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[Decision Leader Review](#)

[Decision Project Team vs. Execution Project Team](#)

[Quote of the Month](#)

What is the Decision Leader Review?

This monthly publication brings you current research and information in the area of business decision making. You'll find new concepts and ideas you can put to use immediately to improve the quality and speed of your strategic and tactical decision making activities.

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The Decision Project Team vs. Execution Project Team

The word '*project*' is often used to refer to an *execution* or *implementation* project, as in the "Oracle Deployment Project" or the "Manufacturing Transfer Project". In these examples, the decision has already been made and the project team's purpose is to plan and implement the tasks to deploy it.

However, there is benefit in recognizing a second and different type of project - a "Decision Project". In these situations, the decision has not been made yet. The project team's purpose is to analyze the decision options and present a recommendation to a management / executive sponsor or team.

Here are some examples:

Decision Project Statements

Choose new location for customer service center.

Select best software for asset management.

Choose group of suppliers to mfg. components.

Execution Project Statements

Move customer service to new location.

Deploy new asset management.

Transfer component mfg. processes.

There is also a third type of project, often referred to as a "program", such as a new product development program or a company-wide deployment of new systems. These involve a combination of several sub-projects, both decision projects and execution projects.

It's critical to understand that these types of projects need to be managed differently. Why? They differ in at least four areas:

1. Project Outcome

Decision Project

A recommendation to an executive team

Execution Project

The planning and implementation of tasks.

2. Role of the Team

Decision Project

- Assess the business situation.
- Identify and prioritize decision criteria.
- Conduct inquiry and analysis of the options.
- Assess risks related to the preferred options.
- Recommend best choice to executive team.

Execution Project

- Plan, lead and manage implementation tasks and activities.
- Prevent and mitigate risks that threaten successful completion of tasks.
- Make downstream decisions related to execution of the primary decision.
- Provide regular task updates to the executive team.

3. Processes, Thinking Skills & Tools Needed

Decision Project

- Structured business assessment tools.
- Structured decision analysis tools.
- Software to analyze data and compare options.
- Risk prevention and mitigation thinking.
- Data gathering and research tools.

Execution Project

- Structured project management tools.
- Structured risk management tools.
- Software to manage project tasks/breakdown.
- Risk prevention and mitigation thinking.
- Decision analysis for project-related decisions.
- Pre-mortem thinking.

4. Knowledge Needed Within the Team

Decision Project

- Business needs of the decision.
- Accurate information about alternative solutions.

Execution Project

- Detailed knowledge of the execution environment.
- Broad view of how the execution project impacts other areas of the company.

Guiding principles when leading decision vs. execution projects

- **Be fluent in both languages and thinking.** The team must know which thinking mode it is in at all times (decision or execution). Be intentional about talking 'decision' language vs. 'execution' language. Decision language is centered in current timeframe (criteria, options, risks), whereas execution language is focused in future timeframe (timing of tasks, risk prevention, mitigation, pre-mortem).

- **Less is better for decision teams.** The number of people on a decision project team is usually less than on an execution team. We recommend 5-7 people for a decision project team. Execution teams tend to be larger, especially as the size and scope of the implementation increases.

We recently worked with a team who had the task of deploying a new type of software to a specific user group. The team leader staffed the execution team with 15 people. Shortly after the team was formed, a new software alternative emerged, and the team was asked to conduct an updated decision analysis - to include the previous options plus the new alternative.

This suddenly changed the scope from an execution project to a decision project. As such, it was no longer appropriate to have all 15 people on the team. The team was narrowed to the 7 people who had the appropriate knowledge about the decision. After the updated recommendation was presented and approved, the team went back into 'execution' mode and changed to its original group of 15 people.

- **Use RAPID Roles for decision making** (RAPID is for decision teams, RACI is for execution teams). If you are tempted to allow 9+ people on a decision project team, take a hard look at the role each member is playing in the decision ([see the June, 2009 Decision Leader Review for more on this](#)). Lack of clarity around decision roles is a key reason why decision teams move slowly with too many members.

We recently worked with a decision team that had been operating for over 3 months - with 22 people on the team. They rarely had more than 12 people at each of their virtual meetings, and progress was painfully slow. When we applied the RAPID Roles process to their situation, the team discovered they only needed 8 people. Team membership was revised - meetings became more focused, and the decision analysis and recommendation was completed and approved within four weeks.

- **Be intentional about decisions inside an execution project.** After an execution project is launched, there are often multiple downstream decisions that emerge. For each that has high impact, title it as a 'decision project' and follow all principles above

The Idea in Practice

If you are an executive sponsor, team leader, or team member, you must be crystal clear on which thinking mode (decision or execution) the team is in at any given point in their life.

Quote of the Month

"The high quality work of a decision team can be ruined by poor quality work of the subsequent execution team. And, execution teams can rarely fix the consequences of a poor quality, upstream decision."

- Mary Osgood, Senior Partner, FPS
