When teammates raise a white flag

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Executive Overview

It has been said that over half the decisions reached by teams never get carried out and of the rest only half should have been. Whether or not this old saw is accurate is not the point. Managers today are more than a little cynical when it comes to their participation in decision-making teams. While many feel compelled to sit through endless meetings, they frequently surrender—at least privately—by withholding any real effort. And by their own account, they “raise a white flag” in over half the teams in which they participate. In this article, we will explore why this happens and offer ways to manage teams that will minimize the withholding of effort.

“...grabbed the photographic evidence showing the hot gas blow-by comparisons from previous flights and placed it on the table in view of the managers and somewhat angered, admonished them to look at the photos and not ignore what they were telling us: namely, that low temperature indeed caused significantly more hot gas blow-by to occur in the joints. I received cold stares...with looks as if to say, ‘Go away and don’t bother us with the facts.’ No one in management wanted to discuss the facts: they just would not respond verbally to...me. I felt totally helpless at that moment and that further argument was fruitless, so I, too, stopped pressing my case.

Roger M Boisjoly, 1987

Most people instantly recognize the chilling recollection of Roger Boisjoly, the engineer who tried to halt the ill-fated Challenger flight in 1986. It was his testimony that caused the Presidential Commission to conclude that the disaster was the result of a “flawed decision-making process.”

While several flaws were identified, there was—one in particular that received scant attention during the hearings amid all the technical debates. If you read Boisjoly’s testimony carefully, you find numerous statements about a decision-making climate that discouraged full expression of concerns. It was this climate that led several team members at various points in the process—and eventually Boisjoly—to cease any further attempts to alter the course of the final decision.

Thankfully, disasters of the Challenger’s magnitude are fairly rare. Yet for many managers, dramas such as this are played out in the corporate world over and over again on a much smaller scale. The space shuttle disaster should serve to remind us that the ability to manage decision-making teams is a critical managerial skill, and that maintaining a productive decision-making climate is difficult and challenging.
Self-Limiting Behavior

If we consider that the strength of teams—indeed, their primary reason for existence—lies in the potential diversity of perspectives brought to the team by various members, then theoretically better decisions ought to result when all members freely and enthusiastically participate in the process. This approach to decision making was highlighted over ten years ago by Peters and Waterman in their best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence*, when they described communication within excellent organizations:

“They make a presentation and then the screaming and shouting begins. The questions are unabashed; the flow is free; everyone is involved. Nobody hesitates to cut off the chairman, the president, a board member.”

Clearly, such uninhibited participation is often sought, but rarely achieved. More often, the actual decision quality suffers as team members choose to give up. For example, consider the following scenario:

Jack sat in the conference room not feeling terribly excited about the topic of discussion: long-range planning. He thought to himself, “The last time we went through this process it was just an exercise in futility—no one listened to our suggestions.” Most of the individuals in the room agreed with Jack; some had said so at the beginning of the meeting. But their feelings had been dismissed by the division manager when he said, “Look people, corporate told us to produce a long-range plan for this division, and that’s what we are going to do.” So Jack found himself putting on a facade of participation, and involvement, while realizing his main objective really was to get the meeting over with as quickly and painlessly as possible. When the division manager made suggestions about key issues, Jack agreed readily, rationalizing to himself, “Why fight or argue the point? This is a meaningless exercise anyway.

Our research has uncovered considerable evidence that team members frequently engage in behavior similar to Jack’s. We have labeled this behavior “self-limiting” since it describes a general tendency for individuals in teams to limit their involvement. Such behavior may occur at the beginning of the team activity, or as Boisjoly reported, it can occur long after the decision-making process has begun. In any event, whether it occurs in the first meeting, or some time down the road, most managers would agree that this behavior is unacceptable and often dysfunctional.

Surrender by Any Other Name

Over the last quarter century, several behavioral scientists have focused on the tendency of individuals in groups to either withdraw from actively participating or limit their contributions to the group’s decision-making efforts. This tendency has been variously referred to as the “Abilene Paradox,” “self-censorship,” “social loafing,” and “free-riding.” The Abilene Paradox suggests that team members often find themselves pursuing a course of action that is in contradiction to what they really want to do. However, they fail to communicate their beliefs and just go along with the group. Similarly, self-censorship suggests that individuals in cohesive groups tend to ignore realistic appraisals of alternatives, and, rather than “rock the boat,” stop making efforts to think critically. In a similar vein, social loafers and free riders tend to contribute less to the team’s efforts. What all of these popular concepts are addressing is a general tendency for individuals in a group to engage in some form of self-limiting behavior, sometimes under fear of reprisal, as Roger Boisjoly did, or under no fear of reprisal at all, as Jack did. While not all of
these types of behavior are true acts of surrender, they are at the very least a surrendering of the human spirit.

The manifestations of self-limiting behavior can take many forms. The managers we interviewed suggested such behaviors as sulking, daydreaming, doodling, mentally attending to other tasks, refraining from expressing one’s views or judgments, going silent, exerting less energy than one has, behaving non-respondively or passively, and so forth. Our use of the term “self-limiting” highlights the fact that such behavior is a deliberate choice on the part of the individual.

Although self-limiting behavior on the part of one team member does not necessarily equate to a disastrous decision, if all team members are so inclined, the likelihood of a poor decision dramatically increases. When a team member sell-limits, that individual is no longer fully participating in the task of ensuring that group activities are producing the desired results. In effect, the individual has ceased to fully exercise effective influence over events, and has effectively surrendered to other team members. Boisjoly’s decision to succumb to group pressure and give up—“.... So I, too, stopped pressing my case”—during the Challenger launch decision provides an example of the detrimental impact of this behavior. And, as the Challenger incident demonstrates, such behavior often results in decisions contrary to what the team members actually believe should be made, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Unfortunately, while most managers would prefer that all team members fully contribute to the team’s decision, they are also faced with the need and responsibility to keep disruptive team members from sidetracking the decision process. Consider for a moment how Roger Boisjoly’s boss might have viewed Roger’s behavior if you had a subordinate who “angrily admonished” you, how might you have perceived that behavior? Even through Boisjoly was proven correct and his warnings should have been heeded, we suspect that most managers, at some point, would have seen him as disruptive to the process. Ultimately, Boisjoly succumbed to group pressure and eventually was amputated by a management vote. Ironically in this case, the most telling self-limiting behavior seems to have occurred within the management team which silenced Boisjoly’s objections when,

“During the closed manager’s discussion, Jerry Mason (the General Manager) asked the other managers in a low voice if he was the only one who wanted to fly and no one answered him [italics ours].”

Why Team Members Give Up

Even though managers identified many causes for their self-limiting behavior in teams, we found there were six that were most frequently cited.

1. The presence of someone with expertise. When team members perceive that another member of the team has expertise or is highly qualified to make a decision, they will self-limit. Members’ perceptions of other teammates’ competence play a major role here, especially since these assessments are formed quickly, and often before a team meets for the first time. New employees or team members may be particularly at risk, since they may perceive that all other individuals on the team hold more expertise simply by virtue of their tenure with either the organization or the team. However, team members may determine that another teammate possesses more expertise, and thus decide that their input is not needed or, worse yet that attempting to input could make them look foolish and uninformed.
2. The presentation of a compelling argument. Similarly, team members may be inclined to self-limit when a teammate makes a compelling argument. Several managers told us that, if the argument presented was persuasive and similar to their own, they would be inclined to “rest their own case.” Managers reported that frequently the timing of a compelling argument influenced their decision to self-limit—especially if it was made after a lot of fruitless discussion. As one manager noted, “We’d been having a long and absolutely useless discussion, and we were all getting frustrated at getting nowhere. Finally, someone came up with an idea that seemed reasonable, and I was more than happy to agree to it.”

3. Lacking confidence in one’s ability to contribute. If team members feel unsure about their ability to meaningfully contribute to the decision, they will be inclined to self-limit. Managers often pointed out that in important, high profile decisions, if they weren’t extremely confident about their perspective, they just “kept quiet.” Beyond the element of personal risk, often the complexity of the decision influences the confidence level of team members. If, for example, the decision appears to be complicated, insurmountable, or if it is ill defined or ambiguous, individual team members may simply feel overwhelmed by the challenge it represents.

4. An unimportant or meaningless decision. Frequently, managers told us that they were inclined to mentally withdraw or just “loaf” when they believed the decision would have no impact on their unit. In addition, if they saw no direct relationship between their work on the team and the outcome of the team’s activities, they limited their efforts. Unless a decision was seen as vital or important to the individual’s well being, there was a powerful tendency to adopt a “who cares” attitude. Clearly, this attitude was encouraged when the contributions made by individuals were unrecognized. One manager reported that when she realized that only the team leader was likely to get any recognition for the team efforts, she “felt a sense of real frustration; the whole group was putting in minimal effort because there was no payback for us.”

5. Pressure from others to conform to the team’s decision. Irrespective of management level, managers reported being influenced by pressures exerted on them by the rest of the team. Roger Boisjoly poignantly reported, first hand, the incredible pressures to conform exerted by the management team. Whether it’s out of a fear of retaliation, a sense that pressing one’s case will weaken established friendships, or just the real human fear of being shunned by a group, the fact is that most individuals under such pressure cave in. As one manager said, “I know my place, and I know when I’ve crossed the line. I have to have a real good reason to take on my team.”

6. A dysfunctional decision-making climate. Team members found it disconcerting, and a cue to self-limit, when they believed that other team members were frustrated, indifferent, disorganized and/or generally unwilling to commit themselves to making an effective decision. When a team flounders aimlessly for a long time, many members simply give up. Surprisingly, such a climate can be easily created, especially in the early stages of a decision, by inadvertent remarks such as “this is a ridiculous task,” “nothing’s going to change, why bother?” or “management won’t listen to us anyway.”

What Team Leaders Can Do

Clarifying why team members privately surrender, while interesting, is not the whole story. Of greater concern is the frequency of reported surrendering. Overall, managers reported limiting their efforts or input in over half (56%) of the teams in which they had participated. And, as can be seen in Exhibit 1 (at the end of document), the most commonly cited reason is the presence of someone with expertise—a full seventy-three percent of the managers surveyed indicated that this was the number one cause. The second most frequently cited cause was a highly persuasive
argument—especially if the argument was similar to one’s own. One manager we interviewed said, “If someone on the team makes an argument close to my own, I generally feel little need to jump in and add my two cents. Besides, that team member might see my comments as raining on his parade.”

While gaining a better understanding of these causes, and perhaps educating team members about them, is a good first step, managers need to think about other proactive corrective measures. Although we have focused on examples that occurred during decision-making meetings, it is also important that managers give thought to actions that can be employed either before or after a meeting.

**Before the meeting begins**

Several of the causes identified may trigger premeditated self-limiting behavior by team members. That is, members may consciously decide to give up even before the meeting starts—as Jack did in our earlier example. To reduce this possibility, it is crucial that the team leader chooses the right mix of team members and frames the decision appropriately before the meeting.

*Choosing the right mix of team members.* Effective contributions from individual team members depend, in part, on appropriate team composition. Producing the right mix of team members, however, is tough to implement even in the most fluid organizations.10 In general, team leaders should follow two rules in generating an appropriate team composition: create a climate that minimizes status differences, and monitor the size of the team.

First, the higher the status differences between members of a team, the greater will be the attribution of superior skill or knowledge to high-status team members. High-status members are often at the center of communication, thus giving them an even greater aura of expertise that can erode lower status members’ confidence in their ability to contribute. Lower-status team members may not voice their own opinion after listening to a higher status team member because they feel their comments will be inadequate or they associate status with expertise or a compelling argument. Furthermore, lower-status members are likely to feel the pressures to conform more quickly when such pressures are even minimally exerted by a high status member. Thus it is imperative that the team leader encourages all of the members to express their views, and creates a climate where everyone is given adequate non-judgmental air space.

Interestingly, companies that report highly successful teams often use self-managed teams that have a noticeable lack of status symbols.12 In addition, many companies use an informal status-minimizing style of dress as another approach to improving participation in team decision making. In situations where status differences cannot be avoided, team leaders can still reduce such differences by not addressing team members by title in the meeting or in written documents sent to team members.

Second, the size of the team may also influence the prevalence of self-limiting behavior. Although large groups can provide a wide range of abilities and perspectives from team members, self-limiting behavior is likely to increase with group size.13 Teams that are too large for the task often experience problems with individual accountability or responsibility, since the task is spread among too many individuals. Large teams also reduce the potential for each member to make a meaningful contribution, and thus may decrease members’ levels of commitment and identification with the team. Finally, large teams increase the likelihood that
status differences will become pronounced and the weight of pressures to conform will become stronger, thereby discouraging team members from expressing their views.\textsuperscript{14}

On the other hand, teams that are too small to make an effective decision may cause self-limiting behavior if team members perceive the decision task as impossible. If the team is under-resourced, members may perceive the team’s goal as too difficult, thereby drastically reducing commitment and increasing self-limiting acts.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, there is good reason for team leaders to carefully assess what skills and talents are really needed on a team and choose team members carefully. As one manager reported, “It’s too easy to include members just for political reasons when, in fact, such individuals will just side-track the decision-making process. We have found that if members are not given a good reason for being on a team, they are highly likely to engage in self-limiting behavior which we suspect—especially early on in the team’s formation—will have a negative impact on the team’s decision-making climate.

\textbf{Framing the team decision task appropriately.} Often, important team decisions are not given the attention they deserve by all team members because the task is not appropriately presented to the team. Before the meeting, team leaders need to be especially attentive to the cues their actions provide to prospective team members about the importance of the decision to be made. If team members believe that their task is “an exercise in futility” (as Jack did), they will likely come to the meeting prepared to surrender. However, by explicitly conveying the consequences of the team decision to the members early on—perhaps in a memo, or better yet in a briefing at some time before the first meeting—such actions can be reduced.

Team members who are assigned to the team as an additional role responsibility may find good reason to self-limit as a way of reducing role overload or conflict. These team members may be preoccupied with other responsibilities and not able to attend to the current discussion. Because of their other responsibilities they may perceive the upcoming team meeting as a waste of valuable time and label the team decision as unimportant or meaningless—at least as far as their current priorities dictate. Therefore, to convey the importance of the task, team leaders should be sensitive to team members’ other responsibilities, and attempt to reduce or re-prioritize any responsibilities that may hamper decision-making efforts. By addressing such potential conflicts before a meeting, members can come on board with far greater enthusiasm than might otherwise have been the case.

Finally, many teams suffer because their goals are ambiguous or ill defined. To the extent that team goals are unclear, team members may become indifferent to the task or may think that the decision is unimportant. Therefore, providing clear, consistent, and specific goals will likely reduce self-limiting behavior in teams by providing a sense of direction and a better understanding of the decision’s importance. In addition, if the goals are challenging, team members will be motivated to participate, thereby enhancing the team climate and instilling a sense of purpose in team members.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{During the meeting}

Despite efforts before the meeting, team members may still engage in self-limiting behavior during the meeting. The key to reducing or preventing this from happening is to set a positive tone at the start, and actively monitor the group’s process during the meeting. The team leader can either act as monitor or encourage others to play this role. In addition, the entire team can engage in process monitoring by practicing self-management techniques.
Setting the tone for the meeting. If the decision will take several meetings the first meeting for
the group is crucial, since it often establishes lasting precedents for the team. Team leaders
should prepare for, and be conscious of the initial issues raised; they may preoccupy the team for
several meetings. Even if the team meets only once, the initial interactions will set the tone for
the rest of the meeting.

The leader should set a positive tone during these initial interactions by establishing productive
team norms. It is particularly important to define the process norms, which will guide the team’s
actions. Will the decision be achieved by consensus? Will all members share responsibility for
implementing the final decision? It is absolutely essential that the team leader think through and
then conveys to the team these operating norms.

Finally, tone can also be affected by the setting. Does this seem to be a “business as usual”
meeting, or have steps been taken—such as a retreat setting—to set the stage?

Monitoring the process. Team leaders have been exhorted to monitor team decision processes for
some time. However, monitoring the decision process is a difficult challenge. Since team
leaders almost always have ideas or opinions of their own, they find it very difficult to play the
more passive role of facilitator. Yet, quite often, team members will exert greater effort if the
team leader encourages their efforts.

In addition, while there are several kinds of dysfunctional behavior exhibited by team members
that need to be managed by the team leader in order to prevent dropouts, two types of behavior
are particularly damaging to the decision process. First, in the early stages of a team decision,
when brainstorming is essential, premature evaluation of ideas can lead to self-limiting behavior
and a team that “can’t think of anything.” Second, if one particular idea is given a great deal of
attention or if a single team member dominates the discussion, other team members may decide
to self-limit, resulting in premature closure on a decision. A team leader needs to shift the focus
of the discussion to other ideas or other team members so that a full complement of ideas from
various team members can be presented. While this can be difficult during the meeting, the team
leader can always suggest a follow-up meeting to explore ideas that occur to team members after
the meeting concludes. Such “second chance” meetings allow members the opportunity to voice
concerns and opinions that may have been muffled in the earlier meeting.

Encouraging self-management by team members. When the team leader is not included in or is
not able to attend team meetings, self-limiting behavior may be more prevalent. In such cases,
self-management can be the answer for minimizing such behavior. A self-managed team is
typically a group of complementary skilled employees who are allowed discretion over a whole
task in terms of methods, task scheduling, and assignment of team members to tasks. In these
teams, members are encouraged to demonstrate self-managed behavior such as self-
observation/evaluation, goal setting, and self-criticism. While it is possible for team members to
each behave as team leader from time to time, self-managed teams should be encouraged to keep
an open line of discussion on their process or assign a process monitor.

After the meeting

Even after a decision is reached or a meeting has concluded, team members are likely to work
together in the future or be part of other teams. As such, the team leader’s attention to self-
limiting behavior should not end. Often a team decision will not result in any visible action, at
least not in the manner intended by the team. Quality teams, for example, often experience
extensive self-limiting behavior because their recommendations are repeatedly dismissed or ignored by management. This indicates to the team that their effort was not worthwhile and may influence their behavior on future teams.

Team leaders should provide honest feedback to team members as to the final outcome and, if the team’s decision was not acceptable, management’s rationale. It is also important for the team leader to praise individual and group accomplishments—or provide other valued rewards—to encourage future individual and mutual accountability. Each team member should also receive feedback concerning his or her behavior and contributions. Those who gave up should be made aware of their behavior and the consequences. During this process, team leaders should attempt to uncover the causes of this behavior in order to be better prepared to work with these individuals in the future.

**Raising a White Flag**
While team members may frequently raise a white flag in meetings, they rarely wave it around; making such members tough to spot. Because the choice to limit one’s participation is private, it may not manifest itself in an observable form of behavior. In many cases, it may be virtually impossible to know if team members are or are not contributing their full potential. Yet, given our findings it is clear that self-limiting behavior is too commonplace in corporate America to be ignored.

Given the stubbornness of the problem and the potential for things to only get worse as the use of teams proliferates, it is incumbent upon all team leaders to reexamine a decision-making team’s process in order to discover if self-limiting has occurred. This may involve asking members to privately voice concerns to the team leader or perhaps expressing them anonymously in writing. In the case of Roger Boisioly, we will never know whether such actions might have averted a tragedy, but had the team leader regularly employed such tactics, it’s possible.

**Major Causes Cited for Giving Up**

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<th>Cause</th>
<th>Frequency of Citation (percent)</th>
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<td>The presence of someone with expertise</td>
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<td>The presentation of a compelling argument</td>
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<td>Lacking confidence in one’s ability to contribute</td>
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<td>An unimportant or meaningless decision</td>
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**Exhibit 1. Why Teammates Surrender**