



NAC Executive Insights

Leading the Decision-Making Process

Key Points

- Leaders need to be open and listen to other approaches before decisions are made.
- Encourage your teams to have a healthy debate about the different options prior to making decisions.
- A leader's role is to facilitate the discussions and eventually support an option and select the decision as the path forward.
- Non-reversible decisions demand a much greater level of scrutiny before implementation.

Introduction

Making a decision on your own is relatively straightforward. You already know the answer and will decide about the best course of action or you will research the problem, consult with subject matter experts, reflect on your options, and then decide about the best course of action to take. In either case, the decision is yours and yours alone. You live and die by the consequences.

However, more often than not, you are working in a team. That team will usually include your superiors, peers, subordinates, partners, and/or customers. They have their own opinions, preferences, agendas, and peculiar personalities. In these cases, the decision-making process gets much more complex and frustrating. Unnecessary compromises, winners and losers, "my way or the highway," hurt feelings, bad decisions, type-A personalities, and bullying are all possible outcomes of this process.

Sooner or later you will be called upon to lead/manage the process. So as a leader, how do you know when to let go of your own "best solution" and accept somebody else's deferent solution, and when do you say no and fight for what you believe is the right approach? You cannot win them all, nor should you. To quote Kenny Rodgers: "You got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them."

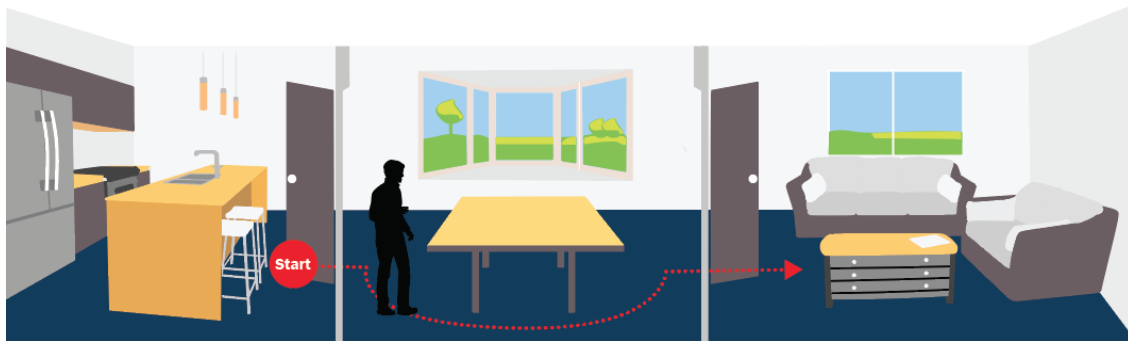
A key quality of a good leader is to know when to give up on an argument with your superiors (wise career move), when to let a peer take the spotlight, and especially when to let a subordinate spread his/her wings and step up as part of their development. However, as the leader, in certain situations, you should also be prepared to stick to your guns and not compromise. The question is how to know which scenario is which.

This insight will summarize my experience and represents the easiest way I found to communicate it to our teams during our workshops and problem-solving sessions.

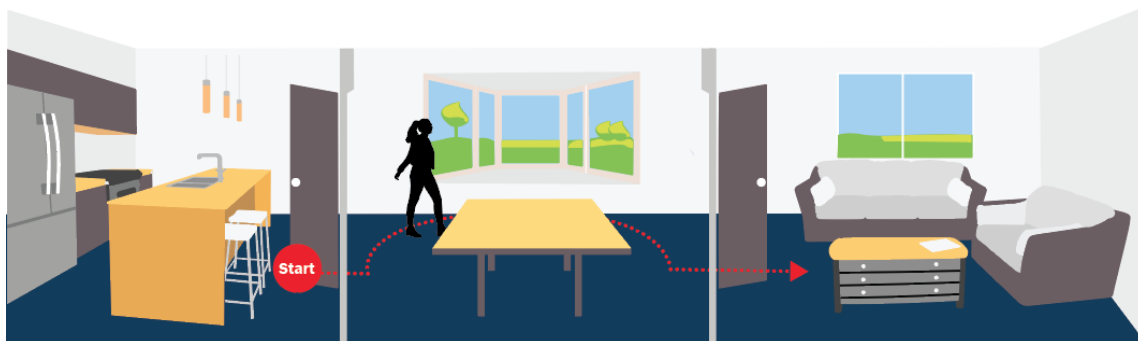
Problem-Solving Exercise

The setup: Imagine a dining room between the kitchen and the living room. A table in the middle of the dining room and a door to the kitchen and another one to the living room. A bay window on the left side wall and a painting on the opposite wall. The goal is to cross from the kitchen to the living room.

- **The first approach:** this is your solution, walk from the kitchen and go around the table to the right and then head to the living room.
 - Advantages: pretty straightforward and simple, gets the mission accomplished with the added bonus of checking out the painting on the way there; no downsides. Who can argue with that approach? It is the “best solution” and of course it is yours.

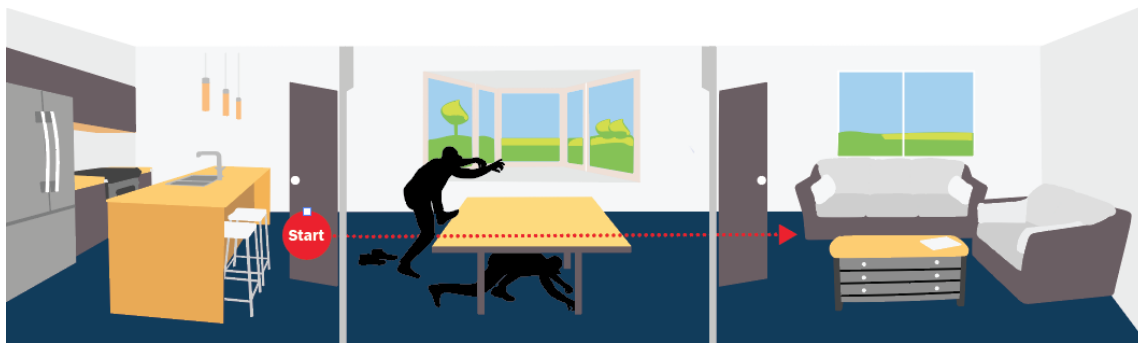


- **The second approach:** I am sure you saw this one coming. A team member suggests that she would go around the table on the left side instead of the right.
 - Should you accept or reject this solution? She states that by going to the left she can look out of the window and check to see if the lawn needs watering—quite similar approaches with minor differentiators. This should be an easy choice; there is not much difference between the two solutions and although yours is better (at least in *your* mind), the other one is an easy compromise.

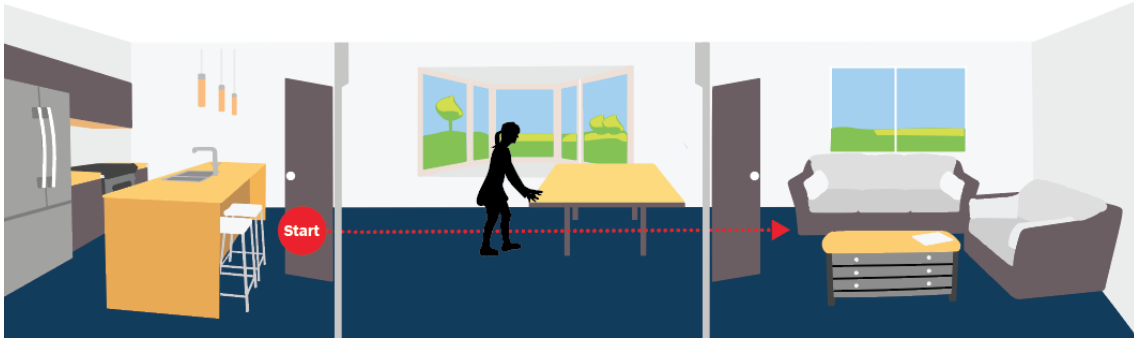


- **The third approach:** Your superior declares that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. He wants to move the end chairs and climb over the table. After some discussion about scratching the top of the table, he agrees to take his shoes off, but still insists on climbing over the table. Another manager agrees with the boss about the straight line and proposes to crawl under the table.

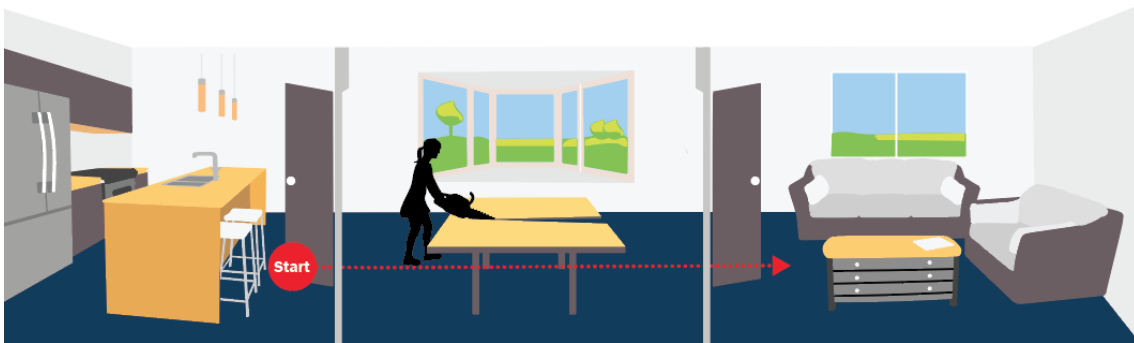
○ Should you accept or fight these solutions? They both sound “stupid,” inefficient, unnecessarily complicated, and not as good as the first two options. Your boss is insisting, and your peer is digging his heels in. The decision is harder here. You should ask yourself about the consequences and overall impact of these decisions if you adopt them and if they are worth the fight. If the consequences are minor, you might want to discuss them a bit further but not risk damaging the relationships you have. By the way, there were a couple of pieces of information that you were not privy to: your boss is aware of a secret mandate from the landlord that all the light bulbs should be changed to energy efficient bulbs and that by the time you go into execution, that mandate would be made public. He is not at liberty to divulge that now. In his mind, when you climb over the table, you will change the light bulbs on your way across the room. Your peer also had an ulterior motive: he wanted to clean up a spill he caused under the table but did not want to be embarrassed by announcing it to the rest of the team. Hmmm, would knowing *that* have changed your opinion? Keep in mind that we don’t always have all the reasons why people around us act a certain way.



- **The fourth approach:** A colleague proceeds to agree with the ongoing line of thought and announces that the most efficient solution would be to move the table to one side of the room or the other and clear the path for a direct line between the two doors. This has the added value of a more efficient delivery of the appetizers to the living room.
 - This approach presents a major change to the status quo and involves significant expenditure in talent and time to reorganize the room. Should you support it? The first question should be: Is it worth it? How many times and how many people must cross the room to make it worth the effort? Any other activities or benefit from this approach? How can you be sure that this unconventional approach will work? What if it doesn’t? Are you willing to take the risk on an unconventional approach? Can you survive without the dining room in place? Do you have contingencies in place to restore the room to its original layout if this plan backfires and doesn’t work?



- **The fifth approach:** and here comes the disruptor...agreeing with the now obvious observation that the straight line is the best approach and adding that dining room tables are so passé; the millennials do not use them anymore, preferring to eat in front of their tablets and smart devices. She proceeds with describing her approach of using a chainsaw to plow through the dining table, cutting it in half, pushing the halves against the walls, and turning them into docking/charging stations for personal devices while freeing the middle of the dining room for walking across between the kitchen and the living room.
 - In addition to all the questions raised for the fourth option, this approach raises several concerns. This is an irreversible one-way path: once the table is cut into pieces, it cannot be put back together. Is this type and level of disruption in line with the group's vision? Do you have the authority to cut the table? Who else needs to sign off on cutting the table? Can the table be replaced if need be?



Summary

In my experience, your role as a leader of the process is not to defend your approach, but to encourage the team to have a healthy debate about the different options. Many viable options have been offered; which one should you support and stand behind? Present and explain your approach and then let the team dynamics take over. You planted the seed. Now see what will grow out of it.

Some of the proposed approaches are like yours or variants of your approach. Many options were steered down the path of the straight line by a statement from the boss. As true as it might be in general, is it the best approach for this application? You need to explore that.

Let the team debate the various options. They might have their preferences, expertise, and areas of comfort. Your role is to facilitate the discussions and eventually support an option and select it as the path forward. You will always know that you have your “perfect” backup solution to implement if things go poorly. Of course, that is true for all the reversible approaches.

My experience is that unless the approach is irreversible, we should be open to other approaches. In the case where an approach is non-reversible, it should be subjected to a much greater level of scrutiny before implementation. You need to seek the buy-in of all the appropriate higher-ups.

In a nut shell, you need to keep an open mind and accept others’ ideas. You need to recognize that sometimes there are hidden reasons that drive some of the decisions and mandates from higher up; learn to accept that.

And again, to close with an old adage: “No single individual in the room is smarter than the collective group.”

About the Author

Elie Homsy was elected to NAC in 2018. He is a senior vice president and Fellow at Parsons. Over his 35-year career, his contributions include development of complex construction technologies, constructability, construction engineering, means & methods, and execution of high-tech transportation projects. In 2008, *ENR* recognized him as a Top 25 Newsmaker.

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