

## HESITATION, DECISIVENESS<sup>1</sup>, AND IMPULSIVITY STORIES<sup>2</sup>

### How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of decisiveness. When we lead with exceptional decisiveness, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not decisive enough, people may progress slowly in their work and become anxious about their future. When leaders are too decisive, people may make hasty decisions and lose trust in their leaders.

Leading with exceptional decisiveness is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of decisiveness between hesitation and impulsivity. It is difficult because a decisive action in one situation is not a decisive action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit decisive, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional decisiveness, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being decisive and of failing to be decisive. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional decisiveness, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of decisiveness, these stories may also be used for discussions about assertiveness or confidence.

<sup>2</sup> The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was decisive?
2. How could the people in this story have been more decisive? How could they have been exceptionally decisive?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

### **Story #1: Deborah Nikkel, Internal Project Manager and Change Management Lead**

I was leading a project to implement a new customer relationship management (CRM) system for the shared Human Resources (HR) services center, which serves over 30,000 employees as a single point of entry and reference for all of their HR needs. In addition to implementing the system itself, we also needed to come up with foolproof methods for ensuring that information available in other databases would be imported into the CRM because the new system did not accommodate all of the information that everyone required. Managers from the Information Technology (IT) department assigned a junior tech lead to help us coordinate the activities of the two technology groups who were supposed to ensure the data was available. These groups reported to different senior managers.

In the past, the IT employees assigned to our projects often lacked rigor, failed to use project management methodologies, and failed to meet our standards. As a result, project managers and leaders in the program management office often had to overcompensate for the IT employees. My expertise was on the functional and change management arenas. Therefore, it was important that the IT lead be strong. I was not in a position to compensate for weakness.

Because of our tradition of compensating for weak IT managers, I assumed I was stuck with the junior tech lead we had been assigned. Unfortunately, it was clear to me that doing so would lead to failure. Past experience with IT had worn me down. I felt hopeless about impacting or changing the situation.

I talked to my boss, and we came up with an approach to remediate the situation. I spoke to the junior IT lead privately. I told her, "Look! You're operating at a purely coordination level, and we need to you take ownership, be proactive, and follow up to ensure goals are being met, and barriers are identified, discussed, and overcome."

It was clear she was uncomfortable moving from a coordination role to a management role and asked, “Does that mean you do not want me to do this?”

My goal was to get her to step up. I intuited that she needed me to tell her I had faith in her abilities. I said, “Absolutely not. You can do this, but you might need some help and some extra coaching.” I offered to make that happen. I assured her that I didn’t want her to fail, because if she could not perform, then the project would be negatively impacted. She agreed to give it a try.

The intervention turned out to be successful. Her efforts improved significantly, and we were able to achieve several important milestones, though not without a struggle and constant oversight on my part.

Ultimately, the IT lead was uncomfortable with her increased responsibility and my expectations. She took the first opportunity she could to exit the project, telling her boss there was nothing left to do, which was not the case.

## **Story #2: Brad Molnar, Senior Accountant**

I was added to a new team of people at work. We were told to identify a process to improve and an idea for improving it. Then we were supposed to present our idea to the larger team. At our first meeting we brainstormed some ideas. We were not assigned a group leader, but as the meeting went on, I noticed that the rest of the team looked to me for my approval since I was the most senior person on the team. I have done these types of presentations many times over the years, so I wanted to let them come up with their own ideas. We agreed to spend a week thinking over the processes and ideas we had discussed. We would meet again the following week to decide what to do.

After thinking about the first meeting and realizing how much everyone else looked to me for approval, I decided that I wanted to go ahead and lead the team through our project. To do this I knew that I needed to make our next meeting more exciting to them, so that they would want to complete our project when I assigned workloads team members. I was pretty certain that the team thought that this was just another task they had to complete for work, so they would not be very interested in it. I decided that they would be more excited about the work if they saw it as a way to make their jobs easier. If we could do that, then they would want the larger team to accept our proposal, so they would be eager to invest time into doing our presentation well.

In the next meeting, I pushed for the team to focus on a process that everyone in the team dreaded doing each month. They did not seem very impressed with the process for which I was advocating. I explained that if we could improve this process, it could take hours of time off of the work that they spend on this tedious task. Then, as we pushed forward, we came up with multiple ideas and the team got more and more energized. Next, we discussed how we needed to present our ideas in a way that would get the larger team to accept our ideas. By the end of the

meeting, it looked to me like the team was energized and excited. I identified the tasks that needed to be done and delegated them without any pushback.

### **Story #3: Dashon Bain, Intern**

I volunteered for, and was assigned, the responsibility of creating a release planning document. A release planning document outlines a team's strategy for releasing new software, and contains information about intended new features, requirements, constraints, milestones, and a schedule of actions for taking the software to market. However, instead of having an in-depth conversation with my manager about what she wanted and how I should involve my co-workers in the process, I just took off and went on my way. Shortly after, I participated in a meeting about the document and because I did not understand my boss' expectations, the meeting was a real dud. I saw that my assumptions were quite off and that I needed to be more strategic if I wanted to create a useful release planning document for a 30-person team. I decided that I needed to focus on others—what they wanted and needed—if I was going to be successful.

I set up a meeting with my manager to explain how my first meeting about the release planning document with the three product owners went poorly. The product owners each led a team that was responsible for different functions in the company's website. I owned up to the fact that I had not been well prepared and did not know what she was expecting. I asked her to explain what she wanted me and the rest of the team to do, and what the end product was that she would like us to create. She then gave me specific expectations and said that as long as those key elements are addressed, it can take whatever form make sense.

This gave me increased confidence that I could meet her objective and develop a useful resource for our team. I set up 15-minute meetings with each individual product owner to ask them what result they wanted the release planning document to create for them and for their teams and what they could do to be ready for to contribute to the discussion about creating the release planning document at the next meeting.

My individual conversations with the product owners were very helpful for each of us. Each of the product owners, in their own way, expressed a need for each team to be more aware of what the other teams were delivering, and of how they impact each other. The product owners also learned that they had some misconceptions about each other's work, and about what our manager was asking from us. I identified my next tasks, and the product owners accepted tasks as well, we agreed to deadlines, and we set up a time for our next meeting.

### **Story #4: Jacob Lutes, Financial Analyst**

Our office's servers crashed at the end of the quarter. Because of this, none of the employees had access to any of their files. They became frustrated at their inability to finish their

quarterly reports. Lacking any other options that they could see, people sat and stared at blank screens.

I understood the anger and anxiety everyone was feeling. I had similar feelings. Then, I realized that even when the servers were fixed, I would not be able to do most of my work until other people got orders to me. That meant that I had to do whatever I could now to help people get their paperwork filled out before the servers came back on.

I asked others what I could do to help them get their paperwork done. Almost everyone I asked tried to explain to me that they could not do anything until the servers are up and running. It was true that most people were not able to perform their “actual work,” including myself, because they needed their Microsoft applications, and those were on the servers. However, I also knew that if I did not do my work in some way, shape, or form, I would be farther behind when the servers were fixed. I needed to get people to be proactive and help each other.

Eventually, the solution I came up with was to go on a scanning spree. Over the course of the next day and a half, I scanned over 450 documents. They all remained in my inbox until the servers came back up because I could not move them without the servers, but at least the scanning was done. Intriguingly, as people sat around watching me go back and forth to scanner, some of them realized that there were some activities that they could do that did not involve the computer. For example, our back room is about to have the carpet replaced, so people began reorganizing the room to make it easier for the old carpet to be removed.