Chapter 10: Key decision points

Case 16: Key decisions

This Case concerns decisions involving significant thinking during a period of deliberation by more than one person. These range from major family decisions (e.g. moving home, getting married) through major business decisions (e.g. new product lines, rebranding, relocations, mergers/acquisitions, closure, and major policy decisions) to official decisions (e.g. planning permissions, court cases, immigration decisions, route choices, school closure/opening, hospital relocation, awarding contracts, passing new laws). They sometimes involve voting (e.g. by members of a standards committee, local council, parliament, or electorate).

The need for the decision might or might not have been recognized by others when your influence begins. You might be trying to influence a process already started or get action on something that is wrong and neglected.

Typical features of such decisions include a set of decision-makers, a wider set of people whose views are important to the decision-makers, a possibly wider set of people who might be affected by the decision, a process of deliberation, and choices, often with stages, rules, defined participants, and voting. There are often big differences in thinking style, amount of expertise and knowledge, and degree of responsibility between the individuals involved. There are often established groups battling each other.

The following guidelines aim to:

- influence key decisions by doing useful mental work and sharing it;

- gain attention for your contributions;

- encourage reason and fairness; and

- keep going.

Share research and thinking

Key decisions typically involve considerable information gathering and thinking. The best way to discover and push towards good outcomes is to do some of that work competently and share your outputs. You can do any part of the work and offer it even if you are not a decision-maker or an official part of their decision-support team. If the decision will affect you in some way then the decision-makers should at least be willing to consider paying attention to your work.

Sharing your reasoning (e.g. as research, suggestions, proposals, recommendations) is completely different from making demands or giving orders (which you might do if

you have authority over someone or are threatening them with consequences if they do not comply). Demands and orders without authority or overwhelming power usually cause a negative reaction, so it is better to simply share your work.

It is vital to move the decision forward by being constructive (e.g. providing new information, suggesting options, doing useful calculations) instead of just trying to delay the process and claiming that those more involved are incompetent or corrupt at every opportunity (even if they are).

There are many ways to contribute:

- **Review the decision process to be used (or being used) and suggest improvements:** You could comment on who is involved and methods for research, deliberation, decision, and voting. There are usually major opportunities for improvement in the way uncertainty is considered, for example.

  E.g. Imagine a proposal for a new train line includes estimates of its journey times calculated using 'a simulation' that are central to the argument for building the line. The estimates are to the nearest second with no indication of uncertainty and no list of assumptions made. It is very unlikely that actual journey times will be as predicted and poor practice to ignore uncertainty for a proposal of this importance. This could be pointed out and a proper analysis could be proposed with detailed suggestions on method. The problem could be illustrated by listing potential reasons for journey times being different from the best estimate and being variable.

- **Review the decision work done and suggest improvements:** You could identify missing information, stakeholders, factors, or causal effects, incorrect information (found through internal inconsistencies or by fact checking externally), statistically unlikely predictions (probable errors), poor courses of action pursued despite obvious improvements available, incorrect calculations, misleading charts or drawings, and misleading statistics.

  E.g. In one application for planning permission I noticed that the side elevation drawing was inconsistent with the rear elevation. Most likely the rear elevation had been incorrectly drawn, making the building alterations look smaller than was really planned.

- **Do research:** You could do library/internet research, surveys, modelling, surveillance, or trials. This might look at facts, the values of stakeholders, or the willingness of stakeholders to try particular courses of action.

  E.g. A group promoting sustainable lifestyles could launch a research programme to find out which lifestyle changes people are making, which they would be willing to try if suitable products or services were available, and which law changes they would support. This information could then be shared with companies likely to offer such products or services and with people in government interested in the relevant law changes. A group with many members could organize simple surveys and ask its members to help recruit survey respondents. The credibility of the research would be increased by reporting lifestyle changes the group thought reasonable but were largely rejected by respondents alongside the changes with wider support.

- **Develop possible courses of action:** Proposing a plan or design that is better for everyone is a powerful move. This is easier if you have expertise and a good process in place for evaluating alternative plans/designs. You might propose an entirely new idea or refine existing ideas. Alternatively, you might examine a proposal and deduce what it implies in practice, perhaps revealing some obvious problems.

  E.g. Imagine the board of a company has been arguing over a plan to replace most of its computer systems in a large project over two years. The board is split between those who think the project is essential and those who think it unnecessary and too risky. They are deadlocked until someone proposes a revised project, structured into many smaller deliveries so the pace of change can be controlled, possible data quality issues can be measured and solved in good time, and less important changes can be dropped later if desired.

  E.g. Proposed legislation is sometimes poor because the authors did not have good ideas for conceptualising the rules and expressing them. In this situation suggesting good wordings can help more than itemizing faults with existing proposals.

  E.g. Imagine a proposal calls for 'continuous improvement' in a situation where, taken literally, this is impractical. You could point out the practical impossibility of continuous improvement and propose an alternative schedule of frequent but discrete improvement activities.

- **Predict and evaluate the effects of alternative courses of action:** Although this should be done in business and official decisions, often it is not or is done incompetently. Failure to deal with uncertainty is normal. If you analyse uncertainty well it is a good basis for reducing that uncertainty through extra research and analysis. This type of contribution includes predicting the effects of doing nothing different, which is sometimes needed to get anyone to take an interest in a problem.

- **Collect and organize overall analyses of courses of action and comparisons between them:** This could include variations on courses of action. It might be organized to help decision-makers select bundles of actions more efficiently.

- **Propose choices from the alternatives:** Because of complexity and uncertainty it can be hard to identify the best choice even when you have excellent predictions and evaluations of options. A compelling method for choosing or a rationale for a particular choice can be influential.

Share widely

Usually, it is best to share the results of your decision-support work widely. Typically, many people are involved in big decisions. Also, if you email one person, they may selfishly decide to quietly delete it. Conversely, if you email several people who might be interested then you are more likely to reach someone receptive (e.g. has a few minutes free, likes your ideas, is looking for fresh inputs). If more than

one person is thinking of your suggestions at the same time then they may start talking together and that will increase consideration of your work.

Also, most decision-makers are concerned with what other people think. They may need votes to keep their jobs or worry about a bad public reaction. They may take popular opinion as evidence that an idea is good or at least worth looking at more carefully. So, try to reach a wider audience of people whose views might be influential indirectly as well as sharing with decision-makers. Let people know the work is being shared widely.

The most direct way to share your thinking is by face-to-face conversation. This is practical for family decisions and smaller organizations. For a campaigning group with many members these conversations can have a large cumulative impact.

> E.g. An organization promoting sustainable lifestyles might ask its members to talk to their families and friends about a list of lifestyle changes to see which they think they could and will adopt.

Another direct approach is to write to individuals (e.g. by email). The emails could go to people in a variety of roles and at different levels of importance. Some choices of who to write to are tricky. For example, if you want to get an idea to a UK government minister it is often better to write to your MP suggesting that they forward it to the minister if they want to. If your MP thinks the suggestion is reasonable then he or she will usually forward it to the minister and is guaranteed a response, eventually.

> E.g. Imagine a large charity has taken a public position on an issue you think harmful to the charity and others. You could analyse the consequences of their position and describe actions to correct the situation. Your thinking could then be shared by email with the chief executive, the head of membership, the head of fund raising, various other technical roles relevant to the issue, their legal advisors, and a selection of volunteers to the charity that you know personally.

To share your ideas with more people, you could convert the private letter into an open letter by posting a copy on a website, social media page, or publishing it in a journal. As well as sending a copy to the key recipient you will also need to let other people know through publicity efforts such as social media postings, mass emails, and contacting journalists.

Another advantage of sharing with more people is that it is harder for anyone to write off your contribution unfairly.

> E.g. Imagine that a prominent female politician makes a strongly worded attack on men generally, calling them all rapists. In response she receives thousands of critical emails. Suppose you also write to her with critical points but your email is not abusive or threatening. Some of the emails she receives threaten her with violence or rape allowing her to say later that she has received thousands of abusive emails, some making vile threats such as rape. She insinuates that all the emails (including yours, to which she has not replied) have been from horrible men who were threatening and abusive. However, if your letter has been made public then it is clear that your email was not abusive or threatening, still less vile.

An alternative is to start a petition and established websites have made this easy. Share your thinking via the text you write to encourage people to sign the petition.

A better format for longer contributions is to publish a report on a topic. This is typical for 'think tanks' and other organized campaign groups. The impact of reports can be amplified to publishing speeches and interviews on video or audio.

E.g. Organizations that publish reports to share their thinking include the Rocky Mountain Institute (sustainable technology), Z/Yen (finance, charities, etc), The National Secular Society, The Centre for Social Justice, The Institute of Economic Affairs, and Demos.

If you have the skill and resources, you may eventually get a paper published in a scientific journal.

E.g. In March 2020 a team of epidemiologists led by Neil Ferguson of Imperial College published a 20 page report (Ferguson, et al, 2020) giving the results of simulations of COVID-19's impact on the UK. The report radically shifted government thinking and plans.

It is easy to set up a website, blog, or social media home page to make your material globally accessible all the time.

Going public is especially important for topics that are difficult to talk about, perhaps because they are embarrassing or are met with angry reactions. People must encounter ideas that are put calmly, rationally, and fairly so that they can become more familiar and comfortable with them.

E.g. In the UK we mostly think sport is a good thing, almost regardless of which sport it is. Any legal sport you can think of has enthusiastic people doing and promoting it. There are coaches, organizing bodies, equipment manufacturers, places you can do the sport, and people wanting to get the sport on television more often. In many sports there are people hoping to win an Olympic medal and struggling to get funding.

But are all sports equally good for society and equally deserving of public funding? Are there objective ways to evaluate this that most people can understand? Yes. Consider the comparison between show jumping and 1500 metre running. Show jumping is very expensive due to the equipment, animals, and venues involved. Doing it is not a good, healthy workout for the rider and can lead to very serious injuries from falls. In contrast, middle-distance running needs very little equipment and provides a good workout. Anyone physically capable can participate in this kind of running and become healthier as a result. The same cannot be said of show jumping.

Or consider shooting compared to badminton. Shooting does not provide a healthy workout and encourages people to own and use guns. It is not a sport most people would want their children to play. In contrast, badminton provides a healthy workout with unusually low risk of sports injuries (due to there being no physical contact with opponents). Almost anyone can play it to some level, from tiny children to people long retired.

Clearly, mass participation in running and badminton are better for society than show jumping and shooting. Happily, far more people participate in running and

badminton than in show jumping and shooting. Overall, although some evaluations are tricky, it is not hard to identify the larger differences in social value between sports and, to some extent, public funding already reflects these evaluations.

However, when it comes to Olympic funding the rule (as I write) is that sports in the UK get funding according to their prospects of winning medals at the next Olympics. If this is to be reformed it will be necessary for people, especially politicians, to get used to stating publicly that funding some sports is more valuable to society than funding others. They must stop fearing criticism from supporters of less socially valuable sports (e.g. show jumpers and shooters who say 'But we have won many medals for you!' and 'This is an attack on traditional British pastimes and values!' and boxers who say 'But we work with under privileged kids!' and 'That's typical of you middle-class liberal elite politicians!' and 'What have you got against us?').

To prepare the way for sensible decision-making about Olympic funding it would help to get people comfortable with statements about the differing social value of sports. They should be said calmly, based on facts and systematic analysis, and show the net benefit to society from revising the allocation of funds, while acknowledging that some people will get less as others get more. If the points are made in an emotive, deceptive way then the effect would be to make these topics even more difficult to talk about.

Explain how you worked

To get people to attend to the work you are sharing, give them good reasons. Let them know the effort and expertise applied and the methods used.

> E.g. 'Our team of retired planners, architects, and historians spent six weeks reviewing the options in detail and developing some alternatives. Their work can be seen at our website: …'

Press for reason and fairness above all

Sometimes the right decision is (or should be) obvious. Sometimes it is not. Either way, approaching the decision with reason and fairness is best. You might say things like: 'I'd like that to be decided after careful consideration of the practical challenges and consequences for all those involved. Without delay.'

Support reasoning achieved rather than people or their tribes. If someone supports the same conclusion that you have reached but does so with tricks or some other alternative to reason then that's a problem. Discourage them from doing it again because they are discrediting the sensible conclusion. If someone who supports the wrong conclusion nevertheless makes a sound inference from reliable information then support that inference.

This is very different from the tribal form of argument that is more often seen in public. It makes perfect sense to encourage people with power to rely on sound reasoning and fairness even if this is not in connection with any particular decision. That alone could be the aim of your message or even your whole campaign.

Never be disruptive

Avoid disruptive campaign tactics completely. These include:

- **Getting in the way:** a rally or march that disrupts traffic; blockading public transport or access to buildings with people, vehicles, or other things; chaining doors or gates shut; stopping building, demolition, or clearing work by putting yourself in physical danger; occupying buildings or wider territory; running out in front of racers; denial of service attacks on computers.

- **Attacking things:** graffiti; breaking windows; looting shops; setting fire to cars and buildings; pulling down fences; putting acid into post boxes; computer hacking attacks.

- **Attacking people:** threatening behaviour; stalking; throwing harmless liquid over people (e.g. a milkshake); throwing food at them (e.g. an egg); throwing stones, bricks, or burning objects at people; acid attacks (e.g. putting acid into post boxes); setting fire to cars or buildings with people in them; kicking and punching people; attacking with a weapon (e.g. baseball bat, sword, machete, knife, gun); bombing; driving a vehicle at people (e.g. van, aeroplane).

These tactics do nothing to advance the decision process and their consequences harm a campaign:

- **Wasted resources:** Disruption wastes resources (e.g. police time, transport effort, repairs and cleaning afterwards). These include the resources of public authorities (funded by the public), ordinary people harmed, and campaign people (who could have been doing something more productive instead).

- **Inconvenient legal consequences:** These include being arrested, getting a criminal record, a restraining order, fines, and paying compensation to victims.

- **Unhelpful perceptions:** The disruption often links an unhelpful idea with the campaign (e.g. disruption linked to sustainability, violence linked to black people, intolerance linked to Muslims, irrational behaviour linked to women voters).

- **Loss of good will:** People harmed directly get angry. Others know the extra effort by public authorities has wasted public resources paid for by ordinary people and know this is inconsiderate. They see the campaigners as childish and stupid, perhaps also evil. It looks like the campaigners do not have good ideas or good reasons, or think their opponents are evil.

- **Increased resistance:** Official decision-makers are less willing to do the things the campaign demands because they do not want to appear influenced by these tactics. Public support is lost due to resentment and unhelpful perceptions. People angered may put more effort into researching the issues and developing counter-arguments and proposals. The result of disruptive campaigning is more effective opposition to the campaign.

Supportive coverage of disruption by news media presumably encourages disruptive campaigners because it looks like popular support. However, the unseen but greater consequences listed above are negative and more publicity only increases them.

Withdraw bad arguments promptly

If you realize you have stated something in public that is incorrect, misleading, or superseded by a better idea then:

* do not repeat that statement;

* quickly remove it from websites you control, possibly putting a note that explains the change made and why; and

* if necessary, quickly publicise the retraction and correction.

An apology might be appropriate but often is not necessary.

If others are using a bad argument despite generally being right and moving in the same direction as you then privately encourage them to withdraw it. If that fails then distance yourself from the bad argument by publicly encouraging them to withdraw it.

Be persistent and focused

Even one mistake with a new venture can turn a good idea into a disaster so it is important to work towards good outcomes through every stage of deliberation. For example:

* getting the thing considered at all

* an initial report

* a consultation

* committee deliberations

* drafting documents

* the decision itself, and

* interpretation and implementation decisions later.

You may need to respond to people pushing in unhelpful directions. They may be extremely persistent, ruthless, and ingenious. Considerable resources may be needed to keep this up and it pays to be focused and efficient.

E.g. When a property developer's inappropriate development is refused planning permission this is not necessarily the end of the matter. Developers often come back with revised proposals in what is really a drawn-out negotiation involving far more than the official planning committee meetings.

E.g. The battles over HS/2 (a new rail line for the UK) continued at stage after stage of the process of design, approval, and construction. There were several

points where the project could have been abandoned and many design details were the subject of campaigns.

E.g. The UK's lengthy battle to leave the European Union was the longest and most convoluted political battle I can recall in my lifetime. It took many years to get a referendum and, once that was won, more years to overcome the obstacles put in the way by politicians, lawyers, journalists, and others. There were battles for power within the government, between the political parties, with judges, and the irrepressible Gina Miller. Work was needed at every stage to achieve the eventual outcome.

Focus on the most important periods of time, people, and arguments. Adapt to new developments. Do not get drawn into spats about who is the better person; focus on the decision.

One of the major challenges in these situations is the involvement of unreasonable, organized groups. These are covered in the next chapter.