

WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER SIX

# The First Ninety Days

*Five practices set in order, from counting the decisions a firm already makes to measuring what deciding better is worth.*

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## THE LICENCE

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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

Five practices set in order, from counting the decisions a firm already makes to measuring what deciding better is worth. It is seven o'clock on a Monday, and the head of a division of an engineering firm, some five hundred people across three sites, is sitting in her car in the car park with the engine off. The rain has just stopped and the windscreen is still beaded. On the passenger seat is a notebook in which, over the weekend, she wrote one line: Nobody here knows who decides anything. She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she means to do something about it. The temptation, which she can feel in her shoulders, is to walk in at half past seven and announce a new decision framework by Friday.

CHAPTER SIX

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## Seven on a Monday, the car park

It is seven o'clock on a Monday, and the head of a division of an engineering firm, some five hundred people across three sites, is sitting in her car in the car park with the engine off. The rain has just stopped and the windscreen is still beaded. On the passenger seat is a notebook in which, over the weekend, she wrote one line: *Nobody here knows who decides anything.* She has read the first five chapters of a book like this one, or lived them, and she means to do something about it. The temptation, which she can feel in her shoulders, is to walk in at half past seven and announce a new decision framework by Friday.

She is a composite, drawn from the way these first weeks are described in the research the earlier chapters read and in the house's own practice, and no firm is meant. This chapter is written to her, and to anyone in her position: the person who runs something and wants to begin. It describes the first ninety days in order, with who is in the room, what each step needs, roughly how long it takes, the decisions that change the result, the mistakes made at each step and how to see them early, how to read what comes back, and what to do on the first Monday. The run sheets and working pages it refers to are gathered in Chapter 7.

Two things should be said before the plan. The first is that nothing here needs a programme, a framework with a name or a launch. Ammanuel Santa Anna's canon puts the reason in a sentence about governance that every first ninety days should begin under:[32] "governance is not a structure. It is a practice." A leader who introduces decision roles as an initiative, with a slide and a title, will find that people respond to the initiative and not to the decisions. The second is that the order matters more than any single step. The chapters were written in the order a reader meets the problem. The ninety days run in the order the practices depend on each other.

## Why this order

The five practices of this book are the decision line (Chapter 1), the sort and the steps of authority (Chapter 2), the speeds and the consent round (Chapter 3), the commitment page and the two-column review (Chapter 4), and the decision log with its measurement conversation (Chapter 5). In the first ninety days they run in a different sequence: count, then name, then close, then move down, then review what is running, then measure.

The reasoning is simple. Every later practice changes who decides what, and people accept such changes when they can see why they are being made. So the first step changes nothing and counts everything: the log is started on day one, because it is the only record of how decisions moved before anything was changed, and it becomes the baseline Chapter 5 requires. Naming owners comes next, because it costs least and is most visible, and because nothing can be moved down until it is clear who held it. The speeds and the round follow, in the leader's own meetings, where she controls the conditions and everyone can watch. Moving decisions down comes only once the room has seen that an owned decision is respected, because the people receiving authority are watching for exactly that. The pages for running commitments come in the second month, once the leadership has the habit of reading a page before speaking. And the measurement conversation is held last, because it measures what the other steps have found, but its history is fixed in the first ten days, for the reason Chapter 5 gives: a baseline drawn after the changes have begun has nothing honest to measure against.

The canon's book on decision-making gives the principle behind the whole plan in one question: "the question is not "What is the best decision-making method?" but rather "What does this particular decision, in

this particular context, with these particular people, actually require?"" The first ten days are spent finding out what the firm's decisions require, by looking at them.

## Who is in the room

Three roles carry the first ninety days, and they are named before anything else is done.

The sponsor is the most senior person whose decisions the practices will touch. In a small firm it is the chief executive; in a large one, the head of a division or a site, like the woman in the car. Her job is not to manage the work. It is to go first in her own meetings, to name herself as owner where she is the owner and someone else where she is not, and to protect the people who make decisions that used to be hers. Expect it to take three to five hours a week, most of it inside meetings she already holds.

The working group is small: four to six people. It includes someone who runs operations, someone from finance who will later hold the measurement conversation, two people from below the leadership whose decisions travel upward most often, and, on purpose, one person who joined recently, because newcomers still notice how long things take. It meets for an hour a week. Its job is to read the log, run the sort and bring back what it finds.

The convenor keeps the log of Chapter 5: every decision of consequence, raised and decided, with its owner and whether it was reopened. Often this is the operations member of the group. The convenor needs about two hours a week, and the one quality that matters most is that people trust the convenor to record what happened rather than what the sponsor would like to have happened.

One decision changes the result more than any other at this stage. The sponsor must decide, before day one, which decisions she herself will give away in the ninety days, and be willing to name them. A sponsor who intends to change how everyone else decides while keeping her own desk as it was will find, as the founder in Chapter 2 did, that the decisions keep flowing back to it.



*Days one to ten: counting before changing*

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## Days one to ten: counting before changing

The first ten days change nothing visible. They gather four inputs, and the convenor does most of the gathering.

The first is the log itself, started on day one and filled backwards for the previous quarter from the records that exist: the minutes, the approval system, the purchasing system's dates, the email trail of the larger decisions. It will be incomplete. That is expected, and the notes column says where.

The second is a list of the standing meetings in which decisions are taken, with who attends. The sponsor sits in on two or three she does not usually attend and, in each, counts: how many items were marked for decision, how many were decided, how many were moved to the next meeting, and how many had an owner anyone could name. Chapter 7 gives the signs that decisions are waiting as a single page, and she ticks them as she sees them.

The third is the decision inventory of Chapter 7: the fifteen or twenty most significant decisions of the last quarter, and for each, who decided in the end, who held the knowledge it needed, and whether they were the same person. The canon's book on governance describes the purpose of the exercise in a sentence: "The gaps between the two maps are your governance opportunities."

The fourth is the history the measurement conversation will read. Finance and the convenor list the operational records the firm's decisions touch, the lead times, the approval dates, the hire and overtime costs, the complaint and claim times, and copy out the last one to two years of each, dated and filed unaltered. Nothing is decided about it yet. It is fixed before anything could move it.

At the end of the ten days the working group meets for the first time and writes, on a single page, its first guess at where decisions wait: two or three kinds of decision that seem to have no owner, one or two that travel further up than they need to, one or two meetings that cannot close, and any commitment that seems to be continuing because nobody has asked whether it should. It is a guess, and labelled one. The page is kept and read again on day ninety.

What goes wrong at this stage. The commonest mistake is to announce. A sponsor who tells the division that she is starting a programme on decision rights will find that every manager starts copying her on everything, to be safe, and the log fills with decisions that were never hers. The early sign is a sudden rise in what reaches her desk. The second mistake is to begin with a framework, roles handed out across the whole organisation before anyone has looked at the decisions. The roles will be drawn around the organisation chart, which is exactly the map the canon warns is not the authority structure. The third is to judge. The log of the last quarter will show waits that reflect badly on particular people, sometimes on the sponsor herself. If the first use of the log is to blame someone, the log will be kept less honestly from that day.

## Days eleven to thirty: naming and closing

In the third week the sponsor changes two of her own standing meetings, chosen because decisions are made there and because the first ten days showed them failing to close.

Before each meeting, she marks every item with its speed, as Chapter 3 describes. Swift items go back, with a note, to the person whose decision they are. Deep items carry a decision line at the top of the paper, as Chapter 1 describes: the choice in a sentence, the owner, the date, who is heard first and the few who must agree. Patient items carry the date they will return. In the meeting, each deep decision is closed by the

owner at the time set, and the consent round of Chapter 3 is run before it is announced, beginning with the newest person and ending with the most senior. Chapter 7 gives the run sheet for both.

Alongside the meetings, the sponsor does one quiet piece of work each week: she takes two of the unowned decisions from the first-guess page and asks, upward or across, whose they are. When the answer comes, she writes it down where the people affected can see it.

The round adds about ten minutes to a meeting of eight people. The speeds usually save more than that, because the swift items leave the agenda. In the first weeks the round produces mostly *no objection*, quickly. The canon's guard against reading that as success is the right one, and the sponsor should expect three or four meetings before the first real objection arrives.

The decision that changes the result is what she does with the first real objection, and above all with the first one that turns out to be mistaken. She answers the harm, not the courage. She changes the decision, tests the objection or gives her reason, aloud. And she treats a mistaken objection exactly as warmly as a correct one. If she does those three things, the room learns quickly that objections are part of deciding. If she misses one, it learns that too.

What goes wrong. The sponsor decides before the round and runs it as a formality. The decision line names a committee. An owned decision is reopened by someone senior because they disliked it. The swift items come back to the meeting because their owners do not believe they are really theirs. The early signs are visible in the log: if decisions marked deep are still being carried to a second meeting in week four, the closing rule is not being kept; if decisions sent back as swift reappear, the people receiving them need to hear, in person, that they are trusted with them.

How to read what comes back. By day thirty the convenor's log should show a handful of decisions closed on the day set, each with a named owner, and fewer items carried between meetings. Read the objections raised in the round as the working group's best evidence of where the firm's knowledge sits: the people who raised harms nobody else saw are often the people who should own the next decision of that kind.

## Days thirty-one to fifty: moving decisions down

In the fifth week the working group runs the sort of Chapter 2 on one site or function, the one the first-guess page named as sending most upward. It gathers the last twenty or thirty decisions that travelled, puts the two questions to each, and sorts them into three piles: those that belong where they were raised, those that belong above, and those that went up because someone was stuck.

The sort takes an afternoon. Then the sponsor and the manager whose site or function it is agree, for each class of decision in the first pile, which step of authority it moves to and when that step will be reviewed: recommend and act unless someone objects, decide and tell, or full authority. They write the edges of each

class, set by the people who carry its risk. For the third pile they agree an escalation path, which is a named person to ask for help with a hard case, and a time within which help will come.

The decisions that change the result are about order and evidence. Move the commonest decisions first, because they are where the waiting accumulates and where the people below already know most. Use the records that already show those people's judgement, the logs, the readings, the histories, as the evidence for the move, and say so, so that the authority is seen to rest on something. And move fewer classes than seems possible, so that each can be watched.

What goes wrong. The person above keeps a shadow approval, asking to see each decision before it is acted on. The edges are drawn so tightly that nothing real moves. A middle manager, newly trusted, becomes the new bottleneck. The first decision made below that goes wrong is taken back up for good. Each has an early sign in the log: decisions in the moved classes that still show two names, the decider and someone above; a moved class with no entries in a month; a new name appearing on most of the slow rows.

How to read what comes back. By day fifty the log should show the moved classes being decided where they were raised, with the time from raised to decided falling for those rows, and the person above told the same day. Read the reopened column beside it. If decisions in the moved classes are reopened more often than before, look first at what the people deciding were not told, before concluding that they were not ready.

## Days forty-one to seventy: the pages for what is running

Overlapping with the sort, the leadership lists every commitment of consequence now running: programmes, projects, pilots, contracts with years still to run. For each it asks whether there is a page, written at the start, saying what the commitment was expected to show and what would make it pause. Most will have none.

For each commitment without one, the working group finds a reader who did not start it and does not report to its sponsor, and asks that person to write the page now, with the sponsor's help but not under her direction: what the commitment should have shown by now, by the measures the organisation already keeps; what would make it pause; when it will next be reviewed. At the next review of each, the two columns of Chapter 4 are read in silence before anyone speaks, and the reader recommends first.

The decision that changes the result is how the first recommendation to pause is received. The sponsor of the division should be present, should thank the reader in a sentence, and should ask the commitment's own sponsor what she knows now that she did not know at the start. If the first pause is treated as an ordinary outcome, the next page will be written honestly.

What goes wrong. The reader is chosen by the sponsor. The signals are written so loosely that nothing could reach them. A signal is reached and quietly moved. The person who recommended a pause is moved

aside. The early sign of each is the same: the right-hand column of the two-column paper begins to be written in adjectives rather than figures.

How to read what comes back. By day seventy each running commitment of consequence should have a page and a date for its next review, and at least one should have been read against its page. A leadership that finds every commitment on track against pages written in the same month has probably written the pages to fit. Read the first pages again at day ninety, beside the log.



*Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring what was found*

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER SIX

## Days sixty-one to ninety: measuring what was found

In the last month the working group chooses one or two of the changes made, the ones whose effect is most likely to show in records the firm already keeps, and holds the measurement conversation of Chapter 5. Finance leads it. The operations member, the people whose decisions were moved and whoever will do the calculation are in the room. The sponsor attends and says little.

The conversation follows the order in Chapter 7: what has changed in how the decision is made, in plain words; what would show in existing records if it worked; what those records show over the history fixed in the first ten days; what moves the figure for reasons nobody controls, and how each will be allowed for; what second measure would show if decisions were merely being made faster and worse, and the reopening rate in the log is the natural one; who calculates, and how it can be checked; how the result will be shown to the people whose decisions produced it. The output is one page, signed by the people in the room. The first conversation usually takes two meetings of ninety minutes. Later ones take one.

By day ninety the first monthly figure should be on the page beside the log, read against the ordinary range of its history, in the same form finance sees it.

The decision that changes the result is timing, and most of it was taken on day ten, when the history was fixed. If a team began to change how it decided before day ten, agree the measurement for that change from now. The earlier improvement is not counted. That is a real cost and a small one beside a number nobody believes.

What goes wrong. The baseline is taken from the worst recent quarter, because it makes the gain look large. An adjustment is added after the results are in. Time is measured alone, without the reopening rate beside it. The calculation is done privately and announced. The early sign of each is the same: someone in the room, often one of the people whose decisions were moved, goes quiet. The sponsor's job at this step is to notice who has stopped speaking.

What this step does not settle is how a measured gain is then shared with the people who produced it: the proportions, the timing, the thresholds and the terms. Those depend on the organisation, its people and its history. They are decided with the people who will be covered, and for an organisation working with Luminous Prosperity they are the substance of the engagement, not of a book. What the first ninety days can do is make that later decision honest, by producing a gain that both sides already believe.

## Day ninety: reading what you have

The working group meets on day ninety with five things on the table: the first-guess page from day ten, the log of the quarter beside the log of the quarter before, the sorted stack with its steps of authority, the pages for running commitments with their first reviews, and the signed measurement page with its first figure.

It asks a short list of questions, in order. Where was the first guess right, and where wrong? Which decisions now have an owner that had none? How has the time from raised to decided changed, in the slowest tenth as well as the middle, and has the reopening rate moved with it? Which classes of decision were moved down, and what happened to them? Which commitments were read against a page, and what was decided? Is there a gain both sides believe, and what does it show? And then the question that matters most for the next ninety days: who is now deciding who was not, and who has stopped?

What not to conclude is as important. Ninety days are too short to say that the culture of decision-making has changed; they are long enough to say whether the practices are being kept. One quarter's faster decisions are not yet a gain, for the reasons Chapter 5 gave. And a log with few changes in it is itself a finding: it usually means one of the earlier steps is not yet real, and the first place to look is whether owners are really being named.

The canon's book on governance, describing the first pilot of a redesigned decision, gives the right expectation for the whole quarter: "Remember: distributed authority is an iterative practice. The first design will not be perfect. The goal is to begin the learning cycle." The second ninety days begin from the log the first ninety days produced.

## What to do on Monday

If the whole of this chapter is too much to begin with, three things can be done on the first Monday, and none of them needs anyone's permission.

Take the agenda of the next meeting you chair, and beside each item write whether it is swift, deep or not yet ripe. Send the swift ones back to the people whose decisions they are.

Choose one decision that has been on more than one agenda. Write it as a sentence with a choice in it, and ask the person above you, or beside you, whose it is. Write down the answer.

And start the log. A spreadsheet with seven columns, filled from this week's decisions: what was decided, raised when, decided when, by whom, who was heard, whether it was reopened, and what it held up while it waited.

The canon's book on governance closes one of its exercises with an instruction that fits the first Monday better than any plan: "Simply notice. The noticing itself begins to shift the pattern." A firm that writes down, for one quarter, when its decisions were raised and when they were made has already begun to decide differently.

## Monday, day ninety-one

It is seven o'clock on a Monday, and the head of the division is in the car park with the engine off. The windscreen is dry this time. On the passenger seat is the same notebook, and under the line she wrote ninety-one days ago she has written a second: *Some of them do now.*

On her laptop the log shows a hundred and thirty rows for the quarter. The two meetings she chairs closed every deep item on the day it was set. At one of the three sites, the maintenance team orders its own parts and tells her the same afternoon. In finance's drawer there is a signed page with a history, two adjustments and a first figure on it.

None of these has a name. Nobody has announced anything. She marks the first item on today's agenda *swift*, sends it back to the person whose decision it is, and goes in.

# References

1. Sources for this chapter: the practices and their sources are those of Chapters 1 to 5: Cohen, March and Olsen, Aghion and Tirole, and Rogers and Blenko on owners and roles; Mintzberg, Raisinghani and Théorêt, Garicano, Leana, and Bloom, Sadun and Van Reenen on where decisions belong; Eisenhardt, Baum and Wally, and Perlow, Okhuysen and Repenning on speed; Staw, Arkes and Blumer, Ross and Staw, and Kahneman and Lovallo on escalation; Simon, Nutt, and Dean and Sharfman on what decisions cost. Full references are in those chapters' notes; Santa Anna, A. *Conscious Governance Models*, on governance as a practice, "The Authority Distribution Assessment" and the Luminous Invitations to its chapter on authority; *Inclusive Decision-Making Protocols*, chapter 1. The Luminous Developmental Canon. The time estimates in this chapter are planning guides from practice, not findings of a study; adjust them to the organisation.

The First Ninety Days

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