

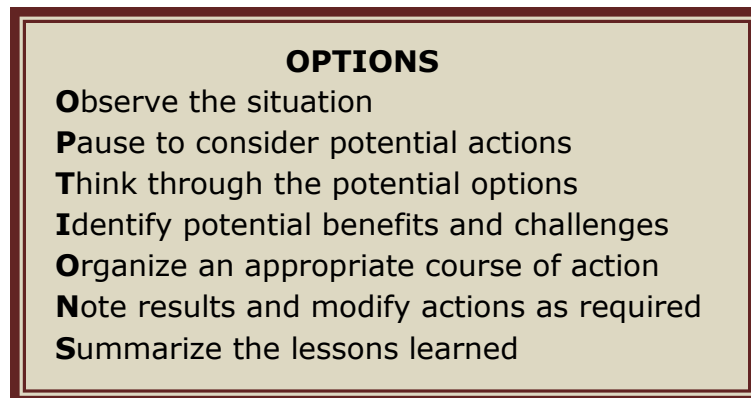
OPTIONS: Selecting Leadership Options

OPTIONS: Selecting an appropriate leadership option

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One of the major reasons for developing this website is to describe a basic set of leadership practices and skills that can enhance the effectiveness of schools and centres. As noted above, self-assessment opportunities and the use of acronym-based reminders of key leadership processes and skills have been included to help readers readily determine the ideas and skills that they might wish to use or learn.

Both formal and informal leaders will have to make decisions about the types of leadership processes or strategies that are appropriate to use in a given situation. Based on my own experience as a leader, it may be helpful to examine a process for selecting the most optimal leadership option out of the wide variety of processes and skills that are available. Using the following acronym-based process may be of help in doing so.



The OPTIONS process is based on the following seven steps:

Observe the situation

Clearly, the leadership skills that will be required to be successful will depend on the nature of the situation. Taking the time to observe and consider the factors that are at play is a crucial step in selecting the most appropriate leadership skill to use in a given situation. For example, if you are chairing a meeting in which an important decision needs to be made and where people will have to support the decision for it to be effectively implemented, it would be wise not to call for a majority vote as a close split between those in favour of the decision and those against it might result in a highly polarized situation. Rather, it may be more sensible to postpone the discussion to gather more information or perhaps use a consensus decision process, which would allow people to shape a decision that might well gather the required support to implement it.

The key point to note is that in most situations there are a variety of options that a leader can consider prior to selecting the skill or skills that will best meet the demands of the situation. The first step in selecting the most suitable option is to carefully consider the factors that are at play in the situation.

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Pause to consider potential actions

After gathering information on the situation at hand, it is wise to begin considering the potential actions that one might use to address it. For example, in meeting situations considering whether the people taking part in a meeting are able to listen to each other, share their ideas in a respectful manner and come to decisions in a positive and productive way can help one decide how to approach the planning and the chairing of the meeting. If the situation is one in which people do not trust each other and there are opposing sides with people who voice their opinions with little consideration or respect for the input of others, you may well want to begin the meeting with a review of established meeting guidelines regarding the types of behaviour that are acceptable during the meeting.

Again, if the situation is a new one where people do not know each other and have little understanding of the key topics under discussion, then one might want to consider ways to establish an ad hoc group or sub-committee that might gather relevant information to guide future discussions of the issues that might arise. The key point is for the leader to observe the situation and consider the group processes or leadership options that might address the key factors in the situation. Those factors usually involve people, the culture of the group or organization and the history of success or failure, as well as the nature of the issue or problems that the group is facing. Based on a more complete understanding of the situation, a leader can strategically consider the potential options that are open and select the most optimal one to use.

Think through the potential options

Throughout this website, a variety of skills and group process options are provided and discussed. One of the important skills that a leader needs to develop is the ability to reflect on a given situation, consider the leadership options that are available and then determine which skill or process might best serve the interests of the group or organization. One of the benefits of using the acronym-based approach used in this website is that the acronyms can readily remind a leader of some of the key leadership options that are available. Quickly reviewing the list of acronyms under the various themes can help in this process.

Experience has also shown that talking over the different approaches that might be taken with a colleague or group of colleagues can be very helpful in making an appropriate selection. In situations where collegial input is not available, personally considering the options or as I like to say, talking the options over with yourself, can be very helpful. The key point is that taking the time to consider the various options that are available within a given situation can be very helpful, especially in challenging or tension-filled leadership situations.

Identify potential benefits and challenges

Whether one discusses the options with colleagues or considers them on one's own, in challenging or difficult leadership situations it is important to consider the potential benefits and challenges associated with the various options that are available. For example, elsewhere on this website, a variety of decision-making methods are or will be described, each of them has certain pros and cons; hence, it is important to be aware of the various options but also take the time to systematically consider the benefits and challenges of using them.

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One of the most important factors to consider is whether the process selected is one that a specific group is familiar with and whether they have the experience and competence to actually use it. For example, a leader may wish to use a consensus decision-making process; however, if the group has had limited opportunities to participate in such a process, it may be more prudent to select a process with which the group is more familiar. Or, a group may have limited understanding of some of the key factors that must be considered in making a specific decision; hence, the leader may choose not to involve the group in the decision making process. Again, the key point is that the leader must consider the readiness of the group to be involved in the type of group process that he or she may wish to use.

Organize an appropriate course of action

Once the leader decides on a suitable option, he or she must reflect on how the process should be organized so that it can be carried out effectively and efficiently. For example, if a leader decides to use a brainstorming process, he or she must decide on the amount of guidance and support a group needs to effectively carry out this process. If the group is familiar with creating and sharing ideas within a brainstorming framework, then minimal instructions will need to be provided; however, if the group is new to the process or has used it ineffectively in the past, the leader should include guidelines and prompts to remind participants of the key features of the process that will be used. Throughout this website, acronym-based reminders are provided that can be used to facilitate the learning and application of key group collaboration and leadership processes.

Note results and modify actions as required

Building personal or group leadership capacity takes time and effort as it involves the inevitable ups and downs of professional learning. Taking the time to assess and evaluate the results of using different leadership options can be a helpful way to enhance and guide the ongoing capacity building process. Encouraging the feedback of trusted colleagues can be a particularly useful way to shape the capacity building process, especially if the feedback is timely and takes into consideration that leadership is an acquired competency that involves ongoing practice and reflection. Taking the time to carefully reflect on how a given leadership process or skill can be modified has proven to be especially beneficial in a variety of educational settings. Most importantly, taking the time to note the results generated by actually using different leadership options and the modifications that were made to them can be very helpful in developing one's leadership expertise.

Summarize the lessons learned

The final step is to reflect on the leadership options that one has used and take the time to briefly record the lessons that have been learned. Building leadership capacity is an ongoing process and establishing a digital or paper-based journal to record progress and the challenges that one has faced can be very helpful in guiding the personal as well as group capacity building process. The lessons learned do not have to be extensive in nature; however, taking the time to reflect on one's learning and leadership performance has been shown to be a valuable source of motivation and guidance for further learning.