



Save stock, avoid damage, and improve work by tapping minds.

Supervisory Decision-Making Styles

- “I tell ‘em what to do, how to do it, and when. There’s no other way. Someone has to call the shots for this operation.”
- “It is usually a mistake for me to finalize production commitments before checking with the crew members. After all, they know what’s happening out there.”
- “I put most problems into my foremen’s hands and let them take it from there. My role is to make sure they know what needs to be done, answer their questions, and get out of the way.”

Deciding to Manage

As with delegation of tasks in general, managers make important choices about how much to involve family members and hired employees in making decisions. Division of functions between “those who think” and “those who do” is not as normal in agriculture as in larger, more bureaucratic organizations. But while farmers, ranchers, and hired managers typically engage in more “doing” than bank and factory executives do, many like to carry all of the thinking load, too. There are disadvantages to doing so.

Unless a grower-manager has all the information relevant to a decision and close control of its implementation, his or her efforts to do all of the thinking may well net a poor-quality decision, the full burden of getting it across to the workers who will carry it out, and frazzled nerves. More importantly, a strict separation of manager and worker roles, with regard to thinking, conveys the message that only one (or a select few) need to feel responsible for anything except what they are specifically told to do. How much stock might be saved, damage avoided, spoilage reduced, and work improved if the minds connected to all the hired hands were tapped?

“Sure, I’d like to have everybody around here caring about the stock, machines, and pack quality,” one orchard operator argues, “but if I don’t act decisively, my men just won’t respect me.” Many managers and supervisors use similar reasoning to explain their reluctance to share their decision-making responsibilities. They

think that failing to maintain tight control may be seen as a sign of weakness. Some simply find their use of authority very satisfying. Others are concerned that their subordinates would not make decisions well.

There is no doubt that workers may react poorly to attempts to give them “management’s work.” Problems often stem, however, not from employees’ inherent limitations but rather from a fear of failure or lack of confidence based on inexperience. Clearly, dropping a major decision—like a complex task—onto a group of workers who have always been directed traditionally with no precedent or personal guidance is asking for trouble. But, like delegation, involving employees in decision making is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Farm and ranch managers may usefully involve others in virtually every decision they make.

Levels of Employee Participation

Figure 4.4 defines five points along a continuum of approaches to decision making. Each represents a type of action characterized by a different degree of participation solicited from employees.

The farther left on the scale, the greater the traditional use of managerial authority (“boss-centered” decision making at the extreme). The farther right, the greater the involvement of employees (“employee-centered” at the extreme). Neither extreme is absolute in practice, as management authority and employee freedom are never without limit.

The concept behind this typology of decision making can be applied to any kind of managerial or supervisory decision and to the potential involvement of either a single individual or group of subordinates. The five leadership styles in the figure are:

1. **Telling:** Supervisor makes a decision and announces it. She or he identifies a problem, considers alternative solutions, chooses one, and then reports it to workers as an order for implementation. She may or may not consider what employees will think about the decision. In any case, she provides no chance for them to participate in the decision making process. *“Please go ahead and start baling the alfalfa now.”*
2. **Selling:** Grower makes a decision and explains his or her reasoning to employees in an effort to gain their acceptance of it. As in telling, all the responsibility for identifying the problem and generating the solution goes to the manager, but he or she recognizes the possibility of some resistance from those who will have to implement it. The manager may indicate to employees what they have to gain from this decision. *“Start baling now. It has dried enough to keep from molding, and it may get too tricky to handle if we let it dry any more.”*