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A LEADERSHIP PARADOX- HOW LEADERS CAN GAIN MORE INFLUENCE BY LETTING GO OF SOME DECISION POWER

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The decision to launch D-Day in 1944, the biggest military operation in history was not a light-hearted one. On the eve of D-Day, General Eisenhower actively sought out the opinion of each one of his commanders in his briefing[i]. There are different accounts of what exactly was said when it was decided to launch the operation on 6th June. Did Eisenhower take the decision alone, was it a shared decision? No one really knows, yet what is striking is that someone of the experience and stature of Eisenhower, a future President, who heavily shaped the decision, still felt the need for some form of collective process in making a decision which probably required unequivocal commitment from all.

In my consulting work, I have come across leaders facing a high impact decision and who carefully sought the right balance between two approaches:

— A more directive decision style but confronted by the limits of "compulsory execution" which does not guarantee execution in any event and certainly not a mindset change, and
— A more participative approach with a laborious closure, that is more complex and resource intensive to implement

How can leaders overcome this binary top-down/bottom-up perspective to leadership and decision-making and what approach to adopt?

The Leader who is in charge
Leaders shape their organisation through the decisions they take; it is one of the main expressions of their power. In fact, it can be seen as their main role. They have the experience, competence and drive to lead. Sometimes they embody best the organisation's core purpose. In some cases, a decision by the leader is also the most efficient in moments of crisis for example.

There are also a number of psychological drivers in the behaviour of leaders. They can sometimes feel entrusted to make a decision but that can be a subjective appreciation and prone to an over-confidence bias. It can be seductive for a narcissistic leader to make a decision alone even when the situation justifies a more inclusive approach. Some leader may over-rely on their gut. A study among Harvard students showed they used both intuitive skills and analytical ability during their studies, but they credited 80% of their successes to instinct[ii]. As much as we might admire the courage of "gut decision-makers", it takes a rare combination of trust,

expediency and consistency of good outcomes. Those conditions rarely last and are hard to replicate.

A top-down model of leadership can also be reinforced by the behaviour of team members. It can be comfortable to leave responsibility to the leader to make the final call and if things go wrong. The overwhelming presence of such a leader can in fact help followers cope with their own anxieties before a decision, a bit like a primary caregiver for a child.

The Leader who achieves through others

Setting aside national culture or a preference for a certain leadership style, a team-centric approach to high impact decisions can lead to more sustainable results than a top-down one. When is it therefore appropriate to share decision-making power as a leader?

A few years ago, the senior partner of a large consulting firm wanted to review the remuneration structure of her partners to favour more client sharing and cross-selling. She had a clear idea of the principles behind the target model, so she could have made the decision single-handedly, the business and economic rationale was well thought out. This decision had all the features of a high impact decision: too hard or too costly to reverse, involving uncertainty and requiring a mindset change. She probably sensed it was going to be too risky to go it alone. The scale of the change meant winning the hearts and minds of the leadership team was critical to gain subsequent support from all partners. The power derived from a position of being senior partner would not be sufficient to see through the decision. She chose to move away from an overly leader-centric decision and made a real difference in the acceptance of proposed model.

In a more team-centric approach the key ingredient is for the leader to accept to let go of sufficient control over the decision outcome to make space for team members to step up, contribute and thereby own the decision. It is almost counter-intuitive that for high impact decisions, a leader is likely to gain more influence and support toward a decision by sharing the prerogative to make that decision. What the leader keeps control over however is the process for making that decision.

The critical path to collective decision making

A decision-making process reveals many of the underlying dynamics in a team e.g. feeling included/excluded, patterns of dominance by some members, self-silencing etc..., All those dynamics need to be factored in the approach to a decision. To support the work with executive teams preparing for a high impact decision or wanting to assess their effectiveness, I have developed a "decision mirror" structured around the 4 following phases:

The **framing stage** is a key moment because high impact decisions have usually no easy solutions and the risk is high that each team member's "own view of the world" will limit the dialogue and perceived decision-making options. Frames lead us to taking short-cuts, going straight to the solution before we have fully considered what is the question. Difference in frames is also a major source of disagreement in any decision process so understanding them early on and keeping them in check is essential. As an example, in the 1990s, Encyclopaedia

Britannica lost half its sales because its frame of the world was to sell hard-copies of an encyclopaedia. It got overtaken by Microsoft Encarta who saw itself in the business of selling knowledge, not in the book publishing business which was too limiting a frame[iii]. In the framing stage, a team should ask itself - do we agree as a team on the problem the decision is intended to address? Have we sufficiently clarified and agreed on what a particular decision is meant to accomplish?

Generating options is the next stage which relies on a high-quality dialogue characterised by openness. At this stage, divergence of views is to be encouraged, while acknowledging that people who bring a different perspective or new information take a social risk of being pressured by the group to conform with the preferred option. Peter Drucker, the management thinker, firmly believed that there could be no good decisions without disagreement[iv]. This means cooperating with team members in working toward a shared goal while also being assertive enough in expressing a different perspective. As was the case for the Challenger space shuttle disaster, self-silencing in a team can have dramatic consequences. A good way to start a discussion at this stage is to ask everyone - what is it that we do not know? How do we generate fresh insight before narrowing down options?

Deciding - after the phase of divergence comes the need to converge, a consensus seeking phase. This is probably the most important step for managing those not favourable to the emerging consensus or who will benefit the least from the likely outcome. The care and genuineness with which the opinion of everyone is expressed and listened to, especially for the emerging contrarian views is essential. That is what makes the difference between a dissenting view which becomes blocking in the implementation or one that acknowledges the legitimacy of the emerging majority and is willing to support the decision taken. A key question for a team at this stage would be: how far are we willing, or do we need to integrate the contrarian view into the emerging option? How important is the commitment of those views to executing the decision?

Committing - is focussed on executing but is still part of decision making insofar as it will likely require ongoing adjustments, pedagogy and communication towards all those affected by the decision. The execution phase is also when the decision can most visibly be called into question. If those indicators are visible, then a team needs to have the courage to revert back to the framing stage. A key question for this stage is: are we as a team unequivocal in our support toward the decision?

Any leader wanting to encourage a more collective approach to decision-making and therefore to leadership, needs to be aware of several downsides. Some teams want to protect group harmony, transforming collective leadership into group-think where assertiveness and "outspokenness" is low. Such groups are likely to make worse decision than in diverse teams with outspoken members. A shared approach to decision-making also implies all members need to step up in how they contribute, often out of their comfort zone, as leaders also do themselves by letting go. A collective approach does not need to take more time. In fact, if done well, it will most certainly save time when it comes to execution.

By reflecting on their practice of decision-making, a team can gain a clearer perspective on whether they operate as a team or rather as group and which decisions really need to be collective and which ones are best delegated to the leader or an individual member. This will contribute to eliminating unnecessary frictions and misunderstandings that comes with implicit decision-making. Looking at decision-making in a team matters because it is a very operational and tangible way to analyse the overall effectiveness of that team. In fact, that is probably why Jeff Bezos even talks about the decision-making philosophy at Amazon in his letter to shareholders in 2016. For Amazon, the approach to decision-making contributes to generating business innovation, gaining market share and increased revenue opportunities. So maybe the most important decision of a leader is to decide not to decide alone!

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