



If You Think Your Team Makes Decisions, Think Again

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by Bob Frisch – Featured on the HBR Insight Center

Executives tell me their teams make decisions all the time. "Bob," a CEO will say, "I know you think that individuals — not groups — make most decisions. But that's not true. My team and I make lots of decisions together."

In fact, they don't. It's an illusion. Executive teams may discuss issues, debate courses of action, and even give their stamps of approval, but they actually don't decide anything of moment as a group. True, the agenda will contain an item like "Final decision on China plant expansion." True, a presentation is made, ideas get kicked around the table, arguments and counterarguments arise, opinions form, compromises are struck, and a consensus emerges. True, it looks a lot like the team decided — and the boss may even think that's the case.

But then I ask the CEO two questions. First: "Were you part of the consensus?" If the answer is yes, then in reality the group didn't decide; they agreed on a course of action that was acceptable to the boss. The CEO may reply, "But sometimes the discussion changes my point of view. In that case, the group shapes the decision and participates in it."

Absolutely correct. The group discussion helped evolve the boss's thinking, which reshaped the ultimate decision. But even if the decision wasn't one the boss would have initially made or isn't his or her top choice, the fact is that the CEO was part of the consensus. And as long as the boss is a required part of the consensus — as long as whatever is decided has to be inside the boss's acceptable set of outcomes — then accountability never really shifts to the group. It is the leader, not the group, who ultimately allows that particular decision to go through.

Second, I ask: "What if the group can't reach agreement — what happens then?" Leaders will concede that the decision bounces back to them for disposition. In which case, I would argue, it never left their hands in the first place.

In some cases, leaders do hand off important decisions and then walk away. But my experience has been that when they delegate a decision, they delegate it to an individual, not a group, and the phenomenon I just described cascades down a level.

Yet the illusion that teams decide persists — especially among leaders themselves — while subordinates often find the situation unsatisfying or frustrating. In a study of top management team performance conducted by the global executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles a few years ago, 124 CEOs worldwide and 579 of their direct reports were asked to rate whether leadership team decision processes were clear. On a scale of one to seven, the CEOs rated decision process clarity, on average, at 5.62. The executives who worked for them returned a rating of only 3.86.

Should a leader, not wishing to have a team feel disenfranchised, create ironclad decision processes that genuinely empower the group to make at least some types of important decisions? Probably not. First, the reality of how important decisions take place is unlikely to change. Nor should it. Individuals, not teams, bear ultimate accountability for decisions. Second, the fundamental relationship in organizations remains unchanged. Despite decades of innovation by organization theorists, most executives continue to work in a hierarchy consisting of bosses and subordinates.

The wise boss will recognize that individuals, not groups, own decisions and will make this clear to subordinates. Some may be concerned that team members will feel disempowered. But the truth is not nearly as disempowering as fostering an illusion.

Last week, I spoke with an executive about a meeting we'd worked on together that involved him and his peers. He was very happy with the outcome. "One thing I was very impressed with," he told me, "was that nobody ran to the CEO afterwards to reverse any decisions the group had made, which is what often happens here." That's not just terminology. If something the group does can be reversed by a quick trip to the boss's office afterwards, then the group wasn't accountable for making that decision in the first place. It might be a recommendation, or a preferred option, or a consensus view, but it wasn't a decision. Subordinates would be greatly relieved and better served if we stopped putting the false label of "making decisions" on what they're doing in those meetings.

More important, explicitly letting go of the illusion of group decision making clarifies individual accountability and puts the group's time together to more effective use for debating, revising, brainstorming, and aligning. All of those activities are of great value, but none genuinely involves decisions, even of the casual, consensus-seeking type that characterizes the deliberations of many senior teams. Frankly acknowledging that inescapable fact is the first step to tapping into the real power of the team.



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