

BUILDING BETTER RELATIONSHIPS - STEP 4: HOW WE MAKE DECISIONS

When I was 25, I moved from America to Europe because of my job. I was young, ambitious, and ready to make a name for myself in my new country. Unfortunately, I was also naive enough to think that what made me a high performer in the US would perfectly translate into my new European job. That just wasn't the case. What once was easy, was now becoming a struggle, and I didn't fully understand why. For example, I was a big believer in using my expertise to craft proposed solutions and then presenting those solutions to my leader. In my time in the US, my leader would either give me the green light or point me in a new direction, but once I got their decision, I was able to start running fast. But with my European leader and colleagues, decisions felt like they would take forever. I would go to my leader with an idea, and they would ask me what my colleagues thought of the idea.

This wasn't something I was naturally inclined to do. Sometimes I would have gotten the input of one or two of my colleagues, but only if they were tangibly connected with the proposal. If a colleague had no connection to the situation or my solution, then I left them out of the discussion. I mean why would I get them involved in something they had no connection to? But it was these colleagues who had no direct connection to my proposal that my leader constantly pushed me to talk to, and it frustrated me.

What I eventually came to realize was that my colleagues and leader had a more consensual approach to making decisions. It wasn't enough to get the leader onboard. I needed to get the team onboard as well. Conceptually this seemed like something I would love, as I always hated being told what to do by my leader, but emotionally I struggled with it. I felt like the team's Consensual decision-making process was like walking through mud, when all I wanted to do was get stuff done as fast as possible. Even though I bristled under a boss telling me what to do, I actually missed having a leader who made the decisions.

Thankfully, I realized the issue of my different cultural approaches to working with others, and I was eventually able to adapt my style and thrive. But as I studied my cultural differences, I realized something important. I am not the stereotypical ambassador for America, and the people I meet do not always match their cultural stereotypes. So instead of trying to work with them based on cultural stereotypes, I started to view people as individuals and try to collaborate with them based on their individual preferences. And now I want to share my lessons with you. Over a series of seven articles, I will share with you the different dimensions of collaboration and leadership, and how you can improve your relationships with your colleagues, your customers, and even in your personal life. This is the fourth article of the seven, and it is focused on the different preferences of how people make decisions.

The Seven Dimensions of Collaboration

The seven dimensions of collaboration is not a concept I created on my own. It is founded on research by Professor Erin Meyer, from INSEAD. In her amazing book, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer highlights seven dimensions of collaboration that vary widely across cultures. The seven dimensions are:

1. How do we build trust? - Task based vs Relationship based trust
2. How do we communicate with each other - Low Context vs High Context Communication
3. What is expected from leaders? - Egalitarian Leadership vs Hierarchical Leadership
4. How do we want decisions to be made? - Consensual vs Top-Down Decisions
5. What do we do when we disagree? - Confrontational Discussion vs Avoiding Confrontation
6. How do we prefer to give and receive feedback? - Direct Feedback vs Indirect Feedback
7. What is our approach to time when it comes to accomplishing tasks and delivering results? - Linear Timelines vs Flexible Planning

I fully recommend everyone read Erin Meyer's book, especially if you are ever working with someone from a different culture. But even if all of your colleagues and customers are from the same country, there is a ton of value in understanding the seven dimensions. Most people do not match the average cultural profile from their country. That is why I recommend trying to understand their individual preferences across the seven dimensions. By trying to understand their individual preferences you will be able to form more productive relationships in your teams and more valuable relationships with your customers.

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Dimension 4 - How Do We Prefer to Make Decisions?

When working with other people, knowing how a decision will be made can help you avoid a lot of conflict or miscommunication. Having clarity on the decision-making process will allow you to have the debate and dialogue needed to achieve genuine buy in on the decision. While there are many different techniques to help you make a decision (SWOT analysis, cost-benefit analysis, brainstorming, etc...), when it comes down to making the actual decision the different styles of decision making differ on whether the group or the individual makes the decision.

For example, on one side of the decision-making spectrum are people who believe the best way to make decisions is to get unanimous agreement from the group. Before the proposal is signed off, the group conducts informal discussions with the goal of trying to form some sort of consensus. By the time they reach the meeting where the decision will be formally made, the decision is already set. While this type of consensus-based decision takes longer, implementing the decision is actually quicker, because everyone has already committed to the idea.

On the other side of the decision-making spectrum, you have people that believe that the majority of decisions should be made by the individual. Typically, this individual is the person with the most authority (the leader, the project manager, the expert, etc...). The group may present different options to the leader, but ultimately it is the leader who makes the decision, and the group falls in behind the decision. Even if the group had no input on the decision, commitment to that decision is expected.

While you might already have a good idea on your preference for decision making, there is an easy way to find out. Answer the below four questions, and based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for either Consensual or Top Down decision making.

1) The best decisions are the ones that get unanimous agreement from the team.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2) Before a big meeting, I will go to all the relevant stakeholders so we can align and potentially even agree on the decision before the meeting.	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) I believe it is the team's responsibility to present the leader with well thought out options, but ultimately the big decisions are the theirs to make and ours to commit to.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
4) Trying to get all the team members and stakeholders to weigh in on a decision often takes too long.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Based on your answers, you should be able to identify your preference for Making Decisions	High Preference for Consensual Decisions	Slight Preference for Consensual Decisions	Mixed Preference	Slight Preference for Top-Down Decisions	High Preference for Top-Down Decisions

Collaborating With People with Different Decision Making Preferences

It goes without saying that if your preference for making decisions matches the other person, then collaborating with them will be easier. But what do you do if you prefer Consensual decision making while the other person prefers a more Top Down approach? Or what about the reverse? Don't worry ... effectively working with people with different decision-making styles is possible. All it takes is a willingness to try and adapt your style to meet their preferences.

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What you should do if you prefer a more Top Down approach to decision making and the other person prefers a more Consensual approach:

- **Plan for decisions to take a longer time** - The first thing a Top Down person needs to do when working with a Consensus builder is to remain patient. Gathering the relevant stakeholders' input and then coalescing around an agreed upon decision takes time. A lot of time. So if you are expecting to come to a decision after one conversation, then you are just setting yourself up for frustration. Take your original timeline for making a decision and double or even triple that time. This time is needed to get everyone onboard and committed to the decision.
- **Plan for quick implementation** - Yes, the decision-making process may take longer than you would like, but that doesn't mean everything is slow in this approach. By getting all the stakeholders onboard before the decision, the time it takes to implement the decision actually goes down. So, when you are determining the timelines for the decision and implementation, recognize that you might be able to execute the eventual decision faster than you expect.
- **Gather input from a broader range of stakeholders** - When collaborating with someone who prefers to make Consensual decisions, you should plan on gathering the input from more stakeholders than you would normally. Some of these stakeholders you might already have planned to contact, but some you might not have thought about. So, the simple thing to do is to ask the Consensus builder which stakeholders they think are critical to involve in the decision.
- **Discuss the decision informally** - A misconception of the Consensual decision-making approach is that we need to gather everyone into one meeting. This is a waste of time and might actually make the decision making process slower. Instead of getting everyone invited to one meeting, we recommend informally talking with each of the stakeholders individually. Gather their input and use their input to revise your proposal. After more people have contributed their opinions, go back to the first stakeholders and share how the idea has evolved. Including everyone informally can allow you to move faster instead of trying to find space in everyone's calendar to meet.

What you should do if you prefer a more Consensual approach to decision making and the other person prefers a more Top Down approach:

- **Get input from their leader** - A common source of frustration for people is when we expect someone to do one thing, and then they do something completely unexpected. So, if you are a more Consensual decision maker, you need to set your expectations for how other people will act. If you are working with a Top Down decision maker, you should expect them to give more decision making authority to the leader. They might push back on the idea of involving many different stakeholders and instead choose to go right to the leader.
- **If you are the leader, then make the decision** - If you are a Consensus building leader, but your team is composed of people with a Top Down preference, be prepared to make decisions. Sure, you can gather input from them or some of the colleagues, but they are ultimately looking to you to make the final call. If you attempt too much Consensus building, your people are not going to react as positively as you might hope. Instead of feeling like you are empowering them, they may feel like you are an indecisive leader.
- **Disagree and then commit** - When working with people that have a Top Down preference, or a leader who is a Top Down decision maker, you need to recognize that your input will not always be sought. Decisions will get made without your say, but you will be expected to still commit to those decisions and execute the plan. A phrase made famous by Jeff Bezos (Amazon CEO) is "Disagree, and then commit." It is fine to disagree with a plan, but when the leader or the team makes a decision, then everyone needs to get onboard with it.
- **Don't forget that Top Down decisions can change** - A common misconception of Top Down decision making is that decisions are set in stone. Often leaders will make a decision, but then later revise that decision if new information surfaces. This can frustrate Consensual decision makers, but we recommend seeing this as a potential opportunity. Instead of getting mad that a decision is changing again, find a way to make the new decision even better.

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Transparency is the Key to Decision Making

Over my 20-year career, the majority of my projects and work have required me to collaborate globally. I have been lucky and simultaneously challenged by colleagues from too many countries to count. This kind of career has been great and something I have really enjoyed, but at the same time I have been forced to grow and adapt my ways of working. It has not been easy to design and implement my projects across global companies with tens of thousands of employees. But if I could share one tip when working with anyone different than you, it would be to be transparent.

Now I don't mean transparent with every idea or thought in your head. Instead, I mean that you should help others come to a transparent agreement on how they will work together. It would be super simple to assume everyone on a team preferred one type of decision-making process, but that just sets you up for frustration or even potential failure. What we recommend is to transparently discuss with the person or the team how the decision will get made. Will it be a vote or from the leader? If it is a vote, do we need 100% agreement or a simple majority? Are there any concerns (fast timelines, inability to change the decision, etc...) that would impact how the decision should get made?

These types of open and transparent discussions on how you will make a decision allow you all to set clear expectations, and to commit to how you will work together. Now it might seem silly to talk about HOW you will make a decision before you talk about the specific decision, but this kind of alignment is critical. By being open and transparent on how you will work together, you increase the likelihood of establishing a collaborative and successful relationship.

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