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DECISIVE LEADERS: A PARADIGM FOR OVERCOMING
PARALYSIS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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DECISIVE LEADERS: A PARADIGM FOR OVERCOMING
PARALYSIS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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To my beautiful bride, Heather. Your love for the Lord inspires
me to live fearlessly and love sacrificially.

To our three wonderful children, Thaddeus, Judah, and Delia. The Lord
loves you deeply, and he has great plans for you.

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PREFACE

In the simplest terms, I am overwhelmed by the ever-present Triune God. Throughout this program and during the writing process I have sensed the love, guidance, and strength of my Lord.

I am deeply grateful to the many people who have supported me throughout this journey. I want to thank our cohort leader, Dan Dumas, who invested countless hours and energy into this group. His leadership and friendship have impacted my life in profound ways. My doctoral program experience has also been enriched by traveling alongside other Godly leaders. These men have become my brothers. I cannot imagine this journey without them. I also want to thank my project supervisor, Dr. Shane Parker, who provided wisdom, guidance, and encouragement at every turn. His insight and friendship are deeply appreciated. Dr. Bowen, my second reader, also provided many helpful remarks and words of encouragement in this process. Each of these relationships has shaped me as a Christian, as a ministry leader, and as a learner.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the nature of biblical wisdom, leadership dynamics, and decision-making processes can position Christian leaders and organizations to flourish. With the guiding help of the Holy Spirit, Christian leaders, teams, and organizations can learn to exercise decisive leadership. The purpose of this project is to identify and understand the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams.

Context

The concept of this study was birthed in a local church context in which I desired to understand the nature of biblical wisdom, leadership dynamics, and decision-making processes. During this time, I was serving in a local church that was quickly growing and evolving. The needs of the congregation were changing; demands upon the staff were evolving; leadership structures were being developed; and organizational dynamics were shifting. Navigating these changes yielded many questions that inspired this study.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for churches to get stuck somewhere between their current reality and the preferred future. Churches get stuck for a variety of reasons: lack of financial resources, disagreement about the most important priorities, leaders who differ in their assessment of the situation, competing interests between departments, conflict on the team, absence of buy-in from key stakeholders, communication gaps, or a lingering lack of clarity about how to proceed—a simple, *we just don't know what to do*. These realities can impede the decision-making process. Yet, underneath these tactical issues one might uncover that leaders struggle to move forward because they do not have

a good process, framework, or paradigm for the nature of decision-making. *Who needs to speak into this decision? Are the right people at the table? Which information is most relevant? Is this a matter of conviction or preference? Is our thinking too narrow? What information might be missing?* These questions, and many others, reveal that decisive leadership requires thoughtfulness and diligence. Ryan T. Hartwig and Warren Bird write,

Leadership teams are forced to make the decisions that all others in the organization have either avoided making themselves, causing those problems to rise up the ranks to the senior leaders, or those that others at lower levels don't know need to be made, don't know how to make them or aren't authorized to make them.¹

There is, however, a way out. Church leaders and ministry teams can learn to identify the common barriers and decision-making traps that confront their organizations. Quite often this is the first step toward getting un-stuck. However, their work must not stop here. Beneath the uncertainty there is an opportunity. Leaders and their teams must tap into a paradigm that promotes decisive action toward the preferred future. Hartwig and Bird write, "If you want a great senior team, your team needs to make important decisions."²

Evaluating Church Contexts

The local church is the focal point of this study. Decisive leadership in this environment is critical at every stage. To reliably and meaningfully assess decisive leadership in the local church, two simple criteria were applied to identify churches for this study. First, each church had been established and functioning independently for a period of at least five years. Second, each church was governed by a plurality of elders, as described in the New Testament. I identified four congregations that were examined and studied for the purposes of this research: The Austin Stone Community Church (ASCC) located in Austin, Texas; Clear Creek Community Church (CCCC) located in

¹ Ryan T. Hartwig and Warren Bird, *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 173.

² *Ibid.*, 177.

Houston, Texas; Redeemer Christian Church (RCC) located in Amarillo, Texas; and Redeemer Round Rock (RRR) located in Round Rock, Texas. Each of these churches voluntarily participated in this research study. At this point, it is helpful to provide a brief contextual description of each of these churches.

ASCC was planted in 2002, in Austin, Texas. Initially a Bible study that met in a living room, the church began to grow rapidly after the public launch. ASCC is a multi-site church with six campuses that meet in four locations throughout the city. Each campus is led by a campus pastor and a group of campus elders. The elders of the ASCC share the authority and the responsibility of the office to which they have been called. The church desires to see the city renewed and redeemed by a gospel-movement.

CCCC is a multi-site church located in the greater Houston area. They have four campuses throughout the city and each campus is led by a campus pastor and ministry team. CCCC is overseen and directed by a group of elders who are responsible for the doctrine and direction of the church body. The mission of the church is to be a place where unchurched people grow to become fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

RCC is located in the West Texas city of Amarillo. This local church has its roots in the convergence of a dying church that was looking for a new vision and new leadership and a church-planter with a vision to see a new gospel-centered church reaching the city. This church has truly been revitalized. The elders of RCC oversee the doctrine and direction of the church, while the ministry staff help to execute the mission on a day-to-day basis. The vision of the church is to proclaim the gospel, invite people into community, and transform the culture of this city.

RRR is located in the city of Round Rock, Texas. The church is overseen by a group of elders, and the ministry staff help to execute the mission of the church. RRR is committed to learning and living the way of Jesus in the suburbs of Austin. In addition, planting localized churches is a key priority for RRR.

Evaluating For-Profit Contexts

This study also examined one for-profit organization. Although the church is not primarily a business institution, ministry leaders can undoubtedly learn from the marketplace. Assessing the decisive nature of a for-profit organization helped to yield findings that are profitable for the local church. I identified one for-profit organization that was examined and studied for the purposes of this research: Trustpoint Rehabilitation Hospital of Lubbock (TRH), located in Lubbock, Texas.

TRH is a for-profit hospital established in 2008, in the West Texas city of Lubbock. At inception, Polaris Hospital Company was set up as a corporation to operate as the general partner carrying about 60 percent of the original equity in TRH. The remainder of the ownership equity was held by local physicians. In 2015, a deal was reached to sell 100 percent of the equity in TRH to a strategic rehabilitation provider called Ernest Health. As of today, the hospital maintains 93 rehab beds. Over the years, the management team has remained relatively stable, with 8 of 17 department heads and executives being original team members. TRH was founded on the guiding principle that high quality patient outcomes and customer service would result in positive financial performance.³

Rationale

At its best, applied biblical wisdom, healthy team dynamics, and thoughtful decision-making processes can all work together to create the environment for decisive leadership.

Derek Kidner writes that biblical wisdom “is equally at home in the realms of nature and art, of ethics and politics, to mention no others,”⁴ and it is the duty of the Christian leader to harness this wisdom in his personal life and pastoral ministry.

³ The data yielded from this research interview can be found in appendix 1

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 14.

Leadership that is distinctively Christian must aim to reflect the wisdom of God in a humble, yet courageous, manner.

Applying the wisdom of God is only part of the equation. Understanding and building healthy team dynamics are also key factors. In their research, Hartwig and Bird identify some of the unique challenges that senior leadership teams face when making decisions.

1. The right people to offer the input and perspective are not at the table
2. The discussion centers far more on the pastor's words than ideas from anyone else
3. Some team members dominate the conversation while others offer little or no input
4. It's hard to distinguish if the team actually made a decision or simply had a discussion
5. The team makes a clear decision, only to come back to it again a few more times before taking any action
6. The team dialogs for hours and comes to a consensus, only to experience the lead pastor making a completely different decision a few days or weeks later
7. Team members censor their thoughts in order to keep the peace⁵

Decisive leadership is a multifaceted endeavor. Promoting sound practices and healthy team habits can help organizations experience their potential.

Additionally, leaders make decisions every day. Some of these decisions go unnoticed and some of these decisions are fairly public. Some of these decisions produce immediate consequences and some of these decisions produce enduring effects. When a leader is faced with a decision, it may require little foresight, or it may require several stages of progressive planning. John Shoup and Chris McHorney state, "While good decision making is predicated on having the right information at the right time, the challenge is recognizing what information is relevant and accurate."⁶ Undoubtedly, the opportunity to make decisions, big and small, will visit every leader. Assessing the situation, synthesizing the information, and applying biblical wisdom are all key

⁵ Hartwig and Bird, *Teams That Thrive*, 175-76.

⁶ John R. Shoup and Chris McHorney, "Decision Making: Becoming an Expert of the Process," in *Organizational Leadership: Foundations and Practices for Christians*, ed. John S. Burns, John R. Shoup, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 199.

ingredients for the journey. Yet, many leaders can often struggle to navigate the terrain. Fear replaces confidence, insecurity replaces resolve, and paralysis replaces decisiveness. Christian leaders are not immune to these realities. Christian ministry, like any other leadership arena, requires thoughtfulness and decisiveness.

Shoup and McHorney write, “Ambassadors of Christ take seriously their role of knowing and representing the priorities and values of the kingdom of God in all of their decisions—taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.”⁷ With the guiding help of the Holy Spirit, Christian leaders and teams can exercise decisiveness in their ministry. Stewarding one’s leadership in this way honors God and honors people.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to identify and understand the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams.

Goals

It is all too easy to assume that healthy decisions will just happen. Leaders and organizations that thrive must fight for decisiveness. This fight consists of different enemies: fear, insecurity, paralysis, poor timing, incomplete information, lack of trust, biases, intuitions, and misguided expectations, just to name a few. The following three goals were established to determine the direction and completion of this project.

1. The first goal was to assess and establish a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps.
2. The second goal was to assess and evaluate the functional decision-making practices of selected leaders and their teams.
3. The third goal was to present a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations.

The research methodology and benchmarks of success are detailed in the following section.

⁷ Shoup and McHorney, “Decision Making,” 223.

Research Methodology

Three goals determined the effectiveness of this project. The first goal was to assess and establish a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps. This goal was measured by researching the corpus of literature in the field of leadership and decision-making. This goal was considered successfully met when the research yielded at least five consistent and widely accepted barriers and traps to effective decision-making.

The second goal was to assess and evaluate the functional decision-making practices of selected leaders and their teams. This goal was measured by interviewing selected leaders and by using the qualitative survey instrument “Assessing Decision-Making Practices.”⁸ This goal was considered successfully met when all interviews are completed, and the data has been reviewed yielding a clearer picture of these leaders and the decision-making practices of those teams.

The third goal was to present a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. This goal was considered successfully met when I documented and outlined a method for practicing decisive leadership in organizations.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

Certain key terms used throughout this project are defined below.

Wisdom. Wisdom, as a whole, is God-centered. This project draws heavily upon the work of Derek Kidner and his study of Proverbs. He writes that wisdom “consists in the shrewd and sound handling of one’s affairs in God’s world, in submission to his will.”⁹ I assume this Godward orientation to wisdom.

One limitation applied to this project. The accuracy of assessing each participating organization was dependent upon the reliability of their contributions. To

⁸ See appendix 4. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

⁹ Kidner, *Proverbs*, 14.

mitigate this limitation, the participants were asked to recall, to the best of their ability, any historical information, factual data, and anecdotal material.

Two important delimitations were placed on this project. The surveys were administered to senior level, or executive level, leaders in these organizations. Mid-level leaders and employees, as well as entry-level employees, did not participate in this study. Although decisions made at the senior level impact the entire organization, the focus of this research was to examine the highest levels of leadership. A second delimitation in this study was the corpus of literature reviewed. Depending upon the context, leadership is an inherently behavioral, psychological, financial, emotional, and spiritual responsibility. The body of literature that examines leadership is vast, but this study focused upon the biblical, behavioral, and organizational aspects of decisive leadership. To that end, the corpus of literature reviewed has been limited.

Conclusion

Christian leaders and their teams have a responsibility to steward their influence and decision-making faculties for the good of those whom they serve. These men and women have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's Word. The goal is not perfect leadership. The goal is decisive leadership that honors God and serves people.

CHAPTER 2

THE WISDOM OF GOD

This chapter presents the biblical and theological arguments for Godly wisdom. It is the duty of a Christian leader to seek and harness this wisdom in his life and ministry. Christian leaders and organizations face a variety of decisions that must be made—decisions that impact the daily functions of the ministry and those that impact the unforeseen future of the ministry. Members of the team and the people in the organization entrust their leaders to humbly seek the wisdom of God and courageously discern His will. The wisdom of God has been revealed through his Word, and it is given by the power of his Spirit. Together, God’s wisdom and God’s Spirit provide the fuel that leaders and teams need for making sound decisions.

To provide a thorough foundation, this chapter will canvass the Old and New Testaments. First, an exegetical examination of Proverbs 1:1-7 will show that the wisdom of God is to be desired and sought—all true wisdom and knowledge begins with the fear and pursuit of The Lord. Second, the chapter examines 1 Kings 3:1-28 to demonstrate that the wisdom of God and a mind of understanding are given to govern and lead people. Last is a survey of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 and James 3:13-18, which shows that wisdom from above, which is from God, is categorically different from the wisdom of the world.

The Fear of the Lord: Proverbs 1:1-7

In his commentary on Proverbs, Derek Kidner shows that wisdom literature in the ancient world was a highly regarded form of teaching and writing. The book of Proverbs, however, stands above the other ancient wisdom traditions because in it “the one Lord makes known his will, and thereby a single standard of what is wise and right,

and a satisfying motive for seeking it.”¹ For these Proverbial authors it is clear that God is no afterthought. He is the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God of the Israelite people and he invites his people to know him.² Proverbs depicts a relationship between God and man, which Kidner describes in this way: “In submission to his authority and majesty (that is, in the fear of the Lord) we alone start and continue our education; and by the diligent search for wisdom ‘as for hid treasures’ we shall find our prize in a growing intimacy with the same Lord.”³

Wisdom has as its starting place the relationship between God and man. True wisdom and knowledge begin with the fear of the Lord. The first verse gives the title of the book (Proverbs) and it stands for any kind of “sage pronouncement.”⁴ The rewards offered to the hearer are wisdom and instruction (v. 2a); insight (v. 2b); instruction in wise dealing (v. 3a); prudence (v.4a); knowledge and discretion (4v. b); and further wisdom and guidance (v. 5). Kidner notes, “The many aspects of wisdom are displayed by the nouns of verses 2-5.”⁵ Verse 6 details a secondary purpose of the book: to “introduce the reader to a style of teaching that provokes his thought.”⁶ Verse 7 presents the motto of the book: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” In this sense, the *beginning* is not simply a starting point that one departs from, but it is the “first and controlling principle.”⁷ The reader can conclude that reverential submission to the covenantal God

¹ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol, 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 21.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Yahweh is the foundational bedrock of attaining His wisdom and knowledge on all matters.

In his introduction to Proverbs, Tremper Longman asserts, “The book seems to collect wise sayings from many different [social] settings.” The collected sayings were applicable to the Israelite community as a whole.⁸ Bruce Waltke’s observations corroborate this perspective: “Most of the proverbs pertain to the interests of all people, not just those of a prince.”⁹ The intended audience was broad, and the contents of the book served to instruct an entire nation in the ways of Yahweh. Longman also provides a basic framework for the word *proverb*: a brief, pointed statement; states an insight, makes an observation or offers advice; true only if stated at the right time and in the right circumstance.¹⁰ This collection of wisdom occupies an important space in the Israelite tradition and the utility of proverbial statements must first be understood in that context.

Longman also provides help with the theological nature of the book of Proverbs: “Proverbs is not rightly understood if it is taken as a book of practical advice with an occasional nod of the head to Yahweh. The book is thoroughly and pervasively theological.”¹¹ The phrase “the fear of Yahweh” introduces a relationship between God and his people. This verse is intended to “color our view of the teachings of the book as a whole.”¹² Although it is common for the modern reader to think of wisdom as a set of life principles, the biblical portrait shows that true wisdom begins as a relationship to, and with, God. This relationship is between the Creator and the created being.

⁸ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 28.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 130.

¹⁰ Longman, *Proverbs*, 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² *Ibid.*

Another relationship dynamic must be considered: God and lady Wisdom. Although the reason for such a personification is contested among scholars, the text clearly reveals that lady Wisdom represents God’s wisdom. Longman notes, “Thus, if one wants to know how the world works and thus to successfully navigate life, one had better know this woman, which is Yahweh’s wisdom and Yahweh himself.”¹³ Contrast this portrait with lady Folly. Folly represents the idols and false gods that lured the Israelite people. For the modern reader, these false gods prove to be fatally attractive and they stand in stark opposition to lady Wisdom. Throughout the book the call is to “become intimately involved with Wisdom or Folly, to make one of them an integral part of our lives.”¹⁴

Longman introduces his commentary on these verses by writing,

This unit begins with a typical superscription, proceeds through a lengthy and technical description of its purpose, and then ends with what proves to be the underlying principle of the book’s teaching as a whole. This introductory passage is jam-packed with words that are important to wisdom literature and are repeated throughout the book.¹⁵

The text of Proverbs 1:1-7 reads,

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The superscription in verse 1 provides information about authorship and genre, which sets the writing in its proper historical context. Verses 2 and 3 are not addressed to a specific group; thus, their intention is to be understood by all readers and they describe qualities that the text is supposed to impart upon these readers. The verb *to know* governs the two objects of *wisdom* and *instruction*; the text intends to show that *wisdom* and

¹³ Longman, *Proverbs*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

instruction should be recognized and embraced.¹⁶ Next, the phrase “to understand” governs the object *words of insight* and implies a kind of insight gained by knowledge. The first part of verse 3 emphasizes the kind of instruction or insight that “[recognizes] the true nature of a situation or circumstance. . . . “The final colon of v. 3 explicitly for the first time introduces us to the ethical nature of wisdom.”¹⁷ The book of Proverbs intends to impart knowledge and it esteems the righteous and virtuous.

Next, the biblical writer moves to address a specific group—the simpleminded. A simple person is inexperienced and naïve on such matters that are addressed in this book. However, a teachability marks them. The text intends to guide the simple toward prudence, which is characterized by the ability to use reason. Longman notes, “Prudence carefully considers a situation before rushing in. It implies coolheadedness.”¹⁸ A parallel intention is to give knowledge and discretion to the *youth*. The “young” can refer to the chronologically young person (adolescent) or the immature person, as well. The implication is that the young person would gain knowledge through his relationship to the Creator God, Yahweh.¹⁹

The author then changes the addressee and now the wise person is in view. The wise person can benefit from the instructions that follow in the book. Longman notes, “In this case, it is a matter of increasing what is already there, building on a structure that the person already has.”²⁰ The wise person will continue to learn and gain knowledge. Waltke’s comments support this view. The “hearing” of verse 5 reflects a giving of one’s

¹⁶ Longman, *Proverbs*, 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

ear to the speaker's words externally and obedience to these words inwardly.²¹ Further, the wise person will increase his ability and capacity to understand four types of wisdom (v. 6): a proverb, a saying, words of the wise, and riddles. It is beyond the scope of this section to define each of those types, but Longman provides a helpful summary: "The one who masters what follows [in the text] will be adept at the interpretation of difficult sayings."²² The wise person grows wiser, still.

The final verse (v. 7) of this prologue captures the foundational truth of the book. Longman writes, "There is no knowledge apart from a proper attitude and relationship to Yahweh."²³ In contrast to secular wisdom, this verse emphasizes the theological and relational nature of knowledge and wisdom. The words and sayings that follow are theocentric in nature and, as Longman notes, "the verse demands a particular attitude in one's relationship to Israel's covenant God."²⁴ Waltke similarly summarizes this theocentric worldview: "What the alphabet is to reading, notes to reading music, and numerals to mathematics, the fear of the Lord is to attaining the revealed knowledge of this book."²⁵ The second part of verse 7 offers a contrast—the fool despises wisdom and ultimately rejects God. The second colon, as Longman notes, "states that not everyone is willing to submit themselves to Yahweh to gain knowledge and wisdom."²⁶ A sharp contrast between wisdom and folly pointedly concludes this introductory prologue.

Ray Ortlund provides a thorough, pastoral exegesis of Proverbs 1:1-7. He begins his commentary by noting that the word "beginning" is of critical importance. It is used

²¹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 133.

²² Longman, *Proverbs*, 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁵ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*, 134.

²⁶ Longman, *Proverbs*, 102.

to show that “the fear of the Lord is both a doorway and a pathway. It is a new beginning, and it never ends.”²⁷ Verse 1 tells the reader how the book will communicate—through short, proverbial statements—and it tells the reader something of its authorial perspective. Raymond Ortlund writes that a biblical proverb is “a little representation of some aspect of our daily lives.”²⁸ Through these proverbial texts the reader learns about the application of God’s wisdom in real life. The opening verse also emphasizes a theocentric perspective by noting that the author of the book, and its contents, stand in the stream of biblical history. Ortlund succinctly writes, “[Solomon] understood that everything is connected with our Creator, and therefore everything is interesting.”²⁹

Ortlund emphasizes two primary goals presented in the text: deep character and straight thinking. First, deep character is formed through wisdom and instruction (v. 2). Wisdom, however, is not simply intelligence or mental ability, it is “skill, expertise, competence that understands how life really works, how to achieve successful and even beautiful results.”³⁰ Armed with this kind of wisdom, the Christian is able to navigate the winds and waves of life. Yet, to achieve this kind of character, instruction—also translated “discipline”—must knock upon the door of the believer. Ortlund writes, “We are foolish people pursuing wisdom by humbling ourselves under the Lord’s correction.”³¹

In verse 3, the writer presents the learner’s point of view: he is to humbly receive this instruction. The following verse moves to reveal the teacher’s point of view. He distributes three benefits to the learner: prudence, knowledge, and discretion. Deep

²⁷ Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *Proverbs: Wisdom That Works*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*

character growth happens when the learner positions himself to obtain these benefits, for he needs guidance and direction as he navigates this broken, complex world. Ortlund captures this truth powerfully:

We were born into a preexisting order that God created long ago. We need to know what that order is and how it works in relationships, in finances, in sex, in every area of life, so that we can stop shooting ourselves in the foot. If we know, we can adjust, and we can thrive.³²

Verse 5 emphasizes the truth that even the wise can continue to grow in character and in Godly wisdom.

Second, Ortlund observes that the book aims to lead the reader toward straight thinking. The word “insight” refers to a deep understanding of things that are not always obvious, a way of thinking that is not always apparent. He writes, “We begin to leave behind our shallow entertainment mindset with its effortless, pat answers that in fact have always failed us.”³³

Ortlund concludes his exegetical work by emphasizing the importance of verse 7. Fools despise the wisdom of God and believe that they are too good for it, too knowledgeable for it, or too busy for it. In contrast, those who fear the Lord take a different posture: “The fear of the Lord is openness to him, eagerness to please him, humility to be instructed by him.”³⁴ Offering hope to the reader, Ortlund writes, “Our true crisis is not informational but relational. It is he, the risen and living Lord Jesus Christ, to whom we must pay close attention, if we are ever going to learn anything. That means we must forsake the fool within, named Self, decisively and endlessly.”³⁵

This section provided an exegetical overview of Proverbs 1:1-7 and showed that all true wisdom and knowledge begin with the fear and pursuit of The Lord. Christian

³² Ortlund, *Proverbs*, 29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

leadership is first and foremost a relational orientation and submission to God. His wisdom shapes the character and ministry of the Christian leader.

Wisdom to Govern and Lead God's People: 1 Kings 3:1-28

It is the duty of a Christian leader to seek and harness God's wisdom in his life and ministry. A careful examination of 1 Kings 3:1-28 shows that, in practice, the wisdom of God and a mind of understanding are given to govern and lead God's people.

In his commentary on 1 Kings, Dale Ralph Davis introduces the reader to an important caveat of this historical book: "The writer of (1-2) Kings must be very selective, which implies that what he does include must be of vital importance."³⁶ This distinction reminds the reader that the historical record of 1 Kings 3 serves to simultaneously inform and instruct the reader. As Davis notes, verse 3 makes a sharp declaration about King Solomon: he loved Yahweh and he walked as his father David walked.³⁷ As a response to Solomon's worship, Yahweh appeared to him in a dream, summoning him with an open-ended offer: "Ask what I should give you?" (vv. 4-5). Davis writes, "Do you see how God's generosity lures us to prayer?"³⁸ As the narrative proceeds, the reader notices that Solomon does not begin with his wish list; instead, he begins with recalling all that Yahweh has done: "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father" (v. 6). Davis summarizes this pointedly: "Old promises or new promises—Yahweh has kept them."³⁹ The faithfulness of God *is* the confidence of Solomon, and his praise of Yahweh leads to humble prayer before Yahweh. Verses 7b-9 record Solomon's answer.

³⁶ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and The Folly*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Solomon recognizes his own need for help, his insufficient ability, and the major responsibility bestowed upon him. He is an inexperienced leader, so he prays for a “discerning heart.” Davis notes, “We must understand ‘heart’ as the whole wad of intellect, affections, and will at the center of man.”⁴⁰ Solomon asks for an understanding heart in order to rule and govern the people of God, and to distinguish between right and wrong (v. 9). Consequentially, God is pleased with Solomon and he grants him that which he did, and did not, ask. Davis properly summarizes this passage of Scripture: “Ask, for his generosity lures you; ask, and remember his goodness to date; ask for the sake of his people; ask, above all, in order to please him.”⁴¹

The historian continues by recounting a case brought to Solomon by two prostitutes. The first woman (the accuser) tells the king that both women had given birth, just three days apart, and that they were staying in the house alone. It is clear that there were no other witnesses, so the king must help judge and discern this case. The accuser states that the other woman’s baby died in the night because she smothered him (in her sleep), and this second woman took the living child from the arms of the accuser and placed the dead baby in his/her place. As Davis notes, the other woman “insisted that the pirated infant was her own.”⁴² The second woman denies any wrongdoing. Solomon briefly summarizes the claims brought by the women and then calls for a sword. Solomon decrees that the infant be cut in two, with each woman receiving half of the baby. Davis writes that these words “so stirred and alarmed the mother-love of the real mother that she insisted the other woman be given the living baby. If she cannot obtain justice, at least she will secure the life of her child.”⁴³ The other woman insisted that the child be cut in two. This exchange was Solomon’s clue as to the identity of the real mother. The historian makes it

⁴⁰ Davis, *1 Kings*, 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39.

clear that God had given Solomon a “wise and discerning heart,” and the ability to govern this people. In this episode, God’s wisdom leads to decisive action and sound practice.

At this point, it is also helpful to briefly consider Peter Leithart’s commentary on 1 Kings 3. By way of introduction, he writes, “In Scripture, wisdom is often more closely associated with the skill of the woodcutter than with the ecstasies of the mystic. First Kings 3 is one of the great biblical treatments of wisdom and sets wisdom firmly in this practical – and in this case political – context.”⁴⁴ Verse 3 immediately tells the reader that Solomon “loved Yahweh” and the following verse indicates that he worshipped Yahweh by offering sacrifices. Leithart notes an important use of “heart” in verse 6 (David’s uprightness of *heart*) and verse 9 (Solomon’s request for a discerning *heart*). Leithart observes that the core of Solomon’s concern for wisdom is the state of his heart before the Lord: “Genuine wisdom is not only cunning or the slick ability to get one’s way, but arises from a heart directed to Yahweh and to his ways.”⁴⁵ Solomon’s request is to discern between good and evil so that he might lead and rule effectively and wisely. God’s wisdom and the king’s ability to lead and make decisions are shown to be intricately woven together. Yahweh promises to add to Solomon honor and riches, which come through the pursuit of wisdom (vv. 10-14). Again, the demonstration of wisdom is seen in the story of the two prostitutes. Solomon displays the ability to discern between the differing testimonies of these women and he decrees a resolution intended to expose their hearts. The people of Israel are in awe as Solomon embraces this wisdom and executes justice (v. 28). Leithart’s commentary affirms that a heart centered upon God, combined with the humility to ask for wisdom, can result in faithful governance and leadership over God’s people.

⁴⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

A final examination of Donald J. Wiseman’s commentary on 1 Kings 3 is helpful at this point. In the first three verses the author-historian delivers a judgment on Solomon’s reign. Arranged marriages often served to fortify international agreements or treaties, but Solomon’s marriage was “contrary to the law, since it meant the acquisition of foreign gods.”⁴⁶ Yet, the author simultaneously writes that Solomon loved the Lord, and his way of life reflected the ways of his father David (v. 3). The author purposefully chose to emphasize Solomon’s character and obedience to the commands of Yahweh. Solomon went to Gibeon, a centralized shrine, and made the sacrificial offerings himself (v. 4), and the result is a vision or revelation from Yahweh (v. 5). Wiseman notes, “God’s request ‘Ask whatever you want,’ and promise ‘I will give you,’ are always to stimulate faith.”⁴⁷ In this case, God’s visit and invitation prompt Solomon to ask boldly and humbly. Wiseman shows that Solomon’s prayer has four elements: (1) it acknowledges God’s past action and steadfastness toward his people; (2) it asks for God’s continued favor, which is shown by this divinely given wisdom; (3) it expresses humility and confesses a lack of experience—Solomon is asking for wisdom to lead and manage; and (4) it asks for the ability to carry out his duties in governing the many.⁴⁸ Wiseman writes, “The attitude of heart or mind which listens to and obeys God is the foundation of all true wisdom.”⁴⁹ Armed with this wisdom, Solomon is able to exercise discernment and judgment when the two prostitutes appear in the king’s court. Solomon is able to utilize that which the Lord has given to him, which leads to a sound decision.

⁴⁶ Donald J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 9 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2008), 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

Wiseman also provides helpful commentary on the biblical essence of wisdom. Solomon is portrayed as a wise king who exercised his God-given wisdom, and this wisdom includes understanding, insight, intelligence, and knowledge. Wiseman writes,

It arises from an attitude of heart or mind, and is expressed also in prudence in secular affairs. Wisdom marks technical skills and craftsmanship. It is also demonstrated by ability in judgment between right and wrong and its application in good administration.⁵⁰

The Lord answers Solomon's prayer. Solomon is often remembered for the wisdom God gave, and all that God added (wealth and glory) beyond anything he could imagine. Solomon's pursuit of wisdom and exercise in leadership is a helpful example for today's Christian leader.

This section showed that the wisdom of God and a mind of understanding are given to govern and lead God's people. This exploration of 1 Kings 3:1-28 has shown that it is the duty of the Christian leader to seek and discern the wisdom of God *for* the benefit of those he is leading.

Wisdom from Above: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 and James 3:13-18

Wisdom that stems from the fear of the Lord is reflected in the prudent application of leadership, decision-making, and governing for the benefit of God's people. However, there is another important truth to consider. The Bible reveals that wisdom from above—from God—is categorically different from the wisdom of the world. An analysis of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 and James 3:13-18 shows that the Spirit of God gives salvific wisdom to every believer and this wisdom manifests itself in specific ways in the life of a leader.

It is helpful to begin this section by examining Gordon Fee's commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Paul aims to deconstruct the Corinthians' understanding of "wisdom" by showing them that, although they think of themselves as "spiritual," they have

⁵⁰ Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, 77-78.

overlooked the point of God’s true wisdom; namely, the revelation of Jesus Christ on the cross. Fee writes, “The gospel of the crucified Messiah is wisdom all right, he affirms, but not of the kind they are now pursuing.”⁵¹ Fee acknowledges that this passage has been misinterpreted in the church, setting up two classes of Christians—one “spiritual” and more mature class of believers, and the other class a more “natural” and immature group. Fee warns, “But such a view runs counter not only to the argument as a whole (not to mention this paragraph), but also to the whole of Pauline theology.”⁵²

Verse 6 begins with Paul’s reassertion that the content and nature of this wisdom is Christ himself, the crucified Messiah. Although he denounces the earthly wisdom of the Corinthians, he is not altogether negating the notion of wisdom; instead, he is arguing for a different kind, nature, and source of wisdom. Paul’s concern is two-fold: (1) he is concerned with persuading them toward the kind of maturity that is becoming of those who are in Christ, and (2) he is concerned with showing them that the wisdom (and rulers) of this age will be shown to amount to nothing.⁵³ In the following two verses (vv. 7-8), Paul elaborates on the nature of God’s wisdom. Fee puts forth four characteristics of this wisdom: (1) God’s wisdom is hidden in mystery from all humanity; (2) this wisdom has been hidden in God from eternity until such a time as this; (3) what has been hidden is now revealed in Christ *for* the glory of the believer, God’s people share in God’s glory; and (4) God’s wisdom is seen in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ which he pre-determined.⁵⁴ The Corinthians were in pursuit of the wisdom that belongs to this age, but Paul reminds them that this “worldly” wisdom is passing away. The following verse affirms the divine

⁵¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 104.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-6.

nature of God’s wisdom: no eye could see, no ear could truly hear, and no mind could fully comprehend God’s ways and God’s wisdom—salvation through the crucified Christ. Yet, this is the very thing God has prepared for those who love him.⁵⁵ Verse 10 introduces the reason for which God’s people can understand the things God has prepared for them—the work of the Holy Spirit. Fee then summarizes verse 11 when he writes, “Therefore, the Spirit of God becomes the link between God and humanity, the ‘quality’ from God himself who makes the knowing possible.”⁵⁶ Continuing to elaborate, Fee writes,

At the human level, I alone know what I am thinking, and no one else, unless I choose to reveal my thoughts in the form of words. So also only God knows what God is about. God’s Spirit, therefore, who as God knows the mind of God, becomes the link to our knowing God also, because as the next sentence goes on to affirm: “we have received the Spirit of God.”⁵⁷

Verse 12 captures the central issue of this section. Paul contrasts the Spirit of God with the spirit of this world. To be clear, Paul is not suggesting that the Spirit of God reveals some “deeper truths” about God. The Spirit does, however, reveal God’s own plan of salvation for his people. The argument is intended to remind the Corinthian believers that they have the Holy Spirit of God, who is not of this age or this world; thus, they should cease thinking like the world thinks. Following this, verse 13 emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit in teaching the Christian spiritual things. Paul’s preaching and human understanding are works of the Holy Spirit, too. By way of contrast, verse 14 paints the portrait of a person who does not have the Spirit of God: they cannot accept the things of God because they are human; the things of God appear to them as foolishness and they cannot understand because their natural abilities are limited.⁵⁸ Indeed, the Spirit of God brings about salvific knowledge of Jesus Christ and this changes the way Christians think

⁵⁵ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 111-16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-25.

and operate in this world. Fee provides a helpful summary of verses 15-16 and the overall thrust of this section:

The Spirit should identify God's people in such a way that their values and worldview are radically different from the wisdom of this age. They do know what God is about in Christ; they do live out the life of the future in the present age that is passing away; they are marked by the cross forever. Being "S/spiritual" does not lead to elitism; it leads to a deeper understanding of God's profound mystery—redemption through a crucified Messiah.⁵⁹

D. A. Carson's *The Cross and Christian Ministry* provides a thoroughly practical perspective of this passage, specifically for leaders. Paul insists that the message he preaches is "a message of wisdom" (v. 6). From the broader context, it is clear that Paul has not graduated from the gospel message and "we are not to think that Paul has gravitated to some new message."⁶⁰ Paul's focal point is still the cross of Jesus Christ. Carson notes that a common misinterpretation of the word "mature" has introduced a distinction among the body of Christ: there are mature believers and then there are immature believers. Yet, the more accurate representation of this word "must refer to all Christians, who cherish the message of the cross, over against the world that rejects the message of the cross."⁶¹ Mature Christians embrace the message of the cross, which is a message of wisdom. However, this wisdom is categorically different from "the wisdom of this age" and it is opposed to the "rulers of this age" who espouse it (v. 6). Carson writes, "They are the best the world can advance, yet they oppose the message of the cross. Their wisdom is without ultimate value."⁶²

Carson observes that the wisdom of the cross is characterized by three things. First, verse 7 shows that this wisdom is mysterious ("a mystery"). Although the Old

⁵⁹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 129.

⁶⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 45.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 47.

Testament Scriptures prophesy about the coming Messiah, Paul conveys the notion that the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ in veiled terms: “In types and shadows and structures of thought.”⁶³ Again, in the broader context, it is clear that God’s wisdom is of an eternal nature, unconstrained by man’s perception of time. God’s perfect wisdom has been hidden for ages and it is now perfectly revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. Second, the outworking of this wisdom has always been God’s plan (v. 7). Carson eloquently writes,

God has purposed to bring his plan of redemption to fruition in the lives of all believers who live this side of the cross. Why then should they depreciate this matchless heritage from God Almighty by becoming infatuated with the faddish fancies of the cross-denying opinion-makers who belong to an age that is passing away?⁶⁴

The apparent defeat of God’s Messiah on the cross is, in fact, the redemptive work and glory that God purposed for the Christian from before the beginning. Again, God’s wisdom is categorically different. A third component is presented by Paul in verses 9-10. Although God’s definitive plan has been revealed in the gospel of the crucified Christ, people remain in unbelief. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Christian has come to the saving knowledge of Christ. And, as Carson notes, Paul introduces a significant contrast at this point: the spirit of God and the spirit of the world.

Verse 10b indicates that there is a knowledge that is beyond the empirical—a kind of knowledge that is of a “different order from the horizontal relationships that ordinarily occupy us.”⁶⁵ Thus, the possibility of knowing God and understanding his salvific purposes does not naturally inhabit human beings. Human knowledge is not sufficient for knowing God, so the Spirit’s revelation is necessary. If humans are to understand God, to think his thoughts and know his heart, then they must receive the

⁶³ Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

Spirit of God.⁶⁶ Explaining verses 11-13, Carson writes, “In short, our very lostness demanded the work of the Spirit of God, to the end that we might ‘understand what God has freely given us.’”⁶⁷

Beginning in verse 14 Paul contrasts the natural person with the spiritual person. The natural person has no desire to grasp the things of God. Paul pointedly accents this categorical difference. Carson interprets this difference:

We do not *want* to know him, if knowing him is on his terms. We are happy to have a god we can more or less manipulate; we do not want a god to whom we admit that we are rebels in heart and mind, that we do not deserve his favor, and that our only hope is in his pardoning and transforming grace. We cannot fathom such things unless we have the Spirit of God.⁶⁸

The wisdom of God is spiritual (Spirit-given) wisdom, thus “we have the mind of Christ” (v. 16). Maturing in this kind of wisdom is demonstrated by continued gratefulness for the cross and a continued dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit. The Christian leader stands ready to embrace this Spirit-given wisdom, over and against the faulty, decaying wisdom of the world. Decisive leaders know that human wisdom is limited, so they seek Godly wisdom, given by the Spirit, as they marshal out their leadership responsibilities and decision-making duties.

The book of James provides an additional viewpoint for the leader’s understanding and exercise of Godly wisdom (Jas 3:13-18). Douglass J. Moo has produced a helpful commentary that can guide the reader’s study at this point. In verse 13, James sets up his argumentation with a rhetorical question, “who is wise and understanding among you?,” which leads into his contrast between the two kinds of

⁶⁶ Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 54.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

wisdom—wisdom characterized by selfishness and wisdom characterized by peace.⁶⁹ With this introductory question, James is able to challenge the audience. This kind of wisdom is to produce good works and is characterized by humility. Moo writes, “The deeds, or ‘works’, that demonstrate wisdom are to be done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”⁷⁰ Then, in verse 14 the author notes the contrasting elements of selfishness and envy. James condemns the unruly and selfishly motivated zeal (“envy”) that causes a person to become critical of others. Boasting in wisdom while displaying jealousy and selfish envy communicates that wisdom is not truly associated with humility after all. This wisdom is not the kind of wisdom that “comes down from above.” Moo writes, “The ‘wisdom’ that manifests itself in selfishness and envy has a quite different origin and nature.”⁷¹ Such origins are earthly, meaning it is weak and imperfect. It is also unspiritual, meaning this kind of wisdom originates at the intersection of man’s unruly thoughts and emotions. Third, this wisdom is demonic, meaning this kind of wisdom does not lead to a Godward lifestyle.⁷² Verse 16 reveals the effects of such ungodly, false wisdom. Moo notes that the disorder that ensues is a result of leaders who are “more interested in pursuing their own ambitions or partisan causes than the edification of the body as a whole.”⁷³

James then moves on to describe wisdom that is heavenly—the wisdom that comes from God (v. 17). He is not describing a kind of wisdom defined by a series of correct propositional statements, but instead a wisdom that motivates certain behaviors

⁶⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 167.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

and attitudes. Wisdom that is *pure* connotes a moral blamelessness and uprightness that is incapable of producing anything evil. This kind of wisdom begins and ends with the Lord God. Second, it is the kind of wisdom that is peace-loving (‘peaceable’), not contentious or divisive. This wisdom is also gentle and kind toward others. It is also marked by an openness (‘submissive’) that is willing to yield, which Moo describes this way: “Not in the sense of a weak, credulous gullibility, but rather in that of a willing deference to others when unalterable theological or moral principles are not involved.”⁷⁴ James couples mercy and good fruits in this verse to show that mercy toward others is itself a fruitful expression. Finally, the sincerity of this wisdom from heaven shows itself to be without pretense. The emphasis on peace-making is clear in verse 18—peacemakers create an atmosphere of peace around them and their reward is a righteous reward.⁷⁵ Moo’s treatment of this passage reveals that wisdom from above is categorically different from the wisdom of this world. The Christian leader knows and understands these differences and he aims to embody these characteristics in his application of leadership and decision-making.

Peter H. Davids provides insightful commentary on this passage as well. The opening verse of this section (v. 13) indicates that “true wisdom will show itself in the good deeds which flow from a proper lifestyle.”⁷⁶ A life devoted to God is a life that reflects faith, good works, and wise dealings. In addition, a secondary trait is revealed in this person’s life: meekness. Davids writes that the “Christian is exhorted to be characteristically meek, particularly in potential conflict situations.”⁷⁷ The writer of the epistle then warns against personal ambition that is harsh and selfishly motivated (v. 14).

⁷⁴ Moo, *James*, 173.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷⁶ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 150.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In this case, an individual is driven more by zealous rivalry than Godly, heavenly wisdom. One must keep in mind that James and his original readers would have equated wisdom with God's Spirit. As Davids notes, "the claims to be wise, to have God's wisdom, and to be filled with the Spirit of God were virtually identical."⁷⁸ Thus, verse 15 highlights the antithesis of such Godward wisdom—it is earthly, void of heavenly inspiration, "devoid of the Spirit," and demonic.⁷⁹ Commenting on verse 17, Davids notes, "The chief characteristic of true wisdom is purity. The meaning here is that of the OT in which God's words are pure (Ps. 12:6 [11:7]) or the ways of the righteous are pure as opposed to crooked (Pr 21:8 LXX) or unjust (Pr 15:26)."⁸⁰

Wisdom from above is reflective of God's nature and God's ways. Continuing in verse 17, the writer shows that a wise person is not easily angered and not easily offended, even when provoked. The wise leader understands that his words and deeds must be sincere and loving. The result of Godly words and deeds is peace in the community (v. 18).⁸¹

Conclusion

This chapter put forth the biblical and theological arguments for Godly wisdom. First, the exegetical examination of Proverbs 1:1-7 has shown that the wisdom of God is to be desired and sought; all true wisdom and knowledge begins with the fear and pursuit of The Lord. Second, the exploration of 1 Kings 3:1-28 demonstrated that the wisdom of God and a mind of understanding are given to govern and lead God's people. Finally, the survey of 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 and James 3:13-18 showed that wisdom from above, which is from God, is categorically different from the wisdom of the world. Wisdom of God has

⁷⁸ Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 152.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

been revealed through his Word, and it is given by the power of his Spirit. It is the responsibility of Christian leaders to seek and harness the wisdom of God as they steward their decision-making duties. The Bible reassures readers that the wisdom of God and the Spirit of God provide the fuel that leaders and teams need for making sound decisions.

CHAPTER 3

A TAXONOMY OF DECISIVE LEADERSHIP

The wisdom of God enables spiritual leadership in the church and other Christian organizations. But, the wisdom of God is also a matter of functional leadership. Armed with the wisdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, leaders can begin to operate more decisively as they exercise their decision-making responsibilities.

This chapter will establish a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps and present a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. The first section will examine some of the traps (intuitions and illusions) that interfere with effective decision-making. Understanding these traps more clearly will highlight the importance of decisiveness. The second will examine common cognitive biases and distortions that influence the decision-making process. It is critical to understand how these biases hinder decisiveness. The final will examine practices that can lead to more robust decisions and a more decisive team culture.

A Brief Intermission: Thinking about Thinking

Before exploring these arguments, it is important to briefly consider the research that has emerged about the nature of thinking: *how do people think?* Thinking *about* thinking is not a wide-spread practice, but surveying this literature will enrich the reader's appreciation for the arguments that follow in this chapter.

First, Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin have demonstrated that mental models permeate the human mind. They write,

The mind is our means for understanding the world. Every time we encounter anything, whether a person, a place, or an idea, our mind builds a simplified model of it. This process allows us to systematically pay attention to some things and not

to others, to layer meaning onto our perceptions, and to make sense of our experiences in light of what we already know.¹

Mental models are a cognitive representation of how something functions in the world. These models determine why some people spend more money on vacations than others, or why some people choose a four-year university over a trade school. In the local church, mental models are readily sustained by denominational traditions, former staffing experiences, governing complexities, or factions that fight for maintaining that which has “always been done.” These different mental models lead to different decisions, but neither person “is very aware that these are the models they hold, nor that neither of these models is exactly right.”² Mental models provide individuals with a systematic way for filtering the world, and they influence the way a person makes decisions. Subsequent sections will examine some of the illusions and biases that lie underneath the surface of these mental models, but it is important to heed the conclusions of Riel and Martin: “It is much easier to look for answers that fit with our world view and bolster it than to actively seek to disconfirm what we know.”³

Second, it is worth noting the vocabulary that Daniel Kahneman presents in the introductory chapter of his seminal work *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. He writes, “The mental work that produces impressions, intuitions, and many decisions goes on in silence in our minds.”⁴ The mind operates instinctively at all times and it is subject to the two systems that are capable of directing human thinking. Kahneman names these two systems: system 1 and system 2. System 1 operates automatically and quickly. Snap judgments and default responses are shaped by system 1. System 2, on the other hand, is capable of

¹ Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin, *Creating Great Choices: A Leader's Guide to Integrative Thinking* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017), 18.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 26

⁴ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 4.

allocating attention to the meticulous activities that demand it. System 1 is the more prominent character and system 2 plays a supporting role in the story. Yet, system 2 is gravely important, as Kahneman explains, “There are vital tasks that only System 2 can perform because they require effort and acts of self-control in which the intuitions and impulses of System 1 are overcome.”⁵

Functionally, system 1 is easily swayed and predisposed to believe. System 2 is tasked with raising doubts and suspicions, but it is usually preoccupied with other mental tasks and also quite lazy. The subsequent sections will explore how these systems influence human thinking and decision-making. Additionally, appendix 2 provides a chart that summarizes system 1 and system 2.

This brief exploration of the nature of thinking reveals that decisions are heavily influenced by *how* humans think, not simply *what* they think. Leaders who learn to think *about* thinking and meaningfully reflect on their own thinking can learn to make more effective decisions.

Part 1: Intuitions and Illusions

Kahneman writes, “The normal state of your mind is that you have intuitive feelings and opinions about almost everything that comes your way.”⁶ Some leaders call this “intuition,” others call this a “gut feeling,” and still others call it a “snap judgment.” Realistically, the brain is just responding rapidly—nothing more.. This first section examines some of the traps (intuitions and illusions) that interfere with effective decision-making. Understanding these traps more plainly highlights the need for clear, decisive thinking. Three common intuitions and illusions will be surveyed: jumping to conclusions, the illusion of understanding, and overconfidence.

⁵ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

Jumping to Conclusions

Kahneman writes,

You meet a woman named Joan at a party and find her reasonable and easy to talk to. Now her name comes up as someone who could be asked to contribute to a charity. What do you know about Joan's generosity? The correct answer is that you know virtually nothing, because there is little reason to believe that people who are agreeable in social situations are also generous contributors to charities. But you like Joan and you will retrieve the feeling of liking her when you think of her. You also like generosity and generous people. By association, you are now predisposed to believe that Joan is generous. Real evidence of generosity is missing in the story of Joan, and the gap is filled by a guess that fits one's emotional response to her.⁷

System 1, which is responsible for quick and intuitive responses, has provided a basic assessment of this situation. Although there is little evidence to support the conclusion (Joan is generous), the story makes sense and it is compatible with the mental model that is currently maintained.

Ministry leaders often meet people like Joan (as described above), I will call him "John." John regularly attends worship services and is fairly involved with his small group. He is a leader in his workplace, appears to draw a substantial salary, and is a devoted husband and father to his family. Every interaction with John is fun and lively. Over time, it is suggested that John might make a great addition to the church (or non-profit) board. He goes through the initial screening phases, and it is discovered that John does not give financially to the local church. There was no evidence to initially support the conclusion that John was generous and invested in supporting the local church, but it was easy to jump to this conclusion because his story fits the mental model currently maintained. Christian leaders are not exempt from jumping to conclusions.

Another instructive example is referenced by Paul C. Nutt.⁸ City leaders in Columbus, Ohio, were determined to revamp the city's long-standing cow-town image. These leaders were convinced that greatness would be achieved from having a major-

⁷ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 82.

⁸ Paul C. Nutt, "Expanding the Search for Alternatives During Strategic Decision-Making," *Academy of Management Executive* 18, no. 4 (2004): 18-19.

league professional sports team. This opportunity found support among several corporations, including Nationwide, Bank One, and Worthington Industries. These companies donated money and formed a leadership team with the mayor. The team proposed the following plan. Nutt writes,

The plan called for a three-year sales tax increase to raise \$203.5 million, with additional funding coming from state grants, private funds, interest, seat licenses, and naming rights. Bank One offered to pay \$35 million over 18 years for naming rights. The package included a 21,000-seat arena for hockey costing \$110 million, a 35,000-seat soccer stadium at \$72.5 million, and \$102.4 million for land and site improvements. The city and county were to donate the land, make road improvements, and clean up the proposed site—the old Ohio State Penitentiary, a long-standing Columbus eyesore. Tax abatement was also requested, with Columbus City Schools to get a lump sum payment and a token amount from a small hockey ticket surcharge. To encourage acceptance, the leadership team claimed that they had no “Plan B.”⁹

As the plan was unveiled, the leadership team was confronted with a challenge. As Nutt describes, the leadership team’s beliefs about great cities and great opportunities were not widely shared. Their main claim (great cities have major league teams) was not accepted by voters, who were highly skeptical of the project, the funding, and the job creation. The city jumped to several conclusions, including: tax-payer support, community-wide acceptance and excitement, and common interest in building a “great city.” In a separate field-study, Nutt argues, “Decisions taken on the basis of a manager’s judgment—without evaluation—were clearly the least successful.”¹⁰

Nutt’s case study is not unique to the marketplace. How many “change initiatives” flounder in ministry settings because unfounded conclusions were reached? One might think of the young, bright, and promising pastor that is hired to turn the church around. He introduces some change initiatives and concludes that the members of the church *have to* follow suit because he is educated and versed in more “contemporary methods.” Unfortunately, he never took the time to develop trust and rapport with the

⁹ Nutt, “Expanding the Search,” 18.

¹⁰ Paul Nutt, “Better Decision-Making: A Field Study,” *Business Strategy Review* 8, no. 4 (1997): 50.

congregation. His conclusions were unfounded, and he had a hard time garnering support because he did not move purposefully and patiently.

These examples reveal that jumping to conclusions is a result of the way system 1 operates. Kahneman summarizes this dilemma: “Jumping to conclusions on the basis of limited evidence is so important to an understanding of intuitive thinking . . . that I [use] a cumbersome abbreviation for it: WYSIATI, which stands for what you see is all there is.”¹¹ Practically, an individual is inclined to maintain confidence in what they believe, construct a story about what they see (even if little information is actually known), and jump to conclusions—what he sees is all there is.

The Illusion of Understanding

Alongside this intuition and propensity to jump to conclusions is the illusion of understanding. Kahneman references the work of Nassim Taleb to highlight the idea that the illusion of understanding is built upon flawed stories (narrative fallacies). Kahneman summarizes the process: “You build the best possible story from the information available to you, and if it is a good story, you believe it.”¹² Quaker’s acquisition of Snapple is a common example in the literature. Chip and Dan Heath recount the story clearly:

In 1983, William Smithburg, the CEO of Quaker, made a bold decision to acquire the parent company of Gatorade for \$220 million. His taste buds proved savvy: Thanks to Quaker’s aggressive marketing, Gatorade grew ferociously. The \$220 million purchase grew in estimated value to \$3 billion. About a decade later, in 1994, Smithburg proposed buying another beverage brand, Snapple, for a stunning \$1.8 billion. It was a price that some analysts squawked might be a billion dollars too high, but because of Gatorade’s massive success, the Quaker board of directors didn’t protest. To Smithburg, the Snapple acquisition must have seemed like a replay of Gatorade.

The high cost of the acquisition, Smithburg knew, would leave Quaker deep in debt, but to him this was actually a bonus. He was worried about a hostile takeover of Quaker, and he believed the debt would deter potential raiders. So with the board’s support, Smithburg moved quickly, and the deal was completed in 1994.

¹¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 86.

¹² *Ibid.*, 201.

It was a fiasco. Quaker discovered that Snapple was almost nothing like Gatorade. The brand's teas and juices demanded very different approaches to manufacturing and distribution. And Quaker managed to make a mess of Snapple's brand image, abandoning the quirky, authentic voice that helped Snapple succeed.¹³

As the authors note, Smithburg was convinced that he understood how to take Snapple in the same, prosperous direction as he had taken Gatorade, and no one would question his illusion of understanding. Nutt reflects upon this classic case study: "To acquire Snapple, Smithburg relied on past practices. He repeated his taste test and made several assumptions without testing any of them. Synergies between Snapple and Gatorade were assumed."¹⁴

Kahneman offers another perspective on the illusion of understanding and the notion of knowability. He writes, "The core of the illusion is that we believe we understand the past, which implies that the future also should be knowable, but in fact we understand the past less than we believe we do."¹⁵

Ministry leaders are not immune to this illusion. Aiming to replicate another ministry's practices and environment without thoroughly vetting the implications is one way to succumb to the illusion of understanding. Carbon-copying a church-plant model from one city to the next is an exercise in assuming causal relationships. The illusion of understanding can position Christian leaders to make hurried decisions and cause them to embrace the notion that *what worked for them will work for us*. Practically, leaders are inclined to generate impressions, draw upon their experience, examine the available facts, rely upon their limited assessments, neglect ambiguity, focus on a few striking things that happened, and assume causal relationships. This is a potent recipe for creating an illusion of understanding.

¹³ Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (New York: Crown Business, 2013), 35.

¹⁴ Nutt, "Expanding the Search," 17.

¹⁵ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 201.

Overconfidence

Kahneman's research demonstrates the mental work that sustains overconfidence. System 1 provides the impressions and assessments that turn into beliefs, choices, and actions. This system works to link the present with the past and the future. All of this happens without a conscious awareness of these activities. The outcome is not simply an opinion, but a thoroughly massaged belief and an overly confident judgment. He articulates overconfidence this way: "When we estimate a quantity, we rely on information that comes to mind and construct a coherent story in which the estimate makes sense."¹⁶

The mind is eager to jump to conclusions and these conclusions can support an illusion of understanding. Taken together, this combination has the potential to lead to overconfidence. Russo and Schoemaker highlight the words of Newton Baker, the US Secretary of War in 1921: "That idea is so damned nonsensical and impossible that I'm willing to stand on the bridge of a battleship while that nitwit tries to hit it from the air."¹⁷

Secretary Baker served in President Woodrow Wilson's administration during World War I. He was respected among his colleagues and served the country in a remarkable way. Secretary Baker made these comments in response to General Mitchell's claim that airplanes could sink battleships by dropping bombs on them. The authors write,

How could a man of such caliber conclude he'd be perfectly safe standing on the bridge of a battleship while the country's best pilots attacked it with bombs? Many educated people in the World War I era believed that no gnat of an airplane could sink a battleship. Baker's big mistake was holding his beliefs with utter conviction. [He] knew with total—and totally unjustified—certainty that planes could not sink ships.¹⁸

¹⁶ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 262.

¹⁷ J. Edward Russo and Paul J. H. Schoemaker, *Decision Traps: The Ten Barriers to Brilliant Decision-Making and How to Overcome Them* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 67.

¹⁸ Russo and Schoemaker, *Decision Traps*, 67.

Years later, this conviction proved to be wrong. This level of overconfidence is common among most people. The proclivity to put too much trust in one's opinion is common among leaders in every kind of organization.

Furthermore, Riel and Martin argue that while mental models help simplify the world, these models can also work to position people to be overconfident in their understanding of the world. They write, "People tend to overestimate their reasoning ability, just as they overestimate their leadership skills, sense of humor, and driving ability."¹⁹ They deliver a more commonplace example of the overconfidence trap. At the beginning of the year, Riel poses a question for the students in her undergraduate commerce class (Rotman School of Management). She asks them to note whether they expect to be in the top half or the bottom half of the grade distribution of the class, and they are asked to state how confident they are in this prediction. Each year, an overwhelming majority of the students expect to be in the top half of the class (a statistical impossibility), and they are highly confident in their belief. These students are, of course, very smart, but they are in a class full of other really smart people. Slowing down to think this all the way through might cause the students to have a greater appreciation for the room and a more reasoned level of confidence in themselves.

Overconfidence is equally at home among Christian leaders and organizations. When an overly confident leader campaigns for his singular idea, it can stifle the creativity and suggestions of other leaders in the room. When the finance team or budget committee recommends a 5-10 percent increase in giving for the next year (based on similar patterns the previous three years), it is operating with a degree of overconfidence. When the staff decides to invest in three more elementary schools because it has successfully invested in one elementary school, they may be operating with a degree of overconfidence. When the teaching pastor fails to intentionally train and develop other teaching pastors (because he "does not have time"), he may be operating with a degree of overconfidence in his own

¹⁹ Riel and Martin, *Creating Great Choices*, 30.

preaching gift. In the long-term, an overconfident team of Christian leaders will stifle the organization because their decisions will reflect the story they have believed, not the story that God intends.

Summary of Part 1

This first section surveyed the literature in the field and explored three common intuitions and illusions: jumping to conclusions, the illusion of understanding, and overconfidence. These manifestations do not need to be trained or taught; leaders and those in their organizations already possess these intuitions and illusions. Understanding these traps can give leaders the sobriety and wisdom to carefully tackle decisions.

Part 2: Biases and Distortions

This section examines common cognitive biases and distortions that influence the decision-making process. Specifically, this section explores the heuristic process, the availability bias, the confirmation bias, the anchoring effect, and narrow framing. It is critical to understand how these biases hinder decisiveness.

The Heuristic Process

Shoup and McHorney begin their exploration of biases and distortions by writing, “Not only is our mind tricked to perceive things that are not there, but it also likes to make up information when there are gaps in our understanding.”²⁰ The mind processes and filters all kinds of information, and every decision maker has his or her own filters that lead to a certain understanding of reality. This view of reality is riddled with biases and distortions. Concurrently, the human mind develops a *heuristic* process that is filling in the gaps, looking for answers, and aiming to make things simpler.

²⁰ John R. Shoup and Chris McHorney, “Decision Making: Becoming an Expert of the Process,” in *Organizational Leadership: Foundations and Practices for Christians*, ed. John S. Burns, John R. Shoup, and Donald C. Simmons, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 202.

Kahneman provides a clear definition of a heuristic: “A simple procedure that helps you find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions.”²¹ For example, someone may be asked, how happy are you with your life these days? The heuristic process will cause this person to answer a simpler question, what is my mood right now? Kahneman sites a survey of German students as an example:

The survey that the young participants completed included the following two questions:

How happy are you these days?
How many dates did you have last month?

The experimenters were interested in the correlation between the two answers. Would the students who reported many dates say that they were happier than those with fewer dates? Surprisingly, no: the correlation between the answers was about zero. Another group of students saw the same two questions, but in reverse order:

How many dates did you have last month?
How happy are you these days?

The results this time were completely different. In this sequence, the correlation between the number of dates and reported happiness was about as high as correlations between psychological measures can get. What happened?

The explanation is straight-forward, and it is a good example of substitution. Dating was apparently not the center of these students’ life (in the first survey, happiness and dating were uncorrelated), but when they were asked to think about their romantic life, they certainly had an emotional response.

The students do not temporarily lose their ability to distinguish romantic life from life as a whole. If asked about the two concepts, they would say they are different. But they were not asked whether the concepts are different. They were asked how happy they were, and System 1 has a ready answer.²²

Functionally, heuristics are treated as a “rule of thumb,” “educated guess,” or “common sense,” and they provide the framework for biases and distortions. Over time the initial question (or problem) a leader set out to answer may be substituted with an easier question. Although a team may want to hire the best possible candidate, they may resort to a “rule of thumb” that prevents them from hiring the best person. The hiring question can become: who had the best interview, or who can we afford, or who

²¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 98.

²² *Ibid.*, 101-2.

represents the safer bet. Although the organization may need to spend the money, decision makers may resort to “common financial sense” that points in the other direction. They substitute with easier questions and reasons: we didn’t budget for this, or she already overspent in her department. Heuristics can cause decision makers to focus on a simpler question, which may very well be the wrong question.

The Availability Bias

It is common to assess (or exaggerate) the risk of heart attack among middle-aged people by recalling any such occurrence among friends or family. It is also common to feel more uneasy about flying when various plane accidents are reported the day before one’s departure. One may evaluate the success-rate of a business venture by recalling various examples of similar businesses that have prospered. Conversely, the probability of failure is also evaluated in this way.

The retrieval of information, or the “availability” of it, drives the judgment and the decision for the participants. Rather than report the facts or data, this heuristic causes an individual to report an impression of how easy it was to recall these instances. Kahneman provides an example: “The CEO has had several successes in a row, so failure doesn’t come easily to her mind. The availability bias is making her overconfident.”²³

Dan Lovallo and Olivier Sibony also highlight this bias, although they articulate it in terms of pattern-recognition:

Particularly imperiled are senior executives, whose deep experience boosts the odds that they will rely on analogies, from their own experience, that may turn out to be misleading. Whenever analogies, comparisons, or salient examples are used to justify a decision, and whenever convincing champions use their powers of persuasion to tell a compelling story, pattern-recognition biases may be at work.²⁴

Leaders are prone to remember decisions that favorably spotlight their leadership or their organizations, and they tend to ignore decisions that have been

²³ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 136.

²⁴ Dan Lovallo and Olivier Sibony, “The Case for Behavioral Strategy,” *McKinsey Quarterly* 2 (March 2010): 8.

detrimental. Decision makers are inclined to look for ready-made ideas that have worked in other organizations because it *has* to work for them, too. Teams are more likely to overestimate their contributions to the success of a project because they have successfully completed other projects. Conversely, they are likely to underestimate their errors in judgment. The availability bias spotlights the moments, events, and decisions that teams want to remember. Yet, it also positions those teams to ignore the issues from which they need to address and learn.

The Confirmation Bias

As noted, system 1 is biased to believe, and system 2 deliberately searches for confirming evidence. In fact, most people seek supporting data that are compatible with the beliefs they currently espouse.

Chip Heath and Dan Heath write,

Imagine that a new restaurant has just opened near you. It serves your favorite kind of food, so you're excited and hopeful. You search the restaurant's reviews online, and the results show a handful of good reviews (four out of five stars) and a handful of poor ones (two stars). Which reviews would you read? Almost certainly, you'd read more of the positive reviews. You really want this restaurant to be great.²⁵

Heath and Heath offer another example:

When we want something to be true, we gather information that supports our desire. But the confirmation bias doesn't just affect what information people go looking for; it even affects what they notice in the first place. Think of a couple in a troubled marriage: If one partner has labeled the other's shortcoming—for instance, being "selfish"—then that label can become self-reinforcing. The selfish acts become easier to spot, while the generous acts go unnoticed."²⁶

In each of these examples the information desired and noticed supports the conclusions that have already been reached. Russo and Schoemaker's work corroborates these findings. They write, "Most of us seem to possess a built-in tendency to favor data that support our current beliefs and to dismiss evidence that upsets them."²⁷

²⁵ Heath and Heath, *Decisive*, 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁷ Russo and Schoemaker, *Decision Traps*, 75.

Leaders are confronted with these types of questions all of the time. Is John capable to lead this project? Is Susan the best candidate for a managerial promotion? Does his performance merit a raise or a reprimand? What data from the field will support the marketing decision? When it comes time to answer these questions, leaders and teams will find the evidence that supports the conclusion they most want to be true. Similarly, in ministry settings, the confirmation bias is subtly at work. Suppose a team is ready to expand the board of elders. The search for evidence would likely point toward someone who has experienced success in the marketplace. The evidence suggests that he is a strategic leader in the company, so the team is inclined to think that this man also possesses the qualities of an elder. If the team wants this to be true, it will find evidence to support the conclusion. But what if his competence has severely outpaced his character? In other cases, ministry leaders revert to reporting numbers as a barometer for health and success. If the team has concluded that discipleship is happening throughout the organization, it is easiest to search for that evidence by examining Sunday attendance. Or, when evaluating a new deacon candidate, the team may go searching for evidence in his or her small group. One might think, their small group is huge; surely they are great with people. But what if the small group hosts are the people magnets?

The impulse for confirmatory biases is quite strong. Heath and Heath richly capture the danger of the confirmation bias: “When we want something to be true, we will spotlight the things that support it, and then, when we draw conclusions from those spotlighted scenes, we’ll congratulate ourselves on a reasoned decision. Oops.”²⁸

The Anchoring Effect

Imagine hiring a worship leader or a chief marketing director for a non-profit organization. The leading candidate has great experience and several qualifications that attract the attention of the hiring manager. Imagine that the hiring manager is ready to

²⁸ Heath and Heath, *Decisive*, 12.

recommend a starting salary of \$70,000 but has not announced this suggestion publicly. Another colleague suggests \$60,000. What does the hiring manager do? Adjust the initial figure? What if that colleague had suggested \$100,000? Shoup and McHorney write, “The initial statement functions like an anchor to serve as the starting point for future discussion. The anchoring effect makes it too easy to minimize or ignore baseline or trend data.”²⁹ The anchoring effect produces a bias toward an opinion, a set of information, or a fixed item, and that bias minimizes the baseline data in favor of the new information.

Tversky and Kahneman highlight this phenomenon in their work:

In a demonstration of the anchoring effect, subjects were asked to estimate various quantities, stated in percentages (for example, the percentage of African countries in the United Nations). For each quantity, a number between 0 and 100 was determined by spinning a wheel of fortune in the subject’s presence. The subjects were instructed to indicate first whether that number was higher or lower than the value of the quantity, and then to estimate the value of the quantity by moving upward or downward from the given number. Different groups were given different numbers for each quantity, and these arbitrary numbers had a marked effect on estimates. For example, the median estimates of the percentage of African countries in the United Nations were 25 and 45 for groups that received 10 and 65, respectively, as starting points.³⁰

This demonstration shows that the “anchoring” value has a strong ability to bias the participants’ responses. When someone is presented with a number or value as a possible solution or explanation for a problem that requires probabilities and computations, the anchoring effect will be induced.

In terms of how the anchoring effect impacts everyday decisions, one might consider the example from a German case study. German judges, averaging more than fifteen years of experience, read a description of an individual who had been caught shoplifting. After reading the description, each judge rolled a pair of dice that were rigged so that every roll resulted in either a 3 or a 9. As soon as the rolling dice came to a stop, the judges were asked whether they would deliver a prison sentence greater or lesser, in

²⁹ Shoup and McHorney, “Decision Making,” 207.

³⁰ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases,” *Science* 185, no. 4157 (1974): 1128.

months, than the number showing on the dice. Each judge was then asked to specify the exact term of the prison sentence. As Kahneman reports, “On average, those who rolled a 9 said they would sentence her to 8 months; those who rolled a 3 said they would sentence her to 5 months.”³¹

Leaders, like most people, are far more susceptible to anchoring—“The powerful impact an initial idea or number has on the subsequent strategic conversation”³²—than they would want to admit.

Narrow Framing

Narrow framing is a common distortion that hinders robust decision making. In an attempt to be decisive, leaders and organizations tend to narrow the scope of their views, therefore limiting real alternatives. Again, the work of Heath and Heath provides a helpful description:

Narrow framing [is the] tendency to define our choices too narrowly, to see them in binary terms. We ask, “Should I break up with my partner or not?” instead of “What are the ways I could make this relationship better?” We ask ourselves, “Should I buy a new car or not?” instead of “What’s the best way I could spend some money to make my family better off?”³³

Narrow framing distorts a leader’s view of the situation by shrinking the playing field and limiting the conversation to a or b, this or that, yes or no. Even if leaders are aware of this trap, it can be difficult to overcome the magnetic pull of this distortion.

The work of Paul Nutt is also helpful at this point. Any attempt to search for alternatives requires key decision-makers to step into unknown territory, suspend their judgment, and wait for answers to emerge. Nutt writes,

³¹ Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 126.

³² Lovallo and Sibony, “The Case for Behavioral Strategy,” 10.

³³ Heath and Heath, *Decisive*, 10.

Waiting can seem unwise when an idea-driven effort has provided a ready-made plan of action supported by an “evaluation” which is really a justification. The ready-made plan sets aside fears, suggests decisiveness, and caters to “see first” preferences, but it also terminates the search for alternatives.³⁴

Nutt refers to this phenomenon as the “limited-search trap.” He rehearses the history of a failed decision by the Shell Oil Company.

The Brent Spar was a floating oil storage facility and loading buoy 137 meters high, weighing 14,500 tons, and costing more than a billion dollars. Shell officials decided to decommission the Spar after finding it would take \$150 million and three years to make needed repairs. Decommissioning created a disposal dilemma, until company officials found that international law allows deep-sea disposals. Shell quickly adopted a deep-sea disposal plan and then spent three years and millions of dollars to compare it with refurbishing the Spar, on-shore dismantling, and in-field disposal near its current location.

However, Shell officials suppressed some of the risk to the deep-sea environment by understating the toxicity and volume of contaminants left in the Spar. Just before disposal was to begin, Greenpeace activists flew to the Spar by helicopter and boarded it. From the deck of the Spar, with world-wide media coverage, Greenpeace argued that the planned deep-sea dumping was environmentally irresponsible. A few days before Shell was scheduled to sink the Spar, Shell officials realized that a deep-sea disposal was no longer possible.

How did Shell get so far off track? Shell officials found that a deep-sea disposal was legal and provided a low-cost and seemingly environmentally friendly disposal solution. When decision-makers buy into a claim without looking further, they miss investigating other, potentially beneficial, arenas of action.³⁵

In another study by Nutt, his research showed that narrow framing is common among many organizations. Identifying options is an important part of the process, but he discovered that few managers allow more than one viable alternative to be thoroughly explored. It is tempting to stop the search for alternatives prematurely and just select what looks like a good option very early in the process. When a solution is adopted prematurely, and that solution is used to justify the need for action, people are drawn to either support or resist. People feel trapped. The narrow frame (or limited-search trap) actually discourages participation and creativity.³⁶ Ministry teams are likely to find themselves in similar territory. They might ask, do we add another service or build a new

³⁴ Nutt, “Expanding the Search,” 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ Nutt, “Better Decision-Making,” 49.

building? Do we move to small groups or keep the Sunday morning bible studies? Should we expand the family ministry team or small groups team?

Riel and Martin elaborate on the effects of this distortion:

[Organizations] have found a way to produce consensus with a seemingly more productive methodology. In this case, the different answers are called options. And we figure out all the pros and cons of all the options until we are tired of talking about it and feel ever less enthusiastic about every one of the options. Sometimes, at this point, we choose the single option that is least destroyed by the process of analysis (the “least-worst” option). We choose one option and move on. No wonder the results of our typical choice-making processes tend to be mediocre.³⁷

The influence of narrow framing can cause leaders to stunt creativity on the team, limit the playing field of alternatives, default to the biases mentioned in previous sections, and make good (but not great) decisions.

Summary of Part 2

This section investigated common cognitive biases and distortions that influence the decision-making process. The mind’s heuristic processes can lead decision makers to substitute with easier questions, fill in the gaps, and avoid thorough lines of questioning. A proclivity toward the availability bias can position decision makers to rehearse the most recent chain of events and draw upon mental associations that adversely impact the decision-making process. Confirmation bias—a strong impulse in every human being—causes the average person to seek confirming data and staunchly oppose disconfirming evidence. The anchoring effect produces responses that are prone to ignore baseline data and trends. Additionally, narrow framing causes most leaders to think that a decision is simply a choice between two or more options—it is either this, or that, or the other. Ministry teams that are unaware of these biases can still make all kinds of decisions, but they are more likely to experience a lack of unity, clarity and decisiveness. It is critical to understand how these biases hinder decision-making practices. Table 1 represents the author’s working taxonomy of common decision-making traps.

³⁷ Riel and Martin, *Creating Great Choices*, 37-38.

Table 1. A taxonomy of common decision traps

Type of Decision Trap	Define It	How it Works	What are the symptoms?	A Helpful Quote
Jumping to Conclusions	A premature assessment or conclusion generated with a limited amount of supporting evidence	System 1 generates a quick and basic assessment of the situation. Although there is little evidence to support this conclusion, the individual has already constructed a story that is compatible with his intuitive assessment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick, intuitive responses with no evaluation • “WYSIATI” – what you see is all there is 	“They did not seem to realize how little information they had.” (Kahneman)
The Illusion of Understanding	The perception that one has achieved a thorough and proper understanding of the situation	System 1 provides the instinctual analysis, while System 2 is reluctant to raise any doubts. These two forces —combined with an individual’s inclination to generate impressions, draw upon experience, neglect ambiguity and assume causal relationships— create the illusion of understanding. An individual builds the most coherent story given the information available, and if it is a good story, he will believe it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine only the available facts • Failure to investigate other explanations • Reliance upon limited assessments • Focus on a few things that happened and assume causal relationships 	“The core of the illusion is that we believe we understand the past, which implies that the future also should be knowable, but in fact we understand the past less than we believe we do.” (Kahneman)
Overconfidence	A deeply held judgment supported by an intuitive assessment and the available information that comes to mind	System 1 provides impressions and assessments, while trying to link this information to the past and the future. A judgment is made, while key information is disregarded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disregard of key information • Assumes knowledge about the future • Places too much emphasis on personal assumptions and judgments 	“People tend to overestimate their reasoning ability, just as they overestimate their leadership skills, sense of humor, and driving ability.” (Riel and Martin)
Availability Bias	Judgment or decision is driven by information that is easily retrieved or recalled	Rather than report the relevant information, this heuristic process causes an individual to report an impression of how easy it was to recall a related instance or event.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignores the size of a category or the frequency of the event • Focuses on ease of retrieval • Analogies and comparisons are used to justify a decision 	“The CEO has had several successes in a row, so failure doesn’t come easily to her mind. The availability bias is making her overconfident.” (Kahneman)

Table 1 continued

Type of Decision Trap	Define It	How it Works	What are the symptoms?	A Helpful Quote
Confirmation Bias	Judgment or decision is driven by information that supports the conclusions which have already been reached	System 1 is biased to believe, and System 2 deliberately seeks out confirming evidence. The mind desires and notices information that supports our conclusions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek confirming evidence • No consideration of the opposite reality • Differing opinions are not welcomed 	“When we want something to be true, we will spotlight the things that support it, and then, when we draw conclusions from those spotlighted scenes, we’ll congratulate ourselves on a reasoned decision.” (Heath and Heath)
Anchoring Effect	Produces a bias toward an opinion, a set of information, or a fixed item, and that bias minimizes the baseline data	When presented with a number or value as a possible solution or explanation for a problem that requires probabilities and computations, the anchoring effect will be induced. It will be difficult to ignore that initial number or idea.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial statement functions like an anchor • Minimize or ignore baseline or trend data 	Anchoring effect is “the powerful impact an initial idea or number has on the subsequent strategic conversation.” (Lovallo and Sibony)
Narrow Framing	The tendency to define the choices or options too narrowly – <i>a or b, this or that</i>	The search for alternatives and the time that is required to generate new ideas can delay the decision-making process. In an attempt to be “decisive,” leaders limit the playing field and limit their perspective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited playing field – <i>a or b, yes or no, up or down</i> • Stop the search for alternatives prematurely • Move forward with a “ready-made” solution • No creative exploration of new ideas 	“Narrow framing [is the] tendency to define our choices too narrowly, to see them in binary terms.” (Heath and Heath)

Part 3: A Way Forward

Aubrey Malphurs captures the significance of culture in his work *Look before*

You Lead:

Most people aren’t aware of the profound influence that culture has on us. We use culture to order our lives, interpret our experiences, validate our beliefs, and evaluate behavior—ours and that of those who share the culture. Since this is largely a mental

reflex—an unconscious process—we’re hardly aware it’s taking place. It simply happens.³⁸

Pastors operate within a church culture. Teams operate within an organizational culture. Directors operate within a departmental culture. Leaders and decision makers operate within an institutional culture. Every culture is embedded with mental models, intuitive impressions, instinctual responses, cognitive biases, and decision-making frameworks that undergird the process. These dynamics are at work, whether teams recognize it or not. Nonetheless, it is possible to overcome these cultural predilections to arrive at healthier decisions. This final section examines practices that can lead to more robust decisions and a more decisive team culture. It introduces practices that are organizational in nature, as well as spiritual (pastoral) in nature. First explored is the concept of metadecisions and framing. Second is discernment practices that can benefit leadership teams as they navigate important decisions. It is possible for discerning, decisive leaders to pave the way toward improved decision-making.

Taken together, the metadecision and framing process, the implementation of discernment practices, and a thorough appraisal of common decision-making traps (see table 1) produce a holistic and robust model, which is explored in the subsequent pages. The taxonomy of common decision-making traps is represented by figure 1. I continue to introduce the paradigm in the sections that follow.

³⁸ Aubrey Malphurs, *Look before You Lead: How to Discern and Shape Your Church Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 13.

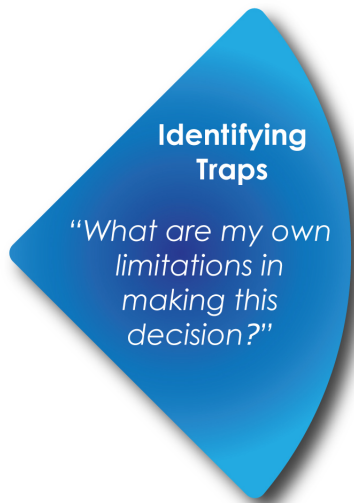


Figure 1. Identifying traps

Metadecisions and Framing

Russo and Schoemaker argue that the decision-making process can be distilled into four main elements: framing, gathering intelligence, coming to conclusions, and learning from feedback. Although these four ingredients are essential, they have found that managers spend most of their time gathering intelligence and coming to conclusions, while the least amount of time is spent on framing.³⁹ Yet, the framing phase has the power to set the stage for a great decision. They write, “At the very beginning, however, you should make choices about the decision process itself—choices that are likely to determine the character of the whole effort.”⁴⁰ They call this the *metadecision*. The authors advocate for spending quality time with the larger issues at hand and probing the metadecision by asking questions like: what is the crux of this particular issue? or how should decisions like this one be made? Russo and Schoemaker tell the story of a metadecision that impacted Pepsi-Cola.

John Sculley recalls that Pepsi-Cola executives believed for many years—rightly—that Coca-Cola’s distinctive, hourglass-shaped bottle was [the] most important competitive advantage. Pepsi-Cola executives had plunged into a series of efforts to

³⁹ Russo and Schoemaker, *Decision Traps*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

compete with Coke's bottle. They approached packaging [with] the competitor's framework. They spent millions of dollars and many years studying new bottle designs. Pepsi wasn't learning from its own or from Coca-Cola's experience. It was weakly imitating Coke.

Then Sculley realized that the issue was being handled incorrectly. He didn't immediately prescribe a new direction, or even order his staff to think about redefining the problem. Instead, he made a metadecision. He asked and answered the crucial question, 'How should problems like this be approached?'

What's the crux of the issue?
Coke's bottle.

How should decisions like this one be made?
By seeking [to] alter the whole playing field and asking what the customer really wanted.

How much time should this decision take?
This decision is central to Pepsi's entire market position. We can take years if necessary to make it correctly.⁴¹

These questions altered the entire process for Pepsi executives and their teams. The results were astounding, and Pepsi-Cola became a fierce competitor with Coke. Sculley did not plunge into the decision prematurely, and he did not try to develop a competitor to the Coke bottle. Instead, he took the time to consider how decisions like this one should ideally be marshalled.

Riel and Martin also advocate for thinking at a metalevel. They argue that normal decision-making processes are designed to produce a doable, realistic answer and that is the outcome one can expect. However, a richer decision-making process does not just choose an option, it creates a better answer. Practically, Riel and Martin propose some helpful principles that decision makers can adopt:

1. "Learn the value of bad ideas." When it comes to idea generation learn to defer judgment. If one idea is deemed to be a bad one, many other ideas will go unstated. In fact, wild, outrageous, or bad ideas might contain the seed of something great.⁴²
2. "Give yourself time." The world is geared for quick responses, superior drive, and speed, so that the real work can commence. Thinking is often overlooked.

⁴¹ Russo and Schoemaker, *Decision Traps*, 8-9.

⁴² Riel and Martin, *Creating Great Choices*, 55.

People act as if there is no time to think, so they don't end up with any time devoted to thinking. Give yourself space to think.⁴³

When teams spend time thinking at this metalevel they will be able to more accurately frame the issue at hand. Russo and Schoemaker explain, "The way people frame a problem greatly influences the solution they will ultimately choose."⁴⁴ They advance some helpful principles for effective framing.

1. Get a fuller picture. Look at the issue: focus on the most important aspects of the questions and allow other aspects appropriate attention.⁴⁵
2. Know your own frames. An individual must understand how he or she has simplified the problem. Strive for awareness of how you have drawn boundaries around the problem and how you are attempting to fill in the gaps. Challenge yourself.⁴⁶
3. Know the frames of others. How does the other person understand the question and the decision that needs to be made? Practice active listening and tailor your communication to the other person.⁴⁷

Ryan Hartwig and Warren Bird provide a concise summary for dealing with the metadecision and subsequent decision frames. They write that teams must "develop an accurate, reasonable, and realistic understanding of the nature of the issue at hand. The team must answer the question, what's going on here, and why?"⁴⁸ The metadecision and framing process is represented by figure 2.

⁴³ Riel and Martin, *Creating Great Choices*, 56.

⁴⁴ Russo and Schoemaker, *Decision Traps*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38, 44.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ Ryan T. Hartwig and Warren Bird, *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 197.



Figure 2. Metadecisions

Thus far, the paradigm reveals the following components:

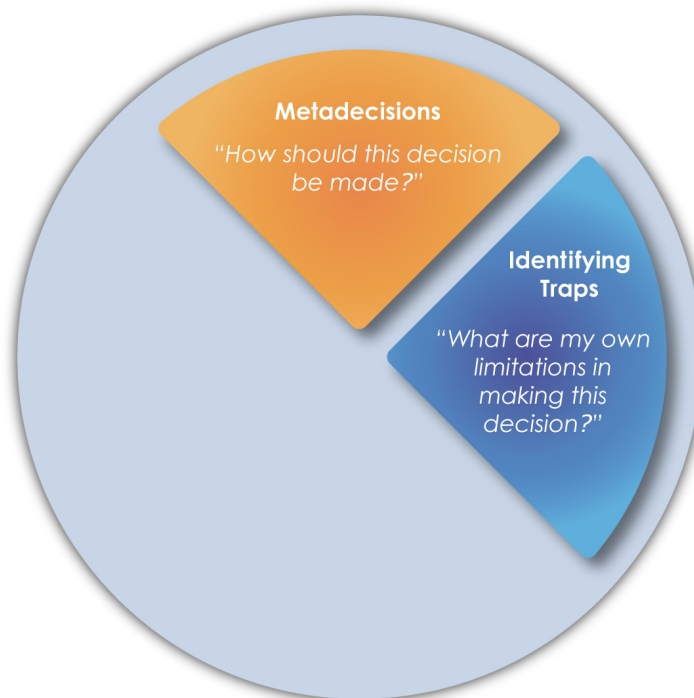


Figure 3. Metadecisions and identifying traps

Discernment Practices

Hartwig and Bird report that teams that are able to make significant, effective decisions do two things simultaneously: “They vigorously pursue God and seek to hear his voice *and* they employ a rigorous, step-by-step approach to making decisions.”⁴⁹ Leaders

⁴⁹ Hartwig and Bird, *Teams That Thrive*, 178.

and their teams do not need to pit these two components against each other. Seeking the Lord and waiting upon the Holy Spirit is not antithetical to decisive leadership. This section explores discernment practices that can benefit leadership teams as they navigate important decisions.

Personal discernment and formation. Paul Kaak, Gary Lemaster, and Rob Muthiah wonderfully illustrate the intersection that many leaders face: “We need to draw on our faith tradition and also draw on ideas that have emerged from the thinking and research capabilities with which God has endowed humans.”⁵⁰ The Christian tradition places a strong emphasis upon prudence because it pertains to Godly wisdom in the daily life of the Christian. Prudence has long been regarded as a virtue, one that must be developed over time and refined through experience and community. They state, “The process of decision-making does not begin once everyone arrives at the meeting; it begins with people who find pleasure in what is good and who are actively developing the virtue of prudence in their lives.”⁵¹ The work of Ruth Haley Barton corroborates this notion of personal prudence and discernment. She writes, “Discernment at the leadership level begins, then, with the spiritual transformation of each leader as they engage the disciplines that enable them to regularly offer themselves—body and soul—to God.”⁵² The continuous personal, spiritual transformation of each member of the team cannot be overlooked. The best thing a leader brings to the decision-making table is his or her transforming-self.

⁵⁰ Paul Kaak, Gary Lemaster, and Rob Muthiah, “Integrative Decision-Making for Christian Leaders: Prudence, Organizational Theory, and Discernment Practices,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 12, no. 2 (2013): 146.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵² Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 38.

A commitment to personal discernment practices can help a leader become self-aware and increasingly attuned to his or her inner-self. As Barton notes, “Those who want to become discerners must have some basic spiritual practices in place to keep them in a posture of willing surrender to God.”⁵³ The temptation for many ministry leaders is to circumvent these practices and move too quickly toward the white board or the conference room. As leadership responsibilities increase it is not uncommon for Christian leaders to find it more difficult to carve out time for solitude, silence, Scripture reading, prayer, and self-examination. Yet, these remain critical disciplines for the Christian leader.

Solitude and silence give way to undivided and undistracted *being*—that is to say, being in the presence of God so that he has complete access to one’s souls. The Christian leader must learn to withdrawal from the daily responsibilities and demands of life and ministry so that he/she can posture himself in the presence of God. Barton writes,

We need to cease striving. We need to know something at a different level than just our intellect. We need time to listen to the still, small voice that is qualitatively different than any other. We need to hear those things that cannot be taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit.⁵⁴

As leaders learn to embrace the beauty of solitude and silence, they also learn to engage the Scriptures in transformative ways. There is a marked difference between approaching the Scriptures to gain information and approaching the Scriptures to experience transformation. When leaders come to the Scriptures to experience transformation they are positioned to hear from God and find themselves in His story, rather than trying to fit God into their own story. This kind of personal formation paves the way for seeing the holistic nature of decision-making. A leader is able to broaden his lens, see the long-term impact of the decision points, empathize with other decision-makers, and hear from God in ways that are biblically-centered. As a leader engages the

⁵³ Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

Scripture, a helpful question to ask can be: Is there a specific Scripture that God is bringing to mind relative to this decision? What is it saying?

In addition to engaging the Word of God, a leader must develop a regular rhythm of prayer. Barton states, “Discernment takes place in the context of friendship with God as it is cultivated through prayer.”⁵⁵ Specifically, Barton advocates for the *prayer of indifference*. When a leader prays for indifference, he is asking God to work in his heart and mind in such a way as to make him indifferent to anything but the divine will of God. When leaders pray for wisdom and discernment they are often already committed to an idea or outcome that they think is the best; in their minds the decision has already been made. However, praying for indifference puts the will of God above preconceived categories, solutions, or plans. As a leader prays in this direction, some helpful questions to ask are: What needs to die in me so that God’s will can become more central to me? What do I need to set aside so that I am completely open to what God wants? How is God moving in a way that is bigger than my way of thinking or constructing or deciding?

Finally, leaders must learn to swim in the waters of self-examination and self-knowledge. A leader must take meaningful responsibility for what is happening in his heart and mind. There is a strong penchant for recruiting and appointing leaders who have enjoyed success in their external spheres, but who have “managed to ignore what is going on inside themselves.”⁵⁶ Personal formation habits will enable leaders to grow in self-awareness and self-knowledge. Some helpful questions to ask and bring before the Lord are: What is driving my attitude or behavior in this particular decision? What is my deepest and most genuine desire relative to the decision in front of me? Is the posture of my heart consistent with what I know about the heart and mind of Christ? What is God doing in my character and spiritual growth?

⁵⁵ Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 42.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

Barton pointedly summarizes the significance of personal discernment and formation: “Individuals not engaged in regular spiritual practices will engage the leadership setting as an untransformed self, stuck in all the particularities of their false-self patterns.”⁵⁷ The personal discernment phase is represented by figure 4.

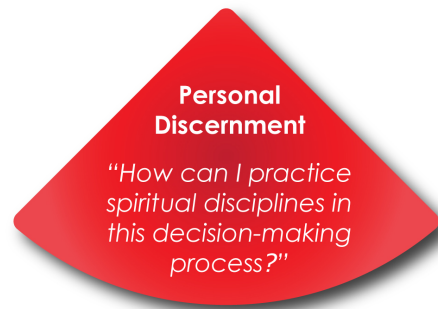


Figure 4. Personal discernment

Thus far, the paradigm has explored the following categories.

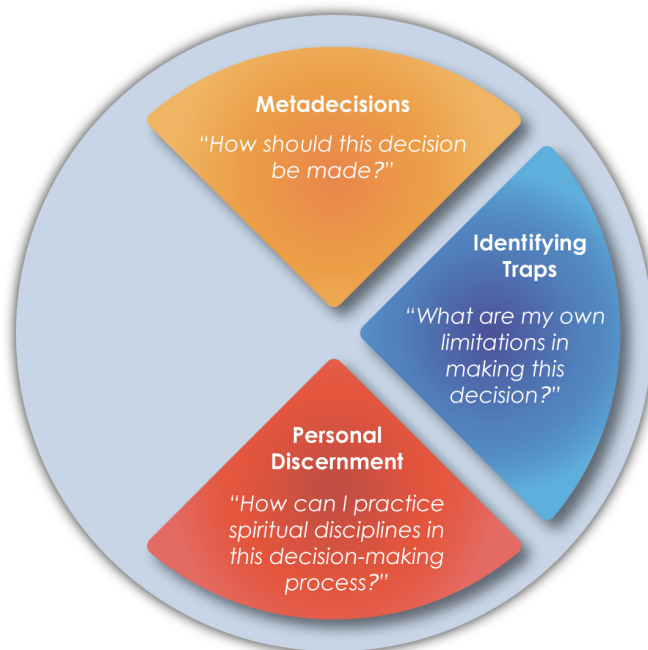


Figure 5. Metadecisions, identifying traps, and personal discernment

⁵⁷ Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 114.

Team discernment and formation. Discerning leaders who are experiencing transformation in their personal journey can then come to the table as a discerning leadership team. One of the key building blocks of this team is a deep belief in the goodness of God. Barton writes that teams need to cultivate a “deep, experiential knowledge that God’s will is the best thing that can happen to us under any circumstances.”⁵⁸ Discerning, decisive leaders know that God is with them, for them, and among them.

As the team comes together it is important to begin by asking the right questions and identifying the undergirding values. Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah propose that decision makers (and decision-making bodies) can utilize the process of discovery questions. Discovery questions are intended to help the group attend to the moving of the Spirit in their midst. They write, “The purpose of the question should be to help the group pay attention to how the Spirit might be leading in relation to the focus issue. All questions should be minimally directive and should be questions for which the questioner genuinely cannot predict the answer.”⁵⁹ It is critical that every person is given the opportunity to speak honestly while all others are asked to listen deeply. Some questions that Kaak proposes include the following:⁶⁰

What are the deepest things that get triggered in you in relation to this issue?
When you dream of the best possible future for our congregation, how might this issue fit in that?
What makes you saddest in this issue? What makes you most hopeful as you consider this issue?

Similarly, Barton argues that any meaningful attempt to prepare the group for discerning a decision must begin with clarifying the question for discernment. Although not every decision will require such a methodical paradigm, many questions that leaders navigate will, indeed, require a thorough process of discerning and deciding. She suggests a

⁵⁸ Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 55.

⁵⁹ Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah, “Integrative Decision-Making,” 159.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

few categories that may warrant a full and thorough treatment: decisions shaping organizational identity, mission, values, and direction; allocation of resources such as time, money, human resources and organizational energy; key personnel; and decisions that will affect the pace and quality of life for staff and the constituency.⁶¹ Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah, and Barton agree that asking the right questions and framing the decision as clearly as possible are foundational processes. The notion of the metadecision (in the previous section) is helpful here, as well.

Barton also suggests that identifying and reaffirming the undergirding values will enhance the process. Decisive leaders know that the undergirding, principle values of the team and organization should not be compromised. A team needs to decide what those values are for their particular context, but Barton does suggest a few to consider: commitment to spiritual transformation; creating a culture of equality and inclusiveness; truth-telling; love and respect; working through conflict; and confidentiality. Although this list is not exhaustive the key decision-makers must identify the values that will guide their decision-making processes. Without these values, decisiveness gives way to fear, insecurity, and paralysis among the team.⁶²

After asking some good questions, reaffirming the undergirding values, and framing accurately, the leadership team can begin to pray for indifference together, pray for wisdom together, and sit in silence together. Again, Kaak argues for scheduling silence into the agenda. Prayer is frequently relegated to the opening and closing of meetings, but “silent prayer within the meeting may uniquely shape the whole meeting time.”⁶³ Silence and prayer contribute to the ethos of the team and open the group to hear from God together. Barton writes, “In silence we can become aware of our emotions, thoughts,

⁶¹ Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 173-75.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 99-105, 184-85.

⁶³ Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah, “Integrative Decision-Making,” 161.

experiences, sin, temptations, attachments and places where we are not indifferent so that we can see how it affects our participation and take responsibility for ourselves.”⁶⁴

Additionally, Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah propose the practice of dwelling in the Word: “Dwelling in the Word involves spending time with the same biblical text as part of multiple meetings over a period of months or years.”⁶⁵ The leader of the meeting selects a passage of Scripture (prior to the meeting), and when the meeting commences the selected passage is read aloud. After meditating upon the passage silently, participants are asked to reflect upon the text. The participants are actively listening to each other and actively seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By cultivating this space, leaders and decision makers are inviting the Spirit to help them see and make connections between the biblical text and their local context. This step is not intended to produce specific answers to specific problems (budgets, small groups, children’s curriculum, etc.), but it is intended to enhance Spirit-led communal discernment among decision makers. When a team engages the Scriptures in this way it communicates that everyone has something valuable to add to the discussion and, ultimately, to the decision.

As the leadership team embraces this posture, they can begin to exercise discernment and operate more decisively. Barton argues that, at this point, the leadership team is positioned to decide well. The following steps are to be carefully and methodically approached:

1. Set the agenda: prayerfully prepare an agenda that is open to God and valuable for others
2. Reiterate the questions that have raised the issue to the fore: bring a renewed focus to the group
3. Gather information in a nonjudgmental way: gather as much data as possible without judging, critiquing or assuming

⁶⁴ Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together*, 212.

⁶⁵ Kaak, Lemaster, and Muthiah, “Integrative Decision-Making,” 163.

4. Listen well to all voices: allow silence, pauses, clarifications
5. Weigh the options: examine how each option might fit with what God is doing
6. Agree together: What level of agreement (i.e., unanimity or majority) does this decision require and how does that impact the ability to move forward? Does the solution or decision accomplish the intended outcome and satisfy the goals?⁶⁶

Team discernment and formation enhances the capacity for decisiveness. A healthy team understands that the process of spiritual discernment and strategic decision-making is a both/and arrangement, not an either/or rivalry. The team discernment stage is represented by figure 6.



Figure 6. Team discernment

Conclusion

This chapter established a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps and presented a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. The first section examined some of the traps (intuitions and illusions) that interfere with effective decision-making. The second section examined common cognitive biases and distortions that influence the decision-making process. The final section examined practices that can

⁶⁶ Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 205-11, 217-18.

lead to more robust decisions and a more decisive team culture. As figure 7 shows, a holistic approach can lead to healthier decisions.

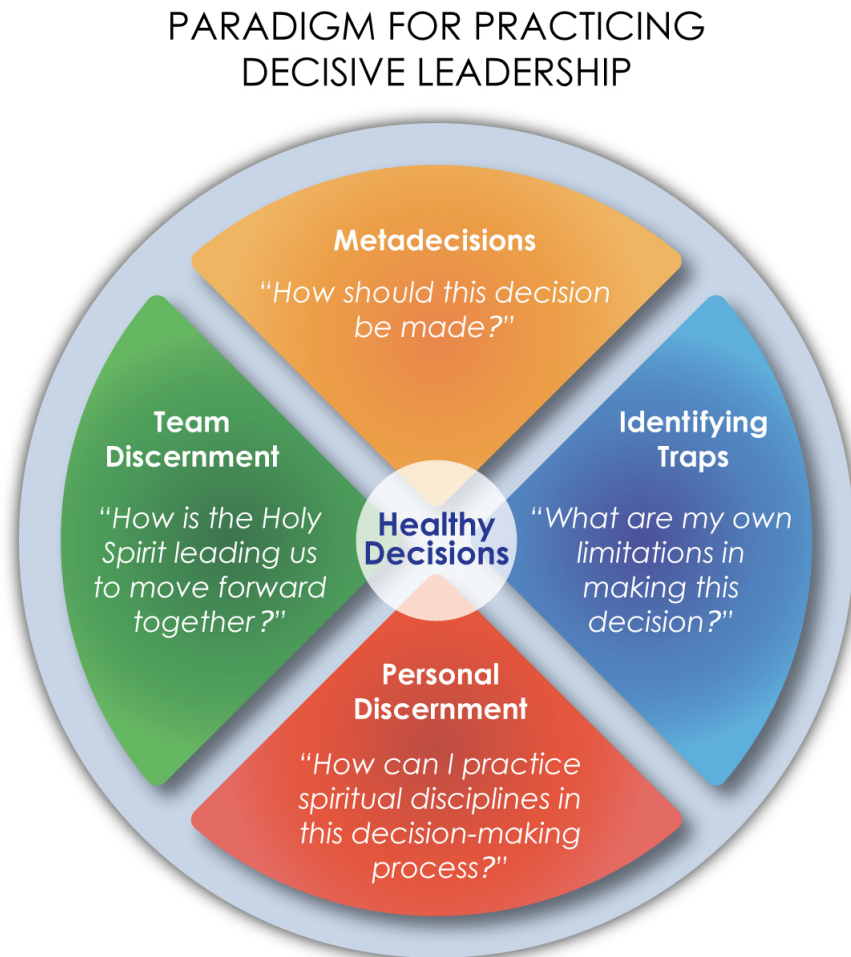


Figure 7. Paradigm for practicing decisive leadership

Shoup and McHorney accurately summarize the dynamics encountered in this chapter: “God can provide the wisdom in one of many ways, but often it is revealed when a decision aligns with the Word of God, the leading of the Holy Spirit, the counsel of others and sound judgment.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Shoup and McHorney, “Decision Making,” 216.

CHAPTER 4

ASSESSING DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES: FINDINGS

Canvassing the field and interviewing church leaders was a key component of this study. Investigating the behaviors, habits, and practices of the senior leadership team (SLT) enabled me to identify common threads, points of differentiation, and nuanced details. Although each SLT exists in a specific time and place, patterns, as well as misnomers, are instructive for leaders and their teams.

The second goal of this project was to assess and evaluate the functional decision-making practices of selected leaders and their teams. The goal was measured by interviewing selected leaders and using the qualitative instrument “Assessing Decision-Making Practices.”¹ The work of Ryan T. Hartwig, co-author of *Teams That Thrive*, was instrumental in the formulation of this qualitative survey instrument. All questions were informed by and adapted from Hartwig’s work and I received his expressed written consent and permission to utilize his work to further my research. In this chapter, I synthesize the findings from the interviews and report upon the most salient data discovered.

The four congregations examined and studied for the purposes of this research were The Austin Stone Community Church (ASCC) in Austin, Texas; Clear Creek Community Church (CCCC) in Houston, Texas; Redeemer Christian Church (RCC) in Amarillo, Texas; and Redeemer Round Rock (RRR) in Round Rock, Texas. Each of these churches voluntarily participated in this research study. ASCC was planted in 2002, and is a multi-site church with six campuses that meet in four locations throughout Austin. The elders of ASCC share the authority and responsibility of the office to which they have been

¹ See appendix 4 for research instrument.

called. CCCC is a multi-site church with four campuses throughout Houston. CCCC is overseen and directed by a group of elders who are responsible for the doctrine and direction of the church body. RCC has its roots in the convergence of a dying church that was looking for a new vision and new leadership and a church planter with a vision to see a new gospel-centered church reaching the city of Amarillo. The elders of RCC oversee the doctrine and direction of the church, while the ministry staff help to execute the mission on a day-to-day basis. RRR is overseen by a group of elders, and the ministry staff help to execute the mission of the church.

To preserve anonymity in the interviews, I assigned a letter (i.e., participant A) to each participant and the corresponding participating church, which also helps to maintain strict confidentiality.

The Purpose of a Senior Leadership Team

To understand the unique vision of the organization and the context for each SLT, each participant was asked a few introductory questions. One of the introductory questions inquired about the specific purpose of the SLT. Although the name of the SLT is slightly different in each church (i.e., executive team, central elders, etc.), each participant indicated that the highest level of leadership responsibility in his church is designated to the office of elder. Collectively, the data show that the elders are given strategic, directional, financial, and doctrinal oversight in each of these local churches. Each church structures the elder board differently, but the governing and pastoral leadership responsibilities reflected the same broad categories. These churches adhere to a biblical model of eldership.

Furthermore, each leader indicated that, ideally, the elders are leading and applying their unique gifts in a designated ministry area, such as preaching and teaching, ministry strategy, operations, groups and discipleship, to name a few. These specific lanes can change from time to time, and elders may serve in a few different ministry lanes simultaneously, but the optimal preference is clarity in the role and passion for the role.

For example, participant B serves with the Central Elder Team (SLT) and also leads in other ministry areas, such as discipleship strategy, church-planting efforts, and international mobilization. Participant D indicated that he serves on the Executive Team of the church (SLT) and also leads in two additional ministry areas—the preaching team and Sunday programming team. The data show that these churches value the corporate (church-wide) leadership of elders and the functional leadership of elders. In other words, each elder is exercising governing authority, while also practicing *boots on the ground* leadership.

Participant B explicitly indicated an additional purpose of the SLT. In this context, the SLT is charged with stewarding the culture and vision. Although this might be inherently implied in the other contexts, it is telling that participant B articulated this very clearly during the interview. It is not assumed on their part; it is a specifically stated purpose for the SLT of this congregation. In fact, the SLT operates by using their Culture Map to drive decision making at the highest level. The Culture Map outlines the church’s vision and mission, core beliefs and convictions, philosophy of ministry and strategy, and the intended outcomes or deliverables. In this context, the SLT can use the Culture Map as a set of guiding principles and values that inform decision making. It is both a tool and a guide for the SLT. This team recognizes the impact culture has upon decision making, and the impact decisions can have upon culture.

A possible organizational and leadership tension surfaced in the response that participant C provided. When asked about the specific purpose of the SLT, participant C noted that two teams might fit within this parameter—the governing council of elders and the ministry staff. To be clear, participant C does acknowledge that the elders are the highest-ranking leaders in the church, and they are given authority over the doctrinal, philosophical, strategic, financial, and pastoral matters of the church. At the same time, the ministry staff also functions by implementing strategic projects, making interdepartmental decisions, and executing the vision. Tension arises if each team believes it is the senior-most team; a duality of authority and responsibility may exist where there is no specific

stated purpose for each team. If this participant stated that two teams could possibly fit within the parameter, what is the understanding that exists on those teams? Might they be confused? A prolonged sense of ambiguity around this structure will make decision making clunkier. If each of these teams is unsure of the dynamics and ground rules for making decisions and executing them, the process can become more difficult.

The data strongly indicate that the stated purpose of the SLT must be clear and direct. A stated purpose yields stronger teams, greater clarity, and responsible decision making.

Decisions: How Are They Made and Who Makes Them?

After a few introductory questions, participants were asked two questions: (1) describe your decision-making practices as a team—how does the SLT make decisions? and (2) what kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the Senior/Lead Pastor alone?

How Does the SLT Make Decisions?

This first question provides a level of insight that I did not expect to find. Each participant's response revealed the functional aspect of decision making. However, more importantly, it revealed the philosophical nature of how each team operates when making decisions; it revealed the *ethos* that characterizes the team.

Participant A clearly indicated that the members of the SLT work together to set vision, make decisions, and empower every team member. Empowerment is the key, not micro-management. Every voice is important and valued on this SLT. Among the SLT members, each person has ownership over particular areas of ministry and leadership, and he is shown deference when a decision falls in the realm of his purview. Participant A is aiming for a team-based environment, and this serves as the bedrock for decision-making dynamics. These decision-making practices reflect a set of relational dynamics and team-based principles that then inform the functional decisions that they must make.

As mentioned in the previous section, participant B recognizes the impact culture has upon decision making and the impact decisions can have upon culture. When asked the same question, this participant indicated that the SLT works to determine two things first: what kind of decision is being made and does the decision impact our vision and culture? This line of inquiry reflects the metadecision and framing techniques described in the previous chapter. The Central Elder Team of this congregation (SLT) uses the culture map to guide its discussions around this line of inquiry. Their culture map serves to bring clarity and alignment around the *type* of decision they are facing and the *impact* of the decision throughout the organization. For example, the team can determine if the decision is primarily theological, philosophical, or organizational—what kind of decision is being made? Furthermore, the team can think through the impact of such a decision. For example, when a ministry team or ministry leader requests a significant amount of financial resources for deployment, the SLT will determine if utilizing these financial resources is aligned with the culture of the system. Does purchasing this building align with the vision and culture? Does funding this public-school initiative and building a school partnership align with the vision and culture? How will using these funds impact the ministry or organization? Answering these questions allows the Central Elder Team to evaluate decisions and frames at the meta-level. This participant also indicated that decisions are made in plurality, never are they made in isolation. The SLT operates with a set of philosophical values that permeate their decision-making duties.

In contrast, the response of participant C primarily revolved around habits and practices, and less around ethos or philosophy. Inevitably, these habits and practices become the ethos of how the team will make decisions. When asked this first question, this church leader indicated that the senior pastor prepares the agenda and discussion items by thinking through the things that need the attention of the full council of elders. This is a subjective process of discernment. The second part to his answer indicated that the ministry staff (the other team) spends its time evaluating the completion of projects

and providing updates and progress reports. Again, it is somewhat unclear which team is the senior team—the full council of elders or the ministry staff. There was no mention of team-based principles, team dynamics, or the culture of how decisions are made. Although many of these matters are preferential, a lack of clarity around their guiding principles and decision-making ethos will create some hurdles along the way.

Participant D responded to this question by acknowledging that a complex system is not in place for making decisions. Instead, the SLT emphasizes a team-based ethos—a high premium is placed upon team-based decision making. The Executive Team (SLT) values the culture of a team-based mentality so enthusiastically that they believe unilateral decisions are bad decisions. Functionally, meetings are conducted such that the collection of issues or agenda items may be led and facilitated by the responsible or overseeing executive team member. In addition, although the senior pastor is treated as a first-among-equals, a high-degree of deference is shown to every member of the team. These findings corroborate the importance of ethos and team-based processes.

Who Makes the Decisions?

This second question sought to identify the kinds of decisions made by the whole team and those made by the senior pastor alone. Three of the four participants responded by stating that making decisions as a team is the preferable option. Participant A indicated that plurality is key as the SLT works to lead the church together, and true plurality is built upon relationship and trust. Participant B also indicated that an ethos of plurality drives their functional decision making. In this context, even the Lead Pastor and the Pastor of Preaching and Vision are connected by a dotted-line on the official organizational chart. The Central Elder Team that leads participant B is comprised of twelve pastors, and the only instance in which the Lead Pastor might exercise a unilateral decision is around matters of employment function. For example, if the Lead Pastor is also the direct supervisor for the Executive Pastor of Operations (and both are on the Central Elder Team), then the Lead Pastor will conduct a performance evaluation. Yet, if

the Lead Pastor wanted to remove the Executive Pastor of Operations, that decision would be handled as a plurality of Central Elders. Participant D also indicated that the SLT is stronger because they approach decisions in plurality. He could not recount any decisions that had been made by the Senior Pastor alone; it is simply not preferable for this team. This kind of team culture is built upon trust, and it communicates that every member of the team has a fair chance at shaping the culture and direction of the congregation.

The responses from participant C represent a different viewpoint. This leader indicated that there is no clear specificity for how this works and who makes the decisions, but rather it is a matter of the Senior Pastor's subjective intuition. The Senior Pastor takes full responsibility for determining and establishing the priorities that need to be decided and executed. He commented that this serves the organization by identifying the bullseye for the team and the church. Although the Senior Pastor may not make the decisions alone, he is determining the priority and primacy of decisions, and *that* decision will undoubtedly impact the team. It was unclear if other members of the full council of elders or the ministry staff are invited to opine, contribute, or prioritize decisions alongside the Senior Pastor.

The data yielded from these two questions are significant. Teams that embrace a culture of plurality truly believe that the best decisions are team-based decisions. *How* a team views itself and conducts itself drastically impacts *how* decisions are made. One cannot separate the culture of the team from the philosophy of decision making. Determining how decisions are made, and what type of decision it is, are the responsibility of the team as a whole. In only one context studied does the Senior Pastor or Lead Pastor appear to arrive at these conclusions on his own. It is more advantageous to think about the metadecision and framing concepts as a team. Evaluating *how* decisions are made and *what* types of decisions are in view can help chart the course for leaders and their teams.

Decisions: Confronting Challenges and Unlocking Innovation

Interview participants were asked a series of questions about the challenges the team faces when making decisions, and about strategies or techniques used to drive innovation.

Confronting Challenges

Two of the four participants indicated that personal sin and relational conflict have the potential to disrupt a good decision-making process. Sin and selfish ambition can cause team members to manipulate the process, distort the truth, and say hurtful things to one another. Both of these participants agree that leaders must learn to identify their own sin, confess their sin, and aim for love and grace. Relational conflict also has the potential to unsettle team members, and teams must confront this kind of conflict directly. Relational conflict will be addressed in another section. A commitment to personal discernment and formation, as outlined in chapter 3, can help to overcome the besetting sins that arise in the human heart.

Participant A uniquely indicated that communication hurdles present a challenge for any growing team. Leaders often rely on each other to communicate diligently so that decisions can be executed, but the lines of communication are easily entangled. This participant recalled a situation in which he was leading a project to move the congregation from a rented facility to a newly purchased property, and the delayed communication among the SLT caused some complications with outside contractors. Timely communication is paramount for effective decision making.

Participant D provided a few salient observations as well. He noted that it is not uncommon for any SLT to be comprised of strong, independent thinkers, which is a valuable commodity. However, one must recognize that strong, independent thinkers are entirely capable of making decisions on their own, and this can present unique challenges if that energy and creative thought are not directed toward a common goal. Additionally, this leader noted that team-based decisions can move more methodically and more slowly.

He noted that there is a difference between speed and strength, and each team member is either inclined toward a speed-perspective (make decisions quickly) or a strength-perspective (make decisions accurately). In my opinion, the decision process can suffer if this gulf is not carefully navigated. The goal is to make strong, timely decisions. This leader recalls a time when the SLT needed to vet a decision about whether they would partner with a state-wide Christian sports camp. If a partnership proceeded, this sports camp would require use of one of the church's campus facilities. The decision would require input from the campus pastor, the student minister, and the children's ministry team. Although some members of the SLT believed that the decision could be made quickly (an easy "no"), other team members acknowledged that a thorough line of inquiry would benefit the decision and serve the SLT well.

Unlocking Innovation

Although some leaders and teams believe that their primary purpose is to solve problems and respond to the issues of the day, some insist upon driving innovation and making future-oriented decisions. Collectively, these participants indicated that meeting culture either contributes to innovation or stifles innovation. Time must be spent mobilizing the SLT to think in this direction.

Participant A noted that they aim for two qualities when meeting as a team: empowerment and family. Empowering the elders (SLT) allows each team member to utilize his God-given gifts, set priorities within his ministry areas, and collaborate with teammates, as needed. Furthermore, the team aims to operate as a family unified in vision and direction and committed to the overall health of the church. In this context, unlocking innovation is a result of listening to the Lord and empowering team members.

Participant B noted that driving innovation is a result of their bedrock values. This team values innovation and is committed to creating a culture that fosters it. Specifically, this participant indicated that four questions have been helpful to the SLT as it conducts its annual strategic planning meeting: what's right, what's wrong, what's

confused, and what's missing? These questions provide helpful analysis and yield information that can be discussed by the SLT.

Participant C noted that opportunities to innovate must be regularly evaluated. This team regularly asks, how can we make it better?

Participant D emphasized a leadership exercise that the Executive Team (SLT) regularly observes. It is not uncommon for this team to read a book together and implement some of the ideas, habits, or practices that the author advocates. Recently, the SLT worked through *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by Chris McChesney and Sean Covey. Each member of the team contributed one WIG (wildly important goal) and committed to execute this goal. This leader chose to architect the entire sermon series and calendar for 2019. Without utilizing this technique or identifying this goal, he was convinced that he would not have directed his energy toward this long-range project. Furthermore, the SLT sets aside a few days every year to think strategically. Although it is tempting to meet and solve problems, this time is not simply dedicated to solving those problems. Instead, the team embraces this mindset: what questions do we need to be asking? This perspective reinforces the importance of meta-level thinking and decision framing.

Confronting challenges and unlocking innovation are important parts of the decision-making process. A team that is unwilling to acknowledge its challenges will make decisions that are muddled, which can cause the overall objective to move out of focus. In addition, fostering innovation allows the SLT to expand the range of possibilities when seeking to make a decision.

Decisions: Hidden Options, Divergent Viewpoints, and Overcoming Biases

The next series of questions introduced to the participants were as follows:

(1) What processes exist for creating or generating alternative viewpoints or hidden options? (2) How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives? (3) How does the SLT solicit critiques of

assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making? These questions sought to identify the processes, mechanisms, or practices that teams incorporate to thoroughly appraise issues or decisions.

Participant A indicated that any strong decision-making process must facilitate collaboration among team members. This kind of collaboration goes beyond simply giving everyone a few moments to speak their mind or voice their opinion. Collaboration that is distinctively equitable allows team members to generate ideas and express their viewpoints without fear of judgment. Hidden options surface if team members feel they can contribute their ideas and opinions to the conversation knowing that shared leadership pulsates throughout the culture. This participant also indicated that processing divergent viewpoints or perspectives requires a posture of humility and a commitment to listen to each other. In this context, complete unanimity is required—100 percent agreement—for the SLT to move forward with a decision. When a unanimous decision cannot be reached, this team sees an opportunity to slow down, reassess the issues, and seek the Lord. Although this is a matter of preference for the SLT at this church, it should be noted that requiring unanimity in the decision-making process allows the team to diligently pursue team discernment practices.

Participant B indicated that plurality is the key for generating alternatives and processing divergent perspectives. I contend that a team that truly embraces plurality will not be hindered by any one team member's role, title, status, intelligence, or tenure. This kind of plurality willingly invites every voice and feedback is genuinely appreciated. Furthermore, in this church context the SLT actively seeks to welcome the voices of racial minorities and women. This participant acknowledges that the SLT hopes to build a formalized structure that supports these voices, and they ask, how can we formally support these voices at the table? When it comes to soliciting critiques of assumptions or biases on the SLT, this participant indicated that the pursuit of self-awareness is paramount. I propose that leaders must diligently wrestle with their own assumptions, biases, and

limitations during the decision-making process. The personal discernment and formation practices outlined in the previous chapter are a beneficial tool for leaders.

Participant C introduced some helpful practices that can aid the decision-making process. When seeking to uncover other options or hidden alternatives, this participant indicated that the leader of the SLT (or the leader of that particular meeting) diligently works to acknowledge the voices that tend to be quieter or more hesitant to speak. He noted that the leader must invite and draw out ideas from all participants. In other words, the leader must acknowledge that there is not just one “idea guy” in the room—every team member has valuable ideas. These habits can help to overcome the confirmation bias, anchoring effect, and narrow framing. Also, in the early stages of discussion, team members are strongly encouraged to present their viewpoint, even if it is a dissenting opinion. This participant indicated that some assumptions and biases can be overcome if the team promotes an atmosphere where differences are truly appreciated and will not be immediately dismissed or punished. The SLT is always contending for unanimity in their decisions and they want to aim for consensus at every turn. However, if this cannot be achieved, the SLT expects support from dissenting voices as the team moves forward. It is peculiar that this SLT enthusiastically values this kind of process, even though the Senior Pastor is still primarily responsible for subjectively determining the priorities that need to be addressed or decided. I contend that even though all voices (and ideas) are valued and divergent viewpoints are welcomed, the scope of these contributions is narrowly defined by the outlook of the Senior Pastor. If the Senior Pastor determines that launching small groups for newcomers is the strategic priority for the next semester, then the team may discuss, debate, and draw conclusions around this topic. However, what if the issue is broader than launching new groups? What if the issue is insufficient training and coaching for group leaders? In other words, the Senior Pastor is setting boundaries around the contributions of the team; boundaries that could limit their full analysis, strongest opinions, and most creative ideas. I assert that if a Senior Pastor is going to unilaterally determine

strategic priorities, then the availability bias is already at play because he is likely to recall the issues, challenges, or decisions that capture his immediate attention or interest.

Participant D indicated that teams must avoid self-deception. He noted that uncovering alternatives and hidden options requires the SLT to get outside of their “bubble.” I assert that this is a step in the right direction to help teams overcome the illusion of understanding. As this SLT collaborates and processes decisions, they work hard to ensure everyone will walk out of the room feeling that they were heard. This participant indicated that it is the responsibility of the team leader (or meeting leader) to facilitate good, open-ended discussion. As the decision is processed, this SLT spends time asking, what are some things that we need to talk about that we aren’t really talking about? Questions like these can help to unearth assumptions or biases. Additionally, this SLT embraces a habit of inviting other viewpoints from those not seated at the table. He argues that this can help to uncover any blind-spots that are working against the SLT.

The data yielded from these questions reveal that teams must work diligently to unearth alternatives, process divergent viewpoints, and overcome biases. Any SLT that is willing to put in the work to navigate this terrain is better prepared to make decisions that reflect the vision of the church, undergird a unified direction, and honor the contributions of every team member.

Decisions: Dealing with Conflict on the Team

Participants were then asked about conflict on the team: how does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process? Collectively, the participants indicated that love and grace must flavor every attempt to resolve conflict. Participant A indicated that the SLT embraces a posture of relationship and mutual, brotherly love—these are foundational ingredients for functioning together. He recalls a conflict that arose in the second year of this church plant. At the time, there were three elders leading the church, and a significant disagreement arose around the direction of the church. One of the elders disagreed strongly with the direction of the ministry. Over time,

his attitude and behavior produced relational toxicity among the team and the team suffered. Eventually, that elder was asked to step down from his leadership role and his family left the church. At its worst, conflict that is not intentionally dealt with can splinter a team.

Participant B provided a helpful nuance to this question. In this context, the SLT deals with conflict by asking a guiding question: what domain of the relationship is the conflict in? This participant noted that the conflict can exist in one of three areas: conflict among brothers, conflict among elders, employee/employer conflict. Identifying the type of conflict can help team members ascertain the point of tension, the offense, and the necessary steps toward reconciliation. In this context, if a member of the Central Elder Team (SLT) experiences anger because another team member expressed a poorly timed joke, then they can approach each other as brothers. If conflict arises because two teammates cannot agree on a financial matter and they slight each other in a meeting, they should approach each other as elders. Or, it may be necessary for two of the Central Elders to approach each other as a supervisor and direct report. I contend that ascertaining the type of conflict and the domain of the conflict can help a SLT to avoid jumping to conclusions. A thorough line of inquiry and sufficient self-examination can aid team members as they work toward reconciliation.

Participant C indicated that the SLT has adopted a deferential perspective. Specifically, team members are never to assume the other person's motivation and they will not reduce another teammate to his/her opinion. These two perspectives build habits that can uphold respect, patience, and grace.

Participant D reported that the SLT values honest opinions and acknowledges that emotions are real. This participant noted that there are at least two layers in a given conflict—the issue and the fight. Therefore, when working through conflict, this SLT aims to talk about the issue, and then talk about the fight (conflict). Recognizing these two layers allows team members to accurately identify what went wrong and where it went wrong.

Overall, these leaders and their teams are committed to a process of honest dialog and appropriate action toward reconciliation.

Decisions: Getting Perspective

The final two questions posed to the participants sought to comprehend the nature of attaining perspective as a SLT. The questions posed are as follows: (1) How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process? (2) How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?

Participant A indicated that the elder team (SLT) spends one full day together every quarter to pray, plan, and have fun as a team. This SLT poses a few questions that drive the conversation: what does the church need and what are we asking God to do? Team members work to answer these questions by reflecting upon the needs and opportunities in their respective ministry areas, and then bring these reflections to the SLT for dialog, planning, and prayer. I assert that these kinds of questions and practices enable a level of team discernment that reflects several core ingredients discussed in chapter 3: discovery questions, silence, and group prayer. Questions have the potential to yield discoveries that deepen understanding; therefore, it is important that this process is unhurried. In addition, Participant A indicated that prayer marks every meeting among the SLT. In many ways, this intangible quality can only be experienced by the team; it can be difficult to articulate in a series of interview questions.

Participant B noted that it is vitally important that each member of the SLT embrace the whole, not just their part. As members of the SLT these elders are responsible for directing the whole of the organization, not simply their ministry areas or preferred projects. This participant stated that team members must realize that they are not simply the recipients of a decision, but they are also contributors *to* the decision. I contend that attaining a fuller picture allows team members to understand how each part of the decision

impacts each layer of the organization. Participant B also indicated that strategic planning and the pursuit of the Holy Spirit are not at odds with each other. In fact, this SLT fully embraces the providence of God *and* the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to reveal His wisdom through the gifts and experiences of each team member. In this context, the spiritual gifts of each person are valued and appreciated. I maintain that this posture and perspective enables teams to remain humbly open to the movements of the Holy Spirit without jettisoning plans and strategies.

Participant C identified the need for a communication mechanism or communication process that allows each member of the SLT to have access to the information that is beyond their respective areas. In this context, delivering good information to the SLT is a key component because it allows team members to stay well-informed from a churchwide perspective. In my estimation, mining the *right* information from all of the available information is a hallmark of strong teams. Distilling this information can help teams overcome biases and blindspots. When it comes to strategic planning and seeking God, this participant indicated that the SLT spends at least half of any given team meeting in a posture of prayer. He acknowledged that prayer cannot simply be attached to the beginning or the end of a meeting. This team aims for a more regular habit of prayer and meditation during their meetings.

Participant D commented on the structural nature of the SLT. Team members are able to adopt a churchwide perspective because each person simultaneously represents different teams (or ministries throughout the church) *and* leads as an elder of the church. This structural configuration allows each person to view decisions from the top and receive feedback from the ground floor. In other words, the Executive Team is working *on* the church and leading *in* the church. For example, this participant is one of the teaching pastors in the church, and he also leads the theological training and pastoral development of other church leaders. As a member of the Executive Team, this participant would discuss the theological direction of a particular sermon series with other SLT members. However,

as a ministry department leader, he can solicit feedback on this issue from the pastoral training group and the Sunday production team. I believe that this enables the issue or decision to be viewed from both angles. Furthermore, the Executive Team is committed to spending time in prayer as a group and opening the Scriptures together. Often, the team will ask open-ended questions like, what is God doing in your heart and what is God putting on your heart for the church? This participant noted that questions like this have changed the entire direction of a meeting. In addition, this participant explicitly noted the importance of a growing, maturing personal relationship with Jesus Christ for each member of the Executive Team—these leaders are disciples of Jesus, first. Again, this kind of personal discernment and formation, coupled with a team discernment method, can greatly aid the discovery process.

The data from these questions reveal that any SLT must diligently seek to attain a churchwide perspective that is informative and accurate. Misinformation will not aid the decision-making process and will not help the SLT move toward the desired outcomes. Moreover, teams should adopt a robust theological understanding of God’s providence and the Holy Spirit’s enduring influence. Faithfully integrating these realities allows teams to plan in pencil.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reported the most significant findings from the interviews and stated my conclusions. Each of these teams embodies a unique vision for their congregation and a distinctive philosophy about team decision-making dynamics. Nonetheless, the data compellingly reveal that certain habits, practices, and philosophies support healthier and more methodical decision-making environments.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT REFLECTIONS

I began this project in the fall of 2017, and the conception of my project centered on leadership and decision making. The initial scope of this idea was vast, and I knew that the specific research question and project purpose would need to be refined. As the first few weeks unfolded, it became clear that I did not want to investigate certain subjects: the will of God and decision making; leadership temperaments and decision making; leadership gifts and decision making; or decision making and personality types. Around the same time, I completed my first reading of *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath. This book gave me a clearer understanding of *how* people make decisions, and it introduced me to the field of behavioral economics. After many conversations with peers and colleagues, and several attempts at drafting purpose statements and outlines, I landed on some key components of the project: *how* decisions are made, decision-making barriers, and team dynamics. These elements served to propel my enthusiasm. Months later, I was able to articulate a clear and refined purpose: identify and understand the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams. To conclude this project, I provide an in-depth evaluation in the following pages. This chapter evaluates the project's purpose and goals, weaknesses and strengths, and concludes with my personal reflections.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

As stated, the purpose of this project was to identify and understand the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams. I strongly believe that this was achieved. Although leading a team cannot be reduced to simply making decisions, it can be argued

that teams must make decisions. Leaders and teams that are not making decisions are not making progress, they are simply rearranging the status quo. Stated differently, indecision is, itself, a decision. Therefore, recognizing that teams must make decisions is a driving force for this project.

In addition, leaders and teams that make decisions are operating within a system, culture, or paradigm. The culture or paradigm greatly impacts the decision-making process. These dynamics, subtle or not, are always at play, so it became part of my investigative line of inquiry. What are these dynamics? Can they be identified? How do they influence decision making?

Third, the purpose statement reveals an inquiry into the notion of decisiveness. I wanted to unearth some of the concepts of being a decisive leader or team, acting decisively, or practicing decisiveness. This line of inquiry yielded fruitful work around the economy of how people make decisions.

Novice leaders and veteran leaders, alike, can benefit from this research project because it provides clear language and categories for the forces that influence the decision-making journey. Overall, the central purpose of the project was successfully actualized. The research yielded answers to many of these driving questions.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

As stated in the first chapter, three goals were established for this project. The first goal was to assess and establish a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps. This goal was measured by researching the corpus of literature in the field of leadership and decision making. This goal was considered successfully met when the research yielded at least five consistent and widely accepted barriers and traps to effective decision making. Chapter 3 carefully explored seven of the most common decision-making traps and biases uncovered in the body of literature that I reviewed. In pursuing this goal, I was able to investigate the behavioral economics, cognitive processes, and leadership practices that collectively contribute to decision making. By establishing this

taxonomy, I have provided a framework that can serve leaders and organizations as they seek to make healthy decisions. Awareness of these decision-making traps can aid leaders to identify poor habits and clouded thinking among their teams. Teams may want to begin by studying and discussing one component at a time, until they move through the taxonomy in full. Furthermore, using this taxonomy throughout the decision-making process (or in various meetings) can also reinforce honesty, as leaders learn to voice their own limitations and the limitations of others in the group. In my estimation, the first goal was profitably implemented.

The second goal was to assess and evaluate the functional decision-making practices of selected leaders and their teams. This goal was measured by interviewing selected leaders and by using the qualitative survey instrument “Assessing Decision-Making Practices.”¹ The goal was considered successfully met when all interviews were completed, and the data was reviewed in order to yield a clearer picture of these leaders and the decision-making practices of those teams. For this goal, I began by reviewing the work of Ryan T. Hartwig. I was also able to set up a phone call with Hartwig, and his feedback helped to refine the development of my research instrument. With his consent and permission, I adapted his material to fit the scope of my inquiry. The qualitative instrument that I deployed consisted of thirteen total questions. Questions probed the context of the participant, the SLT environment, and the functional practices of the SLT. I received permission from each participant to record the interview and the field notes can be found in appendix 5. As leaders engage with this research, they will find it helpful to simultaneously review the findings of chapter 4 and the notes in appendix 5. From there, they can identify which patterns and practices, in their own context, they may want to change or improve. In my estimation, the research instrument and participant interviews were thoroughly deployed, and the goal was achieved.

¹ See appendix 4.

My third goal was to present a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. It was considered successfully met when I outlined a method for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. The method can be reviewed in chapter 3, “A Way Forward.” In that section, I marshalled three arguments for practicing decisive leadership in organizations—metadecisions and framing; personal discernment and formation; and team discernment and formation. When teams engage these three phases, along with utilizing the taxonomy of common decision traps, they can move toward healthier decisions.

The paradigm for practicing decisive leadership is a helpful tool for leaders and teams (see figure 7 in chap. 3). This paradigm (or model) is intended to reflect a holistic approach. An approach like this is beneficial for leaders because rarely do they experience decisions, and their implications, as a set of isolated thoughts and emotions. More frequently, leaders encounter these phases as an internal and external dynamic dance. The phases are not linear in structure and are not numbered in a distinct progression. Leaders and teams can engage this tool by assessing which phase they believe they occupy, and then moving to traverse and examine the other phases. Teams will move toward healthy decisions when each phase is meaningfully surveyed and applied. As a team becomes acquainted with this tool, a leader might consider introducing, studying, and applying one new phase at a time, with a real-life decision that needs to be made. This paradigm also upends traditional decision-making processes by positioning leaders and teams to wrestle with the metadecision (meta-level) and the common traps that interfere. As I highlighted in chapter 3, Russo and Schoemaker argue that many teams make decisions by simply gathering some information and coming to a decent conclusion, while they ignore the metadecision and framing concepts. Furthermore, Christian leaders must learn to diligently navigate the personal discernment and team discernment phases. If they overlook these phases, then they have not necessarily wrestled with God in the decision, but have only asked him for some guidance along the

way. This paradigm profitably advances the field of Christian leadership and successfully meets the stated goal.

Project Weaknesses

As with any writing endeavor, the final product is the result of a journey that has some twists and turns. This project stayed true to my conceptual idea (decision making and leadership), but the idea evolved and crystallized after a few months of guided conversation and personal exploration. Although I am satisfied with the final product, a few weaknesses should be articulated.

First, the project would have benefitted from more participant interviews. I interviewed four church leaders and one for-profit marketplace leader; this was a completely arbitrary choice. To be sure, the data that I was able to yield from the interviews was significant and helpful; however, interviewing three or four more church leaders would have strengthened the data and would have given me insight into other leadership environments and church contexts. The qualitative nature of this study allowed for lengthy interviews that yielded interesting data points, but I would certainly recommend (to fellow researchers) that investigations of this nature include more participants.

Second, the project would have benefitted from a more thorough analysis of literature in the field of Christian leadership. The work of Ruth Haley Barton, Ryan Hartwig and Warren Bird, and Paul Kaak provided substantial contributions to my study, but the scales were tilted in favor of the literature that canvassed leadership science, cognitive science, and behavioral economics (admittedly, I enjoyed exploring those arenas and gainfully employed the research). The field of Christian leadership is replete with resources, and my argumentation would have benefitted from investigating this more carefully. Specifically, I am left pondering a few questions: Is there any work dedicated to understanding Christian leadership and behavioral economics? Is there any work dedicated to uncovering the consequences of poor decision-making in Christian organizations? Has anyone written about decision biases and heuristics from a spiritual,

pastoral, or non-profit perspective? Questions like these whet the appetite and could have reinforced my presentation in chapter 3.

A third weakness centers on the notion of organizational subtleties. My research primarily focused on the decision traps that encumber the mind of any individual, but a stronger dose of organizational research, as it pertains to decision making, would have helped the reader. For example, examining the amount of time and energy that organizations give to decision making would help the reader understand its significance. Questions such as, How often do teams make decisions? How often do meetings consist of discussing weighty decisions? Do organizations spend energy executing a process or simply hire consultants? Again, this line of questioning could have supplemented my research. In addition, surveying organizational chains-of-command and organizational charts might have given readers additional insight into the who of decision making. Offering questions such as, who is in the room and what position do they hold? Who is given a seat at the table and what are the decisions they are responsible for? How does the org chart drive the decision process? How do front-line employees and executive leaders contribute to a decision process? These types of questions open all kinds of research possibilities and it would have been worthwhile to spend some time here.

Project Strengths

Planning, organizing, researching, and executing this written project has been one of the highlights of my doctoral studies. The project has given me an opportunity to contribute to the field of Christian leadership, while also sharpening my research and writing proficiencies. One of the strengths of this project is my disciplined utilization of academic literature. In particular, chapter 3 reflects a well-rounded inquiry of academic scholarship. In fact, it would be helpful to leaders to familiarize themselves with some of these concepts by reading through any of the resources listed in the bibliography. At the suggestion of my project advisor, I launched this endeavor by compiling a list of the most widely-cited authors and researchers in the field of study. I was looking for some “golden

nuggets” in the corpus of literature and hoping to establish the bedrock of my research. Upon finding these authors and resources, my research became increasingly focused. At this stage, I was not aiming to contribute anything new to the field of literature, I simply wanted to unearth a better understanding of mental models, illusions, biases, distortions, and the heuristic process. The disciplined approach to my research and the focused investigation of the literature is a relative strength of this project.

Another strength of my project is the blend of teams and organizations that were selected and interviewed. Although I could have interviewed more participants, the *variety* of organizations selected proved helpful. The context of each participating organization was documented in chapter 1. Additionally, it is important to observe these notes about the organizations:

1. The CEO of TRH is a professing Christian and a committed member of his local church; his participation in the research produced captivating insights into a for-profit organization and how a Christian leader can deploy God-given gifts in this arena
2. The participating churches range in size (Sunday attendance) from 250-5,000 people
3. The participating churches also vary in geographical location—from Amarillo (West Texas) to the greater Houston metropolitan area
4. The participating organizations vary in age—from 7 years to 25 years
5. Each SLT varies in its size – from 5 members to 12 members

All of these qualities strengthened the interviews and the overall project.

The focus on personal discernment and formation, as well as team discernment and formation, are two additional strengths of this project. By introducing these sections, I wanted to provide some language and practices that would guide individuals and teams toward introspection, reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, deciding. It is not uncommon for leaders and teams to simply formulate an opinion (albeit educated) and try to get other people onboard. This is also true (perhaps, especially so) in the church. When facing a decision, church leaders tend to identify their options, discuss those options, and work to garner the support of other leaders. This cycle repeats itself with every new idea or opinion, and church leadership teams can spend an unwarranted amount of time in a state of

paralysis. Before long, the SLT will realize that they are stuck. To overcome this cycle of paralysis and indecision, I argued, first, for personal discernment habits that can actually reinforce each team member's engagement with the spiritual disciplines. Leaders will face decisions that challenge their thinking and reveal their limitations. By regularly engaging the rhythms of solitude, silence, Scripture, prayer and self-examination, leaders and decision makers are positioned to listen to God and discover the motivations, fears, insecurities, and delights that are influencing the heart and the mind. A leader might consider picking one of these spiritual disciplines to engage more consistently in the coming months. This kind of personal formation is beneficial because one can begin to unearth the wisdom, patience, and understanding required in any decision-making process. Second, I argued for team discernment and formation practices that allow the SLT to identify the core elements of the decision; articulate undergirding organizational values and principles; and adopt disciplines for asking questions, sitting in silence, studying Scripture and practicing prayer. Experiencing these rhythms can deepen trust among teammates, expose conflict that leads to reconciliation, and heighten awareness of the movements of the Holy Spirit. Taken together, these phases enrich the holistic approach of the Paradigm for Practicing Decisive Leadership.

What I Would Do Differently

Perhaps the most significant adjustment I would make is the added contribution of minority leaders and female leaders. Although I genuinely value the participation of the selected leaders, the project would benefit from other voices. All the leaders I interviewed are white males. I am curious to know how minority leaders and female ministry leaders would engage the interview questions. I regret that I adopted such a narrow frame (ironically!), but expanding the search for other voices will benefit any continued research or future publication of this material.

Additionally, I would adjust a portion of the interview questions to draw out more anecdotal responses. The research questions I deployed shed light on the functional

aspects of decision making, but I did not specifically ask for anecdotal responses. Adjusting the scope of the questions would be advantageous, such as, Can you think of a time when the SLT experienced a gridlock around a major decision? Can you describe a time when you made a decision without thoroughly examining your biases or limitations? Can you describe a time when the SLT experienced a productive and unified decision? Questions like these could produce some interesting anecdotes for other leaders to learn from.

The notion of mental models is intriguing. The work of Jennifer Riel and Roger L. Martin complemented my research and argumentation in chapter 3. I am, however, left wondering how mental models permeate Christian teams and organizations. Given the opportunity, I would expand the scope of my reading and research to try and find some answers to these questions. A more detailed outline of mental models, and their corresponding effects, could guide readers toward identifying their own tendencies on such a spectrum.

Theological Reflections

It is my conviction that God sovereignly works through our decisions to bring about his plans for our lives. Decision making is part of the beauty and mystery that defines our relationship with God, but we can be certain that he is always working for our good and his glory. Similarly, Christian leaders and teams can be certain that God is providentially involved in the affairs of the church—his plans for his church are beyond all that we can imagine or even accomplish on our own. Leaders and teams within the local church should confidently embrace God’s promises while learning to courageously carry out decision-making responsibilities.

As my biblical and theoretical research unfolded, I became increasingly convinced that Christian leaders and teams are charged to make the best decisions they can. Admittedly, my personality and wiring are inclined to reason that there is one perfect decision for every problem, issue, or circumstance. And, I would venture to say that many Christian leaders feel this way about the decisions in their organizations or churches.

However, this is simply not the case. From a biblical standpoint, believers are taught to seek the Lord, ask for his wisdom, discern in community, and trust in his faithfulness. My Paradigm for Practicing Decisive Leadership aims to capture these elements, and it is helpful because it gives leaders a tool for an often illusive or muddled process. There is no biblical or theological rationale for arriving at the “perfect decision.” Thus, accepting this reality releases leaders from a lot of unnecessary pressure, stress, fear, and paralysis.

Personal Reflections

I am pleased with the final product, but it is *in* the process that the greatest rewards have been found. Through this process, I have explored previously unfamiliar territory, dialoged with some inspiring pastors, leaders, and academics, and experienced the writing process like never before. It is impossible to quantify the value of these things.

As I reflect upon this project, I am overwhelmingly struck by the holistic nature of decisive leadership. Decisive leaders understand that decisions do not exist on one plane—the organizational plane. Many of the decisions that leaders and teams make exist on multiple planes—organizational, functional, spiritual, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and communal. All of these layers are intricately woven together and many decisions will impact people at multiple layers of their lives. Some decisions will frustrate, and others will motivate. Some decisions will move us toward the future, but we will need to part ways with aspects of our past. Some decisions will motivate the team to keep pressing ahead, while other decisions will cause team members to find a new playing field. Some decisions will produce immediate results, and some of us will die before the crop is ready to be harvested. A leader’s personal decisions can impact the entire team, and, conversely, an organizational decision can impact the leader and his/her family. Decisions do not exist in a single column. Yet, by practicing a more decisive and deliberate form of leadership, leaders can navigate the terrain with clarity, compassion, grace, and hope.

Conclusion

Practicing decisive leadership, personally and organizationally, is a matter of stewardship. The process requires great effort in praying, seeking, thinking, analyzing, discussing, assessing, and deciding—this is how a leader stewards the decisions that have been entrusted to him. Believers steward their leadership responsibilities and decision-making capacities to honor God and serve his people. Yet, they do not pursue this leadership expedition on their own. The Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit have been given to believers. Decisive leadership is a blend of fear and courage, limitations and strengths, waiting and acting, faith and obedience, art and science, hesitancy and hope. The author of Proverbs captures it well and passionately instructs when he writes, “Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established” (16:3). Go! Make decisions, press ahead, and trust in God Almighty.

APPENDIX 1

RESEARCH INTERVIEW AND FINDINGS FOR TRUSTPOINT REHABILITATION HOSPITAL OF LUBBOCK

Although this project was primarily designed to advance the field of Christian leadership and decision-making, I found it very beneficial to investigate a for-profit context. Below are the most salient findings from my interview with the CEO.

The purpose of the SLT is clearly defined: promote culture, promote vision, and carry out strategic planning. The long-term vision and culture of TRH is promoted, protected, and evaluated by the SLT. This team consists of the CEO, CFO, Director of Therapy, Director of Marketing and Development, and Director of Patient Outcomes.

When asked about *how* the team makes decisions, this participant indicated that the SLT takes time to read through the organization's guiding principles together (aloud). This exercise helps the team to recall *why* the hospital exists. Functionally, the SLT asks two important framing questions: *is this consistent with our values and principles* and *does this answer the question of 'why do we exist'?*

It is also significant that this participant has adopted a decision-making habit: *can the room reach a consensus without my opinion?* He acknowledges that he reserves the right to make a unilateral decision when one of two conditions are at play: 1) an urgent and time-bound decision (addressing a problem or unique opportunity); or 2) when the room is split. Yet, most of the time he refrains from exercising unilateral decision-making power and works to unearth the perspectives of each team member. He also works diligently to help the team understand one another's vantage point and perspective.

This participant also has a personal philosophy about promoting diversity. It begins in the hiring process – *are you hiring different kinds of people?* This SLT consists

of people who are different – “we try hard not to have the same flavor in the room.” This also requires the leader of leaders to empower each of those diverse voices. In his estimation, the advantage is that the SLT is comprised of people who have failed in different ways and those failures have taught each team member something different.

For further examination, I have included the field notes from this interview:

Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role in the organization (TRH).
 - Completed a clinical degree and began doing direct patient care
 - Was given the opportunity for some managerial leadership and sought opportunities to take on projects
 - Began reading and broadening knowledge of leadership and management
 - Became the department director for a few months
 - The first CEO was removed, and I was soon appointed to the CEO position
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) in the organization?
 - The purpose of the senior leadership: promote culture, promote vision, carry out strategic planning, driving solutions to problems that arise (long-term vision and hospital culture)
 - Strategic initiatives must advance the mission and the values of the hospital
 - The SLT determines the value proposition that the hospital provides to patients, insurance companies, and other acute hospitals (answering the “why?”)
 - SLT: CEO, CFO, Director of Therapy, Director of Marketing and Development, Director of Patient Outcomes
 - Example: The Director of Therapy has great discernment and wisdom; his title may reflect middle-management but his value to the SLT is undeniable
3. What is the vision of the organization? What are the goals of the organization?
 - Mission: to improve the quality of life for our patients
 - Vision: We will be a driving force in the market to help patients get home
 - Specific goals for the coming year: a) increase internal capabilities around dialysis (move toward insourcing); b) strategic partnerships with ACO (providing care and reducing costs) – this increases patient volume without surging costs

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
 - Sometimes decisions are easy and there is a clear path
 - When faced with a difficult decision or a long-term decision, we read through our guiding principles together (out loud)
 - “Is this consistent with our values and principles?”
 - Does this answer the question of ‘why do we exist?’

2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the CEO alone?
 - I probably don't make 5 decisions a year by myself
 - If I do make a decision by myself it falls into 1 of 2 categories: 1) an urgent and time-bound decision (addressing a problem or a unique opportunity); or 2) when the room is split
 - Can the room reach a consensus without my opinion?
3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
 - The biggest challenge we face is when someone in the room doesn't feel empowered to speak their mind
 - A high-degree of determination from one person can create barriers for other people in the room; stifles diversity of opinion
4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?
 - One-on-one conversations: "What are you not saying in the room? What do you really think?"
 - Guiding the conversation and discussion toward collaboration
5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
 - See # 4 above
6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
 - Developing a deeper sense of understanding for everyone in the room; even if there is a "soft" disagreement among opinions
 - Helping the team understand one another's vantage point – ex: put yourself in the CFO's shoes; can you see why the Director of Therapy would feel this way?
7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
 - Mitigating bias: promoting diversity (this goes back to the hiring decision – are you hiring different people?)
 - There are ways to cultivate diversity (gender, race, educational level, work experience, background, age)
 - We try hard not to have the same flavor in the room – this helps to solve team bias because you can get a fuller picture
 - This gets people in the room who have failed in different ways and that has taught each of them something (uniquely and different)
 - I have always insisted on having a CFO who has a strong voice but is different (female)
 - Empowering those diverse perspectives
8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
 - I insist on these 2 things: 1) strongly encourage conflict because I think it is healthy for the organization; and 2) fair rules of engagement
 - Rules of engagement: you have permission to yell at me, tell me your feelings are hurt, BUT it has to be resolved today (emotional resolution)
 - These are written rules of engagement (literally) and this helps to keep us together as a team

9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt an organization-wide perspective during the decision-making process?
 - 1) Transparency: no secrets on the SLT – this builds trust; people know what is going on in other departments and teams
 - 2) The scorecard: everyone presents their data and their action plan (everyone stays informed on the organization)
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?
 - N/A

APPENDIX 2

SYSTEM 1 AND SYSTEM 2 THINKING: A SUMMARY OF KAHNEMAN'S PRESENTATION

System 1	System 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operates automatically and quickly • Gullible and biased to believe; seeks confirming evidence • Requires little or no effort; there is no sense of voluntary control • Generates impressions, intuitions, and inclinations; when endorsed by System 2 these become explicit beliefs and deliberate choices • Generates basic assessments of various situations; this happens at a glance • Establishes stereotypes and categories that represent norms • Interprets what is taking place in the immediate surroundings; seeks to link this with the past and the future • Constructs patterns and draws associations linked to circumstances, events, actions, and outcomes • Focuses on what is seen (WYSIATI) • Frames decisions narrowly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocates attention to the mental activities that demand it, this includes complex and difficult computations or problems • In charge of raising doubts and introducing suspicions, but is often busy or lazy • Follows the path of least effort; reluctant to invest more effort and energy • Activities that impose high demands upon System 2 require self-control; exerting this self-control can deplete the energy of System 2 • Mobilized when System 1 does not have an answer for a question that arises • Has the ability to change the way System 1 works by triggering functions of attention and memory

APPENDIX 3

QUESTIONS FOR ENGAGING THE METADECISION AND FRAMING PROCESS

Below are some additional questions that will help teams engage the metadecision and framing process.

- What is the crux of this issue?
- What is the primary difficulty in this decision?
- What does this team believe about how decisions like this one should be made? What kind of decision is this?
- Does this decision impact other decisions? If so, how and why?
- How much time should the team devote to making this decision? How long should it take?
- Has the team put any boundaries around the problem or issue? Are these boundaries helpful or unhelpful?
- Which criteria will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of this decision?
- Which metaphors are helpful as the team thinks about this issue or decision?
- What are my own biases, limitations, and frames in dealing with this issue?
- How can I seek to understand the frames of others?
- Which other points of view would be helpful?
- How would a more experienced decision-maker handle this?
- How will the team feel about this issue or decision 10 minutes from now? 10 months from now? 10 years from now?

APPENDIX 4

DECISIVE LEADERS: A PARADIGM FOR OVERCOMING PARALYSIS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Assessing Decision-Making Practices A Qualitative Instrument

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify and deepen understanding of the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams. This research is being conducted by Jason Davila for the purposes of completing doctoral project research. In this research, you are being asked to participate in an interview. The researcher will record this interview and take notes. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By participating in this interview, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

The following questions have been informed by, and adapted from, the work of Dr. Ryan T. Hartwig. His research for the publication of *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* is instrumental in the formulation of this qualitative instrument. These questions are being used with his expressed written consent and permission.

Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role at the church.
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) at the church?
3. What is the vision of the church? What are the goals of the church?

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the senior/lead pastor alone?
3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?

5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process?
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?

APPENDIX 5

FIELD NOTES

Participant A

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Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role at the church.
 - A calling to church-planting that emerged at the end of college
 - Set out to plant a church in 2011 (with his friend); shared leadership principles were adopted, as seen in the NT
 - Co-equal eldering and leadership by these two planters; this commitment has led the co-leaders to discover and examine their gifts and truly assess God's calling on them
 - Vision, direction, and mission are my key roles
 - 50% of the preaching
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) at the church?
 - 200-300 people in the church; this size dynamic impacts the leadership team
 - Have tried to maintain a size dynamic that allows the senior leaders to function as true elders (with key leadership responsibility)
 - The SLT are the elders (5 men with specific areas of oversight in the church)

- 3 vocational elders and 2 non-vocational; their leadership can function relationally because of the size dynamic
 - Elders are charged with leading the church in a *clear lane*
 - Ex: financial stewardship/oversight through an elder who has qualified deacons under his care (gifts, calling, and passion are aligned for an elder and his lane of ministry)
3. What is the vision of the church? What are the goals of the church?
 - Vision: gospel-centered missional family who is learning and living the way of Jesus (discipleship and evangelism)
 - Goals (next six years): grow in number, reach, and depth
 - Reach doesn't outpace depth and health
 - From 250 to 500 people; from 12 small groups to 25 groups; 5 elders to 10 elders

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
 - Elder team works together to set vision/direction for the next year (areas of focus, new initiatives)
 - Every voice is needed, and every voice is important
 - Each person has ownership (a first among equals in that particular area of leadership) and then provides progress reports (empowerment)
 - In general, the team will submit to an elder in his particular area of leadership
 - Empowerment ethos more than management
2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the senior/lead pastor alone?
 - Plurality is key (organizational chart reflects this shared leadership; a “circle” or a “square”) – the team leads the church together
 - This team is aiming to operate on relationship/trust, not primarily around organizational or business principles
 - Each team member is given freedom to execute in ministry
3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
 - Communication can be a hurdle; leaders are dependent upon each other to communicate
 - Sin and selfish ambition are challenges that every leader needs to acknowledge
4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?
 - Meeting culture and rhythms can influence these things – how we “execute” those meetings is key (empowerment)
 - Empowerment: listen to the Lord, doing your job well, collaboration with other team members
 - Tools: monthly window, looking forward together (set priorities, key people, prayers, personal needs)
 - Setting culture for the team: we are not just co-workers; we are a family
5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
 - Collaboration is key
 - Shared leadership lends itself to generating new ideas or options

6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
 - Culture of listening and humility; commitment to listening to each other
 - 100% agreement and unanimity are required for SLT decisions
 - If not, it's an opportunity to slow down, reassess, and seek the Lord
 - This is frustrating at different times, but unity is key for leading the church
 - Splintered unity can undermine the mission of the church
7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
 - See #5 and # 6 above
8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
 - Relationship and brotherly love have been foundational components (from day one)
 - In year two, a significant disagreement arose around the direction of the church; one elder was told to step down
 - This produced relational toxicity among the team and made the decision process very difficult
9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process?
 - Every year the elders determine a course for the church
 - Asking: What does the church need? What are we asking God to do this year?
 - Each person brings a church-wide perspective to the daily operations
 - Elder team spends a day together every quarter (pray, play and plan) – if the elders are really connected to the sheep, it helps them to adopt a church-wide (people/sheep) perspective
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?
 - Start every meeting with prayer (invite God into the planning)
 - Elders should be praying regularly for the church – this is part of their daily work and responsibility

Participant B

Agreement to Participate

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Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role at the church.
 - Initially served in various different roles: college ministry, groups ministries, campus oversight
 - Current role (Executive Pastor of Ministry Strategies) began in January 2017 – focus on strategies that primarily support the campuses, as well as extend corporate church-planting and international efforts
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) at the church?
 - SLT is the Central Elder Team – stewarding the culture and vision and managing ministries (12 members on the team)
 - This is a subset of elders of the larger church system – these are vocational staff members of the church
3. What is the vision of the church? What are the goals of the church?
 - The mission of the church is to love God, love the church, love the city and love the nations (ministries are aligned around these pillars)
 - Outcomes: multiply disciples, communities, leaders, churches (benchmarks)

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
 - First and foremost: what kind of decision is being made? does the decision impact the culture? (culture, vision, ministries) – use the Culture Map

- Vision: prayerfully discern (July and January); January allows for mid-course adjustments
 - Decisions are made in plurality (2+)
 - Recognize unique giftings and capacities, then show deference to the “experts”
 - Budget: this is decided by those who have experience (Executive Team)
2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the senior/lead pastor alone?
 - Lead pastor as an employment function (performance evaluations) can make some unilateral decisions
 - But, even the Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision and the Lead Pastor are connected by a dotted-line on the org chart
 - Ethos of plurality
 3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
 - Sin, conflict, friction
 - Different personalities bring their own challenges
 4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?
 - Annual strategic planning and priority setting (conducted in July)
 - Ex: drive clarity in the area of spiritual formation
 - Driving innovation: building this into the culture
 - Gut check: what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s confused, what’s missing?
 - This provides analysis and information
 5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
 - Valuing plurality is the key for diverse viewpoints
 - The right people: creative high-capacity leaders
 - Financial risk can be mitigated in plurality
 6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
 - Divergent viewpoints have been welcomed into the conversation and discussion, but there is not currently a formal structure that supports this
 - What aspects of this need to be formalized in the structure?
 7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
 - Pursuit of self-awareness is key
 - Teams must become aware of assumptions or biases
 8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
 - Guiding question: what domain of the relationship is the conflict in?
 - Conflict among brothers; conflict among elders; employment (ministry function) conflict
 - Feedback loops are critical
 - Fight for clarity and unity – move forward with the expectation that everyone has been heard and we are going forward together
 9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process?
 - You have to care about the whole thing, not just your part (this was a unique challenge when the campus pastors were folded into the Central Elder Team)

- Building a sense of “we”
 - Not just a recipient of the decision, but also a contributor TO the decision
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?
- The character and nature of God: operating with a sense of God’s providence
 - The work of the Holy Spirit does reveal knowledge through gifts and experiences
 - These things are not opposed to each other – planning and pursuit of the Holy Spirit are not at odds
 - Team members value each other’s gifts (plurality) – trust the Spirit’s gifting in each and every person
 - Fight for unity of the spirit and the bond of peace

Final thoughts:

Every time the senior leadership team changes, trust must be rebuilt and re-established.

“There are no perfect decisions. We do the best we can.”

Participant C

Agreement to Participate

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Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role at the church.
 - Serving as the senior/lead pastor for 7 years (November 2018)
 - Previously served as a college ministry pastor, with the long-term intent of planting a church in this town
 - As the core team was being developed an opportunity to replant a failing church presented itself; three months of dialog to determine theological, ecclesiological, philosophical, and strategic alignment with this dying church
 - We went forward with replanting the church
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) at the church?
 - 2 key teams may fit this parameter: the elder board or the ministry staff
 - Elders are the highest-ranking leaders in the church: doctrinal, philosophical, evaluating annual goals and outcomes, shepherding and pastoral care, budget oversight and resource allocation (elders: 3 full-time staff, 7 non-vocational elders)
 - Senior Staff: lead pastor and eight other staff members (ministry directors); senior staff is responsible for executing and implementing
3. What is the vision of the church? What are the goals of the church?
 - Vision: Christ, community, culture (declaring and participating in the mission of God)
 - 3-5 major goals are established every year (strategic planning)
 - Evaluated and determined on an annual basis
 - This process usually happens in the Spring

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
 - The senior pastor (SP) prepares the agenda and discussion items (what are things that need the attention of the full council elders?)
 - The SP determines the agenda items subjectively (discernment of the issue)
 - Senior staff: evaluating completion of projects and tasks; this meeting includes updates and weekly reports; also includes inter-departmental decisions and discussions
2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the senior/lead pastor alone?
 - There is no clear specificity on how this works; this is marked by a level of “intuition”
 - Priority of the decisions are identified by the SP – “a strong senior pastor who is able to determine priorities can actually help reduce conflict”
 - Democratically setting priorities can lead to conflict among team members
 - The SP takes full responsibility for establishing the priorities that need to be decided and executed – works to serve the organization by identifying the “bull’s eye”
3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
 - Relational conflict can create significant challenges – this can zap everyone’s energy and will
 - Reacting to problems is different than proactively leading and managing
4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?
 - Drive innovation: regular practice of evaluating “what’s good” and “how can we make it better”
 - Strengthen morale: stories and celebration moments
5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
 - Creating a culture that allows for open dialog and discussion – this is the time to present a dissenting position
 - Acknowledging the voices that can tend to be quieter or more hesitant
 - The leader must invite and welcome ideas from all participants
 - The leader must acknowledge that there is not only one “idea guy” in the room
6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
 - Try to conduct ourselves in such a way that we are contending for unanimity and consensus
 - If this cannot be achieved, still aim for support from dissenting voices
7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
 - Create a culture where dissent is truly appreciated and will not be immediately dismissed or punished
 - Humility as a value of the culture
 - Present the dissenting opinion with humility and respond with respect
8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
 - Certain types of conflict must be corrected: arrogance, lack of humility

- “Never assume the other person’s motivation” – don’t assume a malevolent motivation
 - Encourage team members to show respect, mercy and love
 - “Do not reduce another staff person to an opinion” (an opinion you disagree with)
9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process?
- Process for church-wide communication or mechanism
 - Ensure that elders have access to information that is outside of their respective areas
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?
- Diagnosing: How much are you praying as a team? How much of a priority is prayer in the team? (this team spends at least half of the elder meeting in prayer)
 - Invite the Lord into making strategy and executing strategy

Final thoughts:

Relational dissension must be confronted

Build a culture of trust and honesty

“Trust is the highest currency of influence” – forged through relationship and shared experience

Participant D

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify and deepen understanding of the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams. This research is being conducted by Jason Davila for the purposes of completing doctoral project research. In this research, you are being asked to participate in an interview. The researcher will record this interview and take notes. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By participating in this interview, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

The following questions have been informed by, and adapted from, the work of Dr. Ryan T. Hartwig. His research for the publication of *Teams That Thrive: Five Disciplines of Collaborative Church Leadership* is instrumental in the formulation of this qualitative instrument. These questions are being used with his expressed written consent and permission.

Introductory Questions

1. Please describe your journey to your current role at the church.
 - Yielded to the call to ministry as a freshman in college
 - While in seminary, served at a church in Dallas for 5 years
 - Then moved to Houston (1998) to serve as the teaching pastor
 - Title and role (in name) have been fairly consistent; core work involves pulpit preaching and theological development
2. What is the purpose of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) here? How is that purpose/function distinguished from other key leaders (individuals and groups) at the church?
 - The SLT at this church is called the Executive Team; these are the executive elders of the church; the team makes the ultimate strategic decisions for the church (directional decisions)
 - Decisions include: operational, financial, ministerial, doctrinal; this team leads across all campuses
 - Some campus pastors are not on the executive team and others are
3. What is the vision of the church? What are the goals of the church?
 - Mission: Lead unchurched people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus
 - Strategy of accomplishing this mission: multi-campus locations (in the 4B area of greater Houston) and small group involvement at each local campus

Decision-Making Questions

1. Describe your decision-making practices as a team. How does the SLT make decisions?
 - There is not a complex system in place

- We have a high value for team-based decision making, although the Senior Pastor is treated as a first-among equals
 - Meeting agenda is sent out in advance to the SLT (week ahead of the meeting); each conversation point may be led and facilitated by the responsible/overseeing executive team member
2. What kinds of decisions are made by the whole team and what kinds of decisions are made by the senior/lead pastor alone?
 - Cannot think of any decisions that have been made by the SP alone (unilateral decisions are not common or preferable) – “unilateral decisions are bad decisions”
 - SP has unique ideas that start with him; but processing is done with the team
 - This kind of dynamic is built on trust – the team is stronger – we trust each other’s experience, wisdom, and spiritual maturity
 - Communicates that everyone has a fair chance at shaping the culture of the church
 - There is a difference between running a staff and directing/leading a team
 3. What are the biggest challenges your team faces when making decisions?
 - Lots of independent thinkers (strong leaders) who are entirely capable of making decisions on their own
 - Team-based decisions are generally slower (strength-perspective VS. speed-perspective) – on a team the needle tends to tilt toward the strength (slower) perspective
 - The challenge is to be efficient (make timely decisions)
 - Ex: Christian sports camp that wants to meet on-campus; not simply an executive decision (student ministry, campus pastor, children’s ministry)
 4. What strategies, procedures, or techniques do you use to solve problems, make decisions or drive innovation?
 - Executive Team: reading and learning from other thinkers (drive innovation) – each team member contributed one “WIG” (wildly important goal) – can prompt and foster innovation
 - Sometimes necessity drives the innovation (ex: hurricane relief in Houston)
 - Create margin: retreats, half-days to get away – “what questions do we need to be asking?” – this is not just about solving problems
 5. What processes exist for creating or generating alternative options or hidden options?
 - Learning from others
 - Avoiding self-deception – getting out of your “bubble”
 - Team-based leadership provides the soil for alternative options and ideas
 6. How does the SLT engage in collaborative conversation and process divergent viewpoints or perspectives?
 - Get to the “brass-tacks” of everyone’s point of view
 - If it’s the senior leader, we do want to show deference – but he does not always get what he wants; the senior pastor works hard to get to the best answer (not just his answer)
 - The leader of that team needs to facilitate good discussion
 - The leader needs to be able to invite everyone’s opinion
 - Everyone can walk out of the room being heard
 - “What are some things that we need to talk about that we aren’t really talking about?”

7. How does the SLT solicit critiques of assumptions or biases that may be guiding decision making?
 - Senior leader: “what’s not working right now?”
 - A policy of open-door communication
 - Does the SLT have any blind-spots? Inviting other viewpoints and campus elders to speak to the team
8. How does the team manage conflict that arises during the decision-making process?
 - Remind the team: honest opinions are important and welcomed, but we acknowledge that emotions are very real
 - Don’t leave the room angry or mad
 - Talking about the issue AND talking about the fight (not just the issue) – is there something still left on the table?
 - “Teams move at the speed of trust” - Covey
 - Understanding how each person is uniquely wired by God
9. How are SLT members encouraged to adopt a churchwide (organization-wide) perspective during the decision-making process?
 - This is a structural configuration: each team member represents different teams/voices throughout the church
 - These leaders press down into the organization and receive feedback upward (from their teams on the ground)
 - Ex: SLT members are viewing decisions from the top but also helping to execute (they are “in” the ministry as well)
 - Example: theological teaching and preaching series; the pathway for it may be discussed at the executive level, but feedback is also garnered from the production team; the ideas are presented as an “unfinished product”
10. How does the SLT use a careful step-by-step approach and seek God for His perspective and leading as you make significant decisions? How do you integrate both?
 - Spending time in prayer as elders; asking what God is doing individually in each team member
 - Opening the Scriptures: “what is God putting on your heart for the church?” – this has changed the direction of the meeting at times
 - The “right people” are mature and growing disciples; personal walk with Jesus is key for leaders at the executive level
 - You can operate in your gifts and talents for a time, but leadership is about what God is doing in the heart

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ABSTRACT

DECISIVE LEADERS: A PARADIGM FOR OVERCOMING PARALYSIS IN ORGANIZATIONS

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The purpose of this project was to identify and understand the dynamics of decisive leadership in teams. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the purpose, rationale, and goals of the project, as well as an overview of the organizational contexts examined in this study. Chapter 2 explores the biblical and theological arguments for Godly wisdom and its implications for decisive leadership. Chapter 3 establishes a working taxonomy of common decision-making traps and presents a paradigm for practicing decisive leadership in organizations. Chapter 4 reports the findings that emerged from the interviews conducted using the qualitative survey instrument “Assessing Decision-Making Practices.” Chapter 5 evaluates the project’s goals, weaknesses, strengths, and concludes with the author’s reflections.

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