

EDUCATION & TRAINING

Make sure your boss avoids decision failures

You can play an important role in helping executives create the best environment in which to make decisions, writes *Michelle Gibbings*



THE EXPERT

Michelle Gibbings is a change leadership and career expert, plus founder of Change Meridian where she works with global leaders and teams to help them accelerate progress. She is the author of *Step Up: How to Build Your Influence at Work*.

Leaders make many decisions each day, ranging from simple things – such as which tie or dress to wear – to more strategic matters, like where to invest, which product to launch and how to address falling margins. And making these bigger decisions poorly not only impacts organisational outcomes; it impacts the leader's brand and reputation in the market.

Making better decisions requires time and space and, therefore, a deliberate focus on how and when they're made.

The optimal time

It's comforting to think that the brain, with its vast capacity for processing streams of information, is infallible. The truth is it's highly fallible and it can often fail when it's most needed. The pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain involved in thinking, analysing and reasoning – gets tired easily.

Think of your brain like a muscle: when you work out at the gym your muscles get tired and need to be rested – for peak performance you must have the right balance between working your muscles and resting them.

It's the same for your mind – every time a person makes a decision, precious resources in the brain are used. And, ideally, your executive would use their decision-making capacity on choices that matter, so they're using that limited capacity wisely.

But when the brain is tired it eagerly takes the path of least resistance, which means seeking to make the decision that's easiest or most familiar. Unfortunately, when leaders are making decisions that are complex and involve many unknowns, that path may not lead to the best outcome.

Naturally, it's best to make important decisions when a person is fresh and their brain is rested – typically, that won't be after a full day of meetings.

So, ask yourself:

- Are there decisions my boss could delegate to someone else?
- Are they making decisions when they're tired?
- How can I structure their meeting schedule so they can make the big decisions when the brain is at peak performance?

Create space for thinking

Being busy is the new normal and your boss probably works long hours and spends much of the day rushing from meeting to meeting. But being overly busy can interfere with ethical decision making. In fact, research shows that when people feel pressed for time they can make decisions they normally wouldn't have made.

In the early 1970s, Princeton University's John Darley and Daniel Batson examined how time pressure affects behaviour. They invited students to participate in a series of experiments and, in one, the students were told to move from one



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building to another with the testers varying the amount of ‘urgency’ projected in the message. And, to move between the buildings, the students additionally had to go past a person slumped on the floor and moaning.

What the researchers found is that the more urgency in the message, the less likely it was for the person to stop and help the person on the floor. At the same time, for those who didn’t stop, many appeared agitated when they got to the next building. This was because they were conflicted between their desire to help and the instructions to get to the new building quickly.

People can fail to see what’s going on around them when they’re busy and pre-occupied with meetings or other demands. For your boss, this may result in them not taking the time to consider the broader factors surrounding a particular decision.

Bear in mind too, that some decisions need to be made fast – relying on instinct – and others slow, relying on deliberate thought.

So, ask yourself:

- How can I best carve out thinking time in my boss’ diary?
- What support can I provide to help my executive know when to make a fast or a slow decision?

Ask questions to encourage diversity of thought

The recently released *Centre for Workplace Leadership’s Study of Australian Leadership* found

that organisations should be concerned about the state of leadership and management capability. For example, it revealed that many senior leaders don’t draw on strategic advice when making decisions about the future.

But, for organisations facing increasing complexity, they need people who are willing to challenge and ask questions. As an EA, you hold a position of trust and influence and can therefore play a crucial role in asking the question that others may be reluctant to ask.

It can be hard to be the person who puts on what Edward de Bono called ‘the black hat’. We worry that if no one else is voicing a concern or questioning, perhaps we’ve misinterpreted the issue being discussed. However, posing the question may help your boss see the issue from a different perspective.

So, ask yourself:

- Are there questions I can ask that may help my executive think differently about this decision?
- Are there other people who should be involved in this decision?

In a world of increasing change and ambiguity it’s essential that leaders know how to make good decisions to ensure good organisational performance. And, using the above tactics, you can help create the environment in which this can occur. ☒

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