

The LEAD Institute  General Systems Consulting Group, Inc.

Insight *Leading & Managing Change*

Three Styles of Decision Making

A question often asked in our team training workshops and team building sessions is when should you involve others in the decision making process and when should you make the decision on your own? A good question. Generally, the answer to this question is that it depends. It depends on the following three variables:

Time — How much time do you have, or how urgent is the decision?

Quality — How good must the decision be?

Commitment — Can you count on people to implement the decision after it is made?

Taking these three variables into consideration leads us to three primary decision making styles:

Command — Decisions you make on your own where **Time** as the driver, **Quality** is assured and **Commitment** is not an issue.

Consultation — **Quality** of the decision is the primary driver, you have **Time** to get advice and **Commitment** is still not an issue.

Consensus — Both **Quality** and **Commitment** are the drivers because you want the best decision that everyone buys into and you have the **Time** it takes to get agreement.

Command Decision Making — Time / Quality & Commitment

Command decision-making is a decision you make on your own without involving others. You make it on your own without getting opinions or advice from others. You may, however, request that others supply you with data and information. But, you do not solicit advice.

The driver for this type of decision-making is **Time**. You need a decision made as quickly as possible and **Quality** is assured because of your expertise, the situation has occurred before and you are relying on your past experience, or you are implementing a known policy, rule and/or standard operating procedure. Finally, **Commitment** is not usually a major issue in the command mode because you are confident that people will take the necessary action to implement the decision.

The reasons for your confidence could be that you are sure people will recognize the decision as being appropriate, they trust your judgment because of your track record of making good decisions and/or they recognize that you have the authority to make this decision and they are obligated to adhere to it.

Naturally, if commitment seems like it may be an issue, then explaining the reasons for the decision will go a long way towards enhancing it. Of course, you also must rely on others letting you know if they think you are making the wrong



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decision and you must be willing to listen.

It is important for you to know what decisions you can make on your own without getting permission from your boss. Knowing this helps you understand the degree to which you are empowered. Like wise, if you have direct reports, it is important for them to know what decisions you trust them to make on their own.

Consultation Decision Making — Quality / Time & Commitment

In the Command mode of decision making the quality of the decision is assured because there is a known decider who knows what to do. When you are in a situation where you are not sure what to decide, then Consultation decision-making is the best approach because the **Quality** of the decision is the driver, you have **Time** to get advice and **Commitment** won't be an issue when you make the final decision.

Consultation is a decision making process where you get advice before you make the final decision. There are two ways to go about getting the advice you need. You can meet, phone and/or email people individually, explain the situation and ask them to give you their recommendation. The other way is to assemble a group of people, explain the situation and open up the issue for discussion.

Regardless of how you do the consultation process, individual one-on-ones or in a group, the final decision is still yours to make. Even if there is general agreement on what to decide, you want to stay away from saying, "The consensus of opinion seems to be. . ." You are not in the consensus mode of decision-making. You reserve the right to say, "Thanks for your input. This is what I decide". Or, you can say, "Thanks for your input. Let me think about this and I'll let you know what I decide." Again, it is good practice to explain to others the reasons for your decision and how you used or did not use the advice given.

Consultation decision making works best when you are truly interested in getting advice, have not arrived at a firm conclusion and are willing to modify what you are thinking about doing based on the advice you get. If, however, it becomes generally known that you tend to lock into a decision and just go through the motions of getting advice, then the quality of advice you get will deteriorate over time. And, most importantly, people will tend to feel cheapened and manipulated when it becomes known what you are doing.

Also, when seeking advice, don't state your position first. Instead, explain the situation and ask the person to give their opinion first. Then, you can present your thoughts about the decision to be made. This allows for a freer exchange of information.

Finally, be careful you do not disguise your command decisions as consultation decision-making. You might say to a direct report, "Do you think we should go ahead and implement the new system?" when you really meant to say, "I have decided to implement the new system?"

Most of my wife's command decisions are usually disguised as questions. In the early days of our marriage she would say something like, "Do you think we should go out to dinner tonight?" or "Do you think it is time to take out the garbage?" Being young and enthusiastic, I thought it was an opportunity for discussion, involvement and that she really wanted my opinion. Wrong! The questions were and still are commands.

Consensus Decision Making — Quality & Commitment / Time

Consensus is a group decision making where two or more people get together to discuss an issue, agree on the decision and, in effect, give their consent. The group, as we say, reaches consensus.

Consensus is a process you use when **Quality** and **Commitment** are the decision-making drivers. You use this when you want the best possible decision

and the assurance that everyone will do all they can to implement the decision. When using Consensus you are betting that an open and candid discussion will give you both **Quality** and **Commitment**. Generally, the cost is **Time**. Consensus decision-making takes time.

Some guidelines for ensuring that the decision process is productive are:

1. Have everyone presents his or her ideas before you open the meeting up for general discussion. You want everyone to get an understanding of how much agreement there is before you start an open discussion. If you don't do this, then the first idea proposed, usually by the dominant person in the group, will be debated at length and the group will never explore the full range of options and everyone's thoughts.
2. Ensure everyone participates during the discussion by either presenting their opinions and/or by affirming the opinions of others when the group agrees with them.
3. Have people explain their reasons when they present their opinions.
4. Make sure everyone is willing to modify his or her position based on the discussion and the information shared and they let people know that they have changed their minds.
5. You want agreement through discussion and total commitment. Therefore, stay away from using majority rule, voting, minority rule and horse-trading.
6. In consensus silence is not golden. When you think consensus has be reached, have everyone openly state that they agree and the reason why they agree.

A consensus decision in the final analysis is total commitment to implement the decision and to do everything possible to ensure success. Therefore, it is acceptable when someone says, "I cannot agree totally with the decision. I still have some reservations. But, I do commit to doing my part to ensure success. You can count on me."

In addition to considering Quality and Commitment as drivers, consensus is best used when the issues to be resolved are either complex or ambiguous. Good team discussion can simplify complex problems and clarify ambiguous issues. However, on the other hand, teams trying to reach consensus on a simple problem will tend to make it complex and make clear problems ambiguous.

In summary, it is important that you are clear about those decisions you have the prerogative to make by Command, those that you want your staff to Consult with you on before they decide and the types of decisions you want to have made by Consensus, with, or without, your involvement.

Don't over use Consensus. Getting groups involved in all decisions will surely slow things down. And, don't be shy about using the Command decision-making style. Your staff expects you to exercise your authority and expertise and, because they are busy people, they are often relieved that decisions are made without their involvement.

Keep in mind that organizations can function well autocratic down in terms of you stating goals and direction, then participative or democratic up in regard to getting the team involved in determining the method to achieve the goals. In a Command/Consultation mode you might hear yourself saying, "I have decided that we will implement the new performance system. What I want is for each of you to come to me with your recommendations in regard to how you think we can best go about doing this." In a Command/Consensus mode you might say, "I have decided that we will implement the new performance system. We'll have a team meeting next week to reach agreement on the most effective way to do this. Please come prepared with your ideas on how you think this could be done."

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