Functional Decision-Making Roles Revisited

By

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In the Fall term of 1973, I accepted a three-month research internship with the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. During that short period of time, I was given the opportunity to interview a fair number of high-level U.S. bureaucrats, members of Congress, and various leaders of private interest groups on the mounting political pressure for the United States to enter into negotiations with the Governments of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, to terminate their status as United Nations Trust Territories -- effective since 1947 -- and to redefine their status in the world community.

It quickly became apparent to me that when it came to group decision-making, the individuals who participated in determining whether or not a particular action is to be taken are based upon roles that often cross traditional hierarchical boundaries and traditional hierarchical roles. I was left with a driving urge to further explore the existing social science literature on how groups solve problems and how they actually make decisions.

The Beginning:

Upon returning to the University of Pittsburg's 1974 Winter term, I was granted permission by the University of Pittsburgh, College of Arts and Sciences, to enroll in a 15-credit independent study course with the University's Conflict Studies Program. Essentially, it was the equivalent of an undergraduate thesis. My initial goal was to merely understand the then-current social science literature on decision-making, and to make some sort of comparative report of my findings in a single major paper.

A faculty committee of three professors was organized: a Sociologist, an Anthropologist, and a Political Scientist. As an initial starting point, each committee member assigned me a few obligatory texts. Of note was the assignment of English anthropologist, P. H. Gulliver's book, "Neighbours and Networks: The Idiom of Kinship in Social Action among the Ndendeuli of Tanzania" (1971). The book reported on an African tribe, the Ndendeuli, that used the idiom of kinship to organize and implement social and community action, not based upon the principles of unilineal descent, but rather based upon a bilateral kinship system of kindreds, kin-sets, action-sets, networks, and clusters.

This single book validated my own observation that social action was acted out by "sets". Participants to the decision-making process were not necessarily based upon strict hierarchical roles, but rather something else. A second book, Lewis Coser's, "The Functions of Social Conflict" (Coser 1956), I had already read as a part of my previous course work.   In it, Coser

revisits the propositions of the early German Sociologist Georg Simmel, specifically, that social conflict has certain positive functions that are essential to the maintenance of social order.

What began as a project to merely describe current social scientific decision-making models grew into a full-fledged model of my own. At its heart was the idea, "that decision-making in groups is accomplished through an incrementally stepped process of interaction, involving only a portion of the group's total membership. The decision-making membership is one that is constantly changing at any given time" (Lefcowitz 1975). What I labeled a "decision-set".

The model assumed that 1). a "decision", is a specific event characterized by the formal and sub-formal implementation of a single action explicitly intended to solve one particular 'problem; and 2). group decision-making can involve a multitude of individuals in the initiation, modification, and implementation of a decision that is not explained by traditional hierarchical models.(Lefcowitz, op. cit., p. 3).

Functional Roles:

My model identified seven (7) decision-making functional roles.   While typically, decision-sets are composed of multiple individuals with distinct functional roles, the roles themselves are not mutually-exclusive. A decision-set can be comprised of a single individual, encompassing all or some of the seven identified roles. Additionally, the model identified a single category for individuals who have hierarchical roles through which the decision path passes, but who have had no impact – for one reason or another -- upon the decision or problem-solving effort: "No Role" (N/R).

Briefly, the seven functional roles are:

1. Headship roles are specifically concerned with the actual utilization of the potential power and authority a superior has over their subordinates. Headships roles are inexorably linked to the bureau's hierarchal structure.

2. Leadership roles rely on an individual's ability to generate support or receive tacit approval from fellow office-holders for their instructions, ideas ,or actions. Quite simply, the basis of leadership roles is endorsement through acceptance and trust.

3. Information roles relates to the collection, evaluation, and distribution of information. Information roles are essential to bureau operation in that they allow organizations to respond to internal and external events, and alterations of circumstance.

4. Advisory roles relate to providing solicited advice to another member of the group; it may come from either superiors, subordinates, or members of the same hierarchal

level. Advisory roles are closely related to information roles, in that they concern the proper action to be taken with respect to a particular piece of information.

5. Ratification roles primarily come in four forms: a). through authoritative reference to an existing body of written rules and regulations; b). through acts of endorsement by superiors; c). through acts of endorsement or approval by an existing governing body; or d). through a combination of the previous methods. Ratification – either directly or indirectly -- comes from above.

6. Action roles are concerned with the manner and to what extent a proposed action itself is to be initiated.

7. Influence roles comprise a group of ever-changing individuals who are technically outside the decision-set membership, but affect the eventual outcome of decision-set interactions through their ability to sway decision-making roles in indirect or intangible ways.

The Long Road to Validity:

The finished undergraduate paper remained unpublished and undeveloped for almost five decades. In part, because I could not see how to realistically apply it to my early aspirations to establish myself as a professional mediator and conflict analyst, my own conscious decision to not pursue an academic career, and most important my own lack of experience. Yet, throughout it all my functional roles decision-making model was not completely dormant.

The proposition that everyone – if they wish – can be a problem-solver within the wider context of social action stuck with me as a basic proposition of the human experience. As a masonry laborer, I arranged scaffolding upon which bricklayers and other laborers had to work in safety; even within the context of that low status job, I was making critical life and death decisions. As a case worker, I was implementing policy and prioritizing decisions that affected individual's and family's ability to minimally survive. As a management consultant, I was solving operational issues that affected how that business efficiently and effectively solved a particular problem…and the list goes on.

The point is: whatever our job -- whatever our particular station in life – we are all paid to solve someone's problems. We are all problem-solvers. Therefore, we are all active decision-makers about some things that are important to someone else for some things that we are receiving payment to solve.

When I entered the IT world as a late bloomer in mid-life -- as I made the long career transition from database developer, to business analyst, to project manager, to process analyst, to process engineer -- I began to have a seat at the table. I was allowed to participate in and

witness interactions where no academic researcher could possibly go. I began to recognize instances -- within the context of my own contractual duties – that I had actually held each of the seven functional roles that I had envisioned decades before.

I had come full circle.

Where from Here?

While the original concept of functional roles, now well-established as a valid approach to looking at group decision-making and organizing group action, the lexicon I had developed to describe decision-making roles seems to be in some respects sadly outdated. Throughout the years, a fairly large number of individual contributors have independently produced functional role models used for various purposes. Of note is the invention of the RACI matrix, of which I was unaware of until the mid-1990s.

The RACI matrix -- an acronym derived from Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, informed – is a method for tracking project roles. It seems to have been created in the 1950s, and has no actual recorded inventor or author. By the 1970s it was called the "responsibility attribution matrix" (Perfony n.d.). From that beginning, a whole host of functional models have emerged (Maggio Sep. 2021) and (Fresco n.d.) :

- RACI-VS (RACI plus "Verification" and "Sign-off");
- RACIO (RACI plus "Out of the Loop";
- RASCI (RACI plus "Support");
- RAPID ("Recommendation", "Establish Agreement", "Perform and Execute"; "Provide Input", "Decide");
- RATSI ("Responsible", "Authority, "Task", "Support", "Informed";
- ARPA ("Accountable", "Responsible", "Participant", "support", "Advisor");
- PACSI ("Perform", "Accountable", "Control", "Suggest", "Informed");
- RACIQ (RACI plus "Quality Review");
- DACI ("Driver", "Approver", "Contributor", "Informed");
- DCI ("Decision maker", "Consulted", "Informed");
- RAS ("Responsible", "Approve", "Support");
- CARS ("Communicate", "Approver", "Responsible", "Support"); and
- CLAM ("Contributes", "Leads", "Approves", "Monitors").

In total, 51 functional roles; not including my own eight and excluding the 14 duplicated roles, this leaves 36 functional roles to describe human action. Some sort of codification effort on my part seems to be needed to bring my model up-to-date.

Functional Roles, Revisited:

One of the main weaknesses of the model was that at the age of 25, still in school, I had no direct evidence to support my thesis, save for a variety of academic tomes and my own limited experience. Decades later, I have participated in tens of thousands of those small, day-to-day formal and informal decisions, and have observed many others from afar within the context of my consultative and contractor roles.

One of the important distinctions between my functional role model and others is that mine was intended to be descriptive. There is a vast difference between the way decisions and group actions "should be done" and what is "actually done". Anyone who has studied how groups work – how large organizations work – recognizes that quite frequently, individuals "cut corners" to accomplish assigned tasks. Whether they are motivated by fear, laziness, or just to keep pace with a firehose of daily and weekly tasks that are considered to be a core part of their responsibilities, the pressure to "just get it done" is real.

RACI-based roles, in their many iterations, generally describe how things should be done: someone has the responsibility of taking some action or performing a task; someone is accountable for ensuring that the action or task is actually done correctly and accomplished in a timely manner; others need to be consulted as interested parties who are affected by the action; and others need to be informed on a routine basis on the action or task's status. From a process engineer perspective both -- of course -- are important, but in this particular instance my own interest remains the latter.

For example, it is rare that large organizations consistently maintain Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The reason is pretty straightforward: individuals are trying to do their day-to-day operational tasks. Often task and process inputs from outside the work unit need to be manually massaged in some way. Technological mishaps, half-measures, situational changes, lack of coordination, and lack of cooperation are the daily bane we have all experienced. The price of documentation and quality control is that it is expensive; it often leads to individuals performing roles that are beyond their regular duties for sustained periods of time.

Rarely do organizations pony up the necessary budget to bring in knowledgeable full-time resources to accomplish the task correctly, or to approach problems in creative ways. In the modern operational -- Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) -- sense of the word, functional experts are the only ones who understand how their piece of the universe actually works. Often, what is in their heads is difficult to describe; the effort to nail down how a process is supposed to work and the way it operates, in reality, is often a relatively long and painful experience that is viewed as undercutting their core job responsibilities.

With these caveats in mind, I present my own updated version of My 1975 model, using RACI-family functional roles where necessary:

1. Accountability roles are specifically concerned with the individual who has the responsibility – who owns -- the outcome of the job, operational task, project, or problem-solving effort, and who has the authority to take action to make sure that a viable solution is efficiently and effectively achieved.

2. Authority roles concern authoritative decision-making power; the individual who has the power to either accept or reject the efforts of the decision-set based upon their direct authority over individuals carrying out Accountability roles .

3. Ratification roles primarily come in four forms: through authoritative reference to an existing body of written rules and regulations; through acts of endorsement by superiors; through acts of endorsement or approval by an existing governing body; or through a combination of all three methods. Ratification – either directly or indirectly -- comes from authoritative sources who do not have direct authority over individuals carrying out Accountability roles .

4. Leadership roles rely on the ability of a specific individual to motivate other decision-set members to follow a specific problem-solving approach, idea ,or action through the influence of acceptance, trust, perceived self-interest, or fear.

5. Action roles concern individuals whose duty is to take specific actions or perform specific tasks.

6. Information roles relates to the development, collection, modification, evaluation, distribution, and analysis of information. Information can be a single new fact, or many exabytes of data.

7. Advisory roles relate to providing solicited advice to another member of the decision-set.

8. Influence roles comprise a group of ever-changing individuals, technically outside the decision-set membership, but affect the eventual outcome of decision-set interactions through their ability to sway decision-making roles in indirect or intangible ways.

<u>Big Decisions vs. Small Decisions; Big Conflicts vs. Small Conflicts:</u>

Perhaps the reader, here, is asking themselves the question, "So What? How does this affect me?"

In the almost five decades since my first formulation of functional decision-making roles have witnessed a transformation of the business workforce. Gone are a long list of manual labor office jobs and devices: typewriters, hand-delivered memorandum, policy documents ready for hand endorsement, and the processing of other files and documents of all sorts have largely disappeared.

Those of us old enough have personally witnessed and participated in the emergence of a new kind of labor pool. It is composed of SMEs, functional experts, and a broad swath of specialized analysts of all stripes. In addition to their own areas of technical and functional areas of expertise, this new workforce is expected to be able to write and spell-check their own documents, enter their own data, answer their own mail, and be able to facilitate their own technical meetings to collect cross-functional requirements. They are expected to play many operational roles, interchangeably, invariably within the context of the same task, project or daily operational responsibility.

If the office worker of the 1970s could affect the decision-making processes and outcomes outside of the confines of a strictly hierarchical decision-making structure, their ability – now a necessity by virtue of their new impact and active involvement—increased exponentially.

All too often, we tend to think of business decisions and business decision-making as "big"; the salesman who closes the big contract; the company that decides to come out with a game-changing product; or the organization that decides to transform itself so that it operates more efficiently and effectively. We frequently forget the immense number of detailed tasks, numerous meetings, critical milestones, and the incremental but crucial smaller decisions by many different individuals who have cooperatively contributed to that larger decision.

We tend to forget, too, that after these decisions have been made that someone -- or more likely a group of others – will be given the task to make them an operational reality. And the whole decision-making process starts all over again. Whether we are talking about decisions, sales, or negotiation, or conflict resolution, we are fundamentally talking about the same thing: groups of individuals cooperating, at times conflicting with each other, and yet trying to work together to achieve a specific goal or solve a specific mutually held problem.

The problem-solving process never ends. It is all about problem-solving. Humans, of course, are not the only problem-solving animals. But we do outpace all other species in our drive to solve – and in many cases invent – solutions for ourselves that turn out to be problems for others.

Problems are solved one at a time, in the order that they present themselves. To better understand how to problem-solve we need to better understand how we all fit in with these functional roles, and how we can all be better problem-solvers.

About Mark Lefcowitz:

Mark Lefcowitz is a Principal Process Engineer, Sr. Project Manager, Sr. Data / Business Analyst, and thought leader specializing in Organizational Change Management, Business Transformation, and Continuous Process Improvement, with over 30 years of professional experience in both the private and public sectors. He is a pioneer in the theory of problem-solving and functional decision-making.

He is a certified Six Sigma Master Black Belt, a certified Project Management Professional, and a certified Lean Master. He has functioned as a Senior Process Engineer, Senior Subject Matter Expert, Program Manager, Project Manager, and Senior Analyst in a variety of legacy operating environments. He is an expert in facilitated processes.

Among his numerous professional achievements, he has successfully taken an organization through both an ISO 9001 certification and a CMMI SCAMPI-A Level-3 assessment—back-to-back, start to finish—in less than five months.

Mr. Lefcowitz' original training was in the field of dispute analysis and its resolution. He was a private mediator for 15-years, serving as a non-attorney member of the Pennsylvania Bar Association's, Committee on Dispute Resolution. He was also one of the founding members of the Pittsburgh chapter of the Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR). He served as its first President.

He is a strong advocate of teaching problem-solving analysis skill sets as a primary first step in assisting businesses and organizations to drive their own business process and transformation efforts. All human endeavors depend on people collaborating with others to achieve commonly shared goals.

Mr. Lefcowitz' has published numerous articles and white papers on a variety of Project Management, Continuous Process Improvement, and Conflict Resolution / Analysis subjects throughout his career.

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