



Leadership and Decision Making

What can we learn about decision making from examples of heroic leadership and heroic deeds? Maybe all the things we shouldn't do.

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To create an organization that makes high quality decisions, you first need to understand the larger dynamics that govern decision making and decision quality. They are:

- A decision is only as good as the weakest link.
- How you frame decisions matters.
- You can't judge a decision by the outcome.
- Decisions are linked.
- You can't know everything beforehand.
- People have different risk profiles.
- Organizational decision making is a balancing act.
- "Two-choice dilemmas" make leaders.
- Organizational decision quality must be built a step at a time.
- It's not a decision until you commit.

Let's look at each of these themes in the context of one of the great case studies in organizational decision quality of the last hundred years: the journey of Ernest Shackleton and his crew to the Antarctic aboard *The Endurance*.

The Endurance

If you want to read a terrific story about leadership and decision making, read "Endurance," Alfred Lansing's outstanding tale of Ernest Shackleton's amazing voyage to the South Pole.

Ernest Shackleton was a turn-of-the-last century British Explorer. Like so many others of his kind, he was audacious, self-reliant, romantic, and never doubted for a moment that if he could imagine it, he could make it happen—just like many of the leaders and executives we know.

A man of limited means and huge ambition, Shackleton meant to be the first man to cross the Antarctic continent by dog sled—the South Pole having already been reached for the first time by the famous Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. Without recounting the entire tale here, here are highlights of some of the critical decisions Shackleton and others made along the way.

- He bought a boat that someone else had commissioned for a different expedition. Why? He got a great deal and he was strapped for funds. It was slab-sided, built like a strong box, and perfectly fitted for bashing around in loose pack ice. As it turns out, he should have bought something with a rounded, bowl-shaped hull so that if the boat got caught in the ice—which it did—it would pop up onto the floe instead of becoming locked in a death grip which is what happened.
- On August 30, 1914, the Endurance set sail for the expedition's staging point, South Georgia Island off the tip of South America. Interesting timing as Britain had just declared war. Before sailing, Shackleton and crew offered themselves and their craft to the service of His Majesty's Navy. Winston Churchill himself made the decision that in the name of King and Country, they should carry on.
- The Endurance left South Georgia Island for the Antarctic at a time when the local whalers couldn't remember worse polar ice conditions. Shackleton made the decision to push on. It turns out the locals were right . . . and then the ice got worse still.
- Near Vahsel Bay, Endurance was caught in a really nasty gale while attempting to navigate along the edge of an ice pack. As the weather moderated, Shackleton pointed the ship between two ice floes towards what looked like open water and their ultimate destination, the Weddell Sea. What seemed like a routine decision sealed the expedition's fate. Hours later, the ice closed around the Endurance. The ship never came unstuck and was ultimately crushed and dragged under by the ice eleven months later.
- Having sat waiting, watching, and hoping for those eleven months, Shackleton and crew then spent the next five months pushing and pulling three boats across the ice, hunting and fishing when they could, all in an attempt to reach open water and ultimately South Georgia Island.
- Finally, as the ice they had been on for sixteen months finally broke up beneath them, the crew mounted a desperate journey in these same three tiny boats across one of the most harrowing stretches of water in the world. Braving gale force winds and treacherous seas, the crew ultimately found its way to Elephant Island. The good news was that it was the first solid land they

had stood on in 16 months. The bad news is that it was 870 miles from South Georgia Island and help.

- Not long after landing at Elephant Island, Shackleton and two crewmen struck out in a 22 foot long boat towards South Georgia Island, leaving the rest to wait and do whatever it took to survive. Shackleton and his two mates landed in the wrong place and determined that the best way to proceed was on foot—a journey that wasn't replicated again until 1955 by experienced mountaineers who found the route Shackleton and crew took to be excruciatingly difficult . . . and they hadn't been on the ice for nearly two years. The final leg to the Stromness Whaling Station included jumping off a 25 foot water fall into freezing water.
- It took another three months from the time Shackleton reached Stromness before he was finally able to return by boat to Elephant Island for the rest of the crew. All of them were rescued, two years to the day after they had sailed from India Wharf.

And those were just some of the big decisions. Mixed in between were all the hundreds and thousands of other decisions Shackleton and his leadership group made to deal with a mind boggling range of issues, even the smallest of which they knew could have immense consequences to the health and survival of the crew.

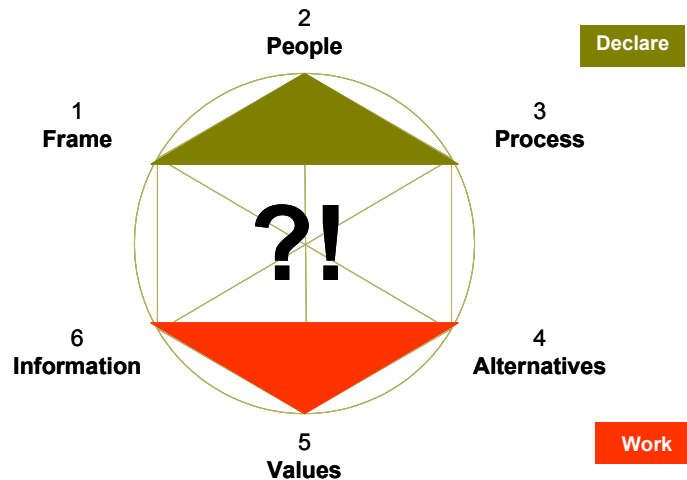
Some of the decisions Shackleton took alone. Some he debated with his officers. Some he opened up to the crew. Some were good decisions that had good outcomes. Some were good decisions that had bad outcomes, as you would expect given where they were and what they were doing (trying to stay alive in the most inhospitable part of the world). Some were bad decisions that still worked out okay, though they didn't seem that way at the time. And some of the decisions were just bad all the way around.

All in all, a decision landscape that looks remarkably like yours except that nothing you deal with in business is anywhere near as perilous as what Shackleton and crew faced. Still, the lessons in organizational decision making found in this terrific epic are worth your consideration, lessons we hope you'll be able to apply via the framework and Decision Points you'll learn in this book to your organization.

A Decision Is Only As Good As the Weakest Link

There are many ways to break down a decision. You may have your own framework, but the one we like was summarized in the introduction to this book. It includes two groups of three Decision Points.

The first three Decision Points—frame, people, and process—comprise your decision declaration. They describe what you’re going to work on and how you’re going to work on it. The second three—alternatives, values, and information—point to what you work with to bring your decision to a final choice you can act on. (We discuss each of the Decision Points in the chapters that follow.) You can do any five of the six really well and still wind up with a low-quality decision if you do the sixth one poorly. For example, you can do brilliant work but if you don’t frame the decisions properly, you’ll have worked on the wrong decision.



To pick an example from the adventures of *The Endurance* and crew, it turns out that Shackleton followed no discernable method or procedure in how he chose his crew. The book clearly suggests that he didn’t have a clear set of criteria (values) he was working against. It’s true he had over 5,000 applicants to choose from (alternatives), but he didn’t examine each closely (using information well) before making his selections. He picked his officers because he’d worked with them before—probably a good thing. As for the rest of the crew, he mostly just went with his gut. Many had never served on a ship. Many had never been on a ship with sails (which *Endurance* had).

All in all, a pretty low quality way (bad process; poorly articulated and used values) to make what proved to be some of the most consequential

decisions of the entire enterprise. If this group had come unraveled, most or all of them would have perished on the ice. The fact that they didn't doesn't make Shackleton's hiring decision process a good one.

Many leaders and managers make decisions just like Shackleton chose his crew. Ignorance, habit, lack of confidence in the people around them, or the seeming crush of time and events can all lead to snap decisions. Often they work, sometimes they don't. When that ratio swings the other way, those same leaders and managers find themselves looking for something else to do.

Your decision making process is only as good as the weakest link. If you want to make consistently high quality decisions, you need to "divide and conquer": break the decision down and work it a piece at a time. Standardize your critical decision making on a single model like the one we use. Put in place the training and tools necessary to create fluency with your people with the model and processes of declaring and working a decision. Weave decision quality into all your management and coaching dialogs so that your people come to understand the importance you place on high quality decision making.

How You Frame Decisions Matters

While each of the six Decision Points is important, framing the decision properly seems to matter the most. If you think about it, it's just not possible to make a good decision, no matter how well you work it, if you're working on the wrong thing.

Consider Shackleton's purchase of *The Endurance*. Lansing reports that by every measure, *Endurance* was an exquisite craft. Barkentine rigged (three masts with the forward one square-rigged), with a coal-fired steam engine, she was lovingly crafted by the master shipbuilders at the Framnaes shipyard, the world's leader in polar shipbuilding. It was arguably the strongest and best built wooden ship to ever come out of Norway, or anywhere else for that matter, and the last of its kind.

There are many decision frames that would have led logically and inexorably to the purchase of this boat for this expedition. Any of the following would have done it.

- We need a boat that's not too big, not too small, but just right given the size of the expedition and all the stuff we have to haul with us.

or

- We need a really strong boat.
or
- We need a boat that won't bob like a cork in the open seas.
or
- We're really strapped for funds. We need a good boat for cheap.

As it turns out, the presenting problem was the lack of funds, and the prevailing frame was “buy a really strong boat for cheap.” The man who ordered the boat for a different expedition had a falling out with his partner, so he was willing to sell his boat to Shackleton for a loss. As long as you disregard the possibility that the boat might be trapped in the ice, what wasn't to like?

A different decision frame would presumably have led to a different decision based on what should have seemed a reasonably high probability “uncertainty” that the boat might become trapped. For example, consider these frames:

- We need a boat that will stand the highest chance of surviving the conditions we'll probably face over the course of an entire year or more sailing near the South Pole.
or
- We need a boat that won't get crushed when/if we get caught in the ice.

Careful framing, taking care not to become trapped by Jumping in, Lazy Framing, and Frame Stickiness—three of the possible traps we'll discuss later—would have changed everything. Different situations would have been encountered and different decisions would have been made.

Maybe Shackleton would never have gone, lacking the funds to buy a more suitable boat. Or maybe he would have raised the funds but the delay would have cost him the entire expedition due to the war. Or maybe he would have been more focused on the design limitations of his boat and would have made a different decision on that fateful day near the entrance to Vahsel Bay. Or maybe he would have sailed in a different boat, still been caught in the ice, but survived to re-float his boat with the ice finally opened up.

It's all speculative at this point, but one thing is certain: Shackleton's decision frame led him to buy The Endurance, and the rest is history.

As a leader or manager, make sure you focus yourself and your people on doing what it takes to properly frame decisions. As you begin the journey to install decision quality in your organization, you should have a hand in declaring or inspecting every significant decision frame. Later, as people become more confident and fluent, you can turn them loose to do their own framing, with you standing by as coach and occasional gadfly.

You Can't Judge a Decision by the Outcome

Taking the long view, the adventure of the *Endurance* was a huge success. Shackleton and crew sailed, got stuck, survived, got rescued, made it home to England, and didn't have to fight in the Great War. The fact that they didn't make it across the Antarctic was a massive disappointment, but the rest of the story turned out well. Books were written and they all became legends. So by that measure, you could probably assert that all the decisions Shackleton and his leadership group made were good ones.

Just reading that last sentence should grate on you. It's an unreasonable statement, but it is how many people evaluate the quality of a decision: if it works out (by what measure and over what time frame?), it must be good. Maybe.

The truth is Shackleton was a consistently poor decision maker if there was any element of strategic thinking required—and a brilliant decision maker when his back was against the wall and the premium was on decisive action. For example, buying the slab-sided *Endurance* was a horrific decision that was only going to work out if the boat didn't get trapped in the ice. At least according to the book, a rounded hull design would have caused the boat to pop up on the ice floe where it could have survived indefinitely until the ice finally opened up. Shackleton chose wrong and he and his crew paid the price—a bad decision with a bad short and medium term outcome—even though “it all worked out in the end.”

The decision to turn towards Vahsel Bay as the gale lifted is another example worth looking at. In retrospect, the outcome was terrible. But at the time, it may have been a superb decision given the prevailing frame (we're behind schedule and we see what looks like open water), the alternatives Shackleton perceived, and the information he had available to him at the time. So for the sake of argument, we could call this one: good decision with a bad outcome.

Here's another example from a completely different direction. A man sits at a bar drinking steadily until closing. He staggers out to his car, starts the engine, eases the transmission into drive, and heads home. The lights are

all green, the police are somewhere else, and fifteen minutes later he lurches to a stop inside his garage. Maybe he does it another five hundred times with the same outcome. So just because he makes it home alive, does that mean in his case, drinking and driving is a good decision? No.

Divorcing the quality of the decision from the quality of the outcome is a tough gap for many people to cross. The logic is there, but it runs the risk of, “so what?”

One of the “so whats” is a simple observation that any decision can be made to look good as long as you feel free to move the goal posts after the fact. If you go back to the beginning and recall what Shackleton meant to do—his original frame and values—the tale of *The Endurance* and crew was a terrific failure. And yet, if you move the goal posts and judge it from a new standard, from the point of view of a tale of human courage and endurance, it was a huge success.

Moving the goal posts happens in business more often than we like to admit, and it comes from the natural tendency to apply revisionist history to decisions that lead to outcomes we don’t like. Or to state it another way, sometimes bad outcomes can be made to look good if we either change the criteria or let enough time go by.

The second “so what” can be drawn from the story of the drunk. Judged by the outcome, driving home was a good decision. Judged by the risks he took, and the risks he subjected other people to, it was a terrible decision. Getting away with it once doesn’t make the decision a good one; nor does it change the probabilities that the same decision another day might result in disaster.

The same point applies to business decisions. A poorly thought decision that leads to a good outcome is still a poorly thought decision. Just because the critical uncertainties didn’t reach up and bite you doesn’t mean that they won’t the next time. Good decisions don’t get rid of chance and uncertainty, but they do make them visible and understandable so that the decision can be worked and made accordingly.

It’s difficult, if not impossible, to create high quality organizational decision making if all you look at is outcomes. You get paid in the short term for outcomes. You build viability and competitive advantage into your organization over the long term based on the quality of the processes you use to arrive at outcomes.

In the case of organizational decision making, you should do the work necessary to install what we call a decision dialog process, one that is appropriately rigorous and flexible for the types of decisions you and your

people make. With that in place, you will be able to judge decisions while they're being made, particularly when there are significant uncertainties, by evaluating the quality of the work done at each of the Six Decision Points: frame, people, process, alternatives, values, and information.

Decisions are Linked

Decisions don't stand alone. They're linked to the ones that went before and the ones that come after. That statement seems like a blinding glimpse of the obvious when you read it, and yet it's easy to ignore or look past those same linkages when it comes time to make our own choices.

Shackleton's Antarctic adventure had a clear beginning, middle, and end. Unless you're in a start up, your situation probably has a middle, a middle, and a middle. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be making decisions with an eye towards the future and the decisions you know you'll have to make later.

In the beginning, Shackleton was faced with unlimited options and only the slightest context: he was looking for a "never-been-done" polar adventure and crossing Antarctic by dogsled seemed to fill the bill. Framing that first decision set in motion the need to make another two, then four, then sixteen, and then a thousand more decisions. Each showed up with a new presenting problem. Each sat in context with all the others that went before. Each added to the decisions that went before to weave a new context with new possibilities and new probabilities.

While Shackleton didn't plan to be marooned, he did plan on being on the bottom of the world for a very long time. Having been on a polar expedition before, he had a sense of many of the things that might happen, and he made decisions accordingly.

Similarly, once it became evident that The Endurance might never sail free again, Shackleton and his leadership group began to plan and decide how they might ultimately be rescued. Think of the uncertainties they faced. They did, and they made decisions accordingly, accounting for the uncertainties and thinking many, many moves ahead to anticipate all the subsequent linked decisions they knew they would have to make.

It's not possible to map the future with any degree of uncertainty. And yet making decisions in the face of uncertainty is what leaders and managers are paid to do. As much as possible, you need to think many moves ahead. You need to see how your decisions might link up, and how others might link them in ways you didn't see, and then set your frame accordingly.

Build “future thinking” into your decision dialogs. Ask yourself and others, “What decisions will this decision likely influence?”

You Can't Know Everything Beforehand

If only Shackleton had known he was going to get stuck in the ice, he might have bought a different boat. Or staid at South Georgia Island. Or taken another route. Or not gone at all. Or, or, or . . .

Later, when Shackleton determined to sail from Elephant Island to South Georgia to find help, all he really knew is that he and his two mates would have to cross more than 800 miles of open, Antarctic waters in a boat that was 22 feet long and about six feet wide, barely bigger than a Chevrolet Suburban. He could also reasonably be sure that the weather would be bad and that there would be ice.

Given more time and more information, he might have been able to narrow the uncertainty he was facing about currents, tides, weather, and ice. In this particular case, he had neither time or access to more information, and even if he did, he still had to act. He still had to decide. So he picked the people he thought best suited to the rigors that lay ahead, gathered up the food and gear he thought he needed and that he thought the others could spare, and off they went.

The decisions you face as a leader or manager aren't much different. Like Shakleton, you can't know everything before you make a decision, and even if you could, the cost and time involved in obtaining all available information and 100% certainty usually generates at least two outcomes:

- The opportunity or problem requiring the decision would have passed.
- The advantage gained by making the decision would have been mitigated or eliminated by the cost of obtaining 100% information and 100% certainty.

Identifying, understanding, talking about, and ultimately quantifying uncertainty are all part of good decision making. Help your people find and understand risk. In doing that, pay particular attention to identifying the “critical uncertainty,” the big unknown on which the decision really hangs. Seek information to take the mystery out of risk. Test you alternatives by looking for information that disproves and disconfirms what you think you want to do. Use your new insights to reframe the decision, identify alternatives, and hone your values so that you can with

confidence choose a path, even though you don't know for sure the outcome.

People Have Different Risk Profiles

Ernest Shackleton obviously had a huge tolerance for risk. In fact, Lansing calls him a “swashbuckler.” He was under-funded from the start and he knew it. But that didn't stop him from mortgaging the journey every way he could, essentially rolling the dice that he wouldn't spend the rest of his days in penury on the chance that he would make it home alive, having trans-navigated the Antarctic, with pictures and movies to prove it.

Then and now, those seem like long odds. Odds that most people wouldn't take for a nickel. Odds that others easily embraced in the go-go days of the late 1990s.

Later, as the drama of the Endurance and crew unfolded, Shackleton's high tolerance for risk led him to formulate a daring strategy that ultimately got 28 people off the Endurance and headed towards rescue all those months hence.

With that said, not everyone needs to be like Shackleton. For what it's worth, the authors certainly fall well below that standard. None of this makes us, you, or anyone better or worse. It just means that situation by situation, we all have different tolerance for risk. Understanding your own tolerance, and that of the people around you, is an important component of leadership.

Risk is the handmaiden of uncertainty. They're related but different concepts. For the hypothetical drunk we described before, the key uncertainties were:

- Will I get stopped by the police?
- Will I get in an accident?

No matter how hard he thinks or works, the answer to those questions will only be known once the drunk heads home. The fellow in the story was willing to take the risk inherent in those uncertainties. Thankfully many more people won't, seeing the choice of getting in the car as unwise, immoral, or maybe just undoable.

Your tolerance for risk colors how you process each of the Six Decision Points (frame, people, process, alternatives, values, and information). Be as explicit as you can at the beginning of every decision process how much risk you're willing to take. In putting together decision teams, think about risk tolerance. In the case of a large, consequential decision, you

might want to create a team of people with a broad risk profile. If you're looking for breakthrough ideas or to get something, anything going, load up the team with people willing to take personal risks. If you're thinking about something that seems too good to be true, bring in some of your worriers and see what they have to say.

Organizational Decision Making is a Balancing Act

Organizational decision making is fraught with paradox: seemingly irreconcilable polarities that demand that the leader make conscious trade-offs to balance conflicting needs within the decision process itself, and then again when it comes time to working a decision to conclusion. Of the many we see, these four seem to summarize the conflicts. We call these the "Four Decision Paradoxes."

- Inclusion vs. Efficiency
- Empowerment vs. Control
- Rules vs. Method
- Head vs. Heart

For example, how much "inclusiveness" is enough? You could eliminate the fuss and muss of dialog and debate and simply make all the decisions yourself . . . and some leaders and managers do. This also limits the number of decisions that get made, not to mention the diversity of point of view and buy-in that might come from involving a wider group of people. With that said, "efficiency" is often the right choice for decisions with significant technical or strategic implications.

Conversely, you could seek to involve your colleagues and subordinates in most or even all the decisions you make. That creates the possibility of rich debate and dialog but limits the number of decisions that might be made as everything gets bashed around by everyone. "Inclusiveness" is usually the right direction when the issues are largely organizational and the uncertainty is whether your people will buy in.

Or consider empowerment vs. control, or perhaps "delegate vs. distribute." Here, the issue is deciding how much of what decisions you keep, and what parts you have others do.

At the empowerment end, you authorize a person or people to work the decision (perhaps even to declare the decision) within certain broad parameters. In effect, you're saying, "you make this decision as if you were me," or more broadly, "I am giving you the power to take this decision through to choice and implementation." In the world of decision

quality, this suggests that you are handing over both the declaration and the working of the decision. This is a viable choice when you have a functioning decision framework and process.

At the control end of the spectrum, you distribute some or none of the decision declaration, and some part of the working (the values, alternatives, and maybe even some of the information). You're saying, "Within this frame, and with these rules and values, you choose what to do." This is the right choice in training and development situations or when the decisions being made are repetitive and carry direct customer experience and/or financial consequences: for example underwriting decisions.

These two paradoxes hint at a third: the method by which you want to move through the decision process. There are times and places when the proper method of work is to follow rules of thumb, ask what we call "magic questions," and rely on other trusty short cuts to get to a choice and begin implementing. In many cases, that may also mean that you intend to measure, learn, and adjust as you go. The premium here is on speed, and decision quality is predicated on the ability to measure, learn, and adjust as you go. Shackleton clearly relied on this type of decision making once out on the ice. It is often the right choice if you have either the need to move quickly.

At the other extreme, you lay out a methodical, multi-step process for working a problem that emphasizes the Alternative and Information decision points. This usually takes the form of a business case. The intent is to think through and quantify every reasonable alternative and potential risk with an eye towards minimizing the need to make adjustments once implementation has begun. This is often the default position for many organizations due to a lack of confidence or unwillingness to implement a choice. It's the right answer where there are significant informational requirements.

Finally, there is the question of how to balance head and heart; logic and instinct. Should you make a decision based solely on the numbers—on expected financial return for example—or should you weigh in with gut, intuition, and seat of the pants? This dichotomy tends to move in concert with the aim/fire, fire/aim paradox, but also hints at issues of creativity and divergent thinking as well.

For example, we have a colleague named Steve Bedford, a former CFO of a large British retailer, who expresses this paradox with the words "why not" and "why not?" the key thought being the question mark. In environments of uncertainty, some people choose to see what's wrong or

why something can't be done. These people are the ones who say "why not," as in, "That won't work and here's why not . . ." Others come at things from a divergent point of view. In the face of, "We can't do that," they're the ones asking, "Why not?"

This last one may seem less paradoxical than the others. You could make the case that you need some of both, and depending on the decision you probably do. As a practical matter, our experience in organizational decision making is that it's easy to find the "why not's" and much harder to find the "why not's?" Creativity doesn't show up by itself. It's risky to ask, "Why not?"

Think about choosing "head" *and then* "heart" in the same decision process to generate and test different choices. Choose intuition when you need to move quickly—one good way is to poll people whose expertise you trust. Choose head when you have time, access to relevant information, and or, you perceive high risks that lend themselves to analysis and quantification.

The ends of these paradoxes are mutually exclusive: you can't be extremely inclusive and still be extremely efficient, for example. One isn't necessarily better than another. They are validated by different values. One extreme might be perfect in one instance and poorly suited to another.

You can certainly make these sorts of balancing decisions on a case by case basis. As an alternative, create rules around the four paradoxes for the different types of decisions people in your organization regularly make.

- Inclusion vs. Efficiency
- Empowerment vs. Control
- Rules vs. Method
- Head vs. Heart

You can express this in terms of high/low and let individual actors work out the specifics, or by being directive and prescriptive in how you want people to manage each paradox.

"Two-Choice Dilemmas" Make Leaders

The term, "two-choice dilemma", is lexically awkward, but nicely descriptive of the kind of decisions that ultimately define leadership. Our Pocket Oxford Dictionary defines the word "dilemma" as a "situation in which a difficult choice has to be made." The concept of a "two-choice dilemma" narrows what we would normally look for in a decision

situation—a decision frame that allows for a nice broad set of alternatives—to a nasty case of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

In his book, “How Good People Make Tough Choices,” Rushworth Kidder says:

- The **really** tough choices . . . don't center upon right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values. Four such dilemmas are so common to our experience that they stand as models, patterns, or paradigms. They are:

Truth versus loyalty

Individual versus community

Short-term versus long-term

Justice versus mercy

- The names for these patterns are less important than the ideas they reflect: Whether you call it law versus love, or equity versus compassion, or fairness versus affection, you're talking about some form of justice versus mercy. So too with the others. But while the names may be flexible, the concepts are not: These four paradigms appear to be so fundamental to the right-versus-right choices all of us face that they can rightly be called **dilemma paradigms**.

The idea that you would find yourself in a two-choice dilemma may seem unappealing. Indeed, as decision consultants, we have an inherent suspicion of decisions that seem to come down to only two alternatives, both of which seem unappealing. Normally, that would be a sure sign that you need to reframe the problem. But sometimes it just doesn't work out that way.

On April 20, 1916, sixteen months after the Endurance had sailed from South Georgia Island, Ernest Shackleton faced a two-choice dilemma: stay with his men on an exposed, inhospitable rock beach at the end of a glacier on Elephant Island and hope a ship goes by, or get in a big dinghy and sail across notoriously treacherous water to South Georgia Island 870 miles away. Super, where do we sign up?

In theory, there may have been other alternatives, but only in theory. Elephant Island was as close to nowhere as you can get and walking

somewhere else wasn't going to improve the situation. From what Shackleton could tell, he and his men were all at the limit of their endurance. No, he faced a classic two-choice dilemma, and waiting around for events to unfold wasn't going to clarify the uncertainties or mitigate the risks. He had to choose and he did.

With luck, you won't have to face two-choice dilemmas of quite that significance or magnitude. But you will face them, and how you work them through, and how you stick with your convictions in the face of the difficulties that usually arise will define you as a leader.

The first thing you need to do when you find yourself in a two-choice dilemma is to call it out. The people around you will know anyway. Ducking the issue or pretending that there isn't a crisis, a mess, or both, erodes confidence and destroys your authority to lead. Stepping up to adversity and tough decisions is what defines leadership. Having called out the two-choice dilemma—a declaration if there ever was one—decide how you're going to work the problem, and then work it with purpose. Make your choice with confidence. Then get in your dinghy and go!

Organizational Decision Quality Must Be Built In Step By Step

Our first decision dynamic, “A decision is only as good as the weakest link,” laid the cornerstone for working a single decision: you have to do high quality work at each of the Six Decision Points: frame, people, process, alternatives, values, and information.

In a similar vein, the decision dynamics we've just laid out each contribute, step by step, to building quality into how the people in your organization make decisions, and building quality decision making into the culture of your organization.

The problem of “missing steps” shows up in typical organizational decision making where most or all of these dynamics appear:

- Frame: Champion advocates a solution based on known facts and a specific set of assumptions about the future.
- Objective: Justify recommended course of action.
- Method: Build a strong case and then present it. Run the gauntlet. If you survive, you go forward.
- Quality: Inspect in at approval.
- Culture: Adversarial, particularly at the end: shoot holes. Alternatives are treated as delays or problems.

When these dynamics are present, you as a decision owner often face consequential decision situations where the first time you see a recommendation is after the declaring and working has been done and you're being asked to vote something up or down. It becomes your job to inspect quality into the process at the end. Donning black hat, you play the role of grinch, gremlin, and grump, looking for problems and shooting holes.

Even if the flaws are real, the decision team inevitably goes back to work, thus slowing momentum and perhaps even missing a critical window of opportunity. The alternative is that you succumb to whatever pressure you're feeling to approve a decision even when it is obvious that it hasn't been well thought through.

There is another way. Laying out clear guidelines and rules of the road—what we call an Organization Decision Map—creates clarity and quality in how decisions should be worked and declared. This helps people see clearly how different types of decisions link, how people should deal with information and risk, and how to balance the Four Decision Paradoxes.

Once in a decision process, particularly one that involves multiple steps and meetings over some period of time, you can build quality in through what we call a “decision dialog process.” Early dialogue between the decision owner and a decision team at key points like framing and alternatives allows decision owners to contribute useful content as well as inspect quality into the decision at critical inflection points. Now, instead of the adversarial process details previously, the decision dynamics can look more like these:

- Frame: Broad range of alternatives. Identification of unknowns. Conscious scope, perspective, and purpose.
- Objective: Shared understanding about best course of action.
- Method: Systematic, decision-focused conversations.
- Quality: Build in at every step with dialogue.
- Culture: Collaborative: conflict occurs early and constructively. Open and inquisitive.

Build quality into your decision framework and into the processes by which you manage how your people make small and large decisions. Pay attention to every step. For smaller decisions, use tools, training, and technology to ensure quality throughout these shorter decision processes. Don't wait until a choice is made to try and catch mistakes or poor reasoning. For larger decisions, build decision processes that create dialog

and critical thinking at specific junctures like framing, values, and alternatives to ensure alignment and agreement on these critical components of decision making.

It's Not a Decision Until You Commit

You may recall our definition of a decision: A decision is an irrevocable allocation of resource.

- Irrevocable: Once you decide, you don't undecided or re-litigate unless you have new information that changes the frame, the values, or the alternatives.
- Allocation of resource: A decision isn't an intention, it's thought into action, action which requires money, energy, and/or effort—resource—to bring it about.

Between “intent” and an “irrevocable allocation of resource” lies a gulf that many people and many decisions never cross. Whatever else you might say about Shackleton, you can't fault him for his ability to make one commitment after another. He was a man who understood how to turn intention into attention and then action.

For example, it's one thing to talk about crossing the Antarctic by dog sled. It's another to raise a pot full of money, hire a crew, and buy a boat. It's another still to set sail from South Georgia Island towards the South Pole. And it's a whole other kind of commitment to get in a 22 foot boat to sail across 870 miles of forbidding and freezing ocean knowing that if you fail, the rest of your crew will probably die on a stone beach in one of the most godforsaken corners of the world. Those are big decisions because those are big commitments.

It's constantly amazing to us how many “decisions” never make it past well debated intent. We've worked with a lot of people in a lot of organizations, and it's hard to count the number of times we've heard things like:

- We're terrible implementers around here.
- A decision will get made one day, and unmade the next.
- We need to learn how to make decisions that don't get re-litigated.
- There are definitely people around here who feel like they can show up at the last minute and change everything.

Debate can be a good, healthy, and necessary part of making high quality decisions. But at some point, if it is to be a decision, there needs to be action. Good leaders and managers make those kinds of decisions—the kind that get acted on. Great leaders and managers foster organizational decision making. They create dynamics and dialogs that cause intention to become attention and then action that is supported and understood. They help the people around them make things happen.

If you know going in that there are no resources, money, or bandwidth available to implement, then cut the charade and terminate the decision process. That's the best decision you can make in that case.

Having worked a decision to a choice, lock it down, and do what it takes to get it implemented. Harvest the learning, and then move to the next decision. It seems simple, yet most organizations, by the admission of the people running them, do a poor job of turning intention into action. All it takes is attention. Yours. Make “irrevocable allocation of resource” your top priority.

Summary

A decision is only as good as the weakest link. Your decision making process is only as good as the weakest link. If you want to make consistently high quality decisions, you need to “divide and conquer”: break the decision down and work it a piece at a time. Standardize your critical decision making on a single model like the one we use. Put in place the training and tools necessary to create fluency with your people with the model and processes of declaring and working a decision. Weave decision quality into all your management and coaching dialogs so that your people come to understand the importance you place on high quality decision making.

How you frame decisions matters. As a leader or manager, make sure you focus yourself and your people on doing what it takes to properly frame decisions. As you begin the journey to install decision quality in your organization, you should have a hand in declaring or inspecting every significant decision frame. Later, as people become more confident and fluent, you can turn them loose to do their own framing, with you standing by as coach and occasional gadfly.

You can't judge a decision by the outcome. In the case of organizational decision making, you should do the work necessary to install what we call a decision dialog process, one that is appropriately rigorous and flexible for the types of decisions you and your people make. With that in place,

you will be able to judge decisions while they're being made, particularly when there are significant uncertainties, by evaluating the quality of the work done at each of the Six Decision Points: frame, people, process, alternatives, values, and information.

Decisions are linked. It's not possible to map the future with any degree of uncertainty. And yet making decisions in the face of uncertainty is what leaders and managers are paid to do. As much as possible, you need to think many moves ahead. You need to see how your decisions might link up, and how others might link them in ways you didn't see, and then set your frame accordingly. Build "future thinking" into your decision dialogs. Ask yourself and others, "What decisions will this decision likely influence?"

You can't know everything beforehand. Identifying, understanding, talking about, and ultimately quantifying uncertainty are all part of good decision making. Help your people find and understand risk. In doing that, pay particular attention to identifying the "critical uncertainty," the big unknown on which the decision really hangs. Seek information to take the mystery out of risk. Test your alternatives by looking for information that disproves and disconfirms what you think you want to do. Use your new insights to reframe the decision, identify alternatives, and hone your values so that you can with confidence choose a path, even though you don't know for sure the outcome.

People have different risk profiles. Your tolerance for risk colors how you process each of the Six Decision Points (frame, people, process, alternatives, values, and information). Be as explicit as you can at the beginning of every decision process how much risk you're willing to take. In putting together decision teams, think about risk tolerance. In the case of a large, consequential decision, you might want to create a team of people with a broad risk profile. If you're looking for breakthrough ideas or to get something, anything going, load up the team with people willing to take personal risks. If you're thinking about something that seems too good to be true, bring in some of your worriers and see what they have to say.

Organizational Decision Making is a Balancing Act. You can certainly make these sorts of balancing decisions on a case by case basis. As an alternative, create rules around the four paradoxes for the different types of decisions people in your organization regularly make.

- Inclusion vs. Efficiency
- Empowerment vs. Control

- Rules vs. Method
- Head vs. Heart

You can express this in terms of high/low and let individual actors work out the specifics, or by being directive and prescriptive in how you want people to manage each paradox.

“Two-choice dilemmas” make leaders. The first thing you need to do when you find yourself in a two-choice dilemma is to call it out. The people around you will know anyway. Ducking the issue or pretending that there isn't a crisis, a mess, or both, erodes confidence and destroys your authority to lead. Stepping up to adversity and tough decisions is what defines leadership. Having called out the two-choice dilemma—a declaration if there ever was one—decide how you're going to work the problem, and then work it with purpose. Make your choice with confidence. Then get in your dinghy and go!

Decision quality must be built in step by step. Build quality into your decision framework and into the processes by which you manage how your people make small and large decisions. Pay attention to every step. For smaller decisions, use tools, training, and technology to ensure quality throughout these shorter decision processes. Don't wait until a choice is made to try and catch mistakes or poor reasoning. For larger decisions, build decision processes that create dialog and critical thinking at specific junctures like framing, values, and alternatives to ensure alignment and agreement on these critical components of decision making.

It's not a decision until you commit. Having worked a decision to a choice, lock it down, and do what it takes to get it implemented. Harvest the learning, and then move to the next decision. It seems simple, yet most organizations, by the admission of the people running them, do a poor job of turning intention into action. All it takes is attention. Yours. Make “irrevocable allocation of resource” your top priority.