous head start. Getting it wrong can send an entire group down the wrong path.

So, the next time a discussion starts wandering, ask: What decision are we actually making right now?

And if the conversation moves to another question, that's okay. Just make sure everyone knows you've changed the frame.

Make good choices, -Kevin