

Chapter Twelve

Team Decisions: Fact or Fiction?

Several years ago, I began to see a trend in my consulting work. People tended to be very uncomfortable dealing with conflict in a team setting, something that was negatively impacting their ability to engage in effective discussion and to execute decisions with commitment. It was a particularly intractable problem with a certain IT leadership team at a telecommunications company; and they had quite a few projects that were in jeopardy because of it. I decided to design a new exercise for their upcoming team effectiveness session I was facilitating. During the off-site meeting, I asked the participants to remember and jot down their thoughts about the last time this team had a really *great* discussion that resulted in a very effective decision. I also asked them to list all of the factors that contributed to the effectiveness of this discussion and decision. I noticed people doodling on their page, squirming nervously in their chairs, and glancing around furtively; but no one was writing down a thing. I asked them if the question wasn't clear. Did I need to explain it further? "No, it's clear," one member said. "It's just that we really don't make decisions as a team. We'll start to talk about something here, and then a few members of the team are assigned to take it off-line and deal with it. Most of the time we don't even know how it got resolved."

I was amazed. This group was missing out on one of the most exciting and rewarding parts of being a team: working together to solve problems creatively. At first, I thought that perhaps the problem just affected this one team. But, after engaging a few more teams in this exercise, I realized that this was in fact true for the majority; and I think that the teams were even surprised by the results of this exercise. I'm continually stunned by how few decisions teams actually make—but need to. I think the vast majority need to make more decisions as a group, but oftentimes don't view decision making as the work of the team. Their gatherings or staff meetings are more likely to serve the purpose of reporting on what they have been doing, and providing highlights of what's coming up—not to tap into the collective knowledge and creativity of the team to solve really tough issues.

Some teams and their leaders have justified this situation by explaining that their organization is just too siloed; they simply don't have enough information to make decisions as a team. Besides, things are happening too fast; you can't slow down to get everyone's opinion on every little thing and make a group decision. Of course, the execution of the decision suffers on many occasions, because team leaders didn't have time to seek the input of others; but that is just the price you have to pay in a new environment that is organized for speed and efficiency versus effectiveness.

Most humans likely consider their problem-solving skills trump those of our feathered, four-legged, and finned counterparts. Yet when we look at the animal kingdom, we can find ample instances of incredibly effective *group* decision-making taking place. It's called *swarm intelligence*, something that profoundly influences the behavior of ant colonies, schools of fish, flocks of birds, and herds of horses; and something that is being applied today to improve the efficiency of traffic patterns, responses to 911 calls, and searches of earthquake-damaged buildings for survivors. Cornell University biologist Thomas Seeley's discoveries, which explored the mysterious decision-making ability of honeybees, were described in an article in *National Geographic* magazine: "The bees' rules for decision-making—seek a diversity of opinions, encourage a free competition among ideas, and use an effective mechanism to narrow choices—so impressed Seeley that he now

uses them at Cornell as chairman of his department.” (If you want to see the fireflies’ version of swarm intelligence—where individual actions come together to have a much greater impact than any one could alone—then you will love Chapter 19!)

So—how much does *your* group resemble this swarm of honeybees? How many decisions do *you* make as a team? Too few; too many? I would guess it is the former, rather than the latter; and if you aren’t sure, ask the team to participate in the same exercise that I conducted with the IT team. If you get great feedback, you can skip this chapter and go on to the next one. If you don’t, then I have a few suggestions for a process (which I explore in greater detail in this chapter and those following) that will help to improve the decision-making ability of your team:

- First, the team needs to believe that they will *find more creative solutions and make better decisions* if they have purposefully created an environment that promotes each person’s ability to bring their unique strengths—and offer their diverse perspectives—to the team.
- Second, there needs to be an *agreed-upon process* for making the decisions—and the team leader needs to clearly explain this process—along with the rationale for choosing this approach, immediately and up front.
- Third, team *leaders* need to be *mindful of their role* in the decision-making process; and must acknowledge that they can be a force for either good or evil.
- Fourth—as mentioned above with the example of the honeybees—there needs to be a wide *variety of ideas freely offered* before making a final decision.
- Fifth, there needs to be *clarity* when the team has reached the point where they *should make—or have made—a decision*; and accept that it is time to move on, getting people to commit to a plan for executing the decision.
- Finally, there needs to be a *mechanism for tracking* the effectiveness of the decisions that the team has made—one that makes members comfortable with revisiting and revising decisions based on new information.

Much of the work described in my chapters leading up to this point will guide you in creating this kind of safe environment; one that allows *a diversity of opinions* to be heard. Team members need to acknowledge that both their own and others' opinions have value, even if they are vastly different. The team needs to find ways to discover and continually emphasize these diverse perspectives. Not only will this stimulate better decision making, it will also, in fact, be better for each person's individual job satisfaction. Research shows that when people get to do the work they do best more often, superior productivity, discretionary effort, engagement, joy, retention, and loyalty result. Great teams play to their strengths; they clearly know who the competition is, and keep their sights focused on what they do and how to defeat them. They expend as much effort as they possibly can to being their best as individuals, a team, and an organization.

After you acknowledge the inherent value of each person's diverse perspective, the next step is to assure everyone that it is okay if this creative abrasion leads to conflict—as long as these differences of opinion remain focused on the issue or problem at hand do *not* get personal. I would expect and want people to passionately debate and share their ideas, as long as they don't denigrate another person's ideas (and thus, that person) in the process. You will be able to make better and faster decisions if the team has collectively created an environment where each person feels equally safe to share their honest perspectives, without a sense of the artificial harmony to which Patrick Lencioni refers in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.

This is the way I describe that behavior to teams. Do you remember the bobble-head dogs that people would place in their car rear windows? You get the picture—they nod relentlessly. Well, if you as the leader ask the question, "Is everyone on board with this decision and our plan of action?" and you see anything even slightly resembling a bobble-head from the people on your team and not a question or a word of concern ... then you might be experiencing artificial harmony! So what do you do if you see this? Don't take them at their word (or nonwords, so to speak). Ask questions of *them*! Ask them to tell *you* all the things that could go wrong, all the iffy assumptions that have been built in, who we *must*

convince this is a good idea . . . and then you bring the renewed energy, candor, and creativity of the team to bear and address those challenges together!

For this process to be truly effective, however, several necessary pieces must be in place for the team to create a fertile environment for productive conflict. One obviously critical element is for the team leader to role model what this looks like; and I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. But what about the rest of the team; what can *they* do to promote this inviting environment? Well, just like you have ground rules to make your meeting more effective (e.g., start and end on time, limit side bar conversations, forbid multitasking), a team also needs to create *conflict norms* that beget productive discussions that will lead to decisions to which everyone can—and *will*—commit. So let me return to the exercise that I talked about at the beginning of this chapter.

After I got over my initial surprise about the IT team's lack of group decision-making—and the corresponding dearth of *norms* to which they could refer back—I helped them to take the only logical next step: create them. I truly believe that generating these principles themselves enhances any team's commitment to uphold them. Several people said they had some ideas of what the guidelines might be, even though this particular team had never used them before. I suggest that you and your team do the same; don't get hung up on whether you currently have any rules. Simply move on to create them; and use them going forward.

But how do you do this effectively? You might begin by asking each member to write down three to five norms that would lead the group as a whole to more productive conflict and make better decisions; that is, conditions that would need to be in place for this to happen. Don't worry about the exact wording at this point; just get the gist of an idea. If the team has many members—or if the environment doesn't make this kind of open, candid discussion realistic quite yet—then have members create small groups of three to four people to share what they wrote down. They then can discuss and agree upon the suggestions that they think are best for this team at this stage in their growth. Again, don't worry about wording at this point; we are simply looking for trends across

the various groups. Are we seeing any kind of pattern? Are you hearing the same repeatedly? If so, then you know you have hit on something. Another way to approach this step is simply to hand each person five sticky notes and a black marker, and then ask them to jot down one idea per note. There is great anonymity in the same color notes and markers. You can then group together the notes that seem to be addressing the same issue.

You have now identified some general themes or concepts for what these norms might be. What next? While you could keep the whole group together to wordsmith each one, I prefer a simpler and more engaging approach. Let people form (new) small groups to work on the single theme about which they feel most strongly. This incites the favorable consequence of having internal champions who will ensure that others adhere to these norms, since they were so deeply involved in their very creation. After about 15 minutes of work, ask the groups to share their draft norms. You want people to react to these by asking them questions such as: “What do you like about it? What would you change? Will we be able to know if someone is living up to the norm—that is, can we see it in action?”

This last point is very important. Beware of vague mom and apple pie norms like “Show respect.” After all, how will you *really* know if someone is showing respect? The very definition of the word respect can vary greatly from one person to the next. As much as possible, leave little room open for interpretation, and make each rule measurable and actionable.

I have had the opportunity over the last several years to work with dozens of teams in creating these conflict norms. Next are some of the general categories into which they tend to fall, and examples of each. Sometimes, when I need to jump-start the process or if I have limited time with a team, I will simply hand them this list with these corresponding instructions:

Choose four to six conflict norms that you think would help this team have productive conflict and make more effective decisions. Feel free to alter the wording, or write your own.

- **Common Goal**

- Establish a common goal that the group fully understands
- Ground the group by stating the objective of the discussion
- Define the topic, problem, or opportunity

- **Environment**

- Provide an opportunity for every voice to be heard
- Ensure open and respectful dialogue—do not belittle people or their ideas
- Create an environment in which team members feel safe to question and/or challenge

- **Participant Behavior**

- Speak so others can *hear* your message
- Remain engaged and attentive, and consider everyone's input
- Seek first to understand, *then* to be understood

- **Decision Parameters**

- Acknowledge the necessary speed or timeline in which a decision needs to be made
- Confirm if it is a decision to be made by the team or simply a request for team *input*
- Provide guidelines and boundaries for each decision to be made

- **Decision Process**

- Provide appropriate advance information to people in time for effective discussion and decision making
- Act on facts and data without analysis paralysis—don't get stuck admiring the problem
- Clarify pros, cons, and risks of options or potential solutions

- **Commitment to Outcome**

- Be decisive and make certain that all members commit to a decision
- When we leave this room, we all speak with one voice

- Although consensus is not necessary, full *support* of the decision is required

An important factor to consider is that cultural differences may exist within a group, particularly in relation to individual levels of comfort with conflict arising during a team meeting. A variety of reasons can influence people's perceptions of the value of and the appropriate way to handle conflict, such as the country or region in which they were born, their nationality or ethnic makeup, how they were raised, and various other life experiences that have shaped them. This makes the need to reach agreement on the norms that dictate how *the team* will deal with conflict that much more critical. Just because conflict may not overtly explode during decision making does not mean that it doesn't exist. It could mean that dissent has just gone underground and is biding time until it can come out later in the form of undermining decisions and delay tactics. By keeping the conflict below the surface and neglecting to address it in a straightforward manner, you run the risk of gaining compliance, but failing to achieve any true commitment to these team decisions. Thus, even though some members may not have joined the team with a high level of comfort with conflict, the team as a whole must become adept at facing and managing it.

I have seen the impressive impact on teams who make the courageous choice to embrace conflict. I was working with a particular group of leaders for a wonderful school, who had exerted a great deal of effort to overcome their natural tendency to gloss over conflict. The norms they created were very effective, because they reflected what *they* most needed to keep in mind and improve upon when making decisions. I came back about a month later and passed one of the team members in the hall. Louise was very excited to see me. "We just had a great fight in our staff meeting this morning. You would have been so proud of us!" When I ran into the team leader a short while later, without my even asking him about it, he said—with a rueful smile on his face—"Well, the team is certainly more *animated* than they've been in the past!" (Remember the old adage—be careful what you ask for, you just might get it!) These team members were now able

to express a sense of passion—and yes, even passionate disagreement—about their work with which they had never before been comfortable; one that would help them face and resolve their most pressing issues.

Now on to my second point: that there needs to be an *agreed upon process* for making the decisions. Perhaps I should be right up front here: I am not expecting that *every* decision truly be a team decision. However, *almost* every decision could benefit from receiving robust team *input*. Although there will certainly be some instances in which the leader should decide alone, I promise you that this should very much be the exception rather than the rule.

So, with all of these caveats in mind, how do you know the best approach to take? I have two words for you: Vroom-Yetton. Most teams to whom I utter these words have never heard them before; but I promise that you will find this decision-making framework (named for its creators Victor Vroom and Phillip Yetton) to be simple and invaluable.

Vroom-Yetton is a powerful tool for determining and making explicit how groups will make decisions. It provides the leader with a thought process for determining the optimum level of involvement of others in the decision, which will then allow the leader to make that rationale explicit to the team. I've usually found that team members know they won't be making every decision, and they don't mind *not* having the absolute final decision-making authority, as long as they understand the decision process up front and view it as fair. What the team does *not* appreciate is being under the impression that the leader wants them to make the decision, and then having that authority taken away. When a manager takes the decision back, it can leave members feeling as though they did something wrong, which seems like failure to the team. That is *never* a good place to start if you want commitment to the final decision.

On the other hand, you as the leader can use this framework to help you think through which level of input you want from the team, before you even engage them in the discussion of the issue. Thus, you are much less likely to need to yank that authority back from them and you can more clearly share your expectations with them, right up

front, at the outset. The levels of the *Vroom-Yetton Decision Making Model* are as follows:

- **Autocratic**
 - A1: Leader solves the problem alone using information that is readily available to him/her.
 - A2: Leader obtains additional information from group members, and then makes decision alone. Group members may or may not be informed of the final decision.
- **Consultative**
 - C1: Leader shares problem with group members individually and asks for information and evaluation. Group members do not meet collectively, and leader makes decision alone.
 - C2: Leader shares problem with group members collectively, but makes decision alone.
- **Group Based**
 - G2: Leader meets with group to discuss situation. Leader focuses and directs discussion, but does not impose will. Group makes final decision.

So with all of these levels to choose from, how can a manager decide which is the most appropriate for each decision? Here are some of the factors to consider when making this choice:

- **Need for complete buy-in:** The more commitment needed from the team to ensure effective execution, the more involved they should be.
- **Learning opportunity for the team:** If the team can use this problem to improve its capacity for making effective decisions in the future or to gain greater knowledge of the issue at hand, then ask them for more input.
- **Criticality of the decision:** If the decision is extremely critical, the leader may not have the freedom to allow as much involvement as might otherwise be the case. On the other hand, the leader may decide that, given the importance of the decision, there needs to be *greater* involvement by the team to ensure that they've fully

vetted all options. Be sure to explain the rationale for whichever choice you make, and if you decide upon limiting team involvement, then identify other ways of gaining their commitment to executing this critical decision.

- **Breadth of impact of the decision:** The broader the impact, the broader the involvement should be. This will give you a greater opportunity to take all of the critical constituents' viewpoints into account when you develop the solution, and when you plan implementation of the decision.
- **Difficulty of execution:** The more difficult the execution, the greater the need is to get the entire team involved. You do not want to be pushing that boulder up the hill all by yourself, and you cannot possibly foresee all of the things that will need to be done if you make the decision alone. You don't want to count on others' engagement if they didn't have skin in the game when the decision was made.
- **Complexity of the problem:** This factor can prompt you to go either way. One might argue that the issue is so complex that you need to get the full involvement of the team because no one person—the team leader included—can have the necessary knowledge and breadth of understanding to make this difficult decision on their own. On the other hand, this very complexity may make it too difficult for the leader to explain the situation to the rest of the team, and thereby give them a credible role to play. This would require the leader to make the decision individually.
- **Individuals' knowledge or credibility on the topic:** If the leader has limited knowledge on the topic, then bringing the rest of the team into the equation obviously makes great sense. If a member of the team were the one who lacks knowledge, then I would still recommend including that person in the discussions for two reasons. First, it will broaden their understanding of the topic; and second, a certain amount of ignorance about an issue can sometimes be a great vehicle for challenging the assumptions that everyone else accepts as true.

- **Timing:** If speed is of the essence, then the leader may not be able to involve the whole team. When the building is burning, you don't want to be debating alternative escape routes if one person absolutely knows the one best way. I find, however, that people tend to use this need for speed as an excuse for expediency versus effectiveness.

The third part of the equation for effective team decisions is the role of the team leader. This element is so critical to the creative exploration of solutions, effective decision-making, and successful execution, that I have devoted the entire following chapter—"What to Do if the Leader Is Keeping Too Tight a Lid on the Jar"—to it.

I will therefore move on to the next critical phase—ensuring that you are remaining open to a wide variety of ideas before making a final decision. As I have stated repeatedly throughout this book—while our differences may sometimes be irritating, they can spur us to look at situations, problems, and opportunities more creatively if we begin with a curious mind. Unfortunately, I have seen the opposite occur in many group-setting situations. When people know that they are attending a meeting where an important decision will be made, there is often a lot of jockeying for position that occurs before anyone steps foot in the door. People sell their ideas beforehand to save time instead of truly coming to learn about potential, viable alternatives.

How do you deal with this kind of preconceived decision making? By reinforcing that curious mind through a balancing act of inquiry and advocacy. I initially learned about this wonderful technique when I was an Organization Effectiveness Manager at Coca-Cola. We were learning how to use a variety of tools from Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. This book introduces a very straightforward concept for teams to understand and use—one that, despite its simplicity, seems almost revolutionary to many a leader.

The unfortunate truth is that most team members have already formed a conclusion about what they think is the right approach; and it can take a great deal of effort to put that mind-set aside and openly request the other's point of view. We are too often working our hardest to convince each other

of the correctness of our conclusion, position, or actions. But true creativity and conflict resolution screams out for inquiry, not for the other person to simply stop talking so that you can interject your opinion. After all, it's hard to hear others above the voice speaking in your own head—isn't it? Inquiry prompts you to focus your energy on truly listening and comprehending another's point of view instead of on defending *your* position.

It has been my experience that the vast majority of people have no problem advocating their opinions; heck, that's what you expect a real leader and strong team member to do, right? Well, I would like to suggest that *true* leadership is something different. When someone offers an idea for a solution that you disagree with, you stop yourself from saying "That wouldn't work." Instead, begin with inquiry by asking, "Can you help me to understand your thinking on that?" or "What leads you to suggest that would be a good alternative?" and then really listen to their response. You just might be surprised.

I have found two other procedural techniques that go a long way toward ensuring a lively discourse on alternative solutions. The first is very simple: send information out to the participants in advance, and expect them to read it and come prepared to learn and share perspectives. One particular team was struggling with the fact that most of its members were hearing about something for the first time during the meeting, and were expected to offer feedback on the spot. They have since implemented a mandate, which stated that anything requiring a decision at the meeting had to have preliminary reading sent out a minimum of 48 hours in advance. This was a terrific way of ensuring a more level playing field for informed discussions and decisions.

This team then went one step further, which brings me to my other procedural recommendation. For significant strategic decisions with far-ranging and longer-term impact, you cannot expect a decision to be made when the topic is initially raised. This team leader has now implemented what he calls a rule of 3, meaning that these higher-level issues will be discussed in three separate meetings, with a decision expected in that third meeting. This gives the team an opportunity to learn about the relevant issues in the first meeting; bring additional information that spurs investigation of a

broader search for alternative solutions to the second; and finally, to making an informed decision to which all can truly commit at the third. This leader knew the value for this team of allowing an appropriate amount of time between the productive conflict and the decision making. (Note: In this chapter, I have focused on ways of inviting a broader range of solutions that are procedural in nature. For true creativity boosters that will really jar team members thinking about a problem in totally new ways, see Chapter 16: “How Could You Forget the Toys?”.)

This brings me to my fifth point on this topic: knowing when you have reached a point where the team is prepared to make a decision and begin planning for its implementation. I didn’t realize how hard this could be until recently when I worked with an IT leadership team at a financial institution. We were discussing why some problems kept resurfacing and never seemed to get fully resolved during a recent strategic planning session. To use HBDI-speak, this was a very Blue-Green group . . . a combo of analyzers and organizers. One team member named Joseph hit the nail on the head when he said, “We like to admire the problem.” Everyone laughed; but it was that kind of uncomfortable laugh when you know something is true even though you don’t like admitting it. This line became code for when we were spending too much time analyzing the problem and needed to go green to solve it. I have used this same line with other very blue-green groups, and it really resonates with them.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned that problems can arise when some members of the team are asked to take the problem off-line and solve it. However, I am not so naïve or unrealistic as to believe that after reading this chapter, you will address every problem you face as a team—or not at all. I don’t necessarily think that is the right solution. I *do*, however, believe in finding the optimum balance and the right criteria for determining when decision making should be taken off-line. And it’s just as important to have an agreed-upon process for reintroducing these decisions to the team later on to inform the entire group of how an issue was resolved. I often recommend that there be a placeholder at every staff meeting for updating the team on how these off-line decisions were resolved, and then thinking through the

impact these decisions will have on the other members of the team.

There is one more (slightly surprising) issue that I have encountered on a couple of teams: they don't know when they have made a decision. I truly believe that everyone reaches a point when they are just talked out, and most team members simply hope that someone else has taken action based on the dialog in which the team has engaged. Well . . . don't count on it. If you aren't quite sure about whether a decision was made or not, simply ask the group: "Can anyone tell me where we landed on the XYZ issue?" When in doubt, seek it out. (I will talk more about the leader's role in effectively bringing a discussion to closure in the next chapter.) And always make sure to assess the rationale for the choices that *are* made. I heard once that all decisions are emotional ones, and that people simply try to justify them with facts *after* they determine their point of view. Being clear on the reasoning behind your team's choices will substantially help if you need to revisit your thinking later. It will also provide valuable content for the communications going out to others about the decision.

One clear sign that your team has made a decision is that you start the concrete planning stage. Nothing says action better than writing *Who? What? By When?* on a flip chart. Something happens to people when they actually *see* the expectation and the due date recorded right there in front of everybody. They suddenly become very concerned about what they are being expected to do, and they want to scrutinize every word that is written down, which is good. It seems a lot less like smoke and mirrors.

I have seen my share of lofty approaches to conducting action planning; yet I keep coming back to asking, "What are the teams I am working with most likely to *do*?" Keep it simple, I say. Ideally, you post the flip chart page at the front of the room with three columns and those words (Who . . . What . . . By When) at the top. Then, as the group makes choices and members volunteer—or receive assignments—for various tasks, add them to the action list. If your team meetings tend to run long, then it is preferable to keep this running list than to wait until the end when you may not have, or make, the necessary time for action planning. If you

do opt to complete this part of the process at the close of the meeting, reserve at least 5 to 10 minutes for a recap of action items and assignments. I have seen more technologically adept teams summarize these to dos in a spreadsheet on a laptop that is projected on to the wall. Whatever works for your team and gets the job done is the approach that your group should take.

After you have identified the plan of action for implementing the team's decisions, your final step is to ask one very simple question that I learned from one of the team leaders with whom I worked: "Who is *not* in the room that needs to know what we just decided?" This is a great way of getting the team to identify the key stakeholders in their decisions. The more essential their sincere commitment and ensuing actions are, the more time and effort you need to spend in rigorously considering how to attain truly engaged input. How are you going to get their support to achieve the decided-upon goals (commitment) versus simply instructing them to do it (compliance)? From an HBDI perspective, this is a time when those with Red quadrant preferences (remember, these are the ones who are very good at all things interpersonal) are particularly invaluable for helping you to both identify these concerned constituents and understand what it will take to gain their support. They can lead a discussion on how this decision will affect these key stakeholders. Of course, you should always keep in mind everyone's favorite radio station—WIIFM or *What's in It for Me?* Your stakeholders, who are likely be different for each of your decisions, might include people who:

- Will be directly affected by this decision
- Have final sign-off authority
- Have to implement the decision
- Could sabotage the process

The next logical step is to figure out how the team will communicate the decision to these people. What are the key messages, what are the right vehicles, and what should the timing be? The more power each stakeholder has to support or derail the decision's approval and implementation, the more thoroughly you will need to plan the communications, and the

more closely you will need to monitor their effectiveness. When you have come this far, you can't leave this last part to chance. Use the team's creativity to determine the most effective means of reaching your most critical stakeholders.

So there you have it—a tried and true process for ensuring your team makes better and faster decisions that include everyone's most creative input. In the next chapter, we will focus on the leader's role in making certain that these are indeed the best decisions. In Chapter 14—the final chapter in this section—we will explore accountability, and figure out how to assess whether team members are fulfilling the commitments they've made. *Because a decision without action is really just a hallucination!*

