

# **Becoming More Collaborative — When You Like to Be in Control**

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**Summary.** When leaders who are used to calling all the shots start working with peers and stakeholders who are as successful, hungry, and confident as they are, they sometimes find themselves at odds. Their previously successful decisive, command-and-control-leadership style is no longer a viable option. And unless they pivot their decision-making style and reposition themselves as open-minded, collaborative leaders, they might be putting their future success on the line. Thus, the overconfident, decisive leader must go through a mindset change. If you're a

leader who struggles to let go of control over decision-making, the authors present several ways to make the mindset and behavioral changes required to become more collaborative. [close](#)

Successful leaders can fall into the trap of thinking they know what's best for their team or organization. After all, they worked hard to get where they are and have made many tough decisions along the way. However, some leaders rely too heavily on their ability to make decisions on their own — with steep consequences for themselves, their team, and the organization.

Mike, the chief technology officer of a fintech organization and one of Luis's clients, was facing a dilemma of his own making. He found himself questioning his direct reports — “Why is it so hard for you to follow through? Can't you get anything right?” — and barking out orders to his peers — “I'm the CTO, right? Stay in your lane; I'll decide what to do.”

Mike, a former military officer, seasoned professional, and ex-CEO, had joined the organization via an acquisition. Early on, it was evident that there was a clash of personalities and cultures on his team and among his peers. He was used to making all the decisions and demanded loyalty and execution. Once, he made a decision that his team knew was not going to work but had them implement it anyway. His decision cost the company a considerable amount of money. It also prompted the CEO to address Mike's overconfidence and leadership style. As he discussed the engagement with Luis, he said, “Mike is a liability to this organization and needs to be dealt with.”

When leaders who are used to calling all the shots start working with peers and stakeholders who are as successful, hungry, and confident as they are, they sometimes find themselves at odds. Their previously successful decisive, command-and-control- leadership style is no longer a viable option. And unless they pivot their decision-making style and reposition themselves as open-

mindful, collaborative leaders, they might be putting their future success on the line. Thus, the overconfident, decisive leader must go through a mindset change.

Gallup research estimates that the cost of poor leadership and lost productivity can tally up to \$1.2 trillion dollars per year due to disengaged employees. In organizations, decisiveness, confidence, and the ability to take and carry out bold action are highly rewarded — and can lead to costly mistakes. Of the variables that impact decision-making, overconfidence can be the hardest to improve, as it “is built so deeply into the structure of the mind that you couldn’t change it without changing many other things,” as Nobel prize-winning psychologist, economist, and author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman, puts it.

If you’re a leader who struggles to let go of control over decision-making, here are several ways to make the mindset and behavioral changes required to become more collaborative.

**First, determine why you make decisions in isolation.**

If you’re an overconfident, dogmatic leader who tends to make unilateral decisions and expect your team and peers to see them through, you first need to understand why that is. Here are some questions to ask yourself to examine your decision-making style:

**Do you think decision-making is a simple gut reaction?** You have many years of experience, so your gut reaction or initial judgment may often be right. But making the correct decision is a complex process that several factors can influence. One big reason people don’t make the right decision is that they don’t have all the information they need due to a lack of input. Many decisions aren’t black and white. They require input, data, expertise, and diverse perspectives from team members and stakeholders.

**Do you think other people’s opinions don’t matter?** When leaders make decisions in silos and don’t seek alignment, they signal to other stakeholders, “I don’t value your opinion.” Every individual

wants to feel valued, recognized, and relevant. When leaders make decisions in a vacuum, they're not providing any of those. However, including others in crucial decision-making can increase buy-in and accountability as the decision moves to the execution stage. It also showcases a leader's confidence in the team, strengthens relationships, and fosters a collaborative culture.

**Do you believe you own decision-making rights?** Some leaders feel that their title and position give them the right to make decisions alone. They want to be in control and rely on hierarchy and authority rather than their leadership capabilities. They must recognize their authority and power are not absolute. In fact, position leadership — where a person's leadership power comes solely through the position they hold in the organization — is the most basic level of leadership, and staying there limits their potential.

**Do you believe only you can make the right decision?** Confidence is a valued skill that is closely linked to professional success. However, confidence can become detrimental when a leader overestimates their ability, knowledge, or judgment. Perhaps they've fallen into the expertise trap and are more likely to “jump the gun” and take on more risk than necessary due to their perceived decision-making abilities.

**Second, determine how you want to reposition yourself as a leader.**

Moving from being a lone wolf to a more strategic, collaborative, and inclusive decision-maker requires you to make behavioral changes in order to influence how others perceive you. If you want to be known as an influential leader, you must encourage your team's engagement, collaboration, and accountability for collective goals and decisions. Here are some ways to get started:

**Cultivate humility.** Being humble means acknowledging you don't know everything, and that's OK. So, always ask yourself, What is the objective? You must reframe what success means for

you. Success is not having the final word or getting your way — it's accomplishing your business objectives. And that requires having a team that's engaged and inspired.

**Be thorough.** Abraham Maslow, a psychologist and creator of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, said: "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."

You must acknowledge that your way is not the only way. Asking for input is not a weakness; on the contrary, it's an advantage that will only make your decision-making more effective. According to Kahneman, when you focus your decision-making solely on your inner beliefs and experiences, you limit your inputs. When you shift your focus to be more inclusive and take the time to search for external factors and perspectives, your rate of success will increase.

**Practice curiosity.** Being open to learning is key to success; only then can you weigh all the options and reach a better outcome. So, always ask yourself: What else do I need to know? Interestingly, the executive search firm Egon Zehnder has found that executives with extraordinary curiosity are usually able, with the right development, to advance to C-level roles. So, curiosity will not only allow you to make better decisions, it will also position you better for career advancement.

**Be a long-term thinker.** If you focus more on short-term outcomes, consider the long-term consequences of your decisions, as well as the "second-degree consequences": the indirect or unintended results of your decision. For example, if you decide to lay off employees to cut costs, you immediately reduce payroll expenses. However, the second-degree consequence may include a negative impact on employee morale, a loss of institutional knowledge, and a potential decrease in productivity.

### **Third, take action.**

Once you make the mental shift and decide how you want to be perceived by others, you must take action. Change will only happen if others experience you in a way that is different and aligned with the brand you want to cultivate. Here are some strategies to get you started:

**Seek different perspectives.** New inputs and options will bring better information that most likely wasn't on your radar and foster creativity, collaboration, and engagement. You, as the leader, must draw information from all sources, thus making sure everyone on your team has their say. For example, you can assign the role of a contrarian or a devil's advocate to a team member. You must reflect and take time to consider all options.

**Change your position into an option.** Overconfident leaders tend to lead with positions. They stake out their own viewpoint and try to convince others to see it, accept it, and go along with it. Positions are inflexible and leave little room for collaboration. This leads to confrontations and a winner-takes-all attitude.

By contrast, when you opt to present your viewpoint as an option, you open up the possibility for collaboration and, most likely, innovation by improving on the options. This can lead to more productive and effective decision-making efforts. This requires being flexible and open to being influenced. Only when you approach decision-making from a place of collaboration will you be able to shift from inflexible to open-minded.

**Engage your team in the process.** The higher you are in the organization, the more you'll depend on others to execute your vision and goals. Winning becomes a team sport. Thus, learning to nurture, empower, and engage your team is essential, especially when it comes decision-making. For example, you could engage your team to run a premortem, a decision-making practice where the team imagines a project has failed and works backward to identify possible reasons why. This process

encourages communication, alignment, better decision-making, and ultimately better outcomes.

You want people to follow you because they want to, not because they have to. To achieve that, you cannot lead by fear or authority.

You must engage your team and build a level of trust and accountability that will enable you to set the direction and empower your team to help you make the right decisions.

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For Mike, going from a lone decision-maker to, as his stakeholders later described him during the end-of-engagement interviews, “an inclusive, open-minded leader,” was transformational for himself and his team. As a leader, it’s important to continually work on your decision-making abilities. While it can be very hard to let go of the need to always be in control and have the last word, adopting an inclusive mindset and incorporating different perspectives and ideas will lead to better outcomes and a stronger team. Don’t let decision-making bravado become a block for your growth and the impact you have on your team and the organization.

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