Thriving as a Win-Win Commitment:
Helping Employees and Organizations to Flourish

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Abstract

The process of decision-making and problem solving is often ineffective because leaders and organizations fail to collaborate to pursue options that positively benefit all parties. This paper identifies five decision-making alternatives and describes their characteristics. It emphasizes the importance of the Win-Win decision philosophy advocated by Stephen R. Covey and identifies seven guidelines for implementing this approach to problem solving.

Keywords: Win-Win approach, collaborative decision making, ethical stewardship, employee engagement, trust in organizations

1. Introduction

In his best-selling book, ***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People***, Stephen R. Covey (2020) explained the virtues of a "Win-Win" commitment to interpersonal relations. Covey's comments were primarily centered on the communication process that occurs between two parties that have related but somewhat diverse interests. The Win-Win perspective advocates that finding solutions that positively benefit both parties is a strategy that typically requires thoughtful and creative wisdom, and the ability to craft such alternatives is a defining characteristic of great leadership. In today's work world where employees are reluctant to make their commitment to their organizations, the creation of a Win-Win work culture is particularly relevant (Ellera, Jamali, & Caldwell, 2023).

The Win-Win perspective that Covey advocated is more than simply a mental model to pursue an optimal benefit but rises to the level of a commitment of the heart as well as the mind. A Win-Win philosophy acknowledges the value and importance of other individuals, rather than simply valuing oneself and considering one's self-interest (Cook, 2017).

The purposes of this paper are to identify the significance of the Win-Win philosophy that Covey advocated, to differentiate that philosophy from other decision-making options, and to explain how that Win-Win approach contributes to thriving in organizations. We begin the paper by introducing five approaches to resolving differences between parties who often have interests that may be sometimes aligned but also somewhat in conflict. We then identify seven guidelines for leaders to consider in adopting and implementing the Win-Win approach.

2. The Nature of Decision Alternatives

As parties work together in collaborative interactions, they do so because the underlying assumption inherent in their relationship is that they have something to gain that links them in the pursuit of a potential benefit. The process by which the parties seek to obtain that benefit is often repeated and has been frequently addressed in the decision-making literature (Gunther, 2008).

Attributed to the insights of Mary Parker Follett, often called "The Mother of Modern Management," (Graham, 2003), the Win-Win approach to mutual effort has historically sought to engage the parties in optimizing the benefits possible from their combined efforts (Follett, 2013). Diagram 1, provided here, identifies five approaches commonly associated with mutual decision making and each of these five approaches will then be briefly explained.

2.1 Win-Win Collaboration

The Win-Win philosophy acknowledges the value and importance of other individuals, rather than simply valuing oneself and pursuing only one's self-interests. The decision to examine options and to consider creative solutions often makes it possible for both parties to achieve a far greater benefit than compromise makes possible. Communication and trust between the parties and a willingness to share information enable the parties to discover an alternative that benefits both participants and enables them to enjoy a greater positive result.

Perhaps the greatest benefit from this collaborative effort is that the two parties also increase trust in each other and establish a relationship that often extends long term. The results of such a collaboration often benefit both parties to a greater degree than they could have previously expected or in ways that they had not thought of achieving (Nielsen, 2004).

Collaborating requires both parties to recognize that they benefit when they take upon themselves the responsibility to consider the best interests of the other party (Morgan, 2012). Covey pointed out that recognizing the importance of working together raises the level of a moral obligation for the parties involved (Covey, 2020). Acknowledging the interdependence of the parties enhances the willingness of the parties to pursue each other's best interests – but that collaborative effort ultimately benefits each party by cooperating to achieve a shared interest.

2.2 Win-Lose Competition

When parties compete in a "zero-sum" relationship, the underlying assumption is that there are scarce resources involved (Roberts & Davidai, 2021). Accordingly, for one party to benefit or "win," the other party must suffer a corresponding loss. The metaphor in this option can be explained in terms of the decision to divide the pieces of a pie with a fixed dimension. For one party to get a larger piece, the other party must consequently receive a smaller piece of the pie.

The emphasis with this competitive position is on obtaining a greater share of the scarce resource than the other party. Typically, this strategy is primarily short-term oriented because the imbalanced share of scarce resources inevitably results in a decrease in trust from the other party (Fearon, 2023).

The Win-Lose assumption is typically founded on the belief that the party who wins has more relative power than the other party, or that the party with greater power does not believe that the other party is able to push for an alternative that results in a greater benefit and must accept the stronger party's position (Coleman, Kugler, & Mazzaro, 2016). Although both parties obtain a benefit, the transaction may generate distrust on the part of the party that receives fewer resources (Craver, 2003). When the relationship between the parties is long term, a Win-Lose approach can hurt the parties' ability to cooperate in the future.

2.3 Lose-Win Accommodation

The Lose-Win relationship is also a "zero-sum" outcome in which the decision to accommodate the other party is reversed from the competitive option, but one party still receives a "better" outcome at the expense of the other party (Christin & Lovaas, 2022). Using the metaphor of dividing pieces of a pie with fixed dimensions once again, the other party gets the larger piece of the pie, and the accommodating party gets the smaller piece.

The willingness to enter a Lose-Win relationship often is an acknowledgement of the superior bargaining position of the other party. However, that willingness can also be an attempt to "signal" another party that the participant in the negotiation is interested in a long-term relationship and is willing to demonstrate that interest as a sign of good faith by cooperating in an initial exchange (Craver, 2007).

The Lose-Win decision may be a choice proposed to another party in acknowledgement of a past history in which unfair treatment or an unbalanced result may have previously occurred. The party proposing the Lose-Win exchange may wish to restore the other party's position to a "fairer" relative position in an effort to restore trust (Shonk, 2023).

2.4 Lose-Lose Avoiding Cooperation

A Lose-Lose choice leaves all the parties involved in an exchange in a worse situation than they originally began (Spacey, 2018). The decision to avoid cooperation with another party results in the failure to pursue a beneficial opportunity for both parties with neither party enjoying an available gain.

A history of bad experiences, lack of confidence in the credibility or objectives of the other party, and the desire to avoid being taken advantage of can also be the motivation for choosing not to engage with another party. Misreading the other party's priorities or actions can also inadvertently create a Lose-Lose outcome (McCrea, 2007). The failure to recognize that a mutually beneficial outcome can result may be a byproduct of distrust (Thompson & Hrebec, 1996).

No win situations sometimes occur in relationships and external conditions or unanticipated factors can result in unintended Lose-Lose outcomes (Nagel et al., 2021). Often driven by fear of loss or the distrust of the other party, the failure to cooperate can create a self-defeating result for the parties involved (Rosenbaum, 2015).

2.5 Compromise – Small Win

A common option in attempting to create acceptable outcomes involving differences in priorities is the decision to compromise, or to take a mid-point approach to the difference in their initial positions (Goertz, 2004). When parties make the decision to compromise, they typically pursue a position in which both parties obtain a small win – but often forego a much greater potential benefit.

Compromise decisions are often undertaken when parties face time pressure, have incomplete information, or believe that they must decide in a context where both parties have equal power. Rather than obtaining a potential outcome that meets the best interests of both parties, they choose to give up a portion of what they desire but label the compromise a partial victory (Stein et al., 1996).

The failure to communicate effectively or to explore possible alternatives results in a sub-optimal outcome for both parties and the compromise typically leaves both parties somewhat dissatisfied with the result but satisfied that they obtained some benefit as well. The compromise is considered by both parties to be a better alternative than no agreement (Thornley, Patel, & Caldwell, 2019).

3. Understanding Negotiation Positions

A variety of criteria can affect each of these five positions and the process by which outcomes are determined. An integrated combination of factors, provided below as Table 1, explains the differences in the perspectives that motivate each of the five negotiation positions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Five Positions

Factor	Win-Win	Win-Lose	Lose-Win	Lose-Lose	Compromise
Level of Trust	High and Willing	Not important	Low and Vulnerable	Very Low	Moderate and Uncertain
Power Relationship	Shared	Greater than other party	Less than other party	Unwilling to engage	Equal
View of Other Party	Respected	Weaker	Stronger	Distrusted	Balanced
Time Focus	Ongoing	Short term	Short term	Not relevant	Uncertain
Primary Goal	Optimal for all	Maintain advantage	Benefit if possible	Minimize downside	Small win
Dominant Value	Mutual benefit	Preserve dominance	Obtain some gain	Avoid great loss	Benefit where possible
Traits Reflected	Abundance Mentality	Self-Interest	Self-Protection	Disdain of other party	Limited vision

As indicated by Table 1, the Win-Win position is open to pursuing the best possible outcomes for the parties involved in mutually interdependent situations. The five positions reflect the factors that determine their willingness to work with others and the impact each position has on building relationships and flourishing individually and collectively.

Covey (2020) explained that an outcome that does not benefit both parties over the long run is ultimately a net loss for the parties involved. Covey advocated that working collaboratively was an ethically responsible obligation of leaders and organizations and his commitment was so strong that he urged leaders to adopt a Win-Win perspective so strongly that any other option was "No Deal" because alternative positions generated distrust in relationships and were virtually guaranteed to impair long-term relationships between the parties.

The Win-Win position adopts the perspective of "ethical stewardship" which incorporates a commitment to the long-term creation of wealth, a respect for the leader's obligation to other stakeholders, and the pursuit of optimal benefits for participants and for society (Caldwell, et al., 2008). As suggested by Peter Block (2013), the leader's commitment to "service over self-interest" is a fundamental moral element of the leader as steward. As a morally virtuous perspective, the Win-Win philosophy honors the leader's ability to honor the ethical obligations implicit in leadership which Covey (1992, 2004, 2020) consistently advocated.

Applied to today's low trust work culture that has been documented extensively by the Gallup organization (Clifton & Harter, 2019), organization leaders can benefit extensively by demonstrating to their employees that they are committed to a Win-Win work relationship.

4. Guidelines for Achieving Win-Win

The challenges of leadership are often frustrating and complex and the task of earning the trust, commitment, and followership of employees is ever present (Craig, George & Snook, 2022). Reversing the unwillingness of employees to fully engage can be accomplished more easily when leaders and organizations adopt practices that demonstrate their commitment to their stakeholders and that reflect a personal commitment to those with whom and for whom they work (Ellera, Jamali & Caldwell, 2023). The following are guidelines that can help organizations to create a Win-Win culture and thereby earn the trust and commitment which are critical to creating successful organizations.

4.1 Clarify Your Purpose

Defining and formalizing one's individual purpose and using that purpose to clarify one's life direction enables leaders to focus their efforts and commit to achieving desired outcomes – including the philosophy that one adopts in decision-making. The most effective approach to clarifying purpose includes articulating both normative and instrumental outcomes related to that purpose. Normative outcomes are values based and instrumental outcomes are specific objectives to achieve in accomplishing one's purpose (Valentinov & Hajdu, 2021).

Clarifying one's purpose to others and communicating that purpose also serves to focus team efforts. Identifying that purpose and emphasizing it formally also serves to increase leader accountability and provides a framework for evaluating progress in achieving organizational goals and priorities (Schein & Schein, 2016). When leaders define their purpose as including earning their employees' trust, they are on the road to creating a Win-Win relationship. Leaders whose actions then mirror that announced purpose are increasingly likely to be perceived as worthy of being trusted (Caldwell & Ndalamba, 2017).

4.2 Affirm Your Moral Compass

A moral compass is the foundation or basis for each person in distinguishing between what that individual determines to be right and wrong (Thompson, 2010). Moral behavior honors the rights of others and seeks to optimize value for people and organizations (Doris, 2002). Moral standards transcend simply defining rules of conduct and alignment with established practices but also include understanding the importance of relationships, duties owed based upon a person's roles, and treating others with a concern for their welfare and growth (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021).

Each person establishes a moral identity based upon the standards which (s)he adopts as the criteria for her or his personal behavior (Burke & Stets, 2022). The core beliefs that are the basis for one's values and standards are a by-product of life experiences, personal history, and the roles played in each person's life (Caldwell & Hayes, 2007). These beliefs guide the moral compass of every individual and reflect the character, integrity, and consistency that are the basis for creating relationships with others and affirming or disconfirming a leader's personal credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Affirming a leader's moral compass demonstrates to employees the commitment to ethical stewardship that is consistent with the Win-Win philosophy (Covey, 2020).

4.3 Adopt the Win-Win Mindset

The mindset for creating a win-win result is to recognize that an individual win at the expense of others is not really a victory (Chambers, 2023). The goal of achieving success in relationships is to understand that the challenge is to create a long-term benefit for all parties rather than to simply accrue a short-term advantage for one party. This stewardship perspective enables a leader to communicate her or his commitment to the creation of value that benefits all participants (Caldwell, Hayes, Karri, & Bernal, 2008). Winning for both parties is about the accomplishment of mutually beneficial goals – and those goals are more likely to be achieved when collaboration occurs (Sinusold, 2020).

Transcending simply "being nice," the Win-Win mindset is about character and integrity (Covey, 2020). That mindset is about recognizing the value of cooperation and the advantages that working together can achieve (Covey, 2020). Because it requires taking a position that benefits both parties, the mindset earns the respect of others and sustains mutual trust. Adopting this mindset, combined with systems that reinforce commitment to employees, demonstrates the leader's respect for and genuine interest in others' best interests.

4.4 Understand Duties Owed

A common error made by many leaders is to overbalance their responsibility owed to stockholders and owners and to minimize their commitment to their employees (Pfeffer, 1998). The most effective leaders understand that their commitment to create long-term value for those who are financially invested in the firm is best achieved when all the stakeholders of a company are acknowledged as important. The Win-Win philosophy is ideal for understanding that every stakeholder's needs must be valued. The most profitable companies are those that are focused on achieving a worthy goal and whose employees are committed together to achieve shared objectives (Collins & Porras, 2004).

Understanding the duties that are owed to all stakeholders begins with identifying who those stakeholders are and recognizing that communicating with each of them is fundamentally important. Listening to stakeholder input and helping stakeholders to understand how the organization creates value enables leaders to explain the rationale for their decisions and builds the trust that is so critical to Win-Win collaboration (Hosmer, 2010). Win-Win decisions are most effectively made when decision makers have fully researched their options and have thoughtfully addressed the consequences of their decisions for each party (Covey, 2020).

4.5 Incorporate Humility in Relationships

Leader humility has increasingly been identified as a powerful contributor to the success of leaders and organizations (Anderson & Caldwell, 2019). Coupled with the fierce resolve to achieve worthy goals, humility demonstrates a leader's willingness to be responsible personally for an organization's failures or shortcomings while giving credit to others who contribute to an organization's success (Collins, 2001).

Humility integrates 1) a clear understanding and valuing of oneself; 2) a high regard for and the valuing and appreciation for others; and 3) a commitment to constantly learning and improving to honor one's obligations to self, others, and the world (Owens, 2009). Motivated by those three factors, leaders willingly hold themselves accountable to high standards while treating others with great respect and creating systems that help others to not only succeed but to feel appreciated (Pfeffer, 1998).

4.6 Commit to Excellence

Employees and organizations thrive when their leaders are committed to excellence and provide the resources required to be truly great (Beer, 2009). When leaders go the extra mile to create superb organizations, their employees are correspondingly more willing to give their best efforts (Collins, 2001). At the heart of the pursuit of excellence is hiring great employees and providing those employees with the support systems that empower and engage them (Glickman, 2023).

Excellence and quality are as similar as two sides of the same coin. Quality is more than simply conformance to specifications or the elimination of variance but is the fitness for use of a product or service, based upon the needs of each customer (Freeman, 2018). Companies epitomize the achievement of quality when they understand what customers are trying to accomplish and focus on helping those customers to succeed more efficiently and effectively (Christensen, 2016). A leader's commitment to excellence in creating a world class culture and organization is entirely consistent with the Win-Win values that generate greater empowerment and employee engagement (Clifton & Harter, 2019).

4.7 Examine Alternatives

A key element in the development of Win-Win options is the willingness and ability of the parties to creatively examine alternatives (Covey, 2020). In the Win-Win process, effective leaders assess alternatives to thoroughly understand their impacts on the parties. In the chaos of day-to-day business, the easy solution is to look for options that are expedient and easiest to implement. Upon reflection, however, many "quick and easy" solutions are often costly, send the wrong message to colleagues, and fail to accomplish what often needs to be done at the level required to achieve the best possible outcomes (Forman, 2020).

Identifying the cost of decisions made and comparing those decisions with better alternatives enables leaders to refine their decision process (Hosmer, 2010). One of the most effective ways to assess alternatives is to adopt a "scenario thinking" approach to future possibilities (Cairns & White, 2017). Utilizing a structured process for examining alternative scenarios enables individuals and organizations to examine possible options and the most effective way to respond. In a world where change is inevitable, engaging employees in anticipating future possibilities and planning for those possibilities increases others' trust in their leaders.

Each of these seven guidelines enhance the ability of leaders and organizations to implement a Win-Win approach that incorporates the best interests of the respective parties – thereby building employee commitment and willingness to be fully committed to their organizations.

5. Conclusion

The Win-Win approach to interpersonal relationships has measurable advantages for leaders, for employees, and for the organizations where leaders work. Reflecting on the implications of the Win-Win position and its impact on others is a wise investment for leaders to consider as they evaluate their assumptions about decision-making and its impact. Each of the seven guidelines identified herein aligns with the Win-Win perspective and clearly reflects the commitment to others that generates employee good will and trust.

The great value of treating employees with dignity, respect, and the pursuit of their best interests has been proven to increase employee productivity and performance (Cameron, 2021) and the Win/Win philosophy is a leadership approach that generates the trust and extra-mile performance that are so important for success in the modern organization.

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