

The Decision Happens in Seconds. The Leadership Was Built Long Before.

A conversation about what leaders and organizations build before pressure arrives.

**What are we building now that will improve the decision
we may have only 30 seconds to make later?**

1 WHICH DECISIONS TRULY REQUIRE REAL-TIME JUDGEMENT?

Where do seconds or minutes matter - and where have we accidentally allowed ordinary decisions to become urgent?

2 WHAT DOES PRESSURE DO TO US?

When stress rises, what happens to our attention, assumptions, communication, and willingness to ask for help?

3 WHAT FAMILIAR PATTERN MIGHT WE OVERTRUST?

Which situations feel familiar enough that we may reach closure before checking whether one important cue does not fit?

4 WHO CAN INTERRUPT OUR THINKING?

Who has permission to say, "You may be missing something" - and can critical information travel quickly enough?

5 WHEN DO WE DIRECT - AND WHEN DO WE OPEN THE ROOM?

Can we distinguish familiar execution problems from novel situations that require collective sensemaking?

6 HOW DO WE LEARN AFTER THE DECISION?

Do we review how the decision was made, or only judge the eventual outcome with the benefit of hindsight?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

One capability we need to build before
pressure arrives

One person or role we need to hear from faster

One decision we should rehearse or review

The decision may be fast. The capability is built over time.

Use the 30-Second Decision Check.

A short discipline for creating room for judgement when the moment is moving fast.

A micro-pause is not indecision. It is room for judgement.

1 WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?

Separate the observed facts from the story you are already telling about them.

2 WHAT MATTERS MOST RIGHT NOW?

Safety? Continuity? Trust? Time? Evidence? Name the immediate priority.

3 WHAT DOESN'T FIT?

Look deliberately for one cue that challenges your first interpretation.

4 WHO KNOWS SOMETHING I DON'T?

Ask before announcing your preferred answer whenever the moment allows.

5 WHAT MUST BE DECIDED NOW?

Do not turn one urgent decision into six unnecessary decisions. Name what can wait.

6 WHAT WILL TELL US TO CHANGE COURSE?

Decide what you will monitor after action begins. Reassess as new information emerges.

AFTER THE MOMENT

Ask: What did we notice first? What assumption shaped the decision? What information arrived too late? Who had information we needed? What should become easier next time?

Real-time judgement improves when experience becomes reflected experience.

REAL-TIME $\neq$ IMPROVISED

The decision may be fast. The capability is built over time.

BEFORE THE MOMENT

Build the capability.



Experience

Learn from varied situations.



Practice

Rehearse, simulate, and prepare.



Principles

Clarify what matters most.



Decision rights

Know who decides what, when.



Trust

Build relationships that hold under pressure.



Shared language

Use common terms and understanding.



Feedback

Review, learn, and improve.

IN THE MOMENT

Use what you've built.



1 NOTICE

What is really happening?



2 FRAME

What matters most right now?



3 CHECK

What doesn't fit?
What am I missing?



4 DECIDE

Choose the best action available.



5 REASSESS

Monitor and adapt as new information emerges.

AFTER THE MOMENT

Make it better next time.



Review

What happened?
What did we notice?



Learn

What worked?
What surprised us?



Adjust

What will we do differently next time?

Better real-time decisions are built long before the moment arrives.



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Build capability.
Make better decisions.
Create better futures.

FAST DOES NOT MEAN RECKLESS



FAMILIAR PATTERN?

Does this match something we've handled before?



Use expertise.
Execute with confidence.



IMPORTANT CUE DOESN'T FIT?

Is something different or unexpected here?



Slow the pattern down.
Reframe and rethink.



MISSING INFORMATION?

What do we need to know that we don't yet have?



Ask who knows.
Get the critical information.



HIGH STRESS?

Is pressure narrowing my thinking?



Create a micro-pause.
Breathe. Reset. Refocus.



REVERSIBLE DECISION?

Can we change course if conditions shift?



Act and monitor.
Keep options open.



IRREVERSIBLE DECISION?

Could this cause harm we cannot undo?



Raise the threshold.
Get more certainty.

*Good leaders know when speed helps—
and when it becomes a hazard.*



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Better judgement.
Better decisions.
Better outcomes.

What Improves Real-Time Leadership Decisions?

Current findings on stress, expertise, information, adaptation, and decision quality

Fast decisions are not simply slower decisions performed more quickly. Under pressure, stress can narrow cognition, familiar patterns can create premature certainty, information may remain distributed across the team, and leaders can either freeze or act too quickly. Current research suggests that stronger real-time judgement is built through expertise, adaptive routines, decision architecture, team support, and disciplined learning after the event.

1 Stress changes the decision-maker.

A systematic review of acute stress found evidence that stress can impair cognitive, motivational, affective, and predictability-related processes involved in decision-making.

Source: van Herk et al. (2024)

2 Fast can be expert - not impulsive.

A 2026 study of professional chess players found faster choices were associated with higher-quality moves. The useful interpretation is not "decide faster" but that speed can emerge from deep pattern recognition in an expert domain.

Source: Sunde et al. (2026)

3 Decision inertia is a real hazard.

In an immersive high-pressure simulation, greater decision inertia was associated with more suboptimal outcomes. Confidence and the validity of available information also mattered.

Source: May et al. (2024)

4 Adaptive expertise requires noticing when the pattern no longer fits.

Emergency-department research showed practitioners moving between routine and adaptive practices. Expectations that authority figures should appear certain could make uncertainty harder to use productively.

Source: Gamborg et al. (2024)

5 Good decisions include what happens before and after the choice.

Experienced emergency decision-makers treated decision quality as broader than the choice itself, emphasizing the processes surrounding the decision and the learning that follows.

Source: Penney et al. (2024)

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LEADERS

Build before the moment.

Experience, rehearsal, decision rights, shared language, and trust become available under pressure only if they already exist.

Use a micro-pause.

Even a few seconds can help separate the facts from the first story the mind creates.

Invite information before declaring.

When time allows, ask what others are seeing before telling the room where you are leaning.

Know which mode is needed.

Familiar urgent problems may need coordination; novel problems may need collective sensemaking.

Review the process, not only the outcome.

Use feedback to turn experience into expertise rather than merely accumulating years.

Speed is sometimes the result of expertise. It is not a substitute for it.

Better Fast Decisions Require Slower Organizational Work.

The capability to respond well under pressure is built through preparation, relationships, and learning.

BUILD THE CAPABILITY

- Clarify decision rights before pressure arrives.
- Rehearse judgement, not only procedures.
- Create thresholds and escalation criteria for recurring high-stakes decisions.
- Build teams in which critical information can travel quickly.
- Make it safe to challenge a senior leader in the moment.
- Use decision reviews to identify what should become easier next time.

WATCH FOR THE OBSTACLES

- Acute stress narrowing attention and working memory.
- Premature certainty because a familiar pattern feels convincing.
- Decision inertia - continuing to deliberate after deliberation stops adding value.
- Leader preferences silencing information held elsewhere in the team.
- Applying a routine response to a genuinely novel problem.
- Judging decisions only by outcomes and losing the learning in the process.

ONE USEFUL TEAM PRACTICE

Before the leader states a preferred answer, ask: "What are you seeing?" Research on groups under stress warns that early preference revelation can shape what information is subsequently shared. A few seconds of open information gathering can make the room smarter.

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Better decisions.
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