

# **Creating and Sustaining Decision-Making Excellence: *a White Paper***

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## **Creating and Sustaining Decision-Making Excellence: a *White Paper***

### **Executive Summary**

Decision-making excellence often differentiates outstanding leaders from adequate ones and exemplary districts from the merely satisfactory. While this excellence is not always recognized for what it is, it is abundantly evident when it is absent.

Decision-making excellence can be cultivated on two levels: individual and organizational. Excellent individual decision makers consistently make good decisions and implement them effectively. In order to be excellent decision makers, individuals need to be competent in each of three major areas:

- Making sense of information
- Involving others effectively
- Implementing successfully

Districts of decision-making excellence have unique and tell-tale characteristics that distinguish them. Having a few excellent decision makers is not enough to guarantee organizational decision-making excellence. Districts must ensure their systems, structures and practices support decision-making excellence. This requires an intentional, persistent, and coordinated effort.

This paper explores the competencies required for decision-making excellence at the individual and organizational level—and what individuals and districts need to do to attain and sustain that excellence.

## Creating and Sustaining Decision-Making Excellence: a *White Paper*

*“Leaders are made or broken by the quality of their decisions.”*<sup>1</sup> The same could be said for school districts. Yet making an excellent decision is an often challenging—and sometimes elusive—pursuit. Many elements must come together to make this happen. True decision-making excellence requires consistently and repeatedly bringing those elements together.

The difference between one excellent decision and **organizational decision-making excellence** is the difference between one person’s lucky shot and a team having a winning season—season after season. After all, one great decision can be a matter of luck—or the good fortune of having several good options from which to choose.

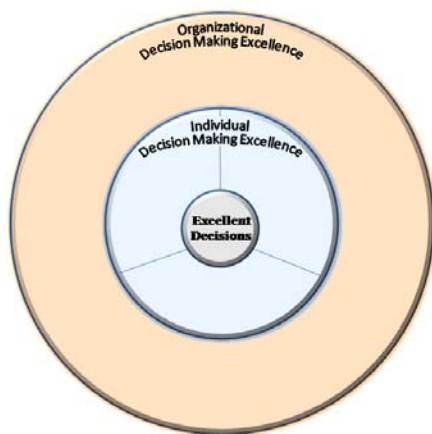
**An excellent decision is one that accomplishes desired ends because it is made and implemented effectively.**

How do we move beyond the single excellent decision? What does it mean and what is required to be an excellent decision maker? What is required to build and sustain a district of decision-making excellence?

### Two Levels of Decision-making Excellence

Decision-making excellence can be found at an individual or organizational level (see *Chart 1*). When it is found at both levels, excellent decisions are consistently made throughout an organization.

*Chart 1*



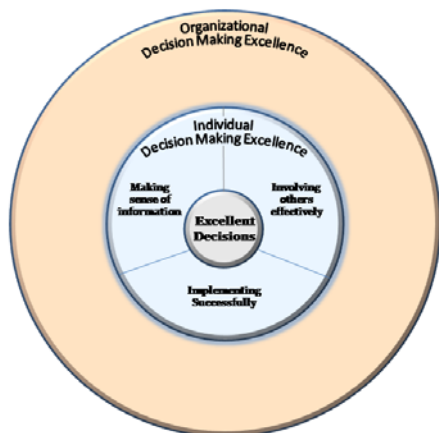
**Individual decision-making excellence**—While one excellent decision can be a matter of luck, **individual decision-making excellence** never is. An individual who consistently makes and implements excellent decisions is a skilled decision maker. These individuals recognize that good decision making is a team effort and tend to have a participative leadership style. They are the people whom others want working for them—and whom others want to work for and with. Decision-making excellence is not the purview of individuals of specific titles, responsibilities, salary grades, or experience—it can be found anywhere.

**Organizational decision-making excellence** is even more elusive, complex, and rare than individual excellence. Districts who achieve decision-making excellence not only have many people throughout the district (in all areas and levels) making excellent decisions, they have an environment that supports them in doing so. Developing **organizational decision-making excellence** requires a comprehensive, intentional and sustained effort.

## Part I: Individual Decision-Making Excellence: Three Essential Competencies

Even with all the technology and innovations, decisions are still made by individuals or groups of individuals. Decision-making excellence starts at the individual level.

Chart 2



To attain *individual decision-making excellence*, people need to be competent in each of three areas (see Chart 2):

1. Making sense of information,
2. Involving others effectively, and
3. Implementing successfully.

### Making Sense of Information

At its most basic level, “decision making is a systematic putting together of facts and experience to produce a better judgment.”<sup>ii</sup> Information helps us make these judgments. However, in this age of technology, we often receive an abundance of information—some of it irrelevant or unnecessary. And we may still be missing critical information. A district considering school closings may need to examine numerous studies, recommendations, and communications from neighborhood groups, parents, teachers, and others. This is all potentially valuable information. But what else is needed? And how do decision makers ensure they effectively use this information?

**Decision makers require good information—and a good approach for analyzing it.**

Decision makers must be able to sort through data, assess its accuracy and usefulness, and identify what information is missing and how to get it. Then they need to be able to analyze the information and draw sound conclusions. While many decision makers are able to *gather* a lot of information, there are many common pitfalls involved in making sense of it.

#### Five common pitfalls

1. *Acting without adequate understanding*  
Some people believe it is more important to act quickly than effectively. Typically this results in band-aid “solutions” which may not work or may even cause new problems.
2. *Embracing the “silver bullet”*  
Becoming prematurely “alternative” driven is a common and failure-prone strategy when stakes and pressure are high. The drive to act and latch onto alternatives is a major decision-making trap identified in Paul Nutt’s *Why Decisions Fail*. Nutt claims that “Decision makers often jump on that first idea that comes along and spend years trying to make it work...”<sup>iii</sup>

4. *Ineffective use of information*

If decision makers use incomplete or inaccurate information, conclusions will inevitably be faulty. Information may be used selectively, often because it comes from a favored source or supports favored alternatives. Sometimes, decision makers become overwhelmed and immobilized by the sheer volume of possible information.

5. *Failure to clarify upfront the situation requirements and priorities*

People often make decisions without adequately understanding a situation and its stakeholders—and without getting agreement on what a solution needs to accomplish. Forging ahead without clear or specific goals is a common failure in decision making.<sup>iv</sup> This increases the risk that consensus will be difficult or that a “solution” will fall short.

6. *Insufficient consideration of risk*

We may get so enamored with a proposed solution that we overlook its possible risks. If risks become reality, the negative consequences of a particular course of action can potentially far outweigh any benefit.

## Involving Others Effectively

Effective decision making requires the ability to successfully involve people. In *The Wisdom of Crowds*, James Surowiecki explores the intriguing and well-substantiated idea that the collective judgment of many people is almost always better than the opinions of just a few—even the experts.<sup>v</sup> Other people provide critical information, perspectives, ideas, and analysis which improve the end result. A collaborative approach to decision-making consistently outperforms an autocratic one.

In addition to increasing the quality of a solution, collaboration increases commitment to its implementation.<sup>vi</sup> Many decisions that might have otherwise been great have gone down in flames due to lack of support. How often have you seen decision makers neglect to get others involved upfront—only to watch these same leaders repeatedly try to “sell” or defend their decisions in the face of fierce opposition? Collaboration takes time upfront, but it saves time in the long-run.

Furthermore, in “King Arthur’s Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations,” David Perkins argues that collaboration—or lack thereof—sends powerful messages about a leader’s:

- value for and trust in the judgment, ability, and knowledge of others
- regard for the value of multiple perspectives and the legitimacy of others’ objectives
- belief not only in the importance of people working together but confidence in what they can achieve.<sup>vii</sup>

Yet, despite all the compelling reasons to use collaborative decision making, it typically is used less often—and less effectively—than it should be. In theory it sounds compelling. But in practice, it can be messy, frustrating, and sometimes downright disconcerting. Sometimes it just seems easier to do it yourself. The problem is that while it may seem easier, it is rarely more effective.

**Collaboration improves quality, increases commitment, and sends powerful messages about value for others.**

### Barriers to effective involvement

*Over-relying on our own—or someone else’s—experience or expertise.* While tempting to think that experience or expertise equips individuals with the best answers, research does not bear this out. In other words, we are often wrong. Michael Fullan states, “...the two greatest failures of leaders are indecisiveness in times of urgent need and dead certainty that they are right in times of complexity.”<sup>viii</sup>

*Involvement that is superficial, disingenuous, or mishandled.* Collaboration is far more than simply sharing information or sitting in the same room. Collaboration is a “process of shared creation”—producing answers or results of substance.<sup>ix</sup> Ineffective involvement produces suboptimal end results, lack of support, even open opposition. It can create a culture where people feel cynical, disenfranchised, disempowered, and undervalued.

### Implementing Successfully

The success of a decision depends on the success of its implementation. Too often we see much time and attention given to making a critical decision and little to planning for its implementation. An ideal decision poorly executed will ultimately look like a poor decision.

**There are no great decisions without effective implementation!**

#### Common Implementation Pitfalls

##### *Lack of proper planning*

Too often people are so relieved to finally make a difficult decision, they fail to plan how to make it a reality. Implementation requires a solid plan, sustained focus, proactive monitoring, timely problem solving, and excellent communications. It is not necessarily as exciting as making the actual decision, but it is the part that produces results.

##### *Waiting until problems arise*

Often, problem solving does not start until someone yells loudly or consequences become great. Being more proactive minimizes frustration and damage. When organizations value the prevention of fires as much as the glory of fighting them, we see more proactive and constructive approaches.

##### *Lack of attention or willingness to measure results*

If it is important enough to invest in making the decision, it should be important enough to monitor how well it is meeting objectives. Measuring results also allows us to identify incipient problems and make quick adjustments.

##### *Not managing the people part of implementation*

This is often the most neglected part of implementation. It involves effectively influencing, involving and communicating with those involved.<sup>x</sup> It requires clear roles and responsibilities and effective and meaningful two-way communication.

## 7 Tenets for Individual Decision-Making Excellence

In their groundbreaking research, Chuck Kepner and Ben Tregoe compared effective and ineffective decision makers. Effective decision makers typically used a logical series of steps to gather, organize, and analyze information, while the ineffective ones did not. Neither, however, was able to clearly articulate their approach. So, in *The Rational Manager*, Kepner and Tregoe outlined the “best practices” used by effective problem solvers and decision makers.<sup>xi</sup> Seven tenets for individual decision-making excellence are drawn from these best practices:

- 1** *Seek clarity and understanding before action*  
Whenever possible, don't be pressured into making premature decisions based on incomplete understanding. Do not let pre-conceived notions, favored alternatives, and biased perspectives discount the facts and cloud your judgment. When we approach decision-making with an open mind and take the time to fully understand problems, we are more likely to develop effective and lasting solutions. Take the time to do it right, so you don't have to do it over.
- 2** *Get and use the information you need...*  
and don't get lost in the information you don't. Information is often over-collected and under-utilized. Good questioning skills help gather, organize, and analyze necessary information—and separate the relevant from irrelevant.
- 3** *Get agreement upfront on objectives and goals*  
People often start decision making by examining specific solutions, thus getting invested and emotionally attached to favored solutions. This makes it harder to later commit to something different. By getting agreement upfront on desired ends and objectives, you find commonality and keep goals in the forefront. These shared objectives underpin everything that follows. Objectives unite people—it is options that divide them.
- 4** *Fully consider possible solutions*  
Expand thinking about possible solutions—don't just be satisfied with the obvious. A good range of options maximizes the chance of picking a winner. Use your objectives to fully assess the possibilities.
- 5** *Examine possible risks*  
Even excellent options carry risk. Anticipating what can go wrong, gives a more realistic picture of an option—and allows us to prevent or prepare for problems.
- 6** *Be intentional, focused, and persistent with implementation...*  
but flexible enough to make adjustments when necessary. The same rigor that went into deciding what to do, needs to go into making sure it actually happens. This involves careful planning, communications, and results monitoring. It requires commitment to finding small problems which are typically more easily and effectively addressed than those that have become entrenched or widespread.
- 7** *Involve stakeholders to strengthen the quality of decisions and commitment to them*  
Involving others can be the most rewarding—and frustrating—part of decision making. Using a visible, shared approach provides an effective and welcome roadmap for collaborative decision making.

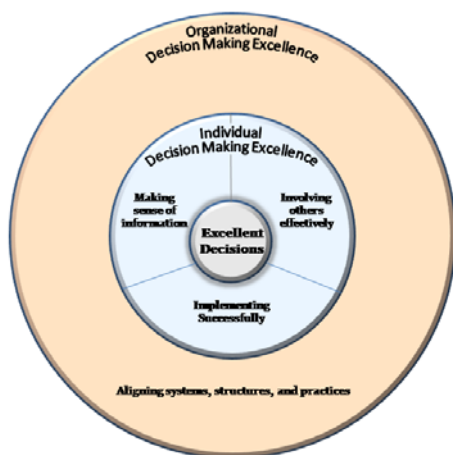
## Part II: Organizational Decision-Making Excellence

Typically, few organizations can make the claim of decision-making excellence. Some key characteristics differentiate these school districts from others:

Characteristics of Districts of Decision-Making Excellence	Characteristics of Other Districts
Decentralized decision making—people of all levels and areas entrusted to make relevant decisions	Centralized decision-making—only a few are seen as decision-makers
Stakeholder involvement consistently sought and utilized	Involvement is minimized or avoided
Track record of success in meeting or exceeding goals	Track record of unmet goals, abandoned initiatives, persistent problems, excuses
Committed to doing the right things in the right way—even when difficult. Clear-cut approach and rationale.	Pushes for quick action and decisiveness—even when speed not necessary. Little attention to process of decision making
Results and outcomes are key measures of success	Value demonstrated through activity
Understands systemic change requires many changes and sustained long-term commitment	History of adopting “silver bullets”—looking for easy answers then abandoning these for next big thing
District climate of: trust, transparency, mutual respect and effective collaboration	District climate characterized by: low morale, mistrust, territorialism, dependence, victimhood
Makes wise and judicious use of resources—e.g., initiatives well-executed, meetings effective and well-run	Ineffective resource management—e.g., ineffective meetings, poor implementation, cost-overruns
Learning/growth mindset—applies “lessons learned”. Believes best people and organizations never stop learning	Little value for reflection or lessons learned. Other priorities always take precedence. Possible hubris—“people look to us”

### Key Essential Competency: *Aligning systems, structures and practices*

In order for districts to achieve widespread decision-making excellence, systems, structures and practices must support it.



Districts may have several (or more) excellent individual decision makers within their ranks. However, this excellence cannot be leveraged and extended without proper organizational support. Regardless of how capable, experienced and excellent people may be, they get worn down, overrun, or frustrated when systems get in the way of doing the right thing. Someone once said, “If you put a good person up against a bad system, the system will win every time.” Many systems affect decision making: information processing, professional development, performance management, compensation, communications, etc. In addition, decision making is affected by how districts are structured and how those units interact.

Some of the most overlooked yet powerful elements of this competency, however, are the explicit or implicit practices by which organizations operate. Districts may not even be aware of these practices and how powerful they can be in guiding behavior. For example, is “fire-fighting” and looking busy more important than producing results—or preventing fires? Are people encouraged to identify problems and possible solutions—or is that someone else’s job? Are people supported in including others in decision making?



Do effective decision-makers get recognized or promoted? Are people expected to monitor results and learn from successes and mistakes—or are they encouraged to move on to other priorities? These and other practices send critical messages about expectations, what the district values, and how individuals should conduct themselves.

In order to improve outcomes for students, evidence suggests districts need to invest meaningfully in teachers and staff and ensure that systems are aligned to help produce these outcomes<sup>xii</sup>. Similarly, these systems, structures, and practices need to be aligned in order to achieve and sustain **organizational decision-making excellence** (or any other major objective). However, all too often, districts fail to address some of these powerful influencers of behavior.

### Common pitfalls relating to alignment of systems, structures and practices

- Underestimating the extent to which systems, structures and practices influence behavior and results—and failing to recognize the toll misalignment takes on individuals trying to do the right things.
- Believing that stating a goal is enough—the rest will somehow fall into place. Setting goals is an important first step, but many simple and complex changes are required to achieve substantive goals.
- Not taking advantage of each interaction, discussion, event to send an intended message—When leaders don't realize the messages their behavior sends, they may unintentionally send undesired messages.
- Failing to consciously create—through intentional choice and effort—a climate or culture that supports decision-making excellence. Not doing this represents a lost opportunity. A culture that is consistent with a desired change, fuels progress towards achieving that change.

## 5 sure-fire ways to increase decision-making excellence within districts

Decision-making excellence would be the norm if achieving it were easy. Typically, every school district does some of these things well, but it is the rare district that excels at them all. Increasing decision-making capacity provides a great advantage. When a district values its people for their minds—not just for being another pair of hands—there is no limit to what can be accomplished. Invest in growing the decision-making capabilities of people—and create an environment that supports them in using those capabilities. Our work with thousands of leaders and hundreds of districts has provided insights into some sure-fire ways to improve decision making within districts.

- 1 ***Give people the necessary skills, tools and strategies and expect people to use them***  
Decision making is a learned skill. People may acquire some of it with time and experience, but, as with any skill, its acquisition can be accelerated with instruction and practice. People must not only be taught strategies for making excellent decisions, people must be supported in using them. Organizations support people in applying skills by: providing opportunities for them to apply the skills, having realistic expectations for outcomes, providing targeted feedback, and making resources (people, information, etc.) available.
- 2 ***Commit to a common process and language for collaborative decision making***  
The entire organization should be working with the same goals, tools, and strategies. An effective, shared approach facilitates collaborative decision-making while minimizing waste. Make sure these strategies are modeled and used at all levels of the organization. Believe in the value of involving people—and make it a reality. Collaboration increases the quality of the end

result—and ultimately increases district capacity. If you think involvement takes too much time, quantify the time and resources spent “selling” or fighting opposition to an unpopular decision.

**3** *Focus on goals and data-driven results*

Ensure all decisions are linked to district goals and that linkage, rationale, and approach are clearly articulated. In addition, make good information accessible and insist people use it. Thus, data becomes part of the equation—not just opinion or conjecture. Measure effectiveness of programs and initiatives to gauge success and make necessary adjustments in a timely way.

**4** *Remove barriers to excellent decision-making*

Part of creating an organization of decision-making excellence involves knowing what gets in the way. Where are the breakdowns in systems and practices that prevent decision-making excellence? Find these and address them. What changes need to be introduced in order to facilitate excellence instead of impede it? Do people have access to the information they need? Are people given the time and opportunity to support collaborative decision making?

**5** *Create a culture of decision-making excellence*

District climate and culture is a powerful and vastly underestimated influencer of behavior. It can either facilitate or inhibit desired change. Fullan attests that indeed, the most important part of creating or sustaining desired change is “reculturing”—transforming culture<sup>xiii</sup>. Culture is evidenced in practices, actions and relationships. Seize opportunities to send a message with words or deeds about what is valued. Practices, systems and structures that emphasize collaboration and shared problem solving help develop inter-departmental relationships that foster trust, cooperation, and effective use of resources.

## Conclusion

If a district wants its people to be excellent decision-makers—if it wants to be a district of decision-making excellence—it needs to be prepared to make multiple changes on multiple levels. Not all leaders have the courage or fortitude to cultivate individual AND **organizational decision-making excellence**. This requires a loosening of control and a sharing of responsibility. It requires humility, self-reflection, and a willingness to take risks. Developing **organizational decision-making excellence** involves supporting individuals in building *and* applying the three competencies of decision-making excellence: making sense of information, collaborating effectively, and implementing successfully. This entails ensuring that structures, systems, and practices support decision-making excellence. The rewards, however, will be seen in a more positive and productive climate, improved morale and in lasting results. As capacity for making excellent decisions increases, so too will the rate of positive and productive change and results.

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## Endnotes

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