

Getting from Impulsive Leadership to Deliberate Leadership

From the [Helping Project Managers to Help Themselves](#) Blog by [Lonnie Pacelli](#)

As an individual contributor, Joe was praised by his management for his speed in delivering results. His management was so enamoured with his ability to get things done quickly that he was promoted to a leader role over a team of ten. Joe's speed in taking action carried over into his decision making. He saw making decisions fast as a sign of getting "real work done," versus sitting around talking about things. "Great leaders don't have all the facts," he would say to his team, as justification for moving forward without a good understanding of a decision's implications. Joe's team learned to just say, "Yes, Sir," and do their best to execute what Joe wanted done by the time expected. His impulsive decision making came to a head with a new hire named Greg.

Joe interviewed Greg for a product management position, who talked a great game and quickly won Joe over. Joe made an impulsive decision to hire Greg without checking his references. After Greg started working, it didn't take long for others to see he was clearly unqualified for the position. Suspicious of Greg's claims, Joe did some digging and found he had embellished the accomplishments on his resume. The team and Joe went through several stressful months cleaning up Greg's messes until he was finally let go. Joe eventually recovered as a leader but learned a painful lesson about impulsive decision making; and he had to earn back credibility with his team.

Before I go further, I want to level-set on what I view as impulsive and deliberate leaders.

An impulsive leader prioritizes decision speed over decision quality

A deliberate leader balances decision speed with decision quality

Let's break this down. Impulsive leaders want to move quickly on a decision and tend to use the concept of "imperfect information" as license to not do their homework. They are very action-oriented but run into problems from not thinking through decisions before acting. To an impulsive leader, need dates aren't as important as moving fast. An impulsive leader may not have the time to do something right the first time, but will need extra time later to re-do or un-do something.

In contrast, deliberate leaders are mindful of decision speed, but only as input into overall decision quality. They understand the concept of imperfect information, but don't use it as an excuse to not learn what they can about a decision's implications. They can be every bit as action oriented as an impulsive leader.

What are some warning signs that you might be an impulsive leader? Here are seven:

1. Reversals on bad decisions are the rule not the exception.
2. You typically get pushback from followers on your decisions.
3. Followers execute to your instructions versus owning the problem and figuring out the "how" on their own.
4. You can't align decision due dates with a business need.
5. You're unable to articulate choices and consequences of decision alternatives.
6. You regularly use the phrase "failure is not an option," when asked about the consequences of failure.

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7. You frequently say something like “ASAP,” or “Yesterday,” when a follower asks when something needs to be done.

Do any of these warning signs resonate with you? If so, then give these eight tips a look to help you make the journey from impulsive to deliberate leadership:

1. **Admit you are an impulsive leader** – The first step in transforming from an impulsive to a deliberate leader is an introspective admission that you are impulsive. Be brutally honest, even if the answer is something you don’t want to hear.
2. **Be clear on the what, why, who, and when** – When faced with a decision, take the time to physically write out the decision, why it’s being made, who it impacts, and when it needs to be made by to seize upon an opportunity or avoid a bad consequence. Unless you’re faced with a decision that requires split-second action, i.e., swerving versus braking to avoid a car accident, taking a few minutes to frame up the decision characteristics is time well spent.
3. **Throttle the decision to the need-by date** – I’ve known plenty of leaders who are simply impatient and want something done right away. However, action for the sake of taking action without regard for a need-by date can result in an unnecessarily lesser-informed decision. Know when your decision needs to be made and pace the actions accordingly.
4. **Write out the alternatives and consequences** – Once you’ve framed the decision and when you need it made, be intentional about the alternatives and consequences, including a “do nothing” alternative. Outlining alternatives and what could happen under each one is a forcing function that helps you slow down and be more thoughtful about the decision. Don’t forget the need-by date.
5. **Think about risks as reckless or calculated** – If you’re looking for risk-free decision alternatives, you’ll thrust yourself into decision paralysis. Joyfully embrace that there will be some risks to your decision, but be intentional about classifying the risk as reckless (acting without thinking about consequences) or calculated (thinking about consequences and having mitigations in place in case something goes wrong).
6. **Syndicate your thinking along the way** – I’ve seen way too many leaders hunker down in an office to think through a problem, then emerge like Moses with the stone tablets to proclaim their answer. Unless the decision is confidential, take the team on the journey with you, letting them know the decision you’re grappling with, and its characteristics, alternatives and consequences. I’ve been most successful with implementing decisions that affected my team when they knew things were in the works and they had opportunities to influence my thinking before the decision was made.
7. **Surround yourself with deliberate people** – Great leaders know their weaknesses and surround themselves with people who are strong in those areas. More importantly, they *actively listen* to them. This isn’t to say the leader always accepts advice given; but they listen and provide rationale as to why they’ve chosen to not accept the advice.

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8. **Ask advice of non-stakeholders** – Some of the best leaders I've known not only possess great first-hand experiential wisdom, but humbly and actively seek out candid wisdom from others who are not directly impacted by the decision. The leader still owns the final decision, but he or she allows others to influence his or her thinking. This takes a bit of courage, because someone could throw cold water on what you may think is a great idea, but it could save you a lot of downstream pain trying to recover from a bad decision.

Remember, impulsive leaders prioritize speed over decision quality, while deliberate leaders balance speed with quality. Keep these eight tips in mind to improve the quality of your decision making and become a more effective leader of followers.