

Sanders, R. (1999). *The Executive Decision-making Process*. Westport: Quorum Books.

Book Review by Cynthia Stone

The Executive Decision-Making Process gives a prescriptive methodology for identifying and solving problems. The book is written for a business audience, but school leaders can apply Sanders' problem-solving strategies to school situations.

Sanders gives many examples of actual problem-solving situations, some resolved satisfactorily and some resolved unsatisfactorily. One example of flawed decision making given by the author is the Bay of Pigs incident in the 1960s. During the Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, the United States was considered a world power and the government of Cuba was considered no match for the United States in military power. The Kennedy administration made the decision to invade Cuba to aid the resistance against the Cuban communist government. There were few voices against the decision. The invasion took place and resulted in a failed mission with many human fatalities. The Kennedy administration was operating on the incorrect assumption that Castro's forces were no match for U.S. forces. Using the Bay of Pigs example, Sanders asserts that many executives and leaders do not correctly identify a problem, or operate on incorrect information to find a solution. He never addresses the fact that prior experience plays some part in identifying and solving problems, and discounts intuition, saying that it is a "weak device." Sanders' key point is that "executives fashion excellent solutions to the wrong problems" and gives the reader concrete steps to follow to lessen the chance of making misguided or haphazard decisions.

Sanders lists five categories of error in identifying problems including: 1. identifying wrong facts that get in the way of effective operations, 2. interpreting right facts incorrectly, 3. assigning right facts to the wrong environments, 4. giving improper weights to the right or wrong facts, and 5. drawing the scope of a problem too narrowly or too broadly. Sanders points out that certain prejudices prevent leaders from profiting from feedback, as did the lack of feedback to Kennedy in the Bay of Pigs incident. Sanders states that leaders should go beyond traditional boundaries and be creative in gathering needed information.

The author also looks at patterns and trends in information that can provide leaders with

clues to identifying problems. He notes the importance of looking at problems or possible problems from different perspectives, asking, "Whose problem is it?" He uses the example of a decision made by Admiral Kimmel during World War II. Kimmel discounted information he felt was not important, which led to the disaster at Pearl Harbor. "The prisms executives use cause them to differ in determining which of these factors should receive priority."

The changing nature of problems is another consideration for executives. What is not a problem one day may become a problem on another day or in another situation. For example, child safety may not be a problem for a principal until a student brings a weapon to school. Executives must be prepared to solve unforeseen problems.

The most interesting chapter, in my opinion, was one that dealt with the critical factors in problem identification. Sanders contends that executives must pierce the barriers around bases of information to find that which is relevant to the problem. He thinks that bases of information in an organization have an unseen barrier around them, and in some organizations the people who are the keepers of that information may have some purpose for hiding information from the leader. The ability to hide information might imply that the keepers of the information may have more real power than the executive.

At the end of the book, Sanders address outcomes with a look at degrees of effectiveness in identifying and solving problems. There are those problems that are solved entirely, and the results are evident. There are those problems that may appear to be solved, but extraneous factors hide the results, making evaluation difficult. In addition, there will always be problems for which a leader does not find a satisfactory solution and learns to cope with the status quo.

District and campus leaders are confronted daily with long-term, as well as, short-term problems. These problems may, or may not, be apparent. In such cases, the leader might benefit from the procedural techniques of identifying problems offered by Sanders.

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Cuban, H. (2001). *How Can I Fix It?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Book Review by Nancy Lara

Cuban offers various approaches to solving problems and managing dilemmas in an educational setting. In what I consider to be the best part of the book these approaches included guidelines providing the relevant values in a situation, knowing what values are important to you in your setting, analyzing what already exists in the situation, and then defining the problem or dilemma.

In Part I the author defines a problem and begins to identify the process of solving the problem. He identifies three processes: problem solving, decision making, and changing. The process of problem solving lists steps to follow. Decision making involves looking at options and consequences. Changes should be well planned so the implementation is smooth.

The author charts the problem-solving procedure and the change process through the following stages: identify the problem, frame the problem, reframe the problem, and generate solutions for change. Managing dilemmas, those situations that have no right or wrong solution are also discussed.

The problem-solving method provided by Cuban is a systematic process for practitioners. Tackling problems involves analyzing the power and conflict aspects of a problem. The author's charts are realistic and give the reader a flexible method for using judgment. An assumption that the author makes is that educators have a need for continued knowledge in problem intervention. I agree with Cuban, because his expertise justifies him as an educator who has invested years in the teaching field. His knowledge is shared in various workshops he has conducted and he continuously accommodates educators by changing presentations based on feedback that he receives from his participants.

The author identifies two types of problems that are categorized as the blame trap and tame and wicked problems. The blame trap involves placing blame on an individual or a group that interferes with problem solving. Tame and wicked problems involve procedures, malfunctioning equipment, and managing relationships. Tame problems are routine where answers can usually be found in district manuals. Wicked problems are more complex

and are packed with potential conflicts. Wicked problems cannot be solved, only managed. Values can clash and a resolution happens only with negotiation. The author recommends steps for solving blame trap and tame and wicked problems.

Analyzing and reframing problems is the hardest task for practitioners to perform, whether alone or in groups. Throughout the book Cuban provides his readers with different scenarios in education and choices for arriving at a conclusion. I found this very helpful and it made his book more applicable.

The strengths in Part I are that the author does provide a simple, but detailed procedure with steps to begin to resolve a problem. The author provides variety with practical choices for problem solving. He also lists examples of real situations and applies his suggestions to finding solutions to problems. One example Cuban gives is a parent-teacher conference. The teacher plans to tell the parent about her high school child's talents and the importance of further education for the child. At the conference, the parent explains that the child needs to work to help the family make a living and assist with sibling care. The reader is given questions to consider in addressing the situation. I feel that the writer simplifies conflict resolution for the beginning educator.

In Part II, the author makes a transition from identifying and reframing problems to connecting with the actual process of change. He categorizes changes as incremental and fundamental. Incremental changes focus on improving efficiency within the existing structure of the school, while fundamental changes involve restructuring the school. Examples are provided and concepts are connected to actual cases.

The book is simple and clear, with procedures that are applicable in school settings. The author also has an extensive background and is knowledgeable of material provided. The philosophy of the author provides simplicity and this book serves as a very practical guide for educator problem solving.

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Blanchard, K., Bowles, S., Carew, D., & Parisi-Carew, E. (2002). High Five! The Magic of Working Together. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Book Review by Armando Aguirre

Blanchard and Bowles, through a realistic story line have compared the running of a private company to that of a little league hockey team. Although at first the comparison might seem far-fetched, the authors quickly pinpoint the similarities.

Alan, the father of a hockey team player, recently lost his position at a private firm. He lost his job, not because he was unproductive, but because he was not a team player. Finding himself with time on his hands, Alan agrees to help coach his son's hockey team. The irony in the new coaching position becomes clear when his coaching responsibilities are unveiled. His assignment is to show the young players how to function as a team.

During Alan's first opportunity to see the boys play, he noticed a few players took most of the shots at the goal; the others stood around watching. The lack of communication and team play was obvious. Just as star players can be found on any sports team at any level, it's not uncommon in the private sector or in the educational setting to have employees, who in their own right, are "superstars". Having a superstar on a team is not a problem. The problem arises when the superstar loses sight of the team members. By working with the hockey team and reflecting on his prior employment, Alan begins to realize how his attitudes and relationships at his former employment were counterproductive to production. The parallels between Alan's behavior at work and the behaviors of the hockey players are frighteningly similar.

Blanchard and Bowles point out the characteristics leaders must possess to create winning teams. The authors emphasize that by working together, people can accomplish more than by working alone. In the case of the hockey team, those who were puck hogs had their roles on the team refocused and the players who did little for the team were assisted in skill improvement. Alan learned to appreciate the importance of teamwork by teaching the boys fair play and discipline. As time passed, the lessons Alan taught the players became imbedded in his own beliefs.

Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles depict the importance of being a team player splendidly. Their comparison of teamwork in a company can be applied to teamwork at a school. In both the company and the school, teamwork is essential for accomplishing organizational goals. The authors do not dismiss the importance of the individual, but instead highlight the need for social acceptance of all members in the organization. Alan discovers that "none of us is as smart as all of us."

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