

WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER TWO

Three Signatures for a Pump

A decision sent upward waits in a queue like any other work, and usually arrives where less is known about it.

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THE LICENCE

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Chapter Two of Who Decides. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/who-decides (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989215).

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 sent upward waits in a queue like any other work, and usually arrives where less is known about it. It is ten past seven on a Tuesday, and the shift engineer at a water treatment works is standing in the pump house with her hand flat on the casing of the number two dosing pump. It is vibrating in a way it was not vibrating a month ago. The light through the high windows is the thin grey of early November, and the hum of the room is slightly off, the way a familiar voice sounds with a cold. In her other hand is a printed requisition for a replacement, raised nine days ago. At the bottom of the page are three boxes for signatures. The first, the maintenance manager's, is signed. The second, the site manager's, is signed. The third belongs to the regional operations director, who covers four sites and is at the other end of the region this week.

CHAPTER TWO

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Ten past seven, the pump house

It is ten past seven on a Tuesday, and the shift engineer at a water treatment works is standing in the pump house with her hand flat on the casing of the number two dosing pump. It is vibrating in a way it was not vibrating a month ago. The light through the high windows is the thin grey of early November, and the hum of the room is slightly off, the way a familiar voice sounds with a cold. In her other hand is a printed requisition for a replacement, raised nine days ago. At the bottom of the page are three boxes for signatures. The first, the maintenance manager's, is signed. The second, the site manager's, is signed. The third

belongs to the regional operations director, who covers four sites and is at the other end of the region this week.

She is a composite, drawn from the way such mornings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no works is meant. She knows this pump better than anyone who will sign for it. She has replaced its seals twice, she keeps the log of its flow readings, and she can tell from the sound alone that it has days rather than weeks. Her shoulders have been up since Friday, when she rang the regional office and was told the requisition was in the queue.

On the following Monday the pump fails. A hired unit is brought in that afternoon at a weekly rate which, over the month it takes the new pump to arrive, costs the works more than the new pump did. The requisition is signed on the Wednesday, by a director who approved it in under a minute, because there was nothing in it she could have judged better than the engineer already had.

Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon, writing on the pathologies of concentrated authority, describes the requisition's nine days in a passage that could be pinned above the regional office:

> *When all significant decisions must route through a small number of positions, those positions become bottlenecks. Decisions queue. Response times lengthen. Opportunities expire while waiting for approval. The organization operates at the speed of its most overloaded decision-maker rather than at the speed the situation demands.*[7]

This chapter makes one claim. A decision sent up a hierarchy waits in a queue, exactly as work does, and it is usually sent up not because the person above knows more but because the person below has never been allowed to decide. Where a decision belongs is a question with an answer, and for most of the decisions a firm makes every week, the answer is lower than the chain it travels.

A queue with a signature on it

In 1976 Henry Mintzberg, Duru Raisinghani and André Théorêt published a study of decisions that nobody had a procedure for.[8] They followed twenty-five strategic decision processes in organisations, from the moment a need was first recognised to the moment a choice was authorised, and they described the structure that such apparently unstructured processes share: phases of identifying the problem, developing options and selecting among them, and around those phases a set of interruptions, delays and returns to earlier steps. The decisions they studied were large ones, and most took a long time. What the study made visible was how much of that time was not spent deciding. It was spent waiting for something: a person, an approval, a moment when the matter could be raised.

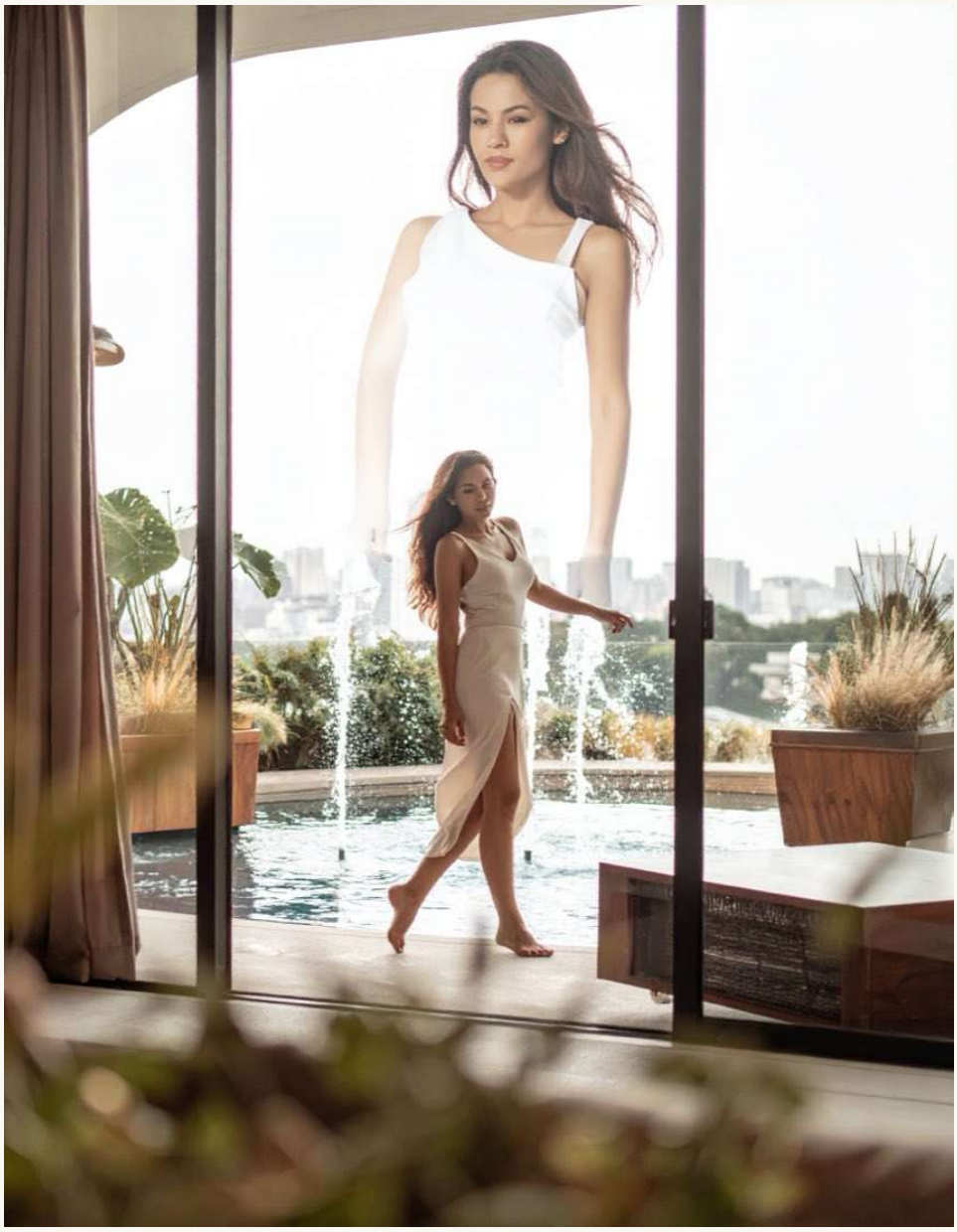
The study is a set of field cases, rich and carefully coded, and its text was not reopened for this book; its phases are given as the decision literature has long summarised them. It should be read as a description of

how strategic decisions move, not as a measure of how long a requisition takes. But the requisition has the same anatomy at a smaller scale. Recognition took a morning, when the engineer heard the pump. Development took an hour, when she priced a replacement. Selection took nobody any time at all. Authorisation took nine days.

The arithmetic of that waiting is already familiar from operations. A director's inbox is a queue like any other, and *Where the Flow Stops*, the house's first book on organisations, shows how [an order holding fifty minutes of work can spend six days inside a building]({{BOOK:orgdev-flow}}) for no reason except the number of things waiting beside it. A requisition on the desk of a person who covers four sites waits behind every other requisition from four sites. Nobody is slow. The director is busy, competent and conscientious, and the queue is long because everything is routed to her.

It is worth looking at the queue from her side of the desk, because from there it does not look like a queue at all. On a Monday morning she has something over forty items waiting for her signature from four sites: requisitions, overtime claims, a contractor's variation, a change to a shift pattern. Each is short, each is reasonable and each takes a minute to read. What takes the time is not reading them. It is the travelling, the meetings at each site, the calls, the incidents that come first, so that the minute for each item arrives days after the item does. Chapter 1 drew on Aghion and Tirole's observation that overload hands real authority to whoever proposes; the director's week shows the other half of the same arithmetic. Her signature has become formal authority with almost no real authority left in it, and it costs nine days to collect.

Santa Anna's book on resources describes what the chain does to a firm over time, in a sentence about a company that grew quickly: "Equipment requests languished in approval queues while consultants were retained at premium rates." The pump is the same story at the scale of one works. The money spent on the hired unit was spent precisely because the money for the new one waited for a signature.



Who knows about pumps

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Who knows about pumps

It would be easy to conclude that the approval chain should simply be abolished. The economics of hierarchy suggests something more useful than that.

In 2000 the economist Luis Garicano published a model of how organisations arrange knowledge.[9] His abstract describes what he called a knowledge-based hierarchy, "a natural way to organize the acquisition of knowledge when matching problems with those who know how to solve them is costly." In such an organisation, "production workers acquire knowledge about the most common or easiest problems confronted,

and specialized problem solvers deal with the more exceptional or harder problems." Hierarchy, on this reading, is not a ladder of importance. It is a referral system. A problem goes up when the person facing it cannot solve it, to someone who has seen more of its kind.

Read the requisition through Garicano's model and the fault is plain. A worn dosing pump is not an exceptional problem at a water treatment works. It is one of the commonest problems on the site, and the person who knows most about it is the engineer with her hand on the casing. The chain routes it upward as if it were rare, to a person who knows less about it, who then approves it without being able to add anything. The hierarchy is doing the opposite of what Garicano's hierarchy is for. It is sending the easy problem up and keeping the person who could solve it waiting.

The canon asks the same question in plainer words, and it puts it before every decision rather than after the fact: "Where does the intelligence for this decision actually live?" Its answer for most operational decisions is the one Garicano's model implies. "Routing it upward through management layers does not add intelligence. It adds delay, distortion, and the demotivating message that frontline judgment is not trusted."

The canon is careful not to make a creed of this, and it should not be read as one. Some decisions need a wider view: a choice that commits two sites, a risk the region would carry, a change to what the works is for. Those belong higher, because the knowledge they need lives higher. And sometimes a decision has to go up because the person facing it is genuinely stuck. The canon treats that kind of escalation as a strength of a living system, not a failure of it: "This is not a failure of distribution. It is a feature of a well-designed system." The fault is not that the chain exists. It is that the commonest decisions on the site travel it.

Adjusters, and the trust that decides

If the engineer knows most, why is she not allowed to decide? The research suggests that the answer has less to do with her than with the person above her, and with what that person believes.

In 1986 Carrie Leana studied delegation in nineteen branch offices of a large insurance company, among forty-four supervisors and the hundred and ninety-eight claims adjusters who reported to them.[10] She was asking what predicted whether a supervisor delegated, and what followed when one did. Her full text was not reopened for this book, and its findings are given here only in the shape the delegation literature has long cited: supervisors delegated more where they judged their staff competent and trustworthy, and where their own workload was heavy. It is one study, in one company, three decades old. Its value is that it locates the decision to delegate where the canon locates it, inside the supervisor's view of the person below.

A much larger study found the same pattern across whole economies. In 2012 Nicholas Bloom, Raffaella Sadun and John Van Reenen collected data on the decentralisation of investment, hiring, production and sales decisions from headquarters to plant managers "in almost 4,000 firms in the United States, Europe,

and Asia."[11] They found, in their abstract's words, that "firms headquartered in high-trust regions are significantly more likely to decentralize," and they offered evidence that trust raises productivity in part because chief executives "can decentralize more decisions." The study measures trust at the level of regions and countries, not of one director and one engineer, and its causal claims rest on careful but indirect methods. What it suggests, at a scale no single firm could reach, is that the height at which decisions are made follows trust, and that the cost of low trust is paid partly in decisions that travel too far.

The canon names the trap this creates, and it is unusually blunt. A firm that keeps decisions at the top tells itself it does so because people below are not ready, and the canon's answer is that they are not ready because they have never been allowed to decide: "Over time, hierarchical authority produces exactly the incompetence it uses to justify its own existence". The engineer has never signed for a pump. She will never be trusted to sign for one until she has.

Trust, in a works, is not built from conversation. It is built from records: the maintenance log the engineer keeps, the flow readings she takes, the history of the seals she has replaced and when. The evidence the director would need to trust the engineer's judgement already exists, written in the engineer's own hand, in a folder in the pump house. Nobody has ever been asked to read it for that purpose. The canon's description of what travelling up a hierarchy does to information is relevant here, because it runs in both directions: "By the time a frontline reality reaches the C-suite, it may be unrecognizable." The engineer's competence is a frontline reality. By the time it reaches the regional office it has become three boxes on a form.

The hand that takes it back

It is worth staying with the person at the top of the chain, because the chain is usually not her design, and she is usually the one person who can shorten it.

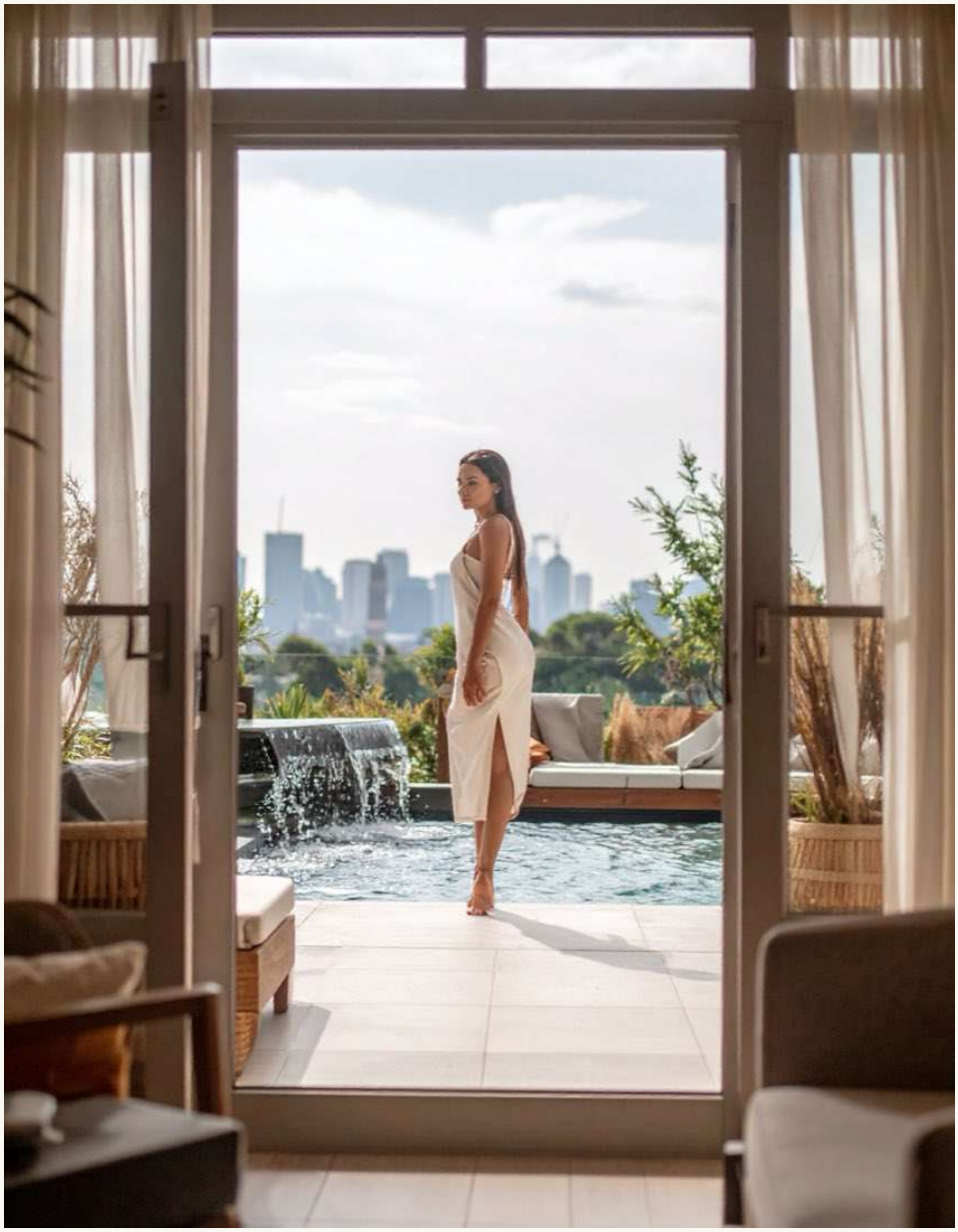
The regional director would say, if asked, that she would be glad to sign fewer requisitions. She means it. And yet the canon is right that something happens in a person when a decision she has held passes to someone else, and its book on management describes it with a precision that most leaders will recognise in their own bodies:

> *When you delegate a high-stakes project to someone you're not sure is ready, something happens in your body. Your chest might tighten. Your jaw might clench. Your breath might shallow. There's a buzz of anxiety in your belly — the nervous system's ancient warning that control is slipping, that the outcome is now in someone else's hands.*

The same book follows the sensation to its usual result. A manager who acts from it takes the decision back, adds a check, asks to be copied, and the person below learns that the authority was lent, not given. "The team that's always rescued never learns to rescue itself." The canon tells the case of a founder who knew all of this, had read the books on delegation and hired strong leaders for the purpose, and found that

it did not change what happened on her desk: "And still, somehow, the decisions kept flowing back to her desk."

Santa Anna's book on resources adds the uncomfortable half of the explanation, and it is uncomfortable because it is kind. The person who holds an approval, it says, "experiences each act of gatekeeping as a micro-dose of safety." Each signature is a small confirmation that nothing on the site will go wrong without her knowing. The book's verdict on this is not a reproach: "This is not malice. It is survival behavior wearing a business suit." A director who understands why the third box exists in her own nervous system is better placed to remove it than one who believes it exists only on the form.



Moving the decision down

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Moving the decision down

What changes this is not a new policy issued from the regional office. It is a conversation, held once, about a stack of paper.

Picture the regional director and the site manager three weeks after the pump failed, at the table in the site office, with the last twenty requisitions and decisions that went up the chain from the works. The director has asked for them on purpose; she wants to see what she has been signing. They take each one and ask two questions of it. Who, on the day it was raised, knew most about whether it was right? And what did the signature above that person add? For most of the twenty the answers are the same. The person who raised it knew most. The signature added a date. For three of them the answers are different: a choice of contractor that would commit two sites, a change to the chemical dosing regime that the regulator would want to see, a capital item large enough that the region would carry the risk. Those three belonged above the site, and the conversation says so.

Then they agree what changes, and the canon's book on governance supplies the shape. It describes authority being moved in steps rather than all at once: "starting with advisory authority ("Make a recommendation and implement it unless someone objects"), moving to provisional authority ("Make the decision and let us know — we'll review for three months"), and arriving at full domain authority ("This is your domain. You decide")." For the commonest decisions on the site, the replacement of equipment that has failed or is failing, the works moves straight to the second step. The engineer decides, records the decision and its reason in the same log as before, and the director is told the same day. The canon is exact about what that last step is for: "Not for approval — the domain holder has authority — but for coherence." The director needs to know what has been decided across her four sites. She no longer needs to decide it.

The conversation has a second effect, which the director notices only afterwards. Going through the twenty, she finds four decisions she had signed without any memory of signing them, and one she would have refused if she had read it closely, a contractor's variation that should have gone out to tender. The chain had not been protecting the works from bad decisions. It had been giving her the feeling of protection while her attention went elsewhere. Moving the commonest decisions down returns her attention to the three kinds that need it, and those three now get more of her time than they did when they arrived in a pile of forty.

Three further habits make the change hold. Every decision that does go up carries a date it was raised and a date it was decided, so that the waiting is visible to both ends of the chain. Every decision that went up and did not need to is noted, without blame, at the director's monthly visit, so the line can be redrawn. And the director does one thing that costs her more than it seems: when the engineer makes a decision she would have made differently, she says so in a sentence and lets it stand. That is the moment the authority stops being lent.

The engineer has her own adjustment to make, and the canon is honest that it is not trivial. "Many people in organizations have been thoroughly trained — by years of hierarchical experience — to defer, to wait for permission, to check with the boss before acting. Being told "You have authority in this domain" does not immediately undo that conditioning." The first time she orders a pump on her own judgement she will check the order twice and ring the site manager to tell him, which is not required, and the site manager should say, in a sentence, that it was not needed and that he is glad to know. The second time she will check it once. Santa Anna's book on management puts the stakes of these small moments plainly: "Every delegation decision is a growth opportunity or a growth suppression." The works is not only shortening a queue. It is growing an engineer who decides.

There are predictable ways this goes wrong, and Chapter 7 carries them with the run sheet. The director keeps a shadow approval, asking to see every decision before it is acted on. The site manager, newly trusted, becomes the new bottleneck himself. The class of decisions moved down is drawn so narrowly that nothing real moves. The limits that remain are the organisation's own to set, and they are set by the people who carry the risk; this issue does not suggest any. What it can say is that the conversation about the stack of paper is usually the first time anyone has looked at what the chain is for.

The gain in this is real and it can be found without inventing its size. Every decision that no longer waits is equipment that does not fail in the queue, hire that is not paid, time an engineer does not spend on the telephone to a regional office. Those costs are in the works' own records, in the hire invoices and the maintenance log, and that is where they should be counted. The pump is a single case; what a firm's late decisions cost across a quarter, and how to count it honestly (Chapter 5), is a question with an answer of its own.

Sorting the stack in your own building

The chapter followed one works through one conversation. The book can go further, into the finer points of running the same sort across a whole organisation.

Begin with the right stack. Take the last twenty or thirty decisions that travelled upward from one site, team or function: requisitions, approvals, variations, exceptions, anything that needed a signature or a meeting above the person who raised it. Twenty is enough to see the pattern and few enough to read in an afternoon. Choose ordinary ones. The decision everyone remembers, because it went badly, will mislead, for the same reason an extreme quarter misleads a measure.

Then put two questions to each, and write the answers down. Who, on the day it was raised, knew most about whether it was right? And what did the approval above that person add: information, a wider view, the carrying of a risk, or only a date? Sort the stack into three piles by the answers. The first pile is decisions where the person who raised it knew most and the approval added a date. Those belong at the level where they were raised. The second pile is decisions where the approval added something real, a view across

sites, a risk the wider organisation carries, a regulator's interest. Those belong above, and the chapter's three examples are typical. The third pile is decisions that went up because the person who raised them was stuck: unsure of the rules, caught between two departments, short of a fact. Those need an escalation path, which is a different thing from an approval. An escalation is a request for help with a hard case. An approval is a toll on an easy one.

The second finer point is to move authority in steps, as the canon describes, and to name the step for each class of decision. Some will move straight to *decide and tell*. Some will begin at *recommend and act unless someone objects within two days*. A few will move to full authority only after a quarter at the earlier step. Write down which step each class is on, and the date on which it will be reviewed. The canon's provisional step carries its own review period, and the review is what makes the step safe to take.

The third is what is told, to whom and when. A decision moved down still needs to be visible, for the reason the canon gives: coherence, not approval. The simplest form is the log the works already kept, with two added columns, *decided by* and *told*, and the rule that the person above reads it weekly. If she finds something she would have decided differently, she says so to the person who decided it, in a sentence, and the decision stands unless it breaks a law or a policy.

The fourth is the limits. Every class of decision moved down will have edges: a size, a risk or a kind of commitment beyond which it goes up again. Those edges are the organisation's own, set by the people who carry the risk and written where everyone can see them. This book does not suggest any. What it can say is that an edge set very low has moved nothing, and that the way to find the right edge is to look at the stack, see where the approvals stopped adding anything, and draw the line there.

The fifth is the person at the top. Moving decisions down will feel, to the person who used to sign them, like losing sight of her own operation, and the chapter's account of what happens in the body is not exaggerated. The practical answer is to give her something better to see than the stack: the log, read weekly, and the dates in it. She will know more about her operation from a column of decision dates than she ever learned from forty signatures.

And the decision that most changes the result is what happens the first time a decision made at the lower level goes wrong, as some will. If it is taken back up, permanently, the organisation learns that authority below is conditional on never being wrong, which nobody can meet. If it is reviewed, the edge redrawn if need be, and the authority left where it was, the organisation learns that decisions below are held to the same standard as decisions above. Chapter 6 places the sort in the second month of a ninety-day plan, and Chapter 7 gives the sort and the steps of authority as a page each.

Ten past seven, a new pump

It is ten past seven on a Tuesday in February, and the shift engineer is standing in the pump house with her hand on the casing of the number two dosing pump. It is the new one. The hum of the room is the right hum.

On the clipboard by the door is the log of decisions for the works. The last entry is hers, from Friday: a worn seal kit on the number three pump, ordered the same morning, reason given in a line. Beside it, under *told*, is the regional director's name and the time the message went.

There is one box at the bottom of the page now. She signed it herself.

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Three Signatures for a Pump

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