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Using the Wheel of Learning to Make Decisions

The “Wheel of Learning” is a helpful tool for decision-making that was developed in connection with the concept of the “learning organization” (Ross, Smith & Roberts, 1994). It can help church leaders make sound decisions and plan for future improvement. I will briefly describe the concept and explain how church leaders can utilize it.

According to David Kolb’s theory of “experiential learning,” people learn in a cycle consisting of four stages:

- Concrete experience;
- Observation and reflection;
- Forming abstract concepts;
- Testing in new situations (Kolb, 1984).

Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) apply this learning cycle to the decision-making process. They suggest that, for any project or decision, each of these four stages demand deliberate attention before moving on to the next. They rename the four stages in this way:

- Reflecting: Evaluate the current situation.
- Connecting: Create ideas and possibilities for action.
- Deciding: Settle on a method for action.
- Doing: Perform the action.

These four stages also apply to team decision-making. The authors suggest these terms for the four stages of team decision-makings:

- Public reflection;
- Shared meaning;
- Joint planning;
- Coordinated action.

Most teams or organizations tend to skip one or more of these stages. The reflecting stage is the most frequently neglected because it appears to be a waste of time. It is important for church leaders to slow down the decision-making and take the time to work through each stage. Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) observe the following:

People who use the wheel recognize that they learn faster when they move slowly—when they are more thoughtful and take the time not just to react momentarily, but to try to understand more deeply what is going on at the moment. If you spend only a few minutes reflecting, you might spend days implementing—not so much to correct for mistakes, but to redesign in mid-action. (p. 61)

Building on Kolb’s theory of learning styles, Ross, Smith, and Roberts also suggest that individuals tend to be strong in one of the four areas. Some people excel at problem analysis and

brainstorming (Stage 1). Others are better at drawing hypotheses and suggest reasons why something happened (Stage 2). Others are better at finding solutions (Stage 3). And the rest excel at implementing the solution (Stage 4). You might think about whether your leadership team consists of people who can contribute in each of these four areas.

Using an intentional, self-conscious process like this for decision-making and planning can enable a church leadership team to be more confident in the outcome. Everyone on the team will be able to contribute to the process and support the final decision.

Sources:

Kolb, D. (1984). *[Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.](#)* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Amazon link:

Ross, R., Smith, S., & Roberts, C. (1994). The wheel of learning: Mastering the rhythm of a learning organization. In Senge, P., Ross, R., Smith, B., Roberts, C., & Kleiner, A. (Eds.), *[The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization](#)* (pp. 59-64). New York: Doubleday.

Links:

For a brief, critical overview of Kolb's concept of experiential learning, go to <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-explrn.htm>.

For an application of Kolb's theory to the church, check out Hendrix, J. (2003). *[Nothing never happens: Experiential learning and the church.](#)* Nashville: Smyth & Helwys.

For information on learning organizations, visit the website for the Society of Organizational Learning: <http://www.solonline.org/aboutsol/>.