

The Decision Maker Bible Study Companion

About Dennis Bakke: Real-Life Decision-Maker

While the people and situations of MedTec are fictional, author Dennis Bakke wrote *The Decision Maker* drawing on his years of real-life experience of creating, implementing, and refining the decision-maker process in his own workplace. Bakke is best known for his 21 years working alternately as co-founder, president, and CEO of AES, a Fortune 200 global power company. You can read about Bakke's time at AES—when he instituted a decision-maker process very similar to the one used at MedTec—in his book *Joy at Work* and the accompanying *Joy at Work Bible Study Companion*. Today, Bakke is CEO of Imagine Schools, a network of 70 charter public schools across 12 states that educates approximately 38,000 students.

But Bakke's story as a person and as a professional would be woefully incomplete without acknowledging his lifelong devotion to the Christian faith and his dedication to making that faith a vital cornerstone to his work in business. Since 1983, Dennis and his wife Eileen have led the Mustard Seed Foundation, an organization exclusively dedicated to providing financial grants internationally to churches and other Christian organizations. Even Bakke's time at AES, however, is evidence of an impassioned and faithful Christian at work: the decision-maker process recognizes the inherent goodness, uniqueness, and creativity in our fellow man, regardless of where our neighbor happens to be on the organizational chart. As *The Decision Maker* shows, empowering others to make decisions is not a superficial guise that only aspires to give a quick boost of improved numbers: the decision-maker process is about allowing each person in a company to fully realize their potential as a unique and gifted creation of God.

As Bakke grew up in his Christian home, he observed that church members seemed to get more credit for contributing to society if they did it within a Christian rather than a secular context, a perception he has sought to correct throughout his career. Searching for intersections between his desire to contribute, his calling, and his faith, he joined Christian Bible study and discussion groups and began to formulate a values- and principles-based approach to business. Bakke asserts that, regardless of where one is working, their work should be treated as a sacred responsibility. We are called upon to steward our talents and skills and to use them in stewardship of the planet where we apply them. Stretching all the way back to the Garden of Eden, the Creator has delegated the decisions about Earth's stewardship to us, and we ought to take that responsibility and accountability for our decisions as a sacred trust and as a duty to honor our Creator in all we do.

Whether your workplace has Christian affiliations or not, *The Decision Maker* has something to teach managers of every level to create a more positive and productive workplace. May the following discussion questions help you and your fellow

workers fully realize the many implications of the decision-maker process and illuminate what you can contribute to it.

Discussion Questions

Chapter One – “How Bad Is It?”

1. After the explosion, Tom is disheartened by both the financial disaster of the broken machine as well as the vacant looks on the faces of his employees—evidence of a broken company. Tom knows that the machine will be fixed once he spends money for repairs, “but people aren’t machines.” While nobody would turn down an offer for more money, in what ways does simply pumping in money fall short in creating a truly joyful workplace or a holistically satisfied person?
2. How do your own answers align with Biblical passages that relate to finance? (Biblical passages pertaining to money include First Timothy 6, Ecclesiastes 5:10-20, and Matthew 6:19-34.)

Chapter Two – “Lipstick on a Pig”

1. It becomes evident to Tom that many of his employees are not happy at work. Do you think that Tom is more interested in creating a workplace of superficial happiness or a workplace of authentic joy?
2. MedTec employees’ perception of work is an understandably common one: “Work’s not supposed to be fun. [...] That’s why they call it work.” What new thoughts would a weary worker have to introduce to their daily mindset in order to arrive at the perception of work that we find in Ecclesiastes 5:10-20?

Chapter Three – “The Big Game”

1. Just as Tom’s son Jason is able to excel when the basketball is in his hands, feeling that we are in control of a situation can be empowering and satisfying. Who do you feel is holding the ball in your life right now—is it you, or is it someone else?
2. If you don’t feel that you are in control, what steps can you take to regain that control without instigating a power struggle?

Chapter Four – “That’s Your Decision”

1. For Tom, the ultimate reason for doing business is something greater than the bottom line: “And profits aren’t the point of doing business. They’re like breathing. You have to have them to stay alive but they’re not your reason for living.” What does this statement tell you about Tom’s beliefs?
2. In what ways does the Bible agree or disagree with Tom’s value system?

Chapter Five – “Basic Assumptions”

1. Do Tom’s affirming words towards the MedTec employees resonate with you?
2. Which of these traits do you feel that you especially have as a worker within yourself?

Chapter Six – “You’re the Expert”

1. Angela asks Tom some pointed questions about the new decision-maker process. What is the difference between asking constructive, challenging questions and pestering your other co-workers? Which style do you think Angela accomplishes in this scene?

Chapter Seven – “It’s All Up To You”

1. Vanessa feels like she won’t be able to handle the new decision-making responsibilities that Tom is giving her. If you were given new decisions to make right now, would you feel uncomfortable like Vanessa? What aspects of the decision-making process feel overwhelming to you?

Chapter Eight – “The Ugly Ditch”

1. Ben has a different set of concerns than Vanessa about the decision-making process: namely, he is extremely hesitant to delegate meaningful decisions to other members of his team. Share a time when you would have been better served relying on the input of others instead of shouldering excessive responsibility yourself.

Chapter Nine – “What About Them?”

1. Share a time when you were able to use your creativity to its fullest potential.
2. In what ways do these examples of creativity reflect the traits of our Creator?

Chapter Ten – “Watch the Numbers”

1. Read Job 31:24 and Psalms 22:8. Who or what do you instinctively turn to and trust in times of crisis?
2. The decision maker process would not be possible if people within a company do not trust each other. What does a trustworthy co-worker look like in your workplace—and does that resemble you?

Chapter Eleven – “If You’re Serious”

1. How would your interactions with those around you change if you stopped treating everybody the same and started treating everybody with fairness?

Chapter Twelve – “Fallible”

1. We are all fallible: but the way we react in the midst of mistake or failure can be even more important than committing the actual mistake itself. After a mistake has been made, what is the best way the person who made the mistake can react in order to help the entire team move on?
2. Do you have enough confidence in yourself and trust in those around you to confess when it’s you who has made the mistake? If you’ve been in this scenario before, were you shown grace by those around you?

Chapter Thirteen – “Advice”

1. Who or what do you first consult when you need advice?
2. In what ways do you use the Bible as an advisor for your personal and business decisions?

Chapter Fourteen – “A Giant Leap”

1. How does the Advice Process create and encourage a tighter-knit community?

Chapter Fifteen – “A Decision This Big”

1. Do you feel that Jim is justified in his hesitancy to go along with Tom’s plan?
2. What distinguishes a co-worker who provides challenging, insightful questions and one who only pesters and irritates?

Chapter Sixteen – “See How It Works”

1. Sam is very interested in Tom’s new methods of running MedTec. Of course, what intrigues Sam is not a slick sales pitch from Tom about the decision-maker process, but rather the positive outcomes it produces for MedTec. In the same way, we might have a “sales pitch” handy describing our commitment to the Christian faith, but it’s inconsequential compared to the ultimate outcomes that our faith has on our lives. What do the outcomes in your life say about your journey in the faith?

Chapter Seventeen – “Human Resources?”

1. How does the request for total budget transparency change your perception of the Decision Maker model?
2. What does Biblical financial stewardship look like in business?

Chapter Eighteen – “The Plan”

1. If the decision was yours, would you adopt a mindset of total transparency in your business? What key factors would influence your decision?
2. When you are tasked with making important decisions, like Jorgen is in this chapter, how do you integrate the advice that you receive into your final decision?

Chapter Nineteen – “The Big Picture”

1. In an effort to be fair—with fairness meaning treating everybody differently, instead of the same—MedTec has allowed each department to set their own budget. Do you agree or disagree that this is an equitable, fair, and beneficial way to structure a business?
2. The changes that Tom and Jim describe to Helen have resulted in an improved working culture and higher job satisfaction. How do you feel about your own job? Is it a place that you enjoy working?

Chapter Twenty – “A Few Questions”

1. If workers were empowered to make decisions, do you think that most of them would abide by the advice process, like Veronica, or find ways to avoid it, like Ben?

Chapter Twenty-One – “Their Own Ideas”

1. What do you think motivated Ben to avoid the advice process?
2. Share of a time when you received wise advice but chose to ignore it. How did the situation end up working out?
3. If you were Tom, how would you have responded to Ben’s refusal to seek advice?

Chapter Twenty-Two – “The New Standards”

1. Anton and Nora identified a potential issue with Ben’s decision. What does Ben’s response say about his character?
2. When someone else notices a problem with one of your own decisions, how are you likely to respond? What does your response say about your character?

Chapter Twenty-Three – “Hear Me Out”

1. By empowering Anton to make such an important decision, Tom and Jim show their level of commitment to the decision-maker process. If you were in Tom and Jim’s spot, would you feel comfortable handing off such an important decision to a lower-level worker? What would hold you back?

Chapter Twenty-Four – “Every Man for Himself”

1. Sam runs into problems as he attempts to implement the decision-maker process because he is only interested in its potential profitability—not in the ways that it values and esteems his workers. As you have learned about the decision-maker process, have you approached it more like Tom or more like Sam?
2. Sam takes shortcuts in the decision-maker process by only delegating those decisions that didn’t feel important to him in the first place. Share an example of a time when you’ve taken a shortcut instead of fully committing to a plan of action. How did this shortcut affect the final outcome?

Chapter Twenty-Five – “That Kind of Boss”

1. Sophia compares Tom’s implementation of the decision-maker process at MedTec to a marriage. Do you agree or disagree with Sophia’s analogy?

Chapter Twenty-Six – “The Bottom Line”

1. If you were in Anton’s place, what decision would you have made?

Chapter Twenty-Seven – “Is That Your Decision?”

1. How did Ben’s actions in the second round of the advice process change the ultimate outcome of his decisions?
2. Do you agree with the thinking that Ben should be the one decide whether he is still a MedTec employee or not?

Chapter Twenty-Eight – “The Final Call”

1. Do you think Tom would still abide by the decision-maker process if his conversation with Katy turned out negatively? Would you?

Chapter Twenty-Nine – “This Place Is Special”

1. What surprises you about the stories that Vanessa’s and Anton’s families share with Tom at the company picnic?
2. Jim tells Tom about what he believes is the true “bottom line” in business: “Creating a company where people know they’re part of something important. Treating them like people, not machines. Giving them a chance to contribute and

learn. [...] That matters to me.” Do you think that Jim has an admirable purpose for his life?

3. As a Christian, how do you feel that the purpose for your life is manifested in your work? Do you believe that you are currently part of something important?

Chapter Thirty – “Let Me Explain”

1. How well does Tom’s belief in people model God’s belief in people?

2. Does your company’s current culture look like MedTec at the beginning of the book, or the end? Where would you like it to be?