

## WHEN DID YOUR TEAM LAST DISCUSS DECISION-MAKING?

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Let us review some learning about decision-making.

### ***Decision-making styles***

Conversations about decision-making quickly turn to decision-making styles. The four most commonly mentioned are: *'directive'* (I decide); *consultative* (I decide with input from you); *democratic* (one person one vote) and *consensual* (we decide, and we support the decision). We may hold the view that certain styles are appropriate for specific types of situation: crisis situations demand directive decision-making; consensual decision-making is the most time consuming and therefore appropriate for questions and problems that have no urgency.

Less well known is the *Gradients of Agreement Scale*, developed in 1987 by Kaner and Berger and the staff of Community-at-Work. It fits with participatory styles of decision-making, but allows stakeholders to express degrees of agreement, rather than force them into 'yes/no' extremes. It serves to determine whether there is support for an option that enough stakeholders can live with, without pitting a majority against a minority as democratic decision-making may do, or requiring full consensus.<sup>i</sup>

Rapid change, even disruption, is increasingly the new normal in our contemporary lives and work. Individuals and organisations are told to be *'agile'*: anticipate emerging new realities that will throw us off-balance and rapidly adapt to new circumstances. Among other characteristics, that requires rapid information feedback loops, fast learning and fast decision-making. Agile companies that are 'ruthlessly decisive' risk an organisational culture that is purely transactional and totally instrumentalises its employees and suppliers. The result might be a collapse of employee and supplier engagement, which carries a high cost in performance, even if it is not calculated into the accounts. *'Agile decision-making'* therefore needs to be complemented with strong measures to boost the engagement of a core of employees and suppliers.<sup>ii</sup>

### ***Centralised, decentralised and distributed decision-making***

In centralised systems, virtually all decisions are made top-down. Decentralisation only happens in still centralised systems, and typically implies a well-defined delegation of authority and responsibility, with the centre retaining the option to intervene and override, if it feels the need. Distributed decision-making occurs within 'flat', networked organisations, where work teams have a very high degree of autonomy, although there are clear procedures for internal and external consultation and accountability.<sup>iii</sup> Brian Robertson, cofounder of HolacracyOne calls it *'integrative decision-making'*.<sup>iv</sup> Two distinctive features of integrative decision-making are: "*one tension at a time*", and "*it are not people but roles that make decisions*". People are not speaking their personal opinions, preferences and possible interests, they need to speak from the role they occupy within the work-team, as responsible stewards of that role.

### ***Decision process***

A commonly held theory is that we follow a rational and structured decision-making process: We state the problem clearly, remind ourselves of our goal and objectives, then consider and weigh different options against each other in light of their perceived costs and anticipated benefits or outcomes, and we make a decision conscious of the trade-offs. A decision-tree is a visual representation that helps us do this in an explicit and structured manner. In theory, though not always in practice, we subsequently monitor what really happens and adjust or adapt if needed. But research on actual decision-making reveals that many other factors come into play.

## ***Factors influencing decision-making***

At least in the work-sphere, we tend to believe, or pretend, that our decisions are essentially shaped by facts and evidence. Ample research has indicated that is not true: First, today's interconnected and rapidly changing world means that, more often than not, we are now confronted with complexity, uncertainty, unpredictability. We have incomplete information, and past experience is no longer a reliable predictor of the future. As Marshall Goldsmith put it: "*What got you here won't get you there.*" Second, all sorts of other considerations and influences come into play, such as: narrow individual or group self-interest (this may not be the best decision for all, but it's the best for me/us); confirmation bias (I ignore facts, information and views that do not confirm my belief and opinion); group conformity and group think (also a form of consensus); first impressions (may lead us to dislike a person and by association reject her or his arguments); appeal of attractiveness (we are more open to influence from physically attractive people, a well-demonstrated factor); role interpretation (I am the leader therefore I must appear confidently decisive even if I have a lot of question marks and don't feel that way); risk tolerance (individual or organisational readiness to try something out even if there remain some important uncertainties); external pressures (a colleague is impatiently waiting for a decision, someone has imposed a deadline); physical condition and emotional state (lack of sleep or anxiety, for example, affect the quality of decision-making).

Research has shown frequent weaknesses in our decision-making, among them 'Spotlight thinking' – our focus is too narrow and too short-term; confirmation bias (already mentioned); getting emotionally attached to a decision; overconfidence about how much we really know or understand, and what we can really predict. The Heath brothers therefore proposed the WARP antidotes<sup>v</sup>:

- Widen your options – look at the bigger picture and longer-term goal and consider at least two or three alternatives explicitly and seriously
- Reality-test your assumptions
- Attain emotional distance before deciding
- Prepare to be wrong: the worst-case scenario may happen.

Our personal, organisational or community values may also impact our decision-making. What do our values tell us we should decide here and how we should decide here? Alternatively, our decisions reveal the values we practice to a wider world. Here we may discover that an individual or organisation is '*not walking the talk*'. Perceived alignment between professed values and behaviour creates an image of integrity and is a key ingredient of trust.

## ***Polarity management and ethical dilemmas***

'*Polarity management*' is the term given by Barry Johnson to "*ongoing issues that are unavoidable and unsolvable*" and where several options are right ones.<sup>vi</sup> Here we are not served by 'either/or' thinking; there is no real choice, we need to do both – or more: Do I pay attention to my life partner, to my child; to myself? There are inherent tensions, but you cannot choose one and cast out the others. It is and will remain a balancing act.

Ethical decision-making considers what we know and believe we should be doing. We not only want to do something right; we want to do the right thing. But there are different ways of weighing difficult choices:<sup>vii</sup>

- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm? (the Utilitarian approach)
- Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake? (the Rights approach)
- Which option treats people equally or proportionately? (the Justice approach)
- Which option best serves the community as a whole? (the Common Good approach)
- Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (the Virtue approach)

## ***Personal preferences, team dynamics; organisational cultures and cultural influences***

As individuals, we may have personal preferences for certain styles of decision-making. Some of us appreciate speed, which is associated with high-energy, while others prefer slower thinking, thoughtfulness. Some of us will focus on the task objective and give less weight to how a decision-

process and its outcome impact the relationship within our social or work circle. Others will give the relationship dimension higher value. Some of us prefer to be told what to do, others want to have a say in decisions that affect them.

Teams (and families or groups of choice such as a sailing club) can have their own decision-culture, sometimes heavily shaped by the team leader or (self-proclaimed) head of the family, but sometimes also by some vocal team-members.

Organisations, as we saw in the above paragraphs, have their own decision-making styles, which will have significant impact on the organisational culture.

The society we come from may also influence or individual and collective decision-making styles. The Dutch and the Swiss are consensus-seekers, which leads to long deliberations – though rapid implementation once a decision is taken, as by then it has broad support. People from other cultures may become impatient with the time decision-making takes here. There is no automatic correlation however, between hierarchical societies and top-down decision-making. Japanese organisations are hierarchical yet come with a strong practice of consultation to achieve agreement before a meeting, a process known as ‘*nemawashi*’. ‘American’ society can be outwardly very informal, but its companies and organisations often show a preference for fast decisiveness, with less weight given to the relationship-factor. For Germans, a decision made becomes a firm commitment, for Americans it can be a placeholder that later is adjusted.<sup>viii</sup> Imagine what can happen when we are a cross-cultural team!

### ***Invitation to reflection***

What is your spontaneous decision-making style? What other decision-making approaches can you still be OK with, and which ones make you feel acutely uncomfortable? Do you have different preferences for different circumstances? What have you learned from life experience about your decision-preferences? What decision-style do you want others to use with you? When was the last time you reflected on your own decision-making reflexes?

How are decisions taken within your family? Who influences this? Are there different decision-making styles or preferences? What happens when a decision must be taken that affects the whole family? When was the last time you as a family talked about your decision-making habits?

How are decisions taken within your work team? Who shapes it? What are its advantages and disadvantages? What might increase the advantages and decrease the disadvantages? What are the considerations that tend to weigh most in your team’s decisions? Have there been changes in the decision-making practices during your time with the team? What caused those changes? Are there different decision-making styles or preferences among team members? How are those interpreted: as resulting from individual personalities; as manifestation of different societal cultures; as requirements of the role someone fulfils in the team? What happens when these must come together in a decision affecting the whole team? What benefits can different styles offer to the team? When was the last time you as a team talked about your decision-making habits?

*What is the decision-making culture in your organisation?* Who shapes it? What are its advantages and disadvantages? What might increase the advantages and decrease the disadvantages? What are the considerations that tend to weigh most in your organisation’s decisions? Have there been changes in the decision-making practices during your time with the organisation? What caused those changes? Are there different decision-making styles or preferences among big influencers in the organisation? How are those interpreted: as resulting from individual personalities; as manifestation of different societal cultures; as requirements of the role someone fulfils in organisation? What happens when these must come together in a decision affecting the whole organisation? What benefits can different styles offer to the team? Are there sub-units or components of the organisation that have different decision-practices from the prevailing one? Why is that? What happens when the sub-culture meets the mainstream culture? When was the last time your organisation talked about its decision-making habits?

*What becomes possible, now that you are more conscious of decision-making habits in yourself and your environment?*

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- <sup>i</sup> See Kaner, S. 2014: *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. 3th edition and [https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/gradients\\_of\\_agreement\\_can\\_help\\_move\\_groups\\_forward](https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/gradients_of_agreement_can_help_move_groups_forward)
- <sup>ii</sup> Holbeche, L. 2015: *The Agile Organisation*. KoganPage pp. 50; 185-207
- <sup>iii</sup> See e.g. Laloux, F. 2014: *Reinventing Organisations*. Nelson Parker pp. 99-106; 329)
- <sup>iv</sup> Robertson, B. 2013: *Holacracy's Radically Different Decision-Making Process*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-ik26qCILo>
- <sup>v</sup> Heath, C. & D. 2013: *Decisive. How to make better choices in life and in work*. Random House
- <sup>vi</sup> Johnson, B. 1998: *Polarity Management. A summary introduction*. [https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/14-06-19.Barry\\_Johnson.Polarity\\_Management.pdf](https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/14-06-19.Barry_Johnson.Polarity_Management.pdf)
- <sup>vii</sup> Markulla Centre for Applied Ethics 2015: *A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making*. <https://www.scu.edu/ethics/ethics-resources/ethical-decision-making/a-framework-for-ethical-decision-making/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Meyer, E. 2017 : Being the Boss in Brussels, Boston and Beijing. Harvard Business Review July-August issue <https://hbr.org/2017/07/being-the-boss-in-brussels-boston-and-beijing>

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