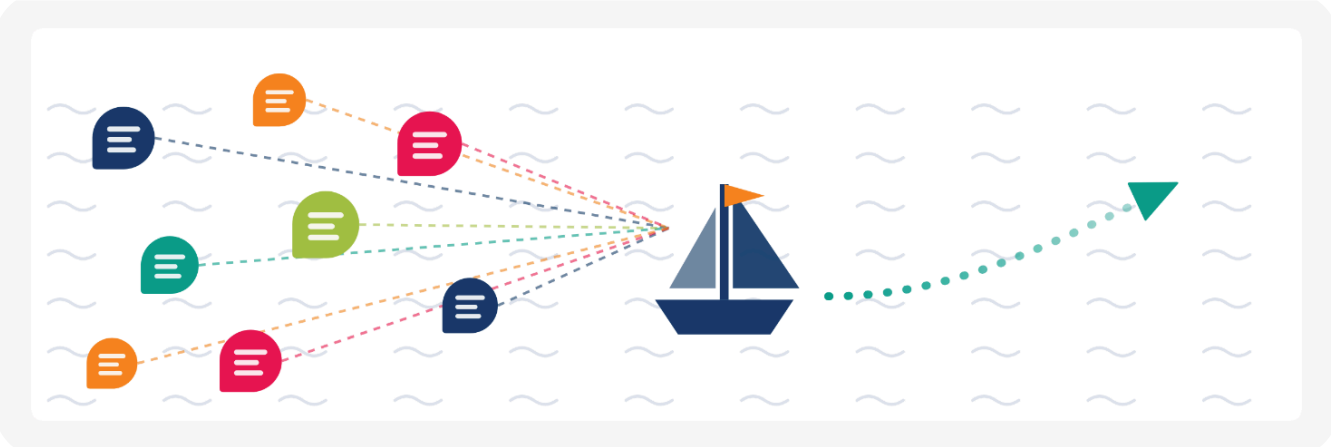
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THE CAPTAIN'S PARADOX

Decision making: judging your leaders on *process*, not outcome

AUTHORS

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THE CAPTAIN'S PARADOX

In a business environment where information shifts faster than most projects can be delivered, judging decisions purely on their outcomes diminishes the quality of the debate and hinders agility.

This is the view we have formed at Serendis when observing the different organisational dynamics at play in decision-making practices. There is a groundswell of interest from our clients who are asking: how do we equip our people to make good decisions in the context of uncertainty? We call this discipline the Captain's Paradox: consult widely, orchestrate heavy debate, then decide alone.

The Captain's Paradox rests on three paradoxes that run against common habits in decision-making.

1. **The most senior person is not always the best decision captain.** The right person for a decision is the one with the expertise and the organisational perspective to hold it, whatever their title.

2. **Measuring success only on outcomes does not drive success.** Judging decisions on results alone encourages leaders to protect themselves, which slows the organisation down.

3. **Decision captains need to consult widely but decide quickly.** The value of the consultation lies in hearing every view, and the value of the decision lies in making a clear call without waiting for agreement.



Why sole outcomes are the *wrong measure* of a good decision

For much of the last few decades, organisations have measured decision quality retrospectively. A project is assessed once it concludes. An investment is judged by the financial return it delivers two or three years later.

This approach made sense when the operating environment moved slowly enough that the information available at the point of decision could reasonably predict the result. That assumption no longer holds. The level of uncertainty means the information a leader has today is often no more than a snapshot, one that can be made irrelevant by market shifts, new technology or competitive pressure well before an outcome is known. This does not prevent leaders from being assessed on their overall performance.

But judging decisions that leaders make, on outcomes they could not have reliably predicted introduces something corrosive: fear. And fear changes behaviour in three predictable ways.

The three ways *fear* undermines good decisions

Each of these patterns removes agility from an organisation precisely when agility is most needed.

01

DECISIONS ARE AVOIDED

People hold back ambitious ideas because failure carries a personal cost, and not deciding is itself a decision that carries its own risk to the organisation.

02

DECISIONS ARE PUSHED UPWARD

When one senior person, often the GM or the executive, acts as decision captain for almost everything, a bottleneck forms. Factions emerge to lobby and influence the executive, and energy goes into building a support base rather than testing an idea on its true merit.

03

DECISIONS ARE MADE BY COMMITTEE

Consensus is not necessarily the stated goal, but it is often what happens in practice as decision-makers seek the safety of others backing them. Unfortunately, it produces a lowest common denominator outcome. People align with the group rather than challenge it.



An agile *decision-making* framework

Clarify the Decision → Hand the Helm → Amplify the Challenge → Resolve → Take the Course →

A five-part process for making better decisions

Rather than measuring decisions retroactively by their ultimate impact, we should measure them by the *quality of the process* that led to the final call. We can define a clear process, embraced throughout an organisation, where leaders' effectiveness is measured by their ability to consult the right stakeholders, tease out healthy conflicts of ideas, show mental agility and then communicate clear strategic paths.

It should rest on a simple discipline: everyone involved in a decision, closely or remotely, should always know exactly where we are in the process. Are we clear on the question? Who is the decision captain? Are we amplifying the challenge? Have we represented all contributions? How are we communicating the resolution?

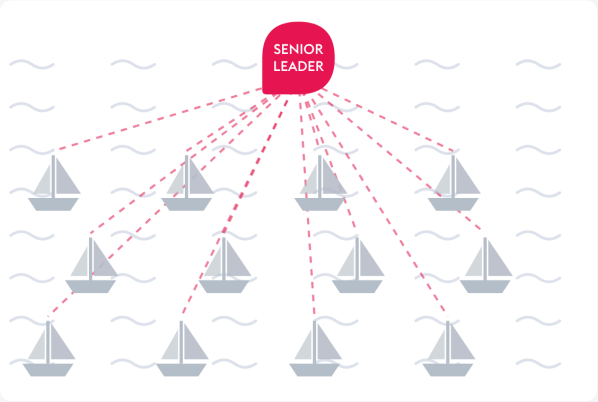
In our analogy, each decision is a ship charting its course on open waters. When a decision needs to be made, we recommend identifying a captain to whom we hand the helm of the ship to define its path. On the water, the captain hears every warning the crew calls out before speaking themselves. At the helm, after hearing every contribution from the crew, the captain makes the call and explains the decision. Once underway, the captain holds that course, despite the possible lack of consensus initially. They adjust only when a genuine new hazard appears on the horizon.

Now, if we widen the view, within any organisation, dozens of important decisions need to be made every week. Picture dozens of ships, each needing to chart their course to a harbour they cannot yet see. When decisions are pushed upwards, senior executives have to steward all of these ships from afar. **What we recommend is a dramatically different model, in which every ship has its own captain.**

If those ship captains pushed every call upwards, always sought consensus or avoided the decision altogether, the ships would crash and chaos would prevail. The same applies in an organisation. The decision captain should be the right person for the job, which means the person with the expertise, the ability to think organisationally and the judgement to consult widely. That person is often NOT the most senior in the room, and a committee cannot fill the role.

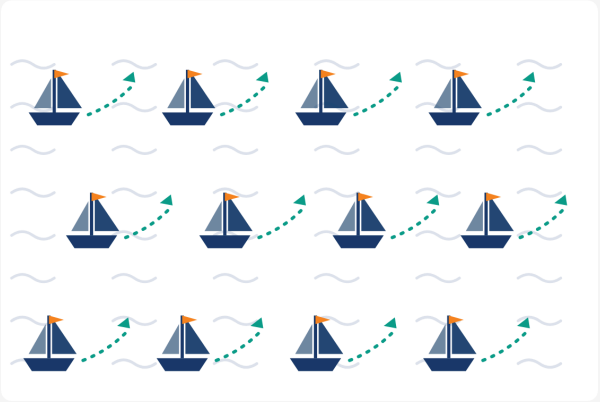
A DECISIONS PUSHED UPWARD

Every ship is steered from afar. Senior executives become the bottleneck for dozens of decisions each week.



B A DECISION CAPTAIN ON EVERY SHIP

Each decision has the right person at the helm, who consults widely, calls the course and holds it.



The five stages below illustrate the model: Clarify the decision (charter the ship and its ideal destination), Hand the helm (name the captain), Amplify the challenge (seek out and listen to all the views on the possible approach), Resolve (call the course) and Take the course (hold the course). Together they form what we call CHART.

THE CHART MODEL

1 CLARIFY THE DECISION

Chart the course

Define the question, the stakes and the timeframe before anyone argues about the answer.

- State the question and what's at stake
- Agree the timeframe
- Identify who should be consulted

2 HAND THE HELM

Name the captain

Nominate one decision captain and agree how the decision will be communicated.

- Choose for judgement, not seniority
- Name one person, not a committee
- Agree the communication plan

3 AMPLIFY THE CHALLENGE

Read the water

Actively draw out the widest possible range of views, rather than simply allow them.

- Decision captain speaks last
- Treat no idea as off-limits
- Interrupt defensive reactions

4 RESOLVE

Call the course

Make the decision, explain the reasoning, and represent every view heard.

- Articulate the decision
- Represent every contribution heard
- Agree how it will be communicated

5 TAKE THE COURSE

Hold the course

Hold people accountable to the decision, while staying open to real new information.

- Reinforce the rationale
- Hold the line on relitigating
- Revisit only for real new information



1 OF 5

Clarify the decision

Charter the ship and its ideal destination

We often overlook this first foundational stage. We assume the decision-maker is obvious, and the strategic question is clear to everyone. The biggest risk here is lack of visibility of the key question or the information that led to this point. This can lead to a lack of alignment after the decision has been made. People may undermine the strategy if this part of the process has not been communicated clearly.

In agile organisations where leaders practice this process regularly, the discipline in sharing these details consistently will become habitual.

In the ship's captain analogy, this is chartering the ship: nobody casts off until the destination, the tide charts and the timeframe are agreed.

CLARIFY THE DECISION: KEY ACTIONS

01

STATE THE QUESTION

What needs to be decided and why, what is at stake, and what happens once the decision is made.

02

AGREE THE TIMEFRAME

Whether the decision needs three hours or six months, the timeframe should be agreed and said out loud to everyone involved.

03

IDENTIFY WHO SHOULD BE CONSULTED

The right people, not everyone. Nobody shares a preference on the outcome yet.

CLARIFY THE DECISION

People may undermine the strategy if this part of the process has not been communicated clearly.



2 OF 5

Hand the helm

Name the captain

This is the delegation step. Decisions are disaggregated so that different decisions are made by different captains, rather than one senior person carrying all of them.

The right decision captain is the person best placed to hold the decision, whatever their seniority. They bring expertise in the matter at hand, the ability to think organisationally rather than from the vantage point of one function, a willingness to set aside their own stake in the outcome, close proximity to how the decision will be executed, and the discipline to consult widely without consulting endlessly. A team leader can reasonably hand this role to someone earlier in their career, if they are the right person to hold it. A committee cannot hold the helm, so one person should be named.

The communication plan should be agreed at the same time, who hears the decision, from whom, and by when, so the delegation is visible to everyone who was consulted.

HAND THE HELM: KEY ACTIONS

01

CHOOSE ON JUDGEMENT, NOT SENIORITY

The right decision captain is chosen for their judgement, their ability to set aside their own stake in a particular outcome, and their proximity to how the decision will actually be executed.

02

NAME ONE PERSON

A team leader can reasonably hand this role to someone earlier in their career, if they are the right person to hold it. A committee is not a captain.

03

AGREE THE COMMUNICATION PLAN

Who hears the decision, from whom, and by when, so the delegation is visible to everyone who was consulted.

HAND THE HELM

The right decision captain is the person best placed to hold the decision, whatever their seniority.



3 OF 5

Amplify the challenge

Seek out and listen to all the views on the possible approach

This is where human nature is most likely to work against good decisions. Familiar biases, including the unconscious pull towards protecting our own personal interests or preferring to be seen as a good team player, can severely narrow the range of views on the table.

To counter this, the decision captain has a specific role to play: to ask open, deliberately provocative questions rather than offer an opinion. Questions such as “what are we likely to be misled by?” or “what potential biases do we need to acknowledge?” or “what are the emotions at play that could derail the real conversation we need to have?” are designed to draw out perspectives that might otherwise stay unspoken.

- Treat no idea as too unrealistic to raise
- Watch out for and interrupt defensive reactions, particularly from the most senior stakeholders
- Thank people explicitly for challenging the group
- Ask “tell me more” before dismissing an unfamiliar view
- Rephrase what has been heard, so contributors know they have been understood

Importantly, you do not need to reach consensus. The purpose of the consultation is precisely to hear contrary views and extreme perspectives so that all angles are considered. Seeking consensus here will stifle the group’s ability to be expansive in their views. The best decisions will come from allowing the group to explore possibilities without the expectation that they will eventually need to agree.

In the ship’s captain analogy, this is reading the water: the crew is called on deck to report what they see, and the captain holds their own reading of the weather until everyone else has spoken.



4 OF 5

Resolve

Call the course

Once the debate has run its course, the decision captain returns to the group, sometimes in a dedicated meeting, to feedback everything they have heard. They are expected to represent each perspective accurately, almost advocating for viewpoints they may not personally hold, before explaining the decision itself: what was decided, which considerations shaped it, and which risks, organisational and personal, are being taken on.

This is demanding of decision captains. It requires genuine mental agility and courage to make a call despite the group's divergence of opinions. **But this is where the power of this model lies. If the decision-captain can demonstrate they have considered all opinions and perspectives in depth and with a willingness to challenge their own initial preference, they will be recognised as having led a transparent and effective process which will create buy-in for the decision.**

Once a decision is made, that meeting is not the place to reopen debate. The group's role shifts from testing the decision to agreeing how it will be communicated to those affected.

In the ship's captain analogy, this is calling the course: the captain returns to the wheel, states the heading, and explains why, before the crew disperses.

RESOLVE

If the decision-captain can demonstrate they have considered all opinions and perspectives in depth and with a willingness to challenge their own initial preference, they will be recognised as having led a transparent and effective process which will create buy-in for the decision.



5 OF 5

Take the course

Hold the course without shutting down legitimate challenge

The next phase is about holding people accountable to the decision while continuing to reinforce why it was made.

When informal narratives emerge that undermine the decision, whether through hallway conversation or quiet disengagement, the response is to restate the process that was undertaken, including the perspectives that were heard but not ultimately followed. Taking the course does not mean shutting down every future challenge. If new information materially changes the picture, the decision captain can, and should, revisit the decision. What this stage prevents is a decision being relitigated simply because someone finds it uncomfortable.

In the ship's captain analogy, this is holding the course: the captain does not change direction every time the crew feels a swell, but adjusts without hesitation the moment a genuine reef appears on the radar.

Summary

This framework gives every layer of the organisation a shared language for where a decision sits in its lifecycle, and a defensible way to communicate it once made.

It also speaks directly to the bottleneck many CEOs describe, where every meaningful decision ends up on their desk. When decision captains are equipped to run this process well and are recognised for the rigour of it rather than judged on outcomes beyond their control, more people across the organisation grow comfortable holding that responsibility.

Judging decisions on their outcomes only creates fear, and fear drives avoidance, upward delegation and decision by committee, all of which slow an organisation down. A five-part process, Clarify the decision, Hand the helm, Amplify the challenge, Resolve and Take the course (CHART), gives leaders a repeatable way to make sound decisions and to be judged fairly for the rigour behind them, regardless of how the outcome unfolds.

FAQs

What is a decision captain?

A decision captain is the person responsible for running the debate, and ultimately making and explaining the decision. They are chosen as the right person for the decision: someone with relevant expertise, the ability to think organisationally and the judgement to consult widely, regardless of seniority. Much like a ship's captain, they hold the authority to act, not simply to be right.

Why does judging decisions by outcome create problems for organisations?

When leaders know they will be judged on outcomes they cannot reliably predict, they tend to avoid deciding, push decisions upward, or seek decision by committee. All three responses slow the organisation and reduce genuine debate.

Can a decision be revisited once it has been made?

Yes. Taking the course does not mean a decision is permanent. If new information comes to light that materially changes the picture, the decision captain can reopen it. What this stage prevents is a decision being reopened simply because someone disagrees with it.

What does CHART stand for?

CHART stands for Clarify the decision, Hand the helm, Amplify the challenge, Resolve and Take the course, the five components of the Captain's Paradox model. In the ship's captain image, a ship is a vessel we charter when a decision is required, we hand the helm to a captain who is responsible to read the water, call the course, and hold the wheel.



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CONTACT SERENDIS

Let's start a *conversation* about your leadership priorities.

Whether you are exploring a new initiative or refining an existing program, we welcome the opportunity to understand your context and discuss how we can support your organisation.

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