

WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER ONE

The Decision Nobody Owns

A decision is often waiting not for an answer but for someone to know whose answer it is.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

A decision is often waiting not for an answer but for someone to know whose answer it is. It is twenty-five past four on a Wednesday, and the third meeting about the delivery days is ending the way the first two ended. The head of commercial at a regional bakery chain has a printed agenda in front of her, and beside the item, in the operations manager's hand, the words for decision have been crossed out and for discussion written above them. Through the window behind the finance partner she can see the loading bay, where two of the vans are being hosed down in the low October sun. The proposal is simple. Forty shops are supplied six days a week, and the figures say five would do, with a larger Saturday load. Everyone in the room has said, in one form or another, that it makes sense.

CHAPTER ONE

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The Decision Nobody Owns

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Twenty-five past four, the third meeting

It is twenty-five past four on a Wednesday, and the third meeting about the delivery days is ending the way the first two ended. The head of commercial at a regional bakery chain has a printed agenda in front of her, and beside the item, in the operations manager's hand, the words *for decision* have been crossed out and *for discussion* written above them. Through the window behind the finance partner she can see the loading bay, where two of the vans are being hosed down in the low October sun. The proposal is simple. Forty shops

are supplied six days a week, and the figures say five would do, with a larger Saturday load. Everyone in the room has said, in one form or another, that it makes sense.

The last slide says *Next steps: align with stakeholders.* It said the same in June.

Her jaw is tight in a way she has noticed before, at this point in this meeting. She does not know whether she is allowed to say *we are doing it*, and she suspects the operations manager does not know whether he is allowed to say it either, and that the finance partner thinks it is a matter for the two of them. She is a composite, drawn from the way these meetings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. The vans will go out six days next week, as they did this week, because nobody has decided otherwise.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon has a passage on authority that reads as if it had been written about the agenda in her hand. It begins by separating authority from the chart that is supposed to show it:

> *The CEO who issues a directive that everyone ignores has a title but no authority. The front-line worker whose informal recommendations are consistently followed by the team has no title but genuine authority. The map is not the territory, and the org chart is not the authority structure.*[1]

This chapter makes one claim. Much of what a firm calls slow decision-making is not slow thinking at all. It is a decision that nobody owns: everyone has been consulted, nobody has been named, and so the question returns to the agenda each month, a little more familiar and no nearer to being settled. The unowned decision is the first place a firm stops deciding, and because the remedy costs one sentence, it is also the cheapest place to begin.

Choices looking for problems

In 1972 three organisational theorists, Michael Cohen, James March and Johan Olsen, published a paper with a title that has outlived most of its readers' memory of its content: *A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice*.[2] They had been studying universities, which they took as a familiar kind of what they called organised anarchy: places with problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participation. In such organisations, their abstract says, decisions can be viewed as "collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work."

The sentence is funny, and it is also exact. The bakery's meeting is a decision situation in which several issues are being aired at once. The operations manager has a feeling about the drivers' rotas. The finance partner has a solution, a cheaper van lease, looking for an issue. The area managers have a long-standing grievance about Saturday stock. Each of them is attending to the question that brought them into the

room, and the question on the agenda, whether to move to five days, is only one of the things the meeting is being used for. A meeting with no owner becomes a place where every problem can be parked and none has to be closed.

A word on the strength of this evidence. The garbage can model is a computer simulation built from observation of universities, and its authors offered it as a way of seeing, not a measurement of how often firms behave this way. What it shows well is the mechanism: when participation is fluid and nobody is charged with a particular choice, the timing of a decision depends on who happens to be in the room and what else is on their minds. What it cannot show is how much of any real firm's calendar works like this. That is a question each organisation can answer about itself, by counting.

Santa Anna's canon names the pattern from the inside, in a list of the dynamics that everyone in an organisation recognises and nobody says aloud. One of them is simply the bakery's agenda across three meetings: "decisions that are made, unmade, and remade in cycles that exhaust the system." The delivery days have been agreed three times. They have not been decided once.

The crossing-out on the agenda is a small act, and the canon's book on decision-making would treat it as the largest one in the room. A decision begins, it argues, before anyone gives an opinion, at the moment someone frames what is being decided, and "The person or group that controls the frame controls the decision — often without anyone realizing it." When *for decision* became *for discussion*, the operations manager did not mean to take anything. He meant to be careful; the rotas were not ready and he did not want to be pressed. But the frame he wrote told nine people that nothing would be settled that afternoon, and so nothing was. The canon adds the reason nobody objected, in a sentence about how frames are usually set: "Most framing happens unconsciously, shaped by organizational culture, professional training, and the cognitive habits of whoever happens to speak first." He spoke first. He usually does.



The right to decide, and the power

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The right to decide, and the power

There is a distinction in economics that makes the bakery's difficulty easier to see. In 1997 Philippe Aghion and Jean Tirole published a theory of what they called formal and real authority in organisations.[3] Formal authority, in their abstract's words, is "the right to decide". Real authority is "the effective control over decisions". The two can sit with different people, and the paper's central point is that "Real authority is determined by the structure of information": whoever knows enough to make a proposal that the formal holder will accept without checking holds the decision in practice, whatever the chart says.

Read the third meeting through that distinction. The head of commercial probably holds the formal authority; the delivery schedule is a commercial matter, and the managing director gave her the review. But the operations manager holds the van rota, the drivers' contracts and the knowledge of which shops can take a larger Saturday load, and without his information her decision would be a guess. He holds a large share of the real authority. Neither of them has said so, and each is waiting for the other to move. The finance partner, who holds neither, is the only person in the room who is sure the decision is not hers.

Aghion and Tirole add an observation that will matter later in this book. Among the factors their abstract lists as increasing a subordinate's real authority is "overload": a superior with too much on her desk accepts more proposals without checking them. A decision that is never formally owned is often quietly made by whoever is least overloaded, by default, and nobody is accountable for it, because nobody was asked.

The canon puts the same point in the language of design. Authority, it says, belongs to a domain of work rather than a person or a title, and a well-drawn domain is specific: "It says what authority is held and, by implication, what authority is not held." The bakery has never drawn the domain around the delivery schedule. It has drawn a meeting around it instead.

Santa Anna is also careful not to let the remedy turn into its own kind of evasion. Writing about firms that distribute authority without drawing domains, the canon describes the result in two sentences: "If a decision goes wrong, who is responsible? Everyone and no one." The bakery is not a flat organisation, and nobody there has read about self-management. It has arrived at the same place by a more ordinary road, through courtesy. Each person in the room is being careful not to assume an authority the others might think is theirs, and the sum of nine courtesies is a decision that belongs to no one.

Who has the D

The best-known practical answer to this problem came from a consultancy. In January 2006 Paul Rogers and Marcia Blenko of Bain & Company published an article in the *Harvard Business Review* called *Who Has the D?*[4] Its opening observation is the bakery's agenda in a sentence: "At many companies, decisions routinely get stuck inside the organization like loose change." Their remedy was a set of five roles, now taught under the acronym RAPID. Bain's own current description gives them plainly. The person who recommends "drives the process, gathering relevant input and developing a recommendation for the decider." Those with input provide "expertise, experience, or information that shapes the recommendation." A small number must agree, which in the framework is a real veto. Some will perform the decision once it is made. And one person decides, the D, who "makes the final decision and commits the organization to action." Bain's page adds the sentence the bakery most needs: "Ideally, there should only be one decider for each decision."[5]

The grade of this evidence should be stated before it is used. RAPID is a practitioner's framework, drawn from a consultancy's engagements, and the article is an argument from cases, not a study. Rogers and Blen-

ko, with Michael Mankins, later published a book, *Decide & Deliver* (2010), which reports survey work linking how well firms decide with how well they perform; it is survey evidence gathered by a firm that sells the remedy, and it is best read as a well-informed opinion.[6] The framework's strength does not depend on those figures. It depends on something anyone can check in their own building: whether, for a given decision, the people in the room could each name the person who will make it.

What the framework does well, and what the bakery's meetings lack, is the separation of being heard from deciding. In the third meeting everyone gave input, and because input was the only role anyone had, everyone's input carried the weight of a vote. The area managers' Saturday grievance had the same standing as the operations manager's rota, and the finance partner's lease had the same standing as both. Once a person is named as the one who decides, the others become something more useful than a committee. They become witnesses, each with a piece of the picture, each heard, and none of them responsible for closing the question.

It also changes what the decider owes the others, and this is the part of the framework least often quoted. A person who knows she will decide has a reason to hear the input fully, because she will be the one answering for the result. A person who believes the decision is collective has a reason to hear it politely, because nothing will rest on her. The difference shows in the questions asked. In the third meeting nobody asked the operations manager what the rota change would do to the two drivers whose contracts guaranteed six days, because nobody needed to know. The person deciding would have asked it first.

The framework's commonest misuse is just as easy to see. Give too many people the right to agree and the veto spreads until the decision needs a unanimous room; name a committee as the decider and the loose change is back in the lining. The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, describes Holacracy, the most radical of the self-management systems, in a phrase that holds the balance RAPID is reaching for: "nobody needs permission, everybody has explicit accountabilities." The second half is the part most firms skip. Permission is easy to grant in a slide. An accountability someone can name is the thing that moves the vans.

What the third meeting costs

It is tempting to treat the unowned decision as a matter of manners, and to answer it with a reminder about meeting discipline. It is more expensive than that, and most of the expense never appears on any report the bakery produces.

There is the plain cost first. Three meetings of nine people, ninety minutes each, is a working week of senior time spent arriving at the same agreement three times. The vans still run six days. If the figures are right, every week of the sixth day is fuel, driver hours and waste the bakery has already decided, in principle, not to spend. None of this needs a consultant's estimate to be real, and none of it should be given one here: the bakery's own fuel cards and rotas would show it, and they are the only source that matters to the bakery.

Then there is the cost the canon is more interested in, because it lasts longer. Santa Anna's book on management records a software engineer describing his first manager: "He wanted compliance wrapped in the language of collaboration. He'd ask for input, then do what he'd already decided." The bakery's failure is the mirror of that one. Its people are asked for input and then nothing is decided at all. Both teach the same lesson, which is that giving input does not change anything, and both produce the same quiet withdrawal. By the fourth meeting, the area managers will stop bringing the Saturday figures, because bringing them has made no difference three times.

The canon gives the reason the unowned decision survives so long, and it is not laziness. "Decisions get delayed because no one wants to be wrong and vulnerability is dangerous." To own a decision is to be the person named when it goes wrong. In a firm where a wrong decision is remembered longer than a slow one, the rational course for every person in the room is to keep the decision collective, which is to say unmade. The head of commercial's jaw knows this before she does. Nobody has told her she would be blamed if Saturdays went badly. Nobody has told her she would not.

The cost does not stay in the room. In the forty shops, the managers have heard that the delivery days are being reviewed, because news of that kind always travels faster than decisions. Some have stopped ordering for Saturday the way they used to, in anticipation of a change that has not come. One has told her staff that the Monday delivery is ending, because an area manager said so in March. The canon's governance chapter has a line about authority that describes the shops' position exactly: "Authority that is not recognized is not authority — it is merely an assertion of will." In the shops, rumour has more authority than the head office meetings, because rumour at least says something.

That is also why the remedy is not exhortation. Asking people to take more ownership, in a room where nobody has been given the decision, asks each of them to seize an authority they are not sure they hold. *The Margin*, another of the house's books, shows how [deciding that a piece of work is finished is itself a decision somebody has to own](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-master-rsd-in-acedemia-final-manuscriptt/page/), and the same holds at the scale of a schedule. Ownership is not a trait people lack. It is a sentence nobody has said.



Naming the owner

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Naming the owner

What changes this is a single line at the top of a page, and the conversation it takes to write it.

Picture the head of commercial the following Monday, who has decided to do one thing differently. Before the fourth meeting is scheduled, she asks the managing director for fifteen minutes and a straight answer to one question: whose decision is the delivery schedule? The managing director is surprised to be asked. In her mind it was always the head of commercial's, and she had been wondering why it was taking so long. That is the first discovery most people make when they ask: the person above them thought the matter was

settled, and has been mildly puzzled by the delay. The second discovery comes when she asks the operations manager the same question. He thought it was the managing director's.

She then writes, at the top of the paper for the next meeting, one line in four parts. *Decision: whether to move the forty shops from six deliveries a week to five, with a larger Saturday load. Decided by: the head of commercial. By: the meeting on the fourteenth. Heard first: operations, on rotas and drivers; the area managers, on Saturday stock; finance, on cost.* Beneath it a second line names the one person who must agree, the food safety lead, because a larger Saturday load changes how long bread sits in a shop's back room, and that is a matter of law, not opinion.

The order of what she did matters more than the line itself. She asked upward before she asked across, so the answer carried the managing director's authority and nobody had to take her word for it. She named herself, which cost her something, rather than proposing a working group, which would have cost nobody anything and decided nothing. She gave the one veto to the person whose objection would be about harm, not preference. And she put a date on it, because a decision without a date is a topic. The canon's chapter on governance describes the same moment in a different setting, a team acknowledging who holds a domain, and it is candid about what kind of act it is: "This may sound ceremonial. It is. And ceremonies matter." The line at the top of the page is a small ceremony. It tells the room, before anyone speaks, what their speaking is for.

The fourth meeting is different from the first three in one respect, and it is the respect that matters. The operations manager, who knows he is being heard rather than asked to decide, gives the rota figures in full, including the awkward one about the two drivers whose contracts guarantee six days. The area managers bring the Saturday stock figures for the first time since June. The finance partner asks a question about the lease and then, noticing that nobody needs her to settle anything, drops it. The head of commercial decides, in the room, with a change: five days, from the first of the month after next, the two drivers moved to the new Saturday run.

There are predictable ways this goes wrong, and Chapter 7 carries them with the run sheet, in the order they tend to appear. The commonest is the owner who, once named, goes back to consulting, because consulting feels safer than deciding. The second is the senior person who names an owner and then reopens the decision when it lands on her desk as a complaint. The third is the line written for every trivial matter, until the ceremony becomes paperwork. The canon's warning about the misuse of its own language applies here with some force: "When leaders invoke "self-organization" to avoid making difficult decisions, that is not living-systems thinking — it is abdication." Naming an owner is not a way for a leader to step back from a decision. It is a way to make sure someone is standing in it.

Naming the owner is only the first place a firm's decisions wait. The second is the queue that forms when a decision is sent upward for a signature (Chapter 2), and the third, subtler, is the room that has an owner and still cannot close (Chapter 3).

Drawing the line in your own building

The chapter ended with one decision owned. The book can go further, into the finer points a leader meets when she tries this across her own organisation, and the first is knowing which of her decisions are unowned at all.

There are signs, and none of them needs a survey. The same item appears on three agendas in a row. Papers are marked *for discussion* when everyone knows a choice is being asked for. Minutes record that something was *agreed* and nobody can say who will act on it. People ask, in the corridor, *who is signing this off?* A proposal is sent to a working group that has no date to report. A decision is described by its topic, *the delivery schedule*, rather than by its choice, *whether to move to five days*. Any one of these can happen in a well-run firm. Three or four together are the garbage can at work.

The second finer point is the wording of the line itself. A decision is a sentence with a verb and a choice in it: *whether to*, *which of*, *how many*. A topic is not a decision, and a line that names a topic will produce a discussion. The test is simple. Could someone say *yes* or *no* to the line, or choose among the options it names? If not, it is not yet ready for an owner.

The third is the right to agree, which is where the framework is most often spoiled. Most of the people who matter to a decision should be heard. Very few should be able to stop it. A useful rule is that the right to agree belongs only to those whose objection would rest on law, on a written policy, or on a harm they are responsible for preventing: the food safety lead, the person accountable for a regulator, the owner of a budget the decision would spend. Everyone else gives input, and their input is weighed, and the owner says how. A line that gives five people the right to agree has rebuilt the committee.

The fourth is the direction in which to ask. The head of commercial asked upward first, and that is usually right. A person who names herself as owner without being sure she is entitled to has made a claim the others may resist. A person who asks the person above whose decision it is, and is told, has a fact. When the answer comes, write it down where the people who will be affected can see it, so that nobody has to take a corridor's word for it.

The fifth is the decision that seems too large for one person. It is common to answer this by naming a committee, and it is almost always a mistake. A large decision can have many people who recommend, many who are heard and several who must agree. It still needs one person whose job is to close it on a date. If the decision is so large that no single person below the chief executive can be trusted with it, the owner is the chief executive, and the others recommend.

The sixth is what the owner owes. She owes the people heard a real hearing before the date, and a sentence afterwards saying what she decided and why their input did or did not change it. She owes the people who will carry it out the decision in plain words, with the date it takes effect. And she owes everyone a rule for reopening: a decision is reopened when new information arrives that was not available on the day, and not

when someone who lost the argument raises it again. Without that rule, every owned decision drifts back into the garbage can.

And the decision that most changes the result is what the senior person does the first time an owned decision reaches her as a complaint. If she reopens it herself, the line at the top of the page means nothing from that day. If she sends the complaint to the owner and asks what new information it contains, the line holds. Chapter 6 places the naming of owners in the first weeks of a ninety-day plan, and Chapter 7 gives the signs of an unowned decision and the decision line on a page each.

Twenty-five past four, the fourth meeting

The fourth meeting ends at twenty-five past four, as the others did, but it began at ten to and it is over. On the agenda the words *for decision* are printed, and nobody has crossed them out. The last slide says *Decided: five days from the first of December. Owner: head of commercial. Review: the second week of January.*

Through the window the vans are being hosed down in the bay, the same two, in the same low sun. The head of commercial puts the agenda in her folder and notices that her jaw is where jaws usually are.

On Thursday morning the drivers' rota for December goes up on the board by the bay, with five days on it.

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