

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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The best decisions are made slowly. The best decisions are made slowly.

*Better judgement.
Better decisions.
Better outcomes.*

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