

114 Flagg Hill Road  
Boxborough, MA 01719  
Phone 978.263.2545  
nancy@guidedinsights.com  
www.guidedinsights.com



# Making decisions that stick

*Planning, inclusion, and clear  
communications help foster  
commitment to act upon decisions*

*By Nancy Settle-Murphy*

# Making decisions that inspire commitment and evoke action

## Making good decisions is hard work

? *Are layoffs really necessary to get to the bottom-line results your organization requires over the next two quarters?*

? *Can your group afford to fund research and development efforts for two competitive products?*

? *How can your management staff be organized differently to allocate skills and experience to improve the overall effectiveness of your company?*

? *When will investments in boosting customer satisfaction go past the point of diminishing return?*

Decisions that have significant impact for a wide population and across multiple business units deserve very careful consideration, deliberate planning and excellent execution. The ramifications of making a poor decision, or of failing to execute on a well-informed decision, could be disastrous, especially when so much is at stake.

Yet surprisingly few companies really take the pains to map out exactly what needs to be done in the planning, execution, and follow-up that will ensure better decisions are made more quickly, resulting in clear action and desired changes.

Is this because so many companies are satisfied with the quality, speed and results of the decisions they make? Surely not! The overwhelming majority of companies we have studied acknowledge that their decision-making processes are in dire need of improvement. Common problems include:

- Decisions must be revisited several times, costing unnecessary time, money and resources
- Decisions are made too quickly, with insufficient information, resulting in quick action—going in the wrong direction
- Stakeholders are not informed of decisions made, leading to inaction at best or frustration and anger at worst
- Decisions are influenced by a few dominating organizations, favoring those who advocate the loudest

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*“Indecision and delays are the parents of failure.”*

*-- George Canning*

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- Decisions are made unilaterally by senior management and broadcast to all employees without supporting rationale, causing skepticism and distrust
- Decisions are made without the implications being clearly understood or communicated, prompting people to ignore the decision until and unless they understand (and agree about) what it means to them

Why then, do so many organizations continue to make decisions as they always have, and expect better results the next time? Perhaps because they realize it can be really hard work to think through every aspect of decision-making that can make or break a successful outcome. Or maybe it's just unfounded optimism that causes people to imagine that *this* time, the stars will be in alignment, and the "right" decision somehow be made, and everyone will buy into it like never before.

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*"I hate to see things done by halves, If it be right, do it boldly. If it be wrong, leave it undone."*  
 --Bernard Gilpin

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Organizations have a choice: They can invest the time up front to make a well-reasoned decision that is likely to garner the commitment of people needed to make something happen as a result. Or they can try to speed through the process of decision-making, and then ultimately spend a great deal of time, effort, resources and money later on, trying to undo the results.

This paper explores why so few decisions lead to positive action, and suggests a number of guidelines that can contribute to successful decision-making.

### Clarify what decision must be made and why

Problems often arise with the very first step: Those responsible for making the decision fail to communicate what, exactly, is being decided upon, why it's important, and what might change as a result.

Assumptions are made that somehow, everyone shares the same understanding of what decision must be made and why. (In fact, it is probably more often true that people have different ideas of the challenge, based on their perspectives, hopes, and motives.)

To lay the foundation for success, consider the following questions and communicate the answers:

- What is the catalyst for this decision, and how urgent is it that a decision be reached?
- What will change as a result? What is the best that can happen as a result? The worst? *The degree to which participants will feel committed to the results will be determined in large part by what they feel they have to gain or lose.*
- What happens if we don't make a decision? What's the worst that can happen? Will we get to maintain the status quo? Will someone else make the decision? Do we have an option not to decide? *The*

*more deeply people believe that some firm decision is really required, the more likely they will be to put forth effort commensurate with the importance of the decision.*

- What measures will we use to evaluate the effectiveness of our decision? At what junctures? Who determines the effectiveness, and what are the rewards/costs associated with success/failure?

## Establish rational decision criteria

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*“Do not choose to be wrong for the sake of being different.”*  
--Lord Samuel

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Picture a group of people sitting around a conference room table right after they have cast their decision-making votes aloud. People look around the room, obviously astonished that some of their peers have voted the way they did. Some ask it with their eyes, and others out loud: “How on earth did you make *that* decision? What could you be *thinking*?”

Indeed! Unless the group has agreed upon certain criteria by which a decision will be made, decisions will be second-guessed by those who have a dissenting view.

Therefore, it’s important to answer questions such as the following *before* the decision is made:

- What are the criteria we will use to make decisions? Who created these criteria, and do all stakeholders agree? *If decision-makers cannot agree upon the criteria to be used, it may be that a conflict of interests exists among participants. Disagreement about the criteria is likely to lead to a lack of commitment to follow through, especially if the decision does not favor a particular point of view.*
- Is equal weight given to all criteria? If some factors should be weighed more heavily than others, does everyone know what those factors are, and why they are deemed more important? *There are many legitimate reasons that some criteria should hold more sway than others. Sometimes those reasons tend to be very subjective. Make sure the group understands and agrees to the weighting for all criteria.*
- Do the criteria reflect the needs of all affected organizations? If not, will the decision be perceived as meeting the needs of some groups over others? *Make sure that you’ve canvassed representatives from all participating organizations on the logic and fairness of the criteria being applied. Be prepared to either modify the criteria or defend them.*
- Are there some barriers, boundaries, or show-stoppers we need to be aware of when reaching a decision? Are there some “sacred cows” we cannot forsake, or some limits over which we cannot transgress? If some areas are out of bounds, say so. Make sure everyone

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*“When possible, make decisions now, even if action is in the future. A reviewed decision usually is better than one reached at the last moment.”*  
-- William Given

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understands what's on the table, and what is not. *You will save a lot of time, frustration and energy if decision-makers identify and communicate all "non-options" right up front.*

## Include the right participants

If the right participants are not involved at the appropriate time, the cost of decision-making can skyrocket. Very often, people who don't have a lot to gain or lose are solicited for their opinions. Just as often, those who stand to be most affected are not involved, in the name of "expediency" or—more bluntly—to move certain political agendas forward.

Keep the process on track by asking the following:

- Who needs to be involved at each phase of the decision-making process, from decision definition to determining criteria to the decision-making itself and the follow-through? *Omitting those who will play a key role at any juncture will likely cost a great deal in terms of time, rework, and political currency.*
- Are some decision-makers "hidden" from view? That is, are there some who are pulling the strings from behind a proverbial firewall, but don't wish to be visible or openly accountable? *Avoid this situation at all costs. Nothing can undermine a sound decision-making process like hidden decision-makers with equally hidden agendas. Insist that all participants know who will be involved in the decision, at what phase, and for what purpose.*
- Make sure to include those who are likely to sabotage the decision if they are excluded. Regrettably, sometimes we must include people who really don't have a legitimate stake in the outcome, but who have the clout and wherewithal to wreak havoc on the process if excluded. Try to limit their scope as much as possible. At a minimum, offer to keep them informed. Planning your decision-making timeframe during a period you know they are unavailable rarely works in the long-term, as tempting as it is. *Those who are excluded, especially those who wish to be included and who have political clout or influence, will do whatever they can to thwart the process.*
- Are some people more appropriate for providing input or otherwise influencing the decision than actually making it? Many organizations claim that their decision-making processes are entirely democratic. Yet it is rarely an efficient, effective, or good business practice to truly accord everyone equal weight in making many decisions, regardless of where they sit in an organization. *Determine what role each person will play and communicate that information clearly. Don't be afraid to name a relatively small group of people as the actual decision-makers.*

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*"It is hard to imagine a more stupid or dangerous way of making decisions than by putting decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong."*

*--Thomas Sowell*

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- Do we have the right number of people to make this decision? Is four too few? A hundred too many? What is the minimum number we can involve, with fair representation for all affected organizations?  
*Beware of decisions that will require a vote by dozens of people. More work can be done faster by fewer people—as long as the right people are involved.*

## Clarify the decision-making process

How, exactly, will the decision be made? Clearly spell out your answers to all participants on the following questions:

- How will the decision be made? By an open casting of votes preceded by a group discussion? By a silent anonymous vote followed by a discussion or debate? Through the use of software polling technology via the web during a con call? What is the mechanism by which we will decide? *Make sure everyone has equal access to the required mechanisms, especially if the use of technology is involved.*
- By what margin will a decision be determined? Two-thirds majority? Unanimous decision? General consensus?
- How much time will we need to make this decision? What happens if we can't agree after several hours? Days? Weeks? Do we have a fallback plan if participants cannot reach a decision within the allotted time? What is the recourse if disagreement prevails?
- Is the “final” decision up for grabs? Or does everyone agree to live and die by the decision reached, regardless of its popularity? Can some people undo it, overtly or covertly? Be sure that everyone understands the ground rules and be prepared to enforce them. *Many decisions don't result in corresponding action because “loopholes” are left open by which decisions can be revisited endless times, including by those who had no official say in the outcome. Honor the efforts of the people who worked hard to achieve this decision by disallowing any revisiting of decisions, if indeed that was the promise made up front. If you can't fulfill this promise, you'll have a hard time convincing these people to work with you again.*

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*“That should be considered long which can be decided but once.”*

*--Publilius Syrus*

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## Understand the implications

Now that a decision has been reached, so what? What will really change as a result? What actions must be taken? Skills developed? New organizations formed? Existing ones altered or disbanded? Budgets cut or fortified? Without

clearly spelling out the implications and ensuring that everyone understands and agrees to them, you're unlikely to see much resulting action.

At this critical point, answer the following questions:

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*"Your life changes the moment you make a new, congruent, and committed decision."*  
--Anthony Robbins

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- What will be different as a result of our decision? Nearly all decisions call for changes. Will we change the way we behave toward each other? The way we work together? The jobs we do? The customers we support? The budgets we have to spend? Will we take on additional responsibilities? Will new skills be required? Will the changes put us in a better position—competitively, organizationally, personally? *If the implications are not well-understood up front, chances are the heel-dragging will begin when everyone is back at work, and the net effect of the decision starts to become internalized. Better to articulate the implications up front, in bold language, to make sure everyone knows how life will be different as a result of this decision. It's relatively easy to go along with a decision when people have not had a chance to think through and discuss the answer to "So what?" By skirting the implications discussion, you can almost guarantee some amount of resistance when reality finally dawns.*
- What are the actions required to enact this decision? By whom? When? How will we monitor and communicate our progress, obstacles, and issues that require resolution? *Make sure that everyone understands and participates in an agreed-upon process to communicate results, share ideas, solve problems, and track progress.*
- What do we do about people who renege on their commitments, or who otherwise attempt to subvert the decision? Is there a penalty for lack of compliance? How do we escalate issues, and to whom? Will peer pressure suffice, or is management intervention needed? *In some organizations, the potential punishments can be just as motivating as the likely rewards. Make sure that everyone is clear about the consequences of non-compliance.*

## Communicate the decision

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*"Long-range planning does not deal with future decisions, but with the future of present decisions."*  
--Peter Drucker

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Now that a decision has been reached, the outcomes made clear, implications explored, associated actions mapped out, who needs to be told? Many decisions that are made behind closed doors are not fully revealed to those who will be affected by the outcome. And many times when decisions are communicated, the associated rationale and criteria remain unclear, leaving people to guess as to the logic and the real meaning for them.

In developing a communications plan, make sure to answer questions such as:

- Who needs to communicate the decision that has been made? To whom? By when? Using what method(s)?

- How much information should be conveyed, and at what point? Not everyone needs or wants to know everything. Some may find the details superfluous, while others may find them essential. Target your key audiences and tailor your communications plan accordingly.
- What behavior is desired as a result of these communications? Understanding? Agreement? Action? Feedback? *Be sure your communication strategy can help elicit the desired response by key audiences.*
- What expectations do we want to set? What expectations must we be careful not to set?

## Evaluate the decision

With the decision made, action taken, and results monitored, how can we make sure we actually made the right decision in the first place?

To improve the decision-making process, answer the following questions:

- How will we know that we have made the right decision? How do we validate our decision with a minimum of risk? Is it possible to act up on the decision a step at a time, instead of in one fell swoop? *Isolating one area of the organization, or building in time between action steps, can provide some “buffer” to make sure that the implications of your decision are those you expected. If they are not, be prepared to modify or reverse your decision, or return to make another decision with this new information.*
- What if it turns out we made the wrong decision? Can we backtrack? Can we modify certain aspects of the decision, or must we go back to the drawing board? *You won’t have enough information to answer this question until you discover how far off the mark your initial decision really was.*
- How do we avoid making a bad decision next time? Take the time to review “lessons learned” with key participants. What contributed to the poor decision? Time pressure? The wrong people? An unwillingness to honestly discuss the resulting implications? Insufficient or inaccurate information? A protracted implementation—which may make today’s right decision a wrong one by the time it finally gets implemented?

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*“An awful decision that’s executed brilliantly is probably worse than a great decision that’s never implemented.”*

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## Summary

There are many junctures in the decision-making process that can make or break a successful outcome. These include clarifying the decision itself, establishing and communicating criteria by which the decision will be made, selecting the right participants, agreeing on a process, spelling out the implications of the decision, communicating the decision and evaluating the results.

By setting the stage to ensure that a well-reasoned decision is made and acted upon, any time, money and resources invested are likely to have the greatest return.



*114 Flagg Hill Road • Boxborough, MA 01719-2108*  
*978.263.2545 • 978.263.3833(Fax)*  
[nancy@guidedinsights.com](mailto:nancy@guidedinsights.com)/[www.guidedinsights.com](http://www.guidedinsights.com)