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Understanding Team Dynamics: Decision Levels

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What are Decision Levels?

When teams work together, not all members hold the same level of power or authority. Each person operates within a particular level of empowerment, defined by how much influence they have over team outcomes. When these decision levels are unclear or misaligned, the team may become dysfunctional (Edmondson, 2018; NASEM, 2015).

A common source of tension arises when teams are asked to discuss an issue that will ultimately be decided by someone else, such as a principal investigator (PI) or senior leader. In many cases, PIs and team leaders may view these discussions as opportunities to gather ideas or surface concerns, while team members interpret the same conversation as shared decision-making. When intentions are not clearly communicated, team members may assume they have been granted authority that they do not actually possess—leading to disappointment or perceptions of bad faith when their input does not directly shape the final decision (Fletcher & Käufer, 2003).

These misunderstandings are often reinforced by implicit assumptions rooted in scientific culture. Teams may default to unspoken hierarchies or norms of authority, assuming that everyone shares the same understanding of who decides what. However, unexamined power structures tend to privilege senior members and obscure the boundaries of participation for others, particularly junior faculty, staff, and trainees (e.g., postdoctoral associates, research assistants) (Bozeman & Boardman, 2014).

To avoid these pitfalls, teams benefit from explicitly identifying and naming their decision level before engaging in a substantive discussion. Clarifying decision levels helps align expectations, supports psychological safety, and increases trust by ensuring that participation matches actual authority (Edmondson, 2018). Importantly, this process often reveals that the designated decision level may not be appropriate for the task at hand. In some cases, teams discover they need more autonomy; in others, greater clarity (not greater power) is what is required.

It is also critical to note that moving “up” in decision level is not always necessary or desirable. Not every issue requires full delegation or participatory decision-making. What matters most is avoiding assumptions and ensuring that all team members share a clear understanding of the scope of their influence.

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Common Decision Levels in Scientific Teams

1. **Directive**
   A decision is made solely by the PI or co-PIs. The team has no formal input and is expected to comply. This level is often appropriate for issues involving compliance (e.g., IRB), funding constraints (e.g., budget), or institutional responsibility.

2. **Consultative**
   The PI or co-PIs retain decision authority but actively seek ideas, perspectives, or feedback from the team before deciding. Input informs the decision but does not determine it.

3. **Participatory**
   The team develops recommendations or action plans, which require review or approval from the PI or co-PIs prior to implementation. Authority is shared but not fully transferred.

4. **Delegated**
   Decision-making authority is fully delegated to team members or subgroups, who are empowered to act on their tasks without further approval. Here, team members or subgroups have both accountability and autonomy.

Explicitly identifying decision levels is a simple but powerful practice. It can help teams navigate power transparently and supports more equitable collaboration.

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