

# DANGEROUS DECISIONS

by

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“They need to learn that this not a democracy, but a benevolent dictatorship,” a senior manager recently said to me. He was commenting on his staff’s desire to be involved in setting performance expectations. His people wanted clear expectations that everyone is held to, and they wanted to be involved in creating those expectations.

Directors, managers and supervisors often find themselves in this double-bind. In many high-profile situations, they need to make a decision and move forward while also making room for staff who want to be involved in the decision.

Involving people is risky—you may get useless input or bogged down in endless discussion. Or, worse, the group may think *they* get to make the decision.

However, leaving people out of the process also presents big problems. If you leave people out or mess up the process, you could be rewarded with resentment and resistance—both active and passive.

Despite those risks, the reality is that your employees, peer managers, regulators—sometimes even your own boss—expect to participate in some decisions, even if you are the “decider.”

Not all decisions require extra care. But “dangerous decisions,” as I call them, do. They are those decisions where:

- People care what decision is made (the “content”), and
- People expect to be involved in the decision making process (the “process”).

This isn’t just about avoiding problems. Handling dangerous decisions well has many benefits, as well.

First, you get solid, truly useful input that helps you make a better decision. We all have blind spots and gathering input helps us avoid ill-advised decisions. Your people can help you be smarter.

A second benefit is showing people that you respect them. The respect you show them increases their trust in you. It’s a “virtuous cycle.” By handling dangerous decisions well, you build goodwill and commitment.

Third, people will buy-in to decisions they were involved in and where they feel their view was taken seriously. Implementation of your decision is much easier.

Finally, taking care with dangerous decisions builds organizational learning because decision making is more transparent. People get to see why decisions are made the way they are, which helps them

make better decisions on their own. Over time, handling dangerous decisions becomes easier and faster because people understand the “big picture.”

## How to do process right

So, how do you manage dangerous decisions? The Effective Engagement model can help you navigate through dangerous decisions. It shows you how to run decision making so that you can make decisions on-time, reduce resistance, and eliminate resentment.

Effective Engagement involves five distinct steps:

1. Share the context and problem
2. Gather input
3. Make the decision
4. Communicate your decision and the rationale
5. Describe the expectations and implications of the decision

You'll notice that the actual decision is Step 3, only halfway through the process. Handling process well requires steps both before and after the decision. Let's start by looking at what you need to do leading up to a decision.

And, let's assume that you are the decision maker. Perhaps it's a hiring decision or what budget cuts to propose. Whatever it is, you are the one to make the decision.

### Step 1: Share the context and problem

If you want people to provide helpful input or to understand why a decision needs to be made, you'll have to educate them about the big picture. People need to understand the context before they can give valuable input. Since we all tend to assume that others see things the way we do, we often skip this crucial step of sharing what we know and bringing people up to speed.

Describe what's going on in the environment that you believe requires action, like trends, politics, or resource constraints. Articulate the problem neutrally, without attaching blame or ascribing causes. A great way to neutrally frame a problem is to describe the desired results you are *not* getting.

Give your people the straight truth; avoid soft-pedaling. One common mistake managers make is trying to protect people from bad news so as not to upset them. I've learned that if people don't know the truth, they will make up a story that is usually worse than the truth.

Present the facts and stand aside to help them interpret them. Plan for questions and answer every one. Helping people understand the big picture is a great strategy for building goodwill.

At this stage, you may hear different definitions of the problem or contradictory data. Try to keep an open mind. The most significant outcome of the entire process may be a new and better definition of the problem.

It's also absolutely essential to clearly state that you will make the final decision—and when you'll make it. Doing this now will save much confusion and anger later. Too many managers let people believe that they get to make the decision when they don't.

Step 1 can take 10 minutes or 10 hours, depending on the complexity of the problem you are facing. If you really need help solving the problem, then it is wise to devote time to ramping up your team.

## **Step 2: Gather input**

Everyone who's had management training since the 1960s knows that they should gather input. Input increases creativity and gains you access to people's special expertise and unique experience. It also generates crucial buy-in when it comes time to implement your decision.

Despite those advantages, most managers struggle with getting input that's actually helpful. Getting good input takes planning.

First, decide what kind of input would be most helpful to you. Some types of input will be more valuable than others. Do you want input on the nature or scope of the problem (e.g., "That's not the problem, *this* is the problem.")? Do you want help identifying criteria or factors for making the decision (e.g., cost vs. benefit or likelihood of acceptance)? Or, are you looking for ideas for options and alternatives (i.e., different solutions to the problem)?

When gathering input, make certain to delineate any boundaries or off-limits areas before beginning discussion; people get frustrated giving input that was out-of-bounds—it wastes their time and yours.

Once you know the kind of input you want, craft open and neutral questions. Good questions are open-ended (not yes/no), clear and concise, and ask for only one piece of information.

Be careful! The questions you ask now will determine what kind of rationale you can present after making the decision (Step 4).

Make sure to avoid "stupid questions"—ones you already have the answers to. Also, stay clear of rhetorical questions, which imply a "right" answer. They are actually statements phrased as a question. Bad questions can undermine trust and respect, even before you've made the decision.

Set a firm yet reasonable deadline for input. And, remind people you will make the decision and when you plan to make it.

Finally, if you can, share a summary of the input before you make your decision. Let people see the diversity and complexity of the input you've heard. This can help you to gather more refined input. It's also helpful for showing people that you didn't get the same input from everyone. Chances are people disagree about what you should do.

Step 2 can often be performed in a single meeting or as a single item in a meeting. Or, for very important decisions, it might take several meetings and/or emails to hear from everyone and get the input you need.

### **Step 3: Make the decision**

Now it's time to make the decision—and prepare a rationale to explain your decision.

Make sure to consider how your decision will be received. Sketch out your rationale in advance. A good rationale recaps the problem and context, summarizes the input you received, and describes how you made the decision (what factors or criteria you used).

It is extremely important to show how the input you received influenced your decision. You won't agree with all the input, but people will be looking for an indication that their input was taken seriously. You need to show that you heard it.

Whether it's a three-minute item in a meeting or a long email, a good rationale indicates your respect for the input. It'll gain you more goodwill.

### **Step 4: Communicate the decision and your rationale**

Once you've made the decision and prepared your rationale, you're ready to share them. Often, this can take more time than you want it to, but your people need an opportunity to ask questions (and get answers) to help them understand the decision and rationale. It's essential for showing respect and building goodwill.

Brace yourself. There is a good chance that someone will complain—either because they don't like the decision itself or they have a *bona fide* complaint about the process. If that happens, stick with your decision and use the conversation as a learning process—for you and others. If you want to rethink your decision, do it privately—not in the meeting.

At the end of the day, you tried your best to make the right decision using the best input available. Your process will not be perfect; no process is.

### **Step 5: Describe the expectations and implications of the decision**

There's one more thing to do. You need to make clear what your decision means for individuals, work units and the organization as a whole. How does this decision change your expectations of others?

In order for your decision to stick, people will probably have to change what they do and how they do it. New work processes or work teams may need to be created. Old practices will need to be stopped, and new ones put into place.

There will be more questions here. Provide ample opportunity for individual employees, managers and work groups to get the clarification they need to carry out your decision. Furthermore, expect “rubs” or complications you didn’t anticipate to emerge. They’ll need to be resolved in order to implement the decision.

In many cases, Steps 4 and 5 can be accomplished in the same meeting. However, if the decision is complex, it might take several meetings with different people to get everyone on the same page.

## **There’s hope**

Remember that people care not just about content of a decision but also about the process for coming to that decision. They want to be involved and to be treated with respect, even if they don’t make the final decision.

The five-step Effective Engagement approach helps reduce frustration, anger and pushback. And, it brings you many benefits: better input and decisions, greater buy-in and commitment, and that virtuous cycle of increasing goodwill, respect and trust.

When the stakes are high, it’s even more important handle decisions well. Given the challenges all organizations are facing today, you need all the goodwill and creative thinking you can get.