

LEAD THE DECISION

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood & Dallas Ludwick

Leaders make decisions every day. Some are straightforward. Others are complicated by competing priorities, incomplete information, strong emotions, or consequences that will affect people differently.

When the decision involves a team, the process matters almost as much as the outcome. People may not agree with every decision, but they need to understand how it was made, what influenced it, and what happens next.

Too often, leaders begin by asking, “What does everyone think?” without first clarifying what they are asking the team to do. Are you gathering perspectives? Generating options? Seeking consensus? Or asking the team to implement a decision that has already been made?

Ambiguity creates frustration. People believe they are being invited into a decision, only to discover that the outcome was predetermined. Or a leader genuinely wants collaboration but allows the conversation to become so broad that no one knows how the final choice will be made.

Before you ask your team to help make a decision, decide how you will decide.

CLARIFY THE TEAM’S ROLE

Not every decision requires the same level of involvement. Some decisions need to be made quickly by the leader. Some require specialized expertise. Some benefit from consultation, while others should be owned almost entirely by the team.

Your responsibility is to make that distinction clear.

If the decision has already been made, say so. Explain what has been decided, why it was necessary, and where the team still has influence. Do not present implementation questions as though the larger decision remains open.

If you are consulting the team, explain that you are seeking their perspectives before making the final call. Tell them what factors you will consider and when they can expect a decision.

If the team is deciding together, define what “together” means. Are you looking for consensus, majority support, or the option the group believes best meets an agreed set of criteria?

If you are delegating the decision, clarify the boundaries, resources, and outcomes the team is responsible for, and then give them enough room to lead.

Involvement does not mean that everyone has equal authority over every decision. It means people understand the role they have been invited to play.

PREPARE BEFORE YOU ENTER THE ROOM

A productive decision-making conversation begins before the meeting.

Get clear on the decision that needs to be made. What problem are you trying to solve? Why does it matter now? What constraints are real? What information is missing? What values or organizational priorities should guide the choice?

Then examine your own position honestly. Do you already have a preferred outcome? Are you genuinely open to being influenced? What reactions are you anticipating from the team? Are you tempted to avoid tension, rush the process, or defend your idea before others have spoken?

Leaders bring more than information into a room. They bring status, emotion, preferences, and assumptions. Even when you believe you are being neutral, your team may be watching your face, tone, and responses for clues about which answers are acceptable.

Preparation helps you remain open without becoming directionless. It also allows you to hold three priorities at once: the quality of the decision, the strength of the relationships involved, and your responsibility to act in alignment with your values.

START WITH THE REAL ISSUE

Before generating solutions, make sure the team understands the issue in the same way.

Ask people for their initial reactions. What stands out? What feels most important? What concerns are underneath the obvious concern? Who will be affected by the decision, and whose perspective may be missing?

This stage can feel slower than moving immediately to solutions, but it prevents the team from solving the wrong problem.

Listen for both information and emotion. A team member's resistance may contain operational knowledge that others do not have. Frustration may reveal a pattern that has been ignored. Anxiety may point to a risk that has not yet been considered.

You do not need to agree with every reaction, but you do need to understand what is driving it. Ask open questions. Reflect back what you are hearing. Check your interpretation before responding.

A leader who listens well does not lose control of the conversation. They gain access to information that authority alone cannot provide.

GENERATE BEFORE YOU EVALUATE

Once the issue is clear, create space for options. Teams often weaken their decisions by evaluating ideas as quickly as they are offered. Someone suggests an approach, another person immediately explains why it will not work, and the conversation narrows before the group has explored what is possible.

Separate generating ideas from judging them.

During the generating stage, ask the team to put forward possible actions, solutions, and ways of communicating the decision. Record the ideas without debating them. Encourage people to build

on one another's thinking. Invite perspectives from people who have not yet spoken.

The leader's response matters here. If you visibly approve of some ideas and dismiss others, the team will quickly learn to offer only what they believe you want to hear.

Do not confuse a lack of immediate criticism with a lack of standards. Evaluation is coming. The purpose of this stage is simply to create enough range before the group begins narrowing its choices.

EVALUATE WHAT MATTERS

Good decisions require more than a collection of opinions. They require criteria.

Before debating which option is best, agree on what the decision needs to accomplish. What will create the greatest positive impact? What risks must be managed? What resources are available? What aligns with the team's values and responsibilities? What is realistic now, and what may require a longer-term response?

Then assess the options against those criteria.

This changes the conversation from "Which idea do I like?" to "Which option best serves what we are trying to accomplish?" It makes disagreement less personal and helps the team compare alternatives more consistently.

Do not assume the loudest support represents the strongest option. Pay attention to whose knowledge is most relevant, which consequences have been considered, and whether the group is drifting toward the easiest choice simply because it creates the least immediate discomfort.

High-performing teams do not avoid disagreement. They learn to use it. The goal is not to remove tension from the decision; it is to make the tension productive.

MAKE THE CALL

Eventually, discussion must become a decision.

Name the option being selected and explain why. Connect it to the criteria, information, and perspectives the team considered. If you are

choosing something other than the team's preferred option, acknowledge that directly and explain what influenced your decision.

Clarity at this stage protects trust. People can usually tolerate a decision they did not choose more easily than they can tolerate a process that feels misleading or arbitrary.

Be equally clear about what the decision does not resolve. Some choices are temporary responses that create time for a better long-term solution. Others need to be tested and adjusted as new information emerges. Saying this does not weaken the decision. It establishes an honest expectation.

Then turn the decision into action. Who owns the next step? What needs to happen first? What support is required? How will progress be communicated? When will the team revisit the decision?

A decision without ownership, timing, and follow-through is only a conversation.

CLOSE THE LOOP

The leader's work does not end when the meeting does.

Check how the conversation landed, particularly after a difficult or high-stakes decision. Ask what was clear, what was missed, and what could improve the next decision-making process. If some team members were quiet, connect with them individually rather than assuming silence meant agreement.

You cannot control how everyone responds. You can, however, remain curious about the impact of your leadership.

Be prepared to learn that your intention and your impact were different. Perhaps the team needed more context. Perhaps you moved to solutions too quickly. Perhaps people did not believe it was safe to challenge you. Perhaps you invited input but became defensive when you received it.

Feedback does not require you to surrender your judgment. It gives you better information about how to lead the next conversation.

THE DECISION STANDARD

Strong decision-making is not about creating universal agreement. It is about creating enough clarity, participation, and accountability for people to move forward together.

Before the conversation, define the decision and the team's role. During the conversation, understand the issue before trying to solve it. Generate options before evaluating them. Use clear criteria to make the choice. Then explain the decision, assign ownership, and return for feedback. When decisions become difficult, become more deliberate.

Your team does not need you to have every answer before entering the room. They need you to create a process that helps the right information surface, allows honest perspectives to be heard, and leads to a decision people can understand and act on.

Decide how you will decide. Then lead the process with clarity.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

Dallas Ludwick is a high-performance coach and culture builder with 25 years of experience helping individuals and teams face fear, grow boldly, and perform with purpose. Known for her direct and supportive approach, she brings a deep passion for creating space where real conversations — and real growth — can happen.

LEAD THE DECISION: A QUICK GUIDE

1. CLARIFY THE DECISION

Name the decision that needs to be made, why it matters now, what is within the team's control, and what constraints already exist.

Ask: What are we actually deciding?

3. PREPARE YOURSELF

Identify your preferred outcome, assumptions, anticipated reactions, and areas where you are genuinely open to being influenced. Consider whose knowledge or perspective needs to be included.

Ask: Am I entering this conversation ready to listen, or simply hoping the team will agree with me?

5. GENERATE OPTIONS

Create possible solutions before evaluating them. Encourage participation, record the ideas, and resist responding too quickly to individual suggestions.

Say: "For now, let's focus on what we could do. We will evaluate the options next."

7. MAKE THE DECISION

Name the decision clearly and explain what influenced it. If the final choice differs from what some team members preferred, acknowledge that directly.

Say: "Here is what we have decided, and here is why."

9. CLOSE THE LOOP

Return to the team after the decision. Ask how the process landed, what was missed, and what could improve future decisions.

Ask: What did we learn about the issue, our team, and how we make decisions together?

2. DEFINE THE TEAM'S ROLE

Be clear about whether you are informing the team, consulting them, deciding collaboratively, or delegating the decision. Identify who will make the final call.

Say: "Here is the decision we are working through, and here is the role I am asking you to play."

4. UNDERSTAND BEFORE SOLVING

Invite initial reactions, questions, concerns, and relevant information. Listen for what may be underneath people's responses and ensure the team is solving the right problem.

Ask: What are we seeing, what might we be missing, and who will be affected?

6. AGREE ON THE CRITERIA

Decide what the best solution needs to accomplish. Consider impact, risk, values, resources, timing, and the people affected.

Ask: What matters most in making this decision well?

8. TURN THE DECISION INTO ACTION

Identify the next steps, who owns them, what support is required, and when the team will assess progress.

Ask: Who will do what, by when, and when will we revisit this?

LEADER'S CHECK

Before leaving the conversation, make sure your team can answer five questions:

What did we decide?

Why did we decide it?

What happens next?

Who is responsible?

When will we revisit it?

Lead the decision by creating clarity before, during, and after the choice is made.