

FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

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Family life requires constant decision making. The family is quite similar to a company. Decisions constantly need to be made so as to ensure smooth running and success. If decisions are not taken quickly and adroitly, the family like the company is heading for loss and eventual failure. Decision making is an important part of human life but is a skill that must be developed. Even though every one of us is capable of making decisions, not all of us are capable of making good and healthy decisions. That is why assistance, guidance and motivation are required. Simple decisions like choosing a drink at a party or washing your own plate are easily made but complex decisions like purchasing a new house or car require time and collaboration.

At a certain point in life, everyone has to make complex decisions. For example, a student has to choose a stream of study after one's 10th standard. What one later chooses to make a career depends to an extent on what decision one makes at that point of time. Tough decisions are not always left up to parents but in a family it is usually they who take up the responsibility of making decisions and for good reason since they are the ones responsible for the security and happiness of the family.

A man who had been married for over 45 years narrated an incident which happened when he was 52 years old. His wife was then 42, and they had four children,

the youngest of whom was in the 10th standard. His wife discovered that she was pregnant again. They consulted a lady doctor who advised medical termination of the pregnancy. He agreed with the doctor but his wife insisted that she would deliver the baby. In time, she delivered a healthy baby boy. She asked her husband to love the child more than all the other children in reparation for the thought he had entertained about aborting him. Incidentally, the boy grew to be the most loving of all the children and showed signs of high intelligence. The father recounts with a sense of regret that the only serious disagreement he ever had with his wife in all their years of married life was regarding the abortion of their son.

Making decision is tough, more so when your decision affects the lives of others. In families, the situation is delicate because most decisions affect every member of the family. Take for example, something as simple as purchasing a washing machine. Everybody is entitled to use the machine. The mother's work of washing the clothes is perhaps reduced but in the case of a large family, fights and disagreements about who is to use and when, can erupt. Such tensions are bound to arise and can give way to bitterness and division. For this reason, decision making in the family must be done carefully and systematically, so that everyone feels equally responsible for the

decision and for carrying it out.

TYPES OF DECISIONS

Families take decisions with regard to various aspects of life: Instrumental, affective, social, economic, and technical. Instrumental decisions are those which rest on functional issues like providing food, shelter and clothing for the family. Affective decisions deal with choices related to feelings and emotions. Choosing to get married is an example of an affective decision, also dealing with emotional problems in that family like anger issues, rejection, discipline and so on, form part of this type.

Social decisions are those related to the values, roles, and goals of the family, such as decisions about whether one parent will stay at home while the other works when the children are toddlers. Economic decisions focus on choices about using and gathering family resources. Whether an eighteen year old should get a job and contribute to the family income is an economic decision, as is investing money in real estate or stocks. Technical decisions relate to all the subdecisions that have to be made to carry out a main decision. For instance, if one member of the family requires special attention (on account of sports, academics or even physical difficulty) then the whole family needs to adopt a particular way of life that is suitable to provide for the needs of that individual.

Families use a variety of processes for actually reaching a decision. Many families have a habitual process that they use regularly whenever they need to

make a decision. Other families vary in the way they approach decision making depending on the type of decision, their mood, and their stage of development. Researchers often discuss five possible processes that families use in reaching decisions. These include appeals to authority and status, rules, values, use of discussion and consensus, and de facto decisions.

1. Authority and Status – One person in the family, usually the one with the higher status or authority level exercises it in making decisions that the other members follow. This is common among traditional families where usually the father is vested with the authority to decide on behalf of the whole family. The other members are guided by what he says is right. If a family is discussing where they should go for a family summer vacation, for instance, and the father decides that a camping trip is the best decision, the rest of the family concurs because of his authority. This method of decision making works for a family as long as all the members agree about who has the most status and authority. If the family members do not agree, they may engage in serious conflict rather than allowing the father to make a decision for them.

Many families however, have divided certain types of decisions as the province of one member and other types that belong to other family members. For example, with regards to the kitchen department, the mother is the primary decision maker while the father may be the deci-

sion maker when it comes to maintaining the family finances. In such a situation, everyone in the family might have authority over some decision-making concerns. Sometimes, the authority is given to those who display a certain expertise in that field. For example, an adolescent who knows a great deal about computers, the internet or automobiles, may be the one who decides about major expenditures in these fields.

2. Rules – Many families use rules to ease decision making. Rules in general create structures that help families to function. Some specific rules may provide guidance for decisions about dividing family resources. If multiple projects put a stress on the family finance then the family must decide which project is more necessary and urgent as compared to others and therefore requires greater attention and finance. For example, if the family home needs urgent maintenance work, the son wants to buy a new bike and the mother wants a new dishwasher then the priority ought to be the maintenance since neglecting it can have serious consequences. The son and mother may have to continue with their present circumstances till things settle enough to give attention to their desires. This process guides decision making by providing a system to which all of the family agrees.

Rules may also structure decision-making discussions. For example, some families maintain rules about equal participation in a decision-making conversation. They will not come to a decision until all family members involved have an approximately

equal say about the topic. Some families have a rule specifying that each member of the family has to say something before a decision can be reached. Other families have rules setting time limits for the process and a decision has to be reached when the time has lapsed.

3. Values – Decisions based on values are exercised in families that have strongly articulated principles. These principles may be explicitly stated or indirectly communicated, perhaps through family stories or other meaning-making practices. Some of these principles may derive from organized religion, a commitment to social justice, racial equality, or some other cherished value. For example, when parents are deciding about schooling for their children, some may choose religious education or may choose to homeschool, based on a dedication to their values. Additionally, families may choose to give volunteer time, donate money, or take in foster children as a result of their value system.

4. Discussion and Consensus – Decisions founded in discussion and consensus are related to decisions based on values. Families that use discussion and consensus as their mode of reaching a decision are committed to the principles of democratic process. It is important to these families that all members have a voice and that members feel that they contributed to the eventual decision. Families utilizing discussion and consensus often convene family meetings to discuss a potential decision. If a family wanted to adopt this process, they would call a family meeting and let everyone

have a voice in discussing the decision to be made. The process of consensus necessitates that the family would continue discussing the decision until all the members were satisfied with the eventual decision.

A family follows this decision-making process when they talk about their separate positions on a decision and continue talking until they reach an acceptable compromise. This type of decision-making process works best when the family is comfortable with power sharing.

5. De Facto – This type of decision occurs when the family fails to actively engage in a specific process, and the decision gets made by default. For example, when a couple wants to buy a new car, they discuss the decision. They find a car at a price they can afford, but they cannot absolutely agree to buy it. While they wait, trying to decide about the purchase, the car is sold, and they cannot find another that suits them at the right price. In another example, Rosario is trying to decide about taking a new job and moving his family to another state. He is unsure about whether this is a good idea, both personally and professionally. Further, he receives conflicting input from his family about the decision. If he lets the deadline pass for acting on the job offer, the decision is, in effect, made without the family actually stating that they have decided not to move. De facto decisions allow family members to escape responsibility for the repercussions of a decision since no one actively supports the course of action taken.

REVELATIONS

What does the process of decision-making have to say about the family? You may be surprised but in fact, it says a lot about the kind of family life that is lived in the family. The process that the family uses to make a decision reveals more about them and affects them more profoundly than the outcome. It is easy to imagine the case of Rosario. Subtly, his family makes the decision for him. This can affect him negatively as he could end up in a depression or with anger issues, or worse still, suicidal.

Some families discuss their processes and have an overt, preferred mode for decision making. Other families simply fall into one or another process without thinking about it much. Additionally, many families may say they prefer to reach a decision through a discussion of all the members, yet the power relations in the family are such that discussion only confirms what the father, for example, wants as the decision. In this manner, the family may preserve an illusion of openness while actually using an authoritarian process for coming to a decision.

How a family comes to a decision is just as important if not more, as the decision itself. Hence, cultivating a healthy decision-making scheme is vital for the overall health and well-being of the family. Each way of doing things has its own set of pros and cons but it is ultimately for each family to decide which way is best suitable to their make-up and character, so as to produce the optimal results and happiness for every member. □