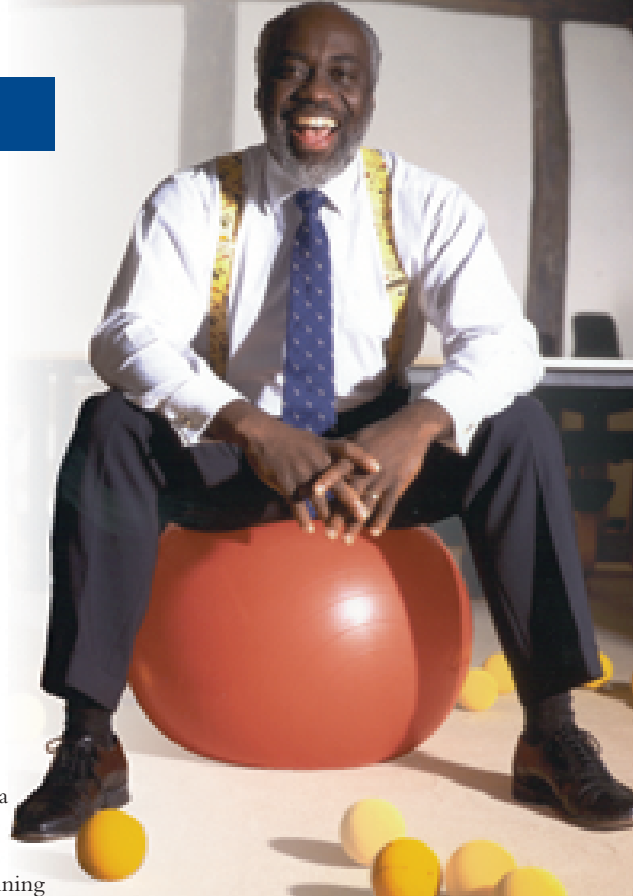# decisions, Decisions! [sic]

After a short break Eddie Obeng is back with his thought-provoking views on project and programme management. Decision-making is probably one of the hardest management tasks and within a project a wrong decision can come back to haunt you. So, get a cup of coffee and read on to see how your decisions can be more effective.

You're waiting for your VP to approve the additional budget spend you need. You've been wondering what can be so difficult. True, there are six other projects in the programme – but yours is the lead enabler, the linchpin. Now you've just heard that you're going to have to present to the Exec. And now one of your team has approached you to ask whether they should hold a user meeting to agree the prototype before it's completely finished. You're not sure, your users are an awkward bunch. You never know if it's better to involve them or keep them in the dark. It's hard to know.

So what is this thing, a decision? A decision is something that happens to select a route at a crossroads from a choice of ways forward. The reason they are worrying is because, usually, decisions are hard to reverse – if you've spent your budget it's gone! And decisions have implications.

The main difference between project decision-making and 'normal' decision-making is that, on projects, the decisions you make come back to haunt you in the future, as the project carries on. For example, in a line job – a customer isn't happy? Give them a refund – problem solved. In a project – a stakeholder isn't happy? Give them a better spec. Problem solved. But now your budget will be overspent, or you will have additional time pressure, so your team are going to have to work harder and morale is going to dip and the change in spec will trigger a change management process with a sign-off by your sponsor who may not agree to the change in spec a week later – so you'll have to go back to the unhappy stakeholder and break the news that you can't give them what you promised. In projects, remember, the first law of change: One change leads to another.

The first thing to be clear on is whose decision it is. I call this big and little decisions. If it's yours to make I call it a decision. If it is for others to influence or make I call it a Decision.

I've discovered, from years of running project management computer simulations that you can substantially increase the performance of a team in a short period by making sure that they have a common decision-making process. A good process can make up for a lack of project management experience in the team. The strange thing is that a good process works just as well in real life as it does in front of a computer. The five-step process I teach is called the project manager's decision-making process. For tackling decisions it is:

1. What is the BIG Issue?
2. Who are the Stakeholders involved?
3. What do I, as the leader, Want to happen?
4. What are my Options? (always include the 'do nothing' option)
5. If I do this option... what do I expect to happen Next?

I have a terrible 'pneumonic' for this which is **ISWON**:

Issue **S**takeholders **W**ant **O**ptions **N**ext?

The BIG Issue is my shortcut way of saying 'What's actually going on?' For example, a team member not achieving their deliverable may appear to be a performance issue. But if you step back and think about all the other things connected with the team member you may realise that the BIG Issue is 'Inclusion' – the team member doesn't really feel included in the team and has no problem in letting everyone down.

Once you have been through the process you need to check that you are maintaining stakeholder engagement. Remember the second law of change: People create change – people constrain change. Let them help you invent the decision and they'll get hooked on making it happen – surprise them with your decision and they'll fight you all the way. So it's essential to check where they stand and make sure you keep them engaged. I use a simple 2x3 matrix. List all the stakeholders you need to agree and all the stakeholders you'll need to do the work and then decide whether you need to involve them in the actual decision-making process or whether it will just be enough to consult or inform them.

Stakeholder Engagement Map
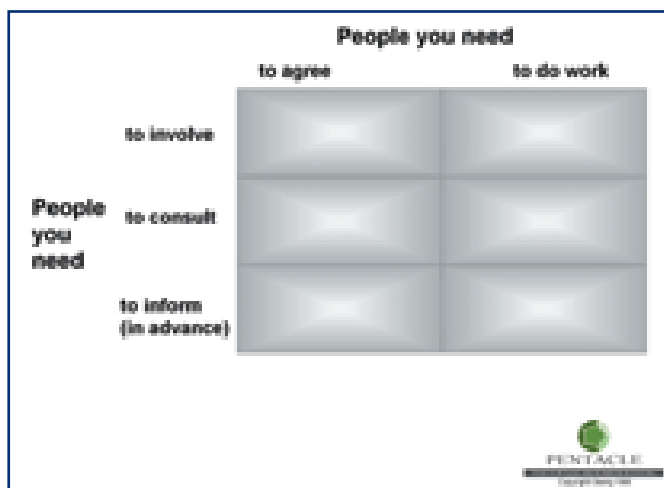
The process is the same if it is a Decision. The main difference is that you have to make sure someone else goes through the project manager's decision-making process. To make this happen you will have to have some additional information.

Whose Decision is it?

What is the Decision to be made? – as clearly and concisely as possible

Why does it need to be made? – use the impact/worst or best case analysis to help

How long is it valid for?

The final wrinkle is to make sure that you've chosen the right method for making the decision. Different methods will lead to different behaviours from stakeholders.

Perhaps this is why your VP was taking so long over making the budget decision and why it's best for you to make your presentation to the Exec. And perhaps you should involve those awkward users – not letting them see the prototype might mean that what happens next is that they become comple-tely obstructive!

*Dr Eddie Obeng is Learning Director at Pentacle The Virtual Business School. He is author of **All Change! The Project Leader's Secret Handbook, Perfect Projects** and, on programme management, **Putting Strategy to Work.***

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