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Nothing creates doubt or distrust faster than an inability to make a decision

In his novel *A Man in Full* about the 1990 real estate crisis in Atlanta, Georgia, Tom Wolfe contrasted the decision-making process of his protagonist, real estate developer Charlie Croker, and that of Charlie's CFO, 'the wiz'. The high-flying real estate developer made decisions using the ready, fire, aim method. By contrast, the wiz's decision making was based on the 'ready, aim, aim, aim, aim, aim' method. Which philosophy better suits a good leader? The pure answer: Neither. Making decisions without good information leads to problems, but not making decisions leads to more problems.

Given the choice of adopting either method, the good leader will find more success following the ready, fire, aim method. Nothing creates doubt or distrust among subordinates faster than an inability to make a decision. Most people find a slow 'no' to be the worst possible result. Multiple requests and an interminable lapse of time just don't fit well with lawyers' make-up. Lawyers usually embrace the often-wrong but never-in-doubt philosophy of life.

Apparent indecision sends a bad message to the troops. Most people realise that a deferred decision really means no. Requesting more time to think about an answer or to consult with others generally means that the decision goes to the back burner, never to return to the front. Faced with an inclination to want more time to decide, how can a good leader make this process easier and timelier without becoming another ready, fire, aim Charlie?

Responding quickly

Nothing makes decision making easier than having a strategic plan or roadmap to follow. Always ask 'does this request fit within our strategic plan?' If you know where the firm wants to go and how it expects to get there, then every request can be tested against that plan. Having

a plan and knowing the firm's strategic direction gives you a baseline to use in making quick and good decisions.

Next, examine the magnitude of the decision for your firm. These decisions don't include a declaration of war or a path that will shape the world for generations to come. Most decisions involve spending money, and very little of it.

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As a first step to prepare for a quick response, set an internal spending limit. Ask yourself 'how much do I feel comfortable spending without a second opinion?' The culture of your firm and your strength and personality as managing partner will help to lead you to the right number.

That doesn't mean that every request below the threshold merits approval. It merely takes the dollar deliberations off the table (e.g. 'am I comfortable spending that much money?'). If the project makes sense and the request fits within your comfort zone, it qualifies for a quick 'yes'. If, on the other hand, the amount of money exceeds that internal limit, a quick 'no' or the dreaded 'let me take that up with the board' is in order.

Perhaps more important than 'how much' is 'who'? In every law firm, certain people make better stewards of the firm's resources than others. Someone with a history of making good decisions can be considered a good risk.

Conversely, little time need be invested in deciding on a request from a partner with a history of multiple started but incomplete ventures.

Regardless of the history of the sponsor, ensuring the success of the undertaking requires a commitment from the person asking the firm for support. He must be committed, remain engaged and submit a written plan. That plan should include benchmarks and periodic updates.

Saying 'no'

Most of this article talks about how to say 'yes' in a quick and forceful manner. The ability to say 'no' in the same way separates the good leader from the pretender. Every request does not warrant a quick 'yes', but it does require a quick response. If you know the answer is 'no', you need to say it.

Looking someone in the eye and telling him 'no' is often the greatest challenge for aspiring leaders. Whether it's a desire to avoid confrontation or to allow the person making the request to save face, many people just can't deal with that facet of leadership. Ironically, nothing garners support faster than a quick face-to-face decision accompanied by sound reasoning supporting the decision.

In summary, time never makes a decision easier. As with most things in life, it's all about preparation. The better prepared the leader, the quicker and more sound the decision. No one gets it right 100 percent of the time. A good leader gets the facts, makes the decision and moves on. He also has a short memory. He learns from his mistakes, but never second-guesses himself.

Leadership thought of the month: Under pressure, golfers revert to their worst swing. ♣

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