



# Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer

## Managing for Conflict and Consensus

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### Introduction

In April 1961, President John F. Kennedy made the decision to authorize U.S. government assistance for the Bay of Pigs invasion — an attempt by 1,400 Cuban exiles to overthrow the Castro regime. Three days after the brigade of rebels landed on the coast of Cuba, nearly all of them had been killed or captured by Castro's troops. As Kennedy recognized the dreadful consequences of his decision to support the invasion, he asked his advisors, "How could I have been so stupid to let them go ahead?"

The president and his advisors certainly didn't lack brains. But the Bay of Pigs decision-making process had many flaws. Veteran officials from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) argued forcefully for the invasion, and they filtered the information and analysis presented to Kennedy. The proponents of the invasion also excluded lower-level State Department officials from the deliberations for fear they might expose their plan's weaknesses and risks.

Throughout the discussions, the president and his Cabinet members often deferred to the CIA officials, who appeared to be the experts on the matter, and chose to downplay their own reservations about the invasion. Arthur Schlesinger, an historian serving as an advisor to the president, later wrote that the discussion seemed to take place amidst "a curious atmosphere of assumed consensus."

### Candor and Conflict

When leaders falter, as Kennedy did with the Bay of Pigs, we often search for flaws in their intellect or personality. But differences in mental horsepower seldom distinguish success from failure when it comes to strategic decision-making in complex organizations.

Decision-making is a function of both decision quality and implementation effectiveness. Decision quality, in turn, often depends on a leader's ability to navigate his or her way through the personality clashes, politics and social pressures of the decision process.

Many executives can run the numbers or analyze the economic structure of an industry, but only a few can master the social and political dynamics of decision-making. Consider the nature and quality of dialogue within many organizations. Candor, conflict and debate appear conspicuously absent during the decision-making processes. Managers feel uncomfortable expressing dissent, groups converge quickly on a particular solution, and individuals assume that unanimity exists when in fact it doesn't.

As a result, critical assumptions remain untested, and creative alternatives don't surface or receive adequate attention. Too often the problem begins with the person directing the process, whose words and deeds discourage a vigorous exchange of views. Powerful, popular and highly successful leaders hear "yes" far too frequently, or simply hear nothing when people re-

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ally mean “no.” In those situations, organizations may not only make poor choices but may also find that unethical choices remain unchallenged.

Of course, conflict alone doesn't lead to better decisions. Leaders also need to build consensus in their organizations. Consensus does *not* mean unanimity, widespread agreement on all facets of a decision or complete approval by a majority of organization members. It does *not* mean that teams, rather than leaders, make decisions. Consensus *does* mean that people have agreed to co-operate in the implementation of a decision. They've accepted the final choice, even though they may not be completely satisfied with it.

Consensus has two critical components: a high level of commitment to the chosen course of action and a strong, shared understanding of the rationale for the decision. Commitment helps prevent the implementation process from becoming derailed by organizational units or individuals who object to the selected course of action.

## The Cuban Missile Crisis

After the botched Bay of Pigs invasion, President Kennedy evaluated his foreign policy decision-making process, and instituted several key improvements. In October 1962, when he learned that the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, he assembled a group of advisors to help him decide how to proceed, and he put those process improvements into action. This group, known as ExComm, an abbreviation for Executive Committee of the National Security Council, met repeatedly during the Cuban missile crisis.

What process changes did Kennedy enact? First, he directed the group to abandon the ground rules of protocol and deference to rank during meetings. When he didn't at-

tend meetings, the group operated without an official chairman. He didn't want status differences or rigid procedures to stifle candid discussion.

Second, Kennedy urged each advisor not to participate in the deliberations as a spokesman for his department. Instead, he wanted everyone to take on the role of a “skeptical generalist,” considering policy problems as a whole rather than in the traditional bureaucratic way whereby somebody confines his remarks to the areas where he's considered an expert.

Third, the president occasionally invited lower-level officials and outside experts to join the deliberations to ensure access to fresh points of view and unfiltered information and analysis.

Fourth, members of ExComm split into subgroups to develop the arguments for two alternative courses of action. One subgroup drafted a paper outlining the plan for a military air strike while the other articulated the strategy for a blockade. The subgroups exchanged memos and developed detailed critiques of each other's proposals. This back-and-forth continued until each subgroup was prepared to present its arguments to the president.

Fifth, Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen, two of the president's closest confidants, were assigned to play the role of devil's advocates. Kennedy wanted them to identify and challenge every important assumption and clarify the weaknesses and risks associated with each proposal.

Sixth, the president deliberately chose not to attend many of the preliminary meetings, to encourage people to air their views openly and honestly.

Finally, he didn't try to make the decision based on a single recommendation put forth after his advisors had discussed and evaluated the situation. Instead, he asked them to present him with arguments for alternative strategies, and then he assumed responsibility for selecting the appropriate course of action.

Kennedy understood that he hadn't given much thought to how the Bay of Pigs decision should be made before plunging into deliberations. This time, he shaped and influenced how the decision process unfolded and thereby enhanced the quality of the solution that he and his team developed.

## Composition

A leader makes four important sets of choices that affect his ability to cultivate constructive conflict and build ensuring consensus: composition, context, communication and control.

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First, a leader determines the composition of the decision-making body. Job titles, positions in the organizational hierarchy and considerations of status and power within the firm shouldn't be the primary determinants of participation in a complex, high-stakes decision-making process. Rather, the leader should consider four other factors — access to expertise, implementation needs, the role of personal confidants and the effects of demographic differences — when selecting who should participate.

People should take part if they have knowledge and expertise that's relevant to the situation at hand. Leaders need to be willing to communicate directly with people several levels down in the organization when making critical decisions. Otherwise they'll be relying on data and analysis that may have been summarized and packaged for presentation in a way that distorts the true picture of the situation.

If someone will play a critical role during the implementation process, it may make sense to solicit that person's advice during the decision process, which helps to incorporate his or her ideas into the decision and build commitment and shared understanding.

Leaders shouldn't rely on cronies or sycophants when making key decisions. But they can benefit from drawing on people with whom they have a strong personal bond.

Finally, leaders should keep demographic similarities and differences of participants in mind when shaping the decision-making process. If the decision requires a great deal of novel and creative thinking, and if the leader's usual group of advisors occasionally falls into the trap of thinking alike, he or she may want to strive for greater heterogeneity.

If, however, the implementation of the decision will require frequent communication and intense co-ordination, and the usual set of advisors has encountered difficulty reconciling starkly contrasting views of the world, the leader may lean toward more homogeneity. The leader should begin each decision process by surveying the demographic similarities and differences among key participants and then seek measures to counterbalance the pitfalls associated with high levels of homogeneity or heterogeneity.

## Context

A leader determines the context in which the decision will be made. A key element is psychological safety — what Amy Edmondson of Harvard University calls the “shared belief that a group is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.” This means that individuals feel comfortable that others won't rebuke, marginalize or penalize them based on what

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they say in a group discussion. They'll share private information, admit mistakes, request assistance or additional data, raise previously undiscussable topics and express dissenting views.

It can be difficult to enhance psychological safety, particularly in hierarchical organizations that are characterized by substantial status differences among individuals. However, leaders can take steps to change the climate within their decision-making bodies. For instance, they can lead by example, acknowledging their own fallibility and admitting prior errors as a way of encouraging people to take interpersonal risks of their own. They can change the language of the workplace so the stigma is taken away from discussing errors, as one hospital did when it realized patient safety required a discussion of accidents and near misses that weren't being identified.

## Communication

The leader decides how communication will take place among the participants — how people will exchange ideas and information, as well as generate and evaluate alternatives. The leader can choose a structured approach, dictating quite specifically the procedures by which participants should offer viewpoints, compare and contrast alternatives, and reach a set of conclusions. Alternatively, leaders can use a largely unstructured approach, encouraging managers to discuss their ideas freely and openly without adherence to well-defined procedures for how the deliberations should take place.

Scholars and consultants have developed numerous mechanisms for organizing discussions to promote a combination of imaginative and critical thinking. For instance,

Edward de Bono invented a procedure called Six Thinking Hats to help groups consider a problem from multiple perspectives. When “wearing the white hat,” for example, individuals must employ an objective, data-driven approach to the decision; donning the “red hat” requires intuition and emotion to be considered.

The Cuban missile crisis highlights variants of two longstanding, very effective procedures for fostering divergent thinking and vigorous debate. Scholars have termed these approaches the “dialectical inquiry” and “devil’s advocacy” methods. They represent simple mechanisms for nurturing cognitive conflict — conflict over ideas rather than personalities. Each involves dividing a decision-making entity into two subgroups.

In the dialectical inquiry method, one subgroup develops a detailed proposal and presents it to the other, preferably in written as well as oral form. The second subgroup in turn generates an alternative plan of action. The two subgroups then debate the competing proposals and seek agreement on a common set of facts and assumptions before trying to select a course of action.

Ultimately, the subgroups focus on reconciling divergent viewpoints and selecting a course of action consistent with the agreed-upon set of facts and assumptions. During this final stage of the process, the subgroups often generate new options as a means of moving beyond the original points of contention between the two camps.

In the devil’s advocacy approach, one subgroup develops a comprehensive plan of action and describes it to the other, which doesn’t try to generate competing options but instead builds a detailed critique of the first subgroup’s proposal. The first subgroup returns to the drawing board to modify its plan, and over successive attempts the two subgroups build a common set of facts and assumptions and then a plan both can accept.

### Control

Finally, leaders must determine the extent and manner in which they’ll control the process and content of the decision. What role will the leader play and how will he or she direct the process?

Leaders must determine how and when to introduce their own views into the discussion. They need to determine how they’ll intervene actively to direct discussion and debate. They should also consider what special role they might play in the debate. For instance, they might consistently occupy the position of the futurist, looking far beyond

the time horizon considered by their advisors. Alternatively, they might personally adopt the responsibility for playing the devil’s advocate. Finally, leaders must determine how they will attempt to bring closure to the process and reach a final decision.

### Conclusion

After the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy made changes in all four areas of his administration’s decision-making: composition, context, communication and control. When decision failures occur, many executives focus on the issues involved and seek to identify the mistaken judgments and flawed assumptions they made. Kennedy focused on the process, searching for ways to use a better process when faced with tough choices in the future. **e**

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