

Attributes of the Situation

The appropriateness of any given approach varies with the situation. Despite the general preferences of managers and employees, circumstances such as the following, may dictate a greater or lesser degree of worker participation in decision making:

- **Complexity of the problem.** More involvement is helpful in a situation where the information relevant to the problem is widely dispersed throughout the organization. The more complex a given problem, the less likely all relevant knowledge is to be in the grasp of the manager and the larger the risk he or she takes in trying to solve it without consulting others. Identifying the cause of an epidemic in the herd, for example, cannot be completed alone in the comfort of the ranch office.

Though complex decisions require broader operational involvement, simple decisions may be delegated narrowly to those employees who have all the necessary information. Who is better situated than the driver of a truck to decide when to fill its gas tank? The principle of placing responsibility where information and expertise are located can be broadly applied. Most routinely recurring decisions (sometimes referred to as “programmable”) about such matters as tank filling, supply ordering, and stock culling can be permanently delegated through job descriptions (written or oral). Managers exert control over those decisions, even if delegated, through policies that act to narrow the decision-maker’s area of discretion (e.g., “At least two weeks worth of feed supplement should be on hand at all times.”). The critical “style” question with respect to a programmable decision is whether to involve workers in establishing the guiding program or policy in the first place.

- **Importance of “buy-in.”** To the extent that quality of execution ultimately determines a decision outcome and may vary, employee involvement in the decision increases the chance of success—not only by engendering commitment but also by inherently easing communication of the action plan. An observant labor contractor once noted that his workers took much better care of their own tools than his. People similarly have more stake in and take better care of the decisions they have helped to make.
- **Time pressure.** Although permanently delegated decisions save the top manager’s time, shared decision making generally takes longer than unilateral action. The more immediate the need for a decision, the more difficult it is to involve employees. It is not surprising to find highly authoritarian management styles on ranches that encounter crisis after crisis. The pattern perpetuates itself, since boss-centered responses to crises do little to develop a staff capacity that helps avert subsequent ones.



- **Organizational traditions and values.** This factor is a facet of a few already covered, but it is worth a separate billing. “The way we’ve always done it here” has a remarkable impact on how it will be done in the future. Farms run with employee-centered decision making will not put up for long with a new boss-centered foreman. Organizations tend to select, promote, and retain people who fit with their prevailing systems. A shared concept of how good supervisors think and behave limits the range of decision making approaches that are available in practice within most agricultural firms.

When decision making responsibilities are shared, slumbering organizations often “wake-up” and workers’ expectations of both themselves and the business increase. The prerequisites for successful employee involvement includes a belief that workers have more to contribute than their hands, an awareness that not all workers want or are yet prepared to be involved, and a willingness to invest in identifying, training (on the job is fine), and recognizing the expanded contributions of those who are already involved. These ingredients can be combined in a multitude of recipes, all of which turn out better with slow cooking.

Like other management decisions, those about inviting and using employees’ thoughts are constrained by many forces. Yet, there is always room for choice among the range of potential approaches. Armed with an understanding of self, employees, and the situation a manager is better able to handle individual decisions and to project the long-term effects of any approach to a decision.



Fitting Style to the Situation

A model offered by Paul Hershey and Kenneth Blanchard identifies advantages, disadvantages, and situational factors conducive for use of four decision-making, delegation, or leadership styles. Akin to the range of approaches shown in Figure 4.4, the model styles are directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating.

Directing

Advantages:

- Fast and efficient for the short term
- Follows a clear line of authority
- Provides certainty about who is in charge and what the employee is to do

Disadvantages:

- Many people resent complete external control
- Inhibits growth and development
- Loses potential to surface helpful ideas

Appropriate use:

- When task is new
- With a new or inexperienced employee
- When other methods have left goals unmet
- When an employee is reluctant to take on a task
- When a task is urgent

Coaching**Advantages:**

- Efficient and timely
- Keeps clear who is in charge
- Exercises power without as much intimidation as directing
- Develops inexperienced people

Disadvantages:

- Not conducive to the growth of mature individuals
- Mature people may feel demeaned and resentful
- Could stimulate turnover if style does not progress as people mature

Appropriate use:

- When an employee has some understanding of the job
- When an employee needs direction and encouragement
- While an employee is gaining experience and competence

Supporting**Advantages:**

- Engages the employee more fully
- Takes advantage of employee knowledge and ideas
- Provides opportunity for growth
- Builds commitment and increases satisfaction in short term

Disadvantages:

- Time consuming
- Group decision “losers” may be disruptive
- Majority decisions are not always best
- Decisions that would require change may be best but are avoided to reduce conflict

Appropriate use:

- When the employee is familiar with the task
- When the employee has high level of competence
- When the employee/employer have time to share ideas and decision making process

Delegating:**Advantages:**

- Encourages growth and development in mature individuals
- Builds long-term productivity
- Works well with committed employees
- Draws out creative effort
- Frees management time for other work

Disadvantages:

- Ineffective with unwilling, unable employees
- Employee may not perform as expected
- Strong individuals may obtain and abuse power

Appropriate use:

- When an employee has the ability to decide and perform responsibly
- When an employee has an interest and desire to self-direct