

LEADERSHIP, JUDGMENT & EXECUTION

The Nature and Discipline of Decision

Why effective leaders must learn the discipline of eliminating possibility.

By Leo M. Tonkin

"A decision is not the evaluation of options. It is the commitment to a future."

— Leo M. Tonkin

Decision is not analysis.

Executives talk about decisions constantly. Organizations invest heavily in strategic planning, governance, analytics, and leadership development designed to improve decision-making. Yet many still struggle with indecision, misalignment, delays, and weak execution.

The issue is not simply operational. It is also conceptual. In practice, decision-making is often treated as an analytical exercise: gather information, evaluate alternatives, debate risks, and select the best option.

But analysis is not decision. **Analysis expands possibility. Decision collapses it.**

THE DISTINCTION

Before a decision, multiple futures remain possible. A real decision collapses those possibilities into one committed path.

The language reveals the discipline.

The meaning is embedded in the word itself. "Decide" shares its linguistic root with words such as homicide and pesticide. The suffix "-cide" derives from the Latin *caedere* - to cut or to kill.

To decide, therefore, is to cut off alternatives.

This matters because many organizations never fully eliminate competing paths. Teams revisit old conversations, hedge commitments, reopen closed discussions, and preserve optionality long after a decision has supposedly been made.

If nothing has been eliminated, nothing has truly been decided.

The cost of preserving optionality.

Optionality can feel safe. It can appear prudent to keep multiple paths alive as long as possible. But there is a point at which preserving options stops reducing risk and starts creating it.

When a decision remains partially open, resources stay divided. Accountability becomes ambiguous. Teams wait for signals. Old priorities remain active alongside new ones. Execution slows because the organization has not fully reorganized itself around what was supposedly chosen.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION

What has actually been eliminated because of this decision - and what will the organization now do differently?

Research reinforces the practical stakes. McKinsey has reported that only a minority of organizations believe they excel at decision-making, while Bain research has connected decision effectiveness closely with financial performance.

20%

Organizations reporting excellence in decision-making in the McKinsey research referenced for this article.

95%

Correlation between decision effectiveness and financial performance reported in the Bain research referenced for this article.

Teams often kill possibility too early.

The dysfunction becomes more visible in groups. When people come together, possibilities naturally expand. Different experiences produce new ideas, perspectives, questions, and pathways. That is one of the great advantages of collaborative leadership.

But something else often happens almost immediately. People begin reacting to ideas before those ideas have had time to develop. Suggestions are dismissed with familiar phrases: "We tried that before." "That won't work." "Leadership will never approve it."

The group begins eliminating possibilities while it should still be creating them. Premature convergence can look like efficiency. It can even look like alignment. Often it is neither.

Great leadership requires protecting possibility long enough for real thinking to occur.

Separate creation from elimination.

High-performing teams distinguish between two very different disciplines. Both matter. The problem comes when they are collapsed into the same conversation.

1 | CREATING POSSIBILITY

Expand options. Encourage divergent thinking. Ask questions. Suspend premature judgment. Let ideas develop before deciding their fate.

2 | ELIMINATING & COMMITTING

Narrow the field. Accept trade-offs. Close alternatives. Clarify ownership. Align resources and action around what remains.

Many teams do the opposite: they criticize while they should still be creating, then hesitate when it is finally time to commit. The result is lengthy discussion followed by weak execution.

THE TEAM DISCIPLINE

Open the field deliberately. Then close it deliberately. Do not confuse exploration with commitment - or commitment with continued exploration.

A decision organizes action.

A decision is not merely a conclusion reached through analysis. It reorganizes behavior, resources, attention, and commitment around a chosen future. Before a decision, the future is plural. After a decision, the organization has a direction to act on.

THE LEADERSHIP DISCIPLINE

A decision is not complete when people agree in the room. It becomes real when decision rights, ownership, priorities, and accountability align with what was chosen.

Who actually gets to decide?

Decisions often stall because organizations blur participation with authority. The people closest to the work may provide input. Others may need to agree. Someone may recommend a course of action. Someone else may perform once the decision is made. But ultimately, someone has to have the authority to decide.

Decision-rights approaches such as RAPID separate five roles: **Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input, Decide**. The point is not the acronym. It is clarity about who is doing what - and who is accountable for what happens next.

Input is not authority. Authority is not execution. Accountability begins with clarity.

The execution test.

WHO DECIDES?

Where does final authority sit?

WHO CONTRIBUTES?

Who recommends, agrees, provides input, and performs?

WHAT CHANGES?

What stops, moves, or gets redirected because of the decision?

WHO OWNS THE OUTCOME?

Who is accountable - and what will tell us it is working?

Most organizations do not struggle only with decision-making. They struggle with committing.