PRIORITY DECISION MAKING

A useful long-range planning technique to help get the most from your resources.

by **TERRY NELSON**

EVERY good decision made is a step forward. Formulating good decisions in the golf course environment often requires a consensus among board members, committee members, or owners. Commonly, people who speak the most tend to influence decision making the most and leave other participants with a lesser impact. A system that affords equal input and is more objective in reaching the best decisions will likely generate the best results. The process described in this article has worked very well for our 36-hole Whitefish Lake Golf Club (Montana). I first learned of this system of decision evaluation in the mid-1980s while attending a workshop for healthcare providers. The basis of the information is from a book entitled, *How to Make Decisions That Pay Off,* written by J. Daniel Mathien and Morris Squire.

The process develops objective decision making on two levels and then graphically depicts the results. This rather unique approach has the flexibility to be used in committee or individual decision making situations. It combines the best of brainstorming (collecting ideas) with management by objectives to develop time-effective, efficient problem solving.

Participants develop creativity in looking at problems from all angles using brainstorming techniques. Brainstorming allows ideas to flow without any barrier or censorship. Often, functional fixation interferes with our thought process and blocks the most creative ideas, so the free flow of ideas brings forth new solutions.

As you move through the process of making priority-based decisions, you will learn how to quickly value each item in relation to other ideas and just how important a particular idea or project could be. The final product will enable the committee to focus resources on those projects that offer the highest opportunity to yield the greatest return.

The process begins by gathering a group of people with a common focus, such as your green committee, general manager, golf professional, course officials, and golf course superintendent. The group collects ideas for projects that will improve the golf course playability, appeal, efficiency, or overall condition. These ideas come from brainstorming and input from the superintendent, architect, USGA agronomist, golf professional, committee members, and suggestions from players. Brainstorming, if used effectively, offers the best opportunity for unique solutions or divergent thought (remember that during brainstorming there are no bad ideas, so just collect, don't evaluate at this level). Perhaps your facility needs new cart paths, an improved irrigation system, larger putting greens, a better practice facility, flower gardens, etc.

As the list of ideas is compiled, it is time to enter the second stage. This is referred to as *objective setting.* The participants select a non-duplicated list of ideas (usually between 10 to 20) to evaluate on an intensive level. These ideas are listed numerically on the paired weighting worksheet (Figure 1). The participants are then asked to assign a relative value to these items by comparing each item to every other item.

Figure 1
Paired Weighting Worksheet

Item	Paired comparison grid	Value	%
1. Plant trees between 1 and 12	① ① 1 ① ① 1 ① 1 ① / 2 3 ④ 5 6 ⑦ 8 ⑨ 10	1= 6	30
2. Reconstruct practice facility net	2 2 2 2 2 2 2 ② / ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ 10	2= 1	40
3. Increase tee size at practice facility	3 3 ③ 3 3 3 ③ / ④ ⑤ 6 ⑦ ⑧ ⑨ 10	3= 3	80
4. Enlarge No. 3 green	④ ④ ④ ④ 4 ④ / 5 6 7 8 ⑨ 10	4= 8	40
5. Relocate cart path No. 11	5 5 ⑤ 5 ⑤ / ⑥ ⑦ 8 ⑨ 10	5= 4	60
6. Landscape club entrance	6 ⑥ 6 ⑥ / ⑦ 8 ⑨ 10	6= 4	25
7. Enlarge No. 4 tee	⑦ 7 ⑦ / 8 ⑨ 10	7= 7	60
8. Add forward tee No. 16	8 ⑧ / ⑨ 10	8= 3	65
9. Replace pump station	⑨ / 10	9= 9	30
10. Cut down hill No. 8		10= 0	90

- Key question — If you could have equal amount of 1 or N, which would you like a little more of (or which is more important)?
- Circle the appropriate number.
- Always work from left to right.
- Enter the total number of circles under value.
- Enter percentage satisfaction based on a scale of 0% to 100%, with 50% "just getting by."
- Plot the reference numbers by value/percentage on the opportunity profile (Figure 2).

Paired weighting worksheet. Ideas for the golf course can be listed and compared against one another to prioritize importance. Current levels of satisfaction are also identified on this worksheet.

This comparative valuation is called *paired weighting* and is step three of the process. The example in Figure 1 shows a paired weighting worksheet for 10 items and can be expanded to cover any number selected. Experience suggests that more than 20 ideas can be cumbersome.

The most effective method of utilizing the worksheet is to move from left to right along the top line with each participant *independently* comparing item 1 with each other item (1-2, 1-3, 1-4, and so on). The key question in paired weighting is, "If I could have equal parts of #1 or #2 (1 or 3, 1 or 4), which one would I want a little more?" (or which is more important?). Use your first impression and circle the appropriate number. Continue the process with item #1 (moving from left to right), then move to the second line, then the third, etc. Circle or mark your choice for each item in all instances. You do not work back up the page.

The relative valuation is found by counting the total number of times you circle or mark each item (as in the attached example). As you count, be sure to mark the items to avoid duplication in totals. It works best to count from left to right on line one, and then

Priority decision making should involve input from the golf course superintendent, green committee, golf professional, club officials, architect, and USGA agronomist. Good planning will help prevent unwelcome surprises.

from top down and then left to right (an "L" shape). Record the total number of times each item was circled or marked on the right side of the sheet. You will now have an objective view of how each participant values each item in relation to every other item.
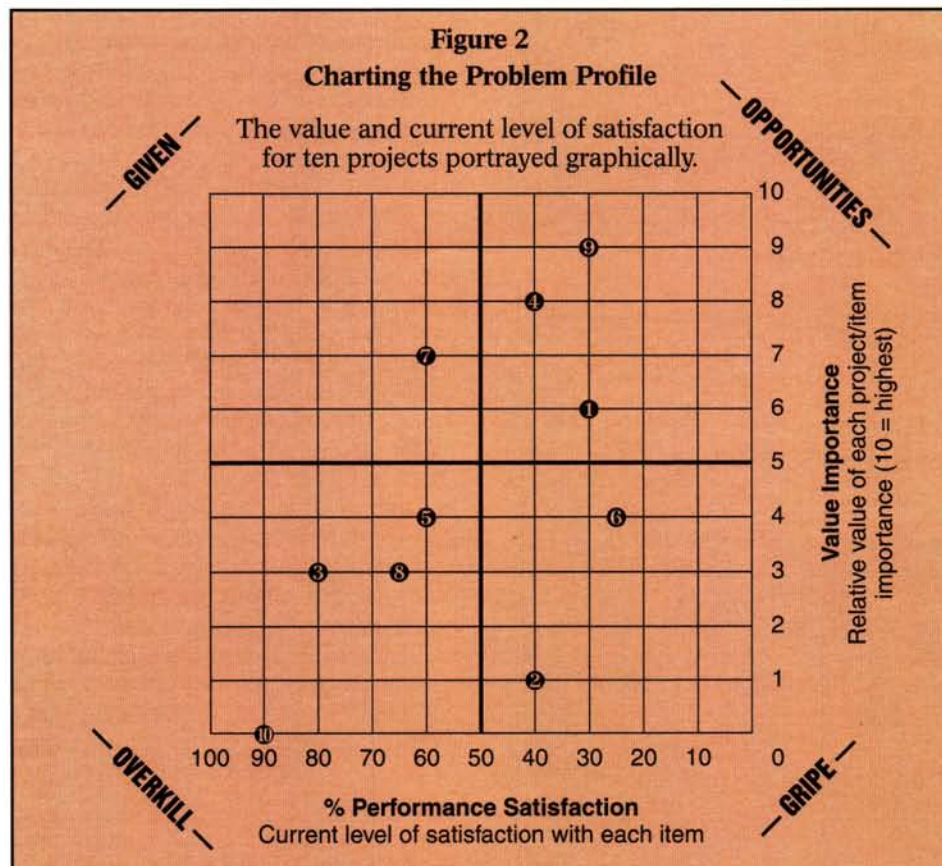
The next step is to measure each participant's *subjective level of satisfaction* relative to each of the ideas selected. This is done by asking the question, "On a scale of 0 to 100, with 50 considered getting by, how satisfied am I with this item?" An example might be your car – if you have a brand-new BMW, you might give it a 90 to 100%. If you have a two-year-old Ford Taurus, you might give it a 50% (you're getting by). If you have a ten-year-old Plymouth Reliant, you may give it 10% or 15%. Score each item and record your percent level of satisfaction to the right of the previously recorded value as shown in the attached example.

You now have established your personal value for each item and also your percent level of satisfaction. With these two measurements you can develop your *opportunity profile*. In Figure 2, the opportunity profile is set up with 10 parameters. As you expand the number of parameters (items to evaluate), simply enlarge the graph. Always keep the horizontal axis at the midpoint of the number of objectives on your list.

You will see that the axis divides the graph into four quadrants. The upper left is an area of high value and high satisfaction. This area contains the *givens* because the items falling there are highly valued and with which you are satisfied. The lower left contains items of low value with which you are also satisfied. You don't value these items highly, but you have high satisfaction. These are classified as *overkill* items.

To the right of the 50% satisfaction line, the lower right half contains items of low value and low levels of satisfaction. This is the *gripes* area. In the upper right quadrant of your graph will fall the items of highest value and current lowest level of satisfaction. It is these items that offer the true *opportunities* to improve your operation.

Figure 2
Charting the Problem Profile

GIVEN / OPPORTUNITIES /

The value and current level of satisfaction for ten projects portrayed graphically.

Value Importance
Relative value of each project/item importance (10 = highest)

OVERKILL / GRIPE /

% Performance Satisfaction
Current level of satisfaction with each item

Opportunity profile. Plotting the average importance and level of satisfaction for each idea for the golf course will identify which yields the greatest return on investment.

In many cases, a poorly functioning irrigation system deserves the highest priority for improvement.

Bunker renovation is an inevitable necessity at most older golf courses. Objective analysis may identify this as a priority.

Perhaps a regrassing program is a priority that will improve presentation and playing quality.

In Figure 2 you will see a graphic portrayal of the values from Figure 1. Reviewing the graph, you can ignore those items classified as *overkill* and *gripes,* while working to maintain those that are *givens.* Those items classified as *opportunities* deserve your attention because any investment of time, effort, resources, or money will give you the greatest incremental rate of return on your unit of investment.

By working through the process you have creatively examined all of your options, established value and level of satisfaction, and objectively determined the best *opportunities* for solving a problem or making a decision.

To develop a group consensus, you simply graph the group's *average* value and level of satisfaction for each item. It is important to note that any individual can vary widely from the norm. Based on results, each person may want to ask what the group knows that they don't, or if they are biased related to a certain item. Those consensus items with a high degree of agreement (low standard deviation) and falling into the opportunity area will provide the greatest payback for the group or organization as a whole.

This process helps determine which objectives should be seriously considered. The whole idea is to describe the perfect situation, and not to worry about what it is like today. This puts us in a *forward thinking mode* and away from projecting the future based on our past experiences. You may find as I have that the group will support the results found using this process and that members feel they had equal input in solving operational problems.

The graph that depicts your organization's consensus makes it easy to make decisions that pay back the quickest. The visualization of the graph makes the best opportunities obvious to the group. Any budgeting process should consider those areas described as highest and best opportunities as goals to accomplish as soon as feasible. In the fictitious example presented here, the committee prioritized a new pump station, no. 3 green, and the need to add trees between holes 1 and 12.

This process can be repeated every few years to help the managing body to develop and review their long-range plan.

TERRY NELSON *is a USGA Green Section committeeman and club secretary at the Whitefish Lake Golf Club.*