FACTOR II: OPERATING SKILLS
CLUSTER D: KEEPING ON POINT

16 Timely Decision Making

The most difficult thing is the decision to act, the rest is merely tenacity. The fears are paper tigers. You can do anything you decide to do. You can act to change and control your life; and the procedure, the process is its own reward. Amelia Earhart – American aviation pioneer and author

Section 1: Your Development Need(s)

Unskilled

☐ Slow to decide or to declare
☐ Conservative and cautious
☐ May procrastinate, seek more information to build confidence and avoid risk
☐ May be a perfectionist, needing to be right, protect strongly against criticism
☐ May be disorganized and always scrambling to meet decision deadlines
☐ May be slow to make decisions on more complex issues

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to use as a substitute for this competency if you decide not to work on it directly.

Substitutes: 1,2,12,27,32,37,39,40,43,47,50,51,52,53,62

Skilled

☐ Makes decisions in a timely manner, sometimes with incomplete information and under tight deadlines and pressure
☐ Able to make a quick decision

Overused Skill

☐ May jump to conclusions and take action before reasonable consideration of the information
☐ May get caught up in deciding for its own sake
☐ May have a chilling effect on getting everyone’s input before deciding
☐ Might be considered impulsive and impatient
☐ Might have some trouble and freeze on issues and problems that are close calls
☐ May make decisions quickly to avoid debate and personal discomfort

Select one to three of the competencies listed below to work on to compensate for an overuse of this skill.

Compensators: 3,11,17,33,39,41,46,47,51,52,58,59,63,65

Some Causes

☐ Avoid conflict
☐ Avoid risk
Disorganized
- Easily intimidated
- Need too much information
- Not focused
- Perfectionist
- Procrastinate
- Slow to make decisions
- Too busy
- Trouble meeting deadlines

**Leadership Architect® Factors and Clusters**
This competency is in the Operating Skills Factor (II). This competency is in the Keeping on Point Cluster (D) with: 50. You may want to check other competencies in the same Factor/Cluster for related tips.

**The Map**
Slow to act? Miss decision deadlines often? Have to scramble to get done? Still weighing the objections? Don’t like to pull the trigger? Unless you’re lucky and work in a very stable niche, this behavior will get you left behind. You won’t respond quickly enough to change; you won’t learn new things; people will be increasingly frustrated as you hold them up. The rewards are to the swift. David Ulrich, a top strategic business consultant, says that in the past there was a premium on being right. That is shifting to being first. In the past, organizations brought out no product until it was time; they worked to make sure it was right and it had a market. Now organizations put out products as fast as possible and fix them later after they get customer reaction. You may associate timely decisions with sloppy decisions, but this is not the case. Timely means sooner, as soon as possible or by a time-certain date but not sloppy. Timely, thoughtful decisions can be of high quality. It’s quality incrementalism.

**Section 2: Learning on Your Own**
*These self-development remedies will help you build your skill(s).*

**Some Remedies**
- **1. Perfectionist? Learn to tolerate incomplete data.** Need or prefer or want to be 100% sure? Want to make sure that all or at least most of your decisions are right? A lot of people prefer that. Perfectionism is tough to let go of because most people see it as a positive trait for them. They pride themselves on never being wrong. Recognize perfectionism for what it might be—collecting more information than others do to improve confidence in making a fault-free decision and thereby avoiding the risk and criticism that would come from making decisions faster. Anyone with a brain, unlimited time and 100% of the data can make...
good decisions. The real test is who can act the soonest, being right the most, with less than all the data. Some studies suggest even successful general managers are about 65% correct. If you need to be more timely, you need to reduce your own internal need for data and the need to be perfect. Try to decrease your need for data and your need to be right all the time slightly every week until you reach a more reasonable balance between thinking it through and taking action. Try making some small decisions on little or no data. Trust your intuition more. Your experience won’t let you stray too far. Let your brain do the calculations.

2. Procrastinator? Start early. Are you a procrastinator? Get caught short on deadlines? Do it all at the last minute? Not only will you not be timely, your decision quality and accuracy will be poor. Procrastinators miss deadlines and performance targets. If you procrastinate, you might not produce consistent decisions. Start earlier. Always do 10% of thinking about the decision immediately after it is assigned so you can better gauge what it is going to take to finish the rest. Divide decisions into thirds or fourths and schedule time to work on them spaced over the delivery period. Remember one of Murphy’s Laws: It takes 90% of the time to do 90% of the project, and another 90% of the time to finish the remaining 10%. Always leave more time than you think it’s going to take. Set up checkpoints for yourself along the way. Schedule early data collection and analysis. Don’t wait until the last moment. Set an internal deadline one week before the real one. More help? – See #47 Planning.

3. Disorganized? Organize with discipline. Don’t always get to everything on time? Forget deadlines? Lose requests for decisions? Under time pressure and increased uncertainty, you have to put the keel in the water yourself. You can’t operate helter-skelter and make quality timely decisions. You need to set tighter priorities. Focus more on the mission-critical few decisions. Don’t get diverted by trivial work and other decisions. Get better organized and disciplined. Keep a decision log. When a decision opportunity surfaces, immediately log it along with the ideal date it needs to be made. Plan backwards to the work necessary to make the decision on time. If you are not disciplined in how you work and are sometimes late making decisions and taking action because of it, buy books on TQM, ISO and Six Sigma. Go to one workshop on efficient and effective work design. More help? – See #50 Priority Setting, #52 Process Management, #62 Time Management and #63 Total Work Systems (e.g., TQM/ISO/Six Sigma).

4. Too cautious and conservative? Learn from mistakes. Analysis paralysis? Break out of your examine-it-to-death and always-take-the-safest-path mode and just do it. Increasing timeliness will increase errors and mistakes but it also will get more done faster. Develop a more philosophical stance toward failure/criticism. After all, most innovations fail, most proposals fail, most change efforts fail, anything worth doing takes repeated effort. The best tack when confronted with a mistake is to say, “What
can we learn from this?” Ask yourself if your need to be cautious matches the requirements for speed and timeliness of your job. More help? – See #45 Personal Learning.

5. **Inconsistent timeliness? Choose when to be timely.** It’s very common for people to be timely in some areas (budget decisions) and untimely in others (give an employee negative feedback). Sometimes we avoid certain areas. Create two columns. Left side are the areas where you seem to make timely and speedy decisions. What’s common about those areas? Right side are the areas where you hold back, hesitate and wait too long to decide. What’s common to that list? Money involved? People? Risk? Higher management’s involved? Are you avoiding detail or strategy or a technical area you dislike or know little about? Since you already make timely decisions in at least one area, transfer your decision behaviors and practices to the other areas. You already have the skills. You just need to get over the barriers (most likely attitude barriers) in the more difficult areas. If you lack expertise, access your network. Go to the two wisest people you know on the decision, hire a consultant, convene a one-time problem-solving group. You don’t have to be an expert in the area, but you do need to know how to access expertise to make timely decisions.

6. **People issues getting in the way? Prepare for difficult conversations.** Sometimes we are timely with some people and not with others. Many times it relates to how they react to you. There are easy to approach people and difficult to deal with people. There are supportive people and punishing people. You may naturally adjust your decision-making style to match the decision customer. Sometimes we avoid hard to deal with people, leaving them to the last minute because we want to be right and not get punished or demeaned. Mentally rehearse for worst-case scenarios/hard-to-deal-with people. Anticipate what the person might say and have responses prepared so as not to be caught off guard. Focus on two or three key points in conflict situations and stick to those clearly and politely. Try not to bring up everything you can think of, but instead focus on essence. Try trial balloons with difficult people. Sometime before a decision is due, float up a small trial balloon on a direction you are thinking of. You’ll take a little heat and maybe a little punishment, but you’ll also get information to create a better decision later. More help? – See #12 Conflict Management.

7. **Overwhelmed? Slice big decisions into bite-size chunks.** Think of a big decision as a series of smaller ones. The essence of timely decision making is the tolerance of increased errors and mistakes and absorbing the possible heat and criticism that follow. Acting on an ill-defined problem with no precedents to follow in a hurry means shooting in the dark with as informed a decision as you can make at the time. Incrementalists make a series of smaller decisions, get instant feedback, correct the course, get a little more data, move forward a little more, until the bigger decision gets made. They don’t try to get it right the
first time. They try their best educated guess now, and then correct as feedback comes in. Many problem-solving studies show that the second or third try is when we really understand the underlying dynamics of problems. So you need to work on two practices. Start smaller so you can recover more quickly. Do something as soon as you can and get used to heat.

8. Stressed? Manage stress and conflict under time pressure. Some are energized by time pressure. Some are stressed with time pressure. It actually slows us down. We lose our anchor. We are not at our best when we are pushed. We get more anxious, frustrated, upset. What brings out your emotional response? Write down why you get anxious under time pressure. What fears does it surface? Don’t want to make a mistake? Afraid of the unknown consequences? Don’t have the confidence to decide? When you get stressed, drop the problem for a moment. Go do something else. Come back to it when you are under better control. Let your brain work on it while you do something safer. More help? – See #11 Composure and #107 Lack of Composure.

9. Holding back information? Inform people in a timely manner. Another common pattern is for a person to have no problem making timely decisions inside one’s head; the problem is holding back announcing the decisions until they become untimely. In this case, there is nothing wrong with your decision-making program; it’s usually your courage and confidence programs. How soon did you come to the decision you are now finally making public? Two weeks ago? Why did you hold it back? Afraid of the reaction? Getting yourself emotionally prepared for the heat? Trying to find the safest time to declare? People like this don’t usually change their minds once the decision is made; they just change their minds about when to tell people what they have decided. To check this out, write down the decisions you would make right now, then compare them with the decisions you actually make and announce later. Are the decisions more the same than different? If they are more the same, you may have this problem. Since the noise and the heat are the same, the simple solution is to declare as soon as you have made the decision. Better to be done with it. If there is any useful data in the noise and heat, you can adjust your decision sooner.

10. Hesitate in the face of resistance? Alleviate your hesitation by analyzing pros and cons. Conflict slows you down? Shakes your confidence in your decision? Do you backpedal? Give in too soon? Try to make everyone happy? Do your homework first. Scope the problem, consider options, pick one, develop a rationale, then go to others. Be prepared to defend your selection; know what they will ask, what they will object to, how this decision will affect them. Listen carefully, invite criticism of your idea and revise accordingly in the face of real data. Otherwise, hold your ground. Are you a chronic worrier? What could happen? What might go wrong? Does it seem like an obsession? Try these two techniques. Write down everything you are worried about. It’s usually hard to fill up a page. Divide your worries into whatever
categories they fall under. Now write down a pro to each con (a worry). Worries are legitimate, but not if you don’t consider the other side. All decision options have pros and cons.

Section 3: Learning from Feedback

These sources would give you the most accurate and detailed feedback on your skill(s).

☐ 1. Direct Boss
Your direct boss has important information about you, your performance, and your prospects. The challenge is to get this information. There are formal processes (e.g., performance appraisals). There are day-to-day opportunities. To help, signal your boss that you want and can handle direct and timely feedback. Many bosses have trouble giving feedback, so you will have to work at it over a period of time.

☐ 2. Direct Reports
Across a variety of settings, your direct reports probably see you the most. They are the recipients of most of your managerial behaviors. They know your work. They can compare you with former bosses. Since they may hesitate to give you negative feedback, you have to set the atmosphere to make it easier for them. You have to ask.

☐ 3. Past Associates/Constituencies
When confronted with a present performance problem, some claim, “I wasn’t like that before; it must be the current situation.” When feedback is available from former associates, about 50% support that claim. In the other half of the cases, the people were like that before and probably didn’t know it. It sometimes makes sense to access the past to clearly see the present.

☐ 4. Peers and Colleagues
Peers and colleagues have a special social and working relationship. They attend staff meetings together, share private views, get feedback from the same boss, travel together, and are knowledgeable about each other’s work. You perhaps let your guard down more around peers and act more like yourself. They can be a valuable source of feedback.

Section 4: Learning from Develop-in-Place Assignments

These part-time develop-in-place assignments will help you build your skill(s).

☐ Manage the renovation of an office, floor, building, meeting room, warehouse, etc.
☐ Plan a new site for a building (plant, field office, headquarters, etc.).
☐ Become a referee for an athletic league or program.
Plan for and start up something small (secretarial pool, athletic program, suggestion system, program, etc.).
Launch a new product, service, or process.
Relaunch an existing product or service that’s not doing well.
Manage a group of people involved in tackling a fix-it or turnaround project.
Help shut down a plant, regional office, product line, business, operation, etc.
Manage liquidation/sale of a business, products, equipment, materials, furniture, overstock, etc.
Work on a crisis-management team.

Section 5: Learning from Full-Time Jobs

These full-time jobs offer the opportunity to build your skill(s).

1. Change Manager
The core demands to qualify as a Change Manager are: (1) Leader of a significant effort to change something or implement something of significance. (2) Success and failure will be evident. (3) Always something new and unique to the organization. (4) Must get many others to buy in and cooperate. (5) Involves cross-boundary change. (6) High visibility sponsor. (7) Exposure to significant decision makers and key stakeholders. (8) Resistance is expected and near-universal. (9) Cost of failure is significant. Examples include: (1) Total Work Systems like TQM, ISO, or Six Sigma. (2) Business restructurings like a move away from a core competence and into a new product space or industry, i.e., American carmakers move into smaller, more fuel-efficient products. (3) Installing major systems (like an ERP or HRIS) and procedures for the first time. (4) M&A integrations, responding to major competitor initiatives that threaten the organization. (5) Extensive reorganizations. (6) Long-term post-corporate scandal recovery.

2. Crisis Manager
The core demands to qualify as Crisis Manager are: (1) Leader responsible for an unpredictable, unique crisis of significant proportion. (2) Success and failure will be evident and visible. (3) Takes Herculean effort to solve. (4) Learning something on the fly. (5) Solution requires cross-boundary team. (6) Leader will be a spokesperson and potentially subjected to media scrutiny. (7) Hostile questioning and suspicious atmosphere is common. (8) Time pressure is extreme. (9) Solution involves working with parties outside the organization. (10) Usually short-term (up to three months). (11) Other parts of job would have to be temporarily set aside. Examples of crisis management would be: (1) A product safety recall; product or system failure. (2) Unexpected death of a CEO or senior corporate executive. (3) Unexpected termination or scandal involving a CEO or senior corporate executive. (4) Trouble with a key customer or supplier that decreases revenue or production. (5) Natural disasters. (6) Terrorist attacks. (7) Kidnapping or arrest of employees; violent crime against employees.
3. Fix-Its/Turnarounds

The core demands to qualify as a Fix-it or Turnaround assignment are: (1) Cleaning up a mess. (2) Serious people issues/problems like credibility/performance/morale. (3) Tight deadline. (4) Serious business performance failure. (5) Last chance to fix. Four types of Fix-Its/Turnarounds: (1) Fixing a failed business/unit involving taking control, stopping losses, managing damage, planning the turnaround, dealing with people problems, installing new processes and systems, and rebuilding the spirit and performance of the unit. (2) Managing sizable disasters like mishandled labor negotiations and strikes, thefts, history of significant business losses, poor staff, failed leadership, hidden problems, fraud, public relations nightmares, etc. (3) Significant reorganization and restructuring (e.g., stabilizing the business, re-forming unit, introducing new systems, making people changes, resetting strategy and tactics). (4) Significant system/process breakdown (e.g., MIS, financial coordination processes, audits, standards, etc.) across units requiring working from a distant position to change something, providing advice and counsel, and installing or implementing a major process improvement or system change outside your own unit and/or with customers outside the organization.

4. Scope Assignments

The core demands for a Scope (complexity) assignment are: (1) Significant increase in both internal and external scope or complexity. (2) Significant increase in visibility and/or bottom-line responsibility. (3) Unfamiliar area, business, technology, or territory. Examples of Scope assignments involving shifts: (1) Switching to new function/technology/business. (2) Moving to new organization. (3) Moving to overseas assignment. (4) Moving to new location. (5) Adding new products/services. (6) Moving between headquarters/field. (7) Switches in ownership/top management of the unit/organization. Examples of Scope assignments involving “firsts”: (1) First-time manager. (2) First-time managing managers. (3) First-time executive. (4) First-time overseas. (5) First-time headquarters/field. (6) First-time team leader. (7) First-time new technology/business/function. Scope assignments involving increased complexity: (1) Managing a significant expansion of an existing product or service. (2) Managing adding new products/services into an existing unit. (3) Managing a reorganized and more diverse unit. (4) Managing explosive growth. (5) Adding new technologies.

5. Start-Ups

The core demands to qualify as a start from scratch are: (1) Starting something new for you and/or for the organization. (2) Forging a new team. (3) Creating new systems/facilities/staffs/programs/procedures. (4) Contextual adversity (e.g., uncertainty, government regulation, unions, difficult environment). Seven types of start from scratches: (1) Planning, building, hiring, and managing (e.g., building a new facility, opening up a new location, moving a unit or company). (2) Head ing something new (e.g., new product, new service, new line of business, new department/function, major new program). (3) Taking over a...
group/product/service/program that had existed for less than a year and was off to a fast start. (4) Establishing overseas operations. (5) Implementing major new designs for existing systems. (6) Moving a successful program from one unit to another. (7) Installing a new organization-wide process as a full-time job like Total Work Systems (e.g., TQM/ISO/Six Sigma).

Section 6: Learning from Your Plan

These additional remedies will help make this development plan more effective for you.

Learning to Learn Better

☐ 1. Teach Others Something You Don’t Know Well
Commit to a project like teaching something you don’t know much about to force you to learn quickly to accomplish the task; pick something new, different, or unfamiliar.

☐ 2. Think and Talk More in Probabilities and Less in Absolutes
Try to be less “0/1,” yes and no; don’t be so absolute in everything you do or say. Think and talk in terms of probabilities (I’m about 60% sure my viewpoint is correct). Try to face what’s real about your suggestions and ideas rather than wishing or projecting you were always 100% correct. Tell people how sure you are before you make a statement.

☐ 3. Commit to a Tight Time Frame to Accomplish Something
Set some specific goals and tighter-than-usual time frames for yourself, and go after them with all you’ve got. Push yourself to stick to the plan; get more done than usual by adhering to a tight plan.

☐ 4. Do Something on Gut Feel More Than Analysis
Act on “gut feel”; go with your hunches instead of careful planning. Take a chance on a solution; take some risks; try a number of things by trial and error and learn to deal with making some mistakes.

Learning from Experience, Feedback, and Other People

☐ 5. Getting Feedback from Bosses and Superiors
Many bosses are reluctant to give negative feedback. They lack the managerial courage to face people directly with criticism. You can help by soliciting feedback and setting the tone. Show them you can handle criticism and that you are willing to work on issues they see as important.

☐ 6. Getting Feedback from Direct Reports
Direct reports often fear reprisals for giving negative feedback about bosses, whether in a formal process, like a questionnaire, or informally and face-to-face. Even with a guarantee of confidentiality, some are still
hesitant. If you want feedback from direct reports, you have to set a positive tone and never act out of revenge.

7. Getting Feedback from Peers/Colleagues
Your peers and colleagues may not be candid if they are in competition with you. Some may not be willing to be open with you out of fear of giving you an advantage. Some may give you exaggerated feedback to deliberately cause you undue concern. You have to set the tone and gauge the trust level of the relationship and the quality of the feedback.

8. Feedback in Unusual Contexts/Situations
Temporary and extreme conditions and contexts may shade interpretations of your behavior and intentions. Demands of the job may drive you outside your normal mode of operating. Hence, feedback you receive may be inaccurate during those times. However, unusual contexts affect our behavior less than most assume. It's usually a weak excuse.

Be willing to make decisions. That's the most important quality in a good leader. Don't fall victim to what I call the ready-aim-aim-aim-aim syndrome. You must be willing to fire. T. Boone Pickens – American businessman Chair of the BP Capital Management Hedge Fund
Suggested Readings


