



The 5 Cs of Discernment: A Framework for Executive Decision-Making and Forward Thinking

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The only way around is through.” – Robert Frost

Business, like life, is full of choices.

Executive success often hinges on consistently making sound decisions. The higher you climb, the greater the stakes—stakeholders quickly notice who is responsible when things go awry. Being an effective decision-maker is essential.

Many leaders seldom recognize how decisions are made, often leaving this critical skill to chance. While advice like “trust your gut” or “follow your heart” can be helpful, it’s not enough. These approaches lack the guidance needed to teach others how to consistently make good choices

As Roy T. Bennett said, “Great leaders create more leaders.” That’s why it’s essential to have a simple, impactful framework.

How does a framework help?

First, consider those who struggle with strategic thinking. I once coached a new manager who jumped in at the first sign of trouble, providing answers instead of coaching. This created a dependency among the team.

I received blank stares to questions like, “What is the biggest obstacle you foresee in the next 6 months?” Who on your team has the greatest potential, and what specifically is your plan to coach them to excellence?” What is a recent challenge you’ve faced in holding people accountable, and what are you doing to address this?” And, my favorite, what should we consider implementing over the next 6 to 12 months to achieve even greater performance?” Developing this muscle became vital to this employee’s long-term success because they had

historically been caught off guard by unexpected headwinds and showed little ability to innovate in a hyper-competitive environment. This left them ill-equipped to scale the business until they significantly advanced this aptitude.

Compare this with a second benefit for those forward-thinking minds around the world. Me, for example. I’ve always been a “wonderer.” I wonder why things are happening, what innovative opportunities have yet to be discovered, what else can be done to achieve even greater performance, and so on. Connecting the dots seems to come naturally to me. As a result, I can usually spot opportunities and develop solutions to ordinary circumstances and complex situations.

It wasn’t until I received the gift of feedback from a mentor long ago. “Cam, slow down. Your team isn’t processing this as quickly as you are. You are shining a light on something they haven’t considered. You’re proposing a plan to capitalize on an opportunity they didn’t know existed.” He was absolutely right, and it drove the organization crazy.

This framework, developed from these scenarios and refined over two decades, encourages forward thinking and helps filter ideas.

I call it the 5 Cs of Discernment.

Clarity

Clarity begins with a deep understanding of the topic. This helps leaders see the real drivers behind decisions and spot subtle issues that aren't always obvious.

If you're struggling to identify these influences, a good rule of thumb is to catalog repeatable outcomes. Either positive or otherwise, that might be a pause for consideration. By paying attention to consistent themes within the business, leaders can improve their ability to think critically about potential concepts to explore.

Ask the following questions about a subject.

Question #1: What is the intended outcome?

A simple prompt for determining significance, including its impact on client experience, enhancement of client relationships, business growth, risk mitigation, or the development of future leaders. These are all important aspects that align with the company's vision. By asking this question upfront, less desirable outcomes that fall into a more "nice-to-have" category can be easily stopped in their tracks.

Question #2: What strengths and values are involved within this theme?

This can be an important way to interrupt the typical pattern of human behavior, which is to identify gaps or weaknesses within the team quickly rather than staying centered on existing strengths. By constantly shifting focus away from your team's proven competencies onto each unique occurrence, it will be difficult to inspire the organization to achieve lasting results. It becomes confusing at best. Being great communicators in one area of business surely translates into various aspects. But, far too often, a leader will snap back into creating a

deficiency mindset at the slightest signs of poor performance.

Consider, for example, recurring onboarding issues for new clients. A good leader might spot this quickly and highlight a lack of communication within the team. Worse yet, they might demand more effective communication, stronger adherence to checklist processes, or task certain individuals to more intensive follow-up procedures.

"Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can." – Arthur Ashe

A great leader will elevate their team by attaching an inherent strength or guiding principle to reframe the situation, then empower the team through effective coaching strategies. Asking the team, "How can we leverage our communication skills to help our clients realize even more value throughout the onboarding process?" is a great example of how you can shift the mindset toward a more productive outcome for addressing circumstances that might arise.

Or perhaps your team has displayed a strong commitment to building connections with their clients. In this case, "How can we lean on the strength of our relationships to better serve our new clients during the onboarding stage?" would be a more appropriate course of action.

Including values in your purview adds a lens of intention. It encourages leaders to take a much broader view of occurrences to ensure that they are attentive to those influences that potentially encroach upon the organization's guiding principles.

Executives who consistently uphold their organization's core values will consistently earn trustworthiness within their teams and exhibit heightened levels of engagement and

enthusiasm for adapting to changing priorities. This, again, adds a filter of prioritization that helps even the most chaotic businesses remain diligent in aligning their choices with their company's values.

Question # 3: What can we gain from making a decision?

This takes the initial intended outcome much further. It expands on the potential gains from exploring each topic presented. Executives can now begin to envision the tangible benefits of navigating a wide variety of instances.

Question #4: When is the best time to address this?

When determining a time to follow through on a choice, it can be helpful to pose the question open-endedly. By doing this, you'll be inviting a level of detail into the discernment process that helps organize your intentions. There is a difference between "Now is the best time" and "We have too many initiatives in motion. It's best to wait until Q3."

Use this approach when deliberating amongst a team. It will bring further clarity to the degree of importance to the business if the majority of your executive team is passionate about immediate remedies rather than delaying the development of a solution. The opposite is true if you are passionate but are met with an overwhelming reluctance to add one more thing to the organization's plate.

Consider, for example, a new ERP system that enhances efficiency and productivity across the entire organization. It will make data entry seamless, create more actionable reports, and deliver a higher quality of service to your constituents. However, you've recently undergone a merger and acquisition, and you still need to solidify the strength of your culture.

In scenarios like this, it may be best to pause the implementation of a new system on an already shaky foundation. Hence, the ability to determine time-sensitive sensitivity is a critical component of clarity.

Calibrate

Calibration is the process an executive uses to further refine the direction that is best in a given situation. It stimulates creativity and problem-solving.

Questions to Calibrate:

What possible choices do we have?

What potential benefits are associated with each option?

What level of investment (personnel, capital, partnerships) is associated with each course of action?

What potential setbacks can we anticipate?

How does each align with our current strategic priorities?

How does each align with our mission, vision, and values?

The ability to calibrate as an executive determines choosing the course of action with the best possible outcomes. Calibrating choices requires you to consider the various influences within and outside of your control. This encourages you to gain a deeper knowledge of market influences. existing and potential resources available for deployment, strengthening your ability to think strategically.

Calibrating is best done within a collective group or with a circle of advisors. Your executive leadership team, a seasoned colleague, or a trusted advisor. Consider enlisting a rising star to participate in this process as a chance to elevate future leaders. By inviting others to the conversation, your

probability of selecting the most suitable option will significantly increase. Gaining valuable perspectives from people with different backgrounds, experiences, and competencies will lead to a more comprehensive direction.

The byproduct of a collaborative effort also strengthens commitment to the organization's mission, vision, and values. It also ignites advocacy amongst the team, a crucial factor in the adoption of any decision.

“Decision making is easy when your values are clear.” – Roy Disney

Create

The creation process is where you will turn the hypothetical context into concrete steps, including deliverables and benchmarks, and assign the various roles and responsibilities. I'd encourage you to consider the systems necessary to execute each function properly. Consider, for example, how you will gather and apply feedback, make adjustments, recognize progress, problem-solve for unanticipated difficulty, and ensure communication with key stakeholders.

Smaller entities will have the advantage of being more agile, while larger organizations must consider the involvement and impact on cross-functional departments.

In addition to delegating responsibilities, as the executive in charge, you'll want to stay keenly aware of the following components of the creation process.

Which key stakeholders must be involved early and throughout the process to build and maintain advocacy?

What precise and measurable goals will we use to ensure alignment with our intended outcome?

How will we evaluate the use of resources to fulfill this outcome?

How will we identify and develop risk mitigation strategies through implementation?

How will we monitor progress, allowing for potential adjustments or enhancements?

What resources will be required to achieve optimal success? (Personnel, upskilling, capital.)

And, again, how will we ensure alignment with our mission, vision, and values?

Systematically following these guidelines will help design a more complete course of action. One that passes through critical filters to unlock the greatest potential of success. It will build confidence and elevate your enthusiasm to get started.

However eager you are to implement, I'd instead encourage you to pause.

You know the old saying, “You can't see the forest for the trees,” right? John Heywood said it best when describing someone too intimately involved in the details to look at the entire situation. The same rings true in decision-making.

Whether or not you are following the 5 C's of Discernment on your own or simply overseeing the process with your team, there is great value in stepping away from important projects when they are thought to be complete and ready to go. Why? Because distance allows you to re-evaluate the familiar from a fresh perspective.

Consider, for example, the last time you typed an email in haste. Your blood is boiling with anger and frustration, yet your experience tells you to walk away because nothing good can come of hitting send at the moment. When you return an hour or a day later, you can tactfully revise and confidently send.

Distancing yourself from key decisions allows you to make your decisions even more effectively, and your reputation as an executive will largely be built on the track record of performance resulting from your choices.

“The secret of change is to focus all your energy not on fighting the old but on building the new.” - Socrates

Choose

Choosing to act is a series of small commitments to the strategy you’ve created. However, making a choice within this framework refers to your psychological ownership over the priorities you’ve just committed to.

When you choose to take responsibility for decisions, you foster a sense of accountability and commitment to the outcome. Positive performance is great, but bad performance is equally important to establish trust, model ownership, and cultivate an environment of learning.

And here’s the thing. Because you won’t want to experience being accountable for poor results, your motivation will be much higher for seeing projects succeed. This leads to dedication and commitment, leading to better performance.

“It always seems impossible until it’s done.” – Nelson Mandela

Celebrate

Imagine for a moment. The sounds of golden brass trumpets disperse soothing sounds of triumph throughout the hallway as brightly colored confetti swirls through the air. You’ve skillfully navigated through another incredible

decision-making process with grace and dependability. Congratulations!

Unfortunately, that’s not quite what happens. However, there is a lot to be said for the leader who can recognize the intrinsic value of making deliberate choices in a sometimes uncertain environment. Great leaders invite the gift of celebration into their cultures. The intentional moments of study to measure the success of making a significant stride for improvement should not be underrated.

These moments, no matter how subtle, serve as tremendous opportunities for growth and satisfaction for the collective efforts of the organization. So, I’d encourage you to amplify this important conversation in your business. It presents you with an opportunity to recognize outstanding performance, reinforce value-based behaviors (collaboration, problem-solving, managing conflict, innovation, etc.), and key competencies (resilience, optimism, adaptability, communication, etc.).

It’s worth highlighting that imperfect results should also demand a level of celebration. Establishing a culture that recognizes mistakes encourages people to continue innovating. When team members know that missteps are accepted, they are more likely to continue pursuing solutions without fear of judgment or retaliation. Encourage them to reflect and learn rather than dwell on the past or become uncomfortable about their outcomes.

Fostering this positive atmosphere of continuous learning will build resilience and adaptability within the team. It will improve morale, personal accountability, and communication. And it will inspire growth, which leads to even stronger engagement and decision-making in the future.

“The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.” – Henry Ford

5 Powerful Celebration Questions (regardless of the outcome):

What did we learn from this experience that we can apply in the future?

How can any mistakes we’ve made lead to new opportunities or innovations?

What systems or processes can we improve as a result of this experience?

How did this experience strengthen our team’s resilience and adaptability?

How was our communication with key stakeholders throughout this experience?

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