

# How Successful Leaders Make Better Decisions

By Gary Winters

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Leaders are known by the decisions they make. Famous leaders are often remembered for one critical decision that shaped destiny, such as George Custer's brash decision to attack at Little Big Horn, or Harry S Truman's fateful decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I have been studying organizational leaders for two decades, and have come to the conclusion that what separates effective leaders from others is not their decisiveness, but rather their skill and willingness to use a variety of decision-making styles to choose a course of action for a given situation.

These styles can be thought of as points on a continuum, ranging from decisions made by the leader alone to decisions fully delegated to the team. Each of the styles are valuable for some situations but are inappropriate in others. Effective leaders move back and forth on the continuum, gracefully choosing the most appropriate style in the moment.

## *The Decision-Making Continuum*

Perhaps the most often-used (and abused) style is one I call *Now Hear This!* Much like the captain of a ship, the leader making a *Now Hear This!* decision does so acting alone, without input from others. Once the decision is made the leader can announce it to the team and clarify any questions they may have.

Occasionally, a leader recognizes a need to run his decision past his or her team before it's finalized. I call this the *Trial Balloon* because (if you'll pardon the mixed metaphor) it isn't "set in stone" until the team has reacted. The leader reserves the right to make the final decision, but in contrast to a *Now Hear This!* decision, input from the team is solicited to insure that the leader has considered all the facts and options.

Some decisions are best made by a leader after soliciting the input of key stakeholders, not before. I've adapted President Truman's famous adage, "The buck stops here," to identify the third point on the continuum – the *Buck Stop* decision. Just as Truman did before giving the order to drop the bomb, or John Kennedy did before ordering a block-aid of Cuba during the missile crisis, the leader remains as neutral as possible while gathering the best thinking of the people involved – without yielding the right to make the final decision.

There will be times when the best decision is made by consensus – when the whole team, including the leader, engages in a creative dialogue to determine the best course of action. Because the whole group is "in it together," I call this style the *Life Raft*. The leader facilitates a discussion that helps people plant their stakes – and move them – to reach a solution that everyone can actively support.

Finally, some decisions can be delegated to the team to make without the active participation of the leader. This style, called *You Tell Me!* is the direct opposite of *Now Hear This!* The leader's only responsibility is to define the parameters or boundaries for the decision and the team engages in a process to arrive at a decision.

No style can fit every situation, regardless the effort some leaders expend trying to make it so. For one thing, those who make too many decisions themselves are seen as arrogant, brash, and dictatorial, while those who bring too many decisions to the team are seen as indecisive, weak time-wasters. Aside from the perceptions of others (deserved or not) there is a critical principle with regard to decision-making – *people are more likely to fully support those decisions they help make* (or, put another way, people are more likely to sabotage those decisions they feel are unfairly imposed on them).

And one more thing – a compelling reason to involve people in decisions is the simple truth that arises from all the research on problem solving – more often than not, two heads are better than one, and three better than two, and so on – when trying to find the best solution to a thorny issue.

## ***How to Decide How to Decide***

Successful leaders move across the decision-making continuum with grace, making it look automatic. Our work with leaders who do this reveals that they are asking themselves three questions before choosing the most appropriate style for a given situation.

1. Once the decision is made, will it need simple compliance by the team, or is it a matter that will need their tangible commitment?
2. How much time is available to make the decision?
3. How mature is the team in terms of group decision-making?

*Now Hear This!* and *Trial Balloon* decisions are compliance-centric. That is, they are made with the expectation that the team will implement them because that is the job of the team – to “make it so.” *Life Raft* and *You Tell Me!* are commitment-centric styles, because as people put their fingerprints on the decision and have the opportunity to shape the final outcome, they are much more likely to be highly vested in the decision. As is often said, they “own the decision.” A *Buck Stop* decision balances compliance and commitment.



**Compliance**

**Less Time**

**Less Team Maturity with Decision-Making**

**Commitment**

**More Time**

**More Team Maturity with Decision-Making**

The issue of time is important, because it usually takes a group of people more time to make a decision than one person acting alone. When time is a critical factor, such as during an emergency, successful leaders move to the *Now Hear This!* or *Trial Balloon* end of the continuum. If time is not that pressing a factor, more involvement by the team can be encouraged. We are not surprised to learn that successful leaders have fewer emergencies than less effective leaders.

Successful leaders take the third question – team maturity – quite seriously. They see decisions as opportunities to choose a wise course of action *and* develop their team. They lean in the direction of more team involvement in their decisions, because that is how teams learn to make better decisions. Their confidence in the competence of their team to make decisions will rise as they skillfully facilitate creative dialogue around the conference table.

### *Choose Wisely*

We don't celebrate December 6th as the birth date of President George Custer because he never became president. What appeared to be a brilliant military career which might have been followed by a political one ended not because Custer was decisive, but because he failed to access the information available to him by his scouts. In other words, he chose to say *Now Hear This!* when he would have been better served to make a Buck Stop decision.

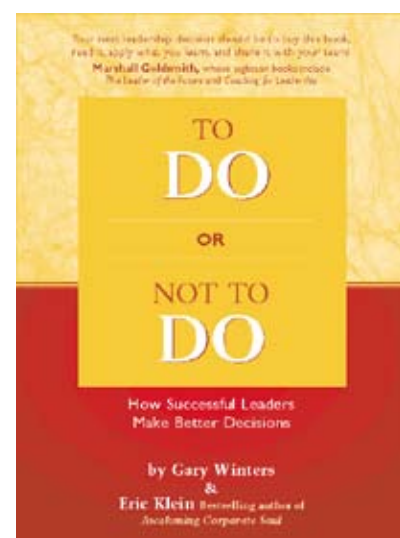
Successful leaders weren't born with the ability to use the full spectrum of team-based decision-making styles. They've learned how to move across the continuum until they felt comfortable with every style. As they did so, the quality of their decisions increased as did the confidence of others in their leadership.

### *About Gary Winters*

For over 20 years, Gary Winters has coached leaders on decision-making, building teams, communication, and managing change and transition. He is the coauthor of *To Do or Not To Do – How Successful Leaders Make Better Decisions*. For more information on these topics, please visit his blog, [The Leadership Almanac](#).

As a Senior CENTRE Consultant, he has worked with leaders in such cities as Berkeley, Brentwood, Oceanside, Oxnard, Sacramento, San Diego, and many others. He has also worked with several water agencies, delivered Management Academies for Supervising Deputy Attorneys General of the California Department of Justice, and numerous Boards and Commissions.

Mr. Winters is available to present the material in this article on a deeper level in workshops or as a luncheon or after-dinner speaker. Please call THE CENTRE at 619-685-1340 for further information.



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