

Pivotal Decisions Shape Careers

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By Francie Dalton

COLUMBIA, Md. -- How you manage pivotal decisions shapes you and your career, shapes how others view you and the quality of your leadership, reveals your core values, and, as a result, sets precedent -- shaping the culture of the organization.

Conversely, failing to recognize the special nature of pivotal decisions increases the likelihood that your decisions will be reactionary and/or perfunctory, generating unintended and complicating consequences that are more severe, harder to endure, more expensive to remediate, and harder to recover from.

A decision is pivotal if any of the following is true:

A significant degree of risk, exposure or uncertainty surrounds the decision. Failure in some form is a distinct possibility.

Some form of change will follow, with the decision itself being a catalyst for or a precursor to some set of "next steps."

Radial impacts will ensue from the decision, affecting one or more of the following: the responsibilities or careers of individuals, organizational structure or operations, internal policy, or your reputation as a leader.

None of the choices attendant to the decision includes a win/win with all options having some advantage. Instead, pivotal decisions are so because they are either win/lose, with considerable distance between the best possible and worst possible outcomes; or lose/lose, forcing a choice between two or more equally negative outcomes.

The fact that you did not intend the consequences is not mitigating; the fact that you are not sensitive to any resulting negative perceptions is not insulating. Instead, primary among the negative outcomes of mishandled pivotal decisions is an erosion of the credibility of your leadership -- something that's virtually impossible to rebuild.

The most frequently cited circumstances exemplifying the need for pivotal decisions include: leadership transitions or internal restructuring; threatened loss of key staff at crucial times; mission-relevant requests from key constituents that would cause significant cost over-runs, delays, or substantial re-work; and, of course, poisonous, divisive, alienating behaviors from those whose results or political connections are crucial to the organization.

The best time to confront pivotal decisions is before you have to. However, you do have two alternatives: You can wait for them to burst upon you without warning and then do your best to wing it; or you can just accept that your organization will be in a perpetual state of damage control as you struggle to mitigate the results of unanticipated pivotal decisions. Impractical as it may initially seem, it really is possible to anticipate pivotal decisions, to prepare for them in advance, and to lead through them, virtually, before they ever happen.

Here's a five-step process that will help you do so:

Imagine the toughest business scenarios you might face; reasonably predictable dilemmas in which you would be highly vulnerable. Think of all that you take for granted managerially, and imagine losing it. Consider that about which you are most certain, and think of what would happen if that certainty proved unfounded. Also included here might be a significant difference of opinion between you and your boss regarding a major initiative; a particularly difficult associate, etc. Work to identify at least two potentially calamitous scenarios.

Identify the indicators likely to precede each scenario. What specific occurrences would indicate that the scenario is indeed becoming imminent? Listing these will increase the probability that you'll recognize the indicators and when they actually occur, especially those you're predisposed not to recognize due to your own biases or blind spots.

Walk through each scenario, one at a time, as though you were really facing the difficulty. What are your options and the predictable consequences of each option? Which option would you choose? Why? Be sure you can clearly articulate your reasons for choosing a particular option. Fluency here will help you speak with a conviction adequate to be persuasive with key audiences.

It's important to visualize the implementation of your chosen option. If you have trouble here, if you can't really see yourself implementing the decisions you've concluded are the correct ones, if it's your modus operandi to duck or delay the toughest decisions, then perhaps you should give up your leadership role. If such decisions cause you emotional anguish, if you rail against having to make them, realize that's exactly the kind of decision senior executives should be making, and that you're not alone in your discomfiture. But one of the luxuries you have to surrender once you've moved into the executive ranks is the luxury of behaving the way you feel. No honorable

executive relishes the implementation of decisions that will be painful to others, but your feelings cannot be the determinant for taking action.

Identify what's thematic about your decision making. The criteria you use to make pivotal decisions are likely to be consistent over time. For example, are you consistently benevolent? If so, you're likely to have earned an organization of mediocre performers. Is it your pattern to be harsh? If so, you're likely to have earned resentment of your leadership. Do you typically "duck" all the incendiary issues? If so, you're likely to have earned a lack of respect for your leadership. Understand that whatever pattern you've established, it's already visible, and is speaking volumes to key audiences. So take some time to discern what your pattern indicates about the style and quality of your leadership, and what the impact of this pattern is on your organization. Then determine what adjustments, if any, you need to make.

Remember that pivotal decisions are frequently necessitated by that which should have been anticipated in the first place. Learning how to anticipate pivotal decisions will deliver three tremendously useful outcomes to you: First, the process trains your brain to recognize precursors; this then accelerates your ability to act. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, anticipating pivotal decisions equips you to apply preventive measures instead of slugging your way through damage control measures.

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