

## When Decisions Cause Distress— a path of courage and compassion

Empowerment



Decision Making



This article addresses a question I'm asked frequently by leaders: How can I foster an environment of empowerment when I have to make decisions at times which may cause some people to feel *disempowered* and distressed?

I grappled with this question repeatedly in my years as an organizational leader. It helped to know from research that empowerment depends on people's energy being harnessed in a common direction. And, that requires decisions which at times will inevitably make some people unhappy.

While it may seem obvious, it also helped to *fully* accept that I could not establish a stable state of empowerment with everyone all the time. Even apart from unpopular decisions, feelings of empowerment fluctuate depending on how work evolves, unexpected events, and the way stress can undermine enthusiasm.

### Key conditions for the best levels of empowerment

I began to see my role as constantly tending to the *conditions* which offer the best chances for the most people to feel empowered as continuously as possible. One key condition is to assure that work conversations are safe and honest in order to elicit feelings and concerns and address them through problem solving. In this way, leadership authority is a *resource* not to demand compliance but to model and assure norms for communication and to assure that difficult issues are discussed.(1)

Another key condition for the best level of empowerment is assuring that decision making emphasizes participation and open dialogue. Here are a few principles for guidance:

- Always consider consulting with others before deciding. Include those who will be impacted and those with relevant expertise. Not only is this respectful but diverse thinking will improve the decision.
- After deciding, meet with people to let them know explicitly how you considered their input. Explain your rationale for the decision in terms of how it serves the vision and avoid language of control.
- Always elicit reactions to decisions. Seek out concerns and acknowledge them as legitimate. Commit to ongoing problem solving to mitigate them but without derailing forward progress.
- Ask for people to help design and choose the *what* and *how* and *timing* of implementation.
- Regularly review decision-making processes. Ask for feedback about clarity, timeliness, and quality.

## **Courage and compassion**

Staying engaged with others' feelings and concerns through open dialogue while also staying the course to desired results by making difficult decisions is emotionally and psychologically demanding. But, if we want empowerment, we have to meet this challenge with both courage and compassion.

## **Reference**

- (1) Heifetz, Ronald A. **Leadership Without Easy Answers** The Belknap Press 1994

## **Additional resources**

- [Are flaws in decision making process causing conflict and poor alignment--a quick diagnostic](#)
- [We have a consensus!....?](#)

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## **About Neil Baker M.D.**

Neil Baker M.D. works with organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for more than twelve years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).