

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

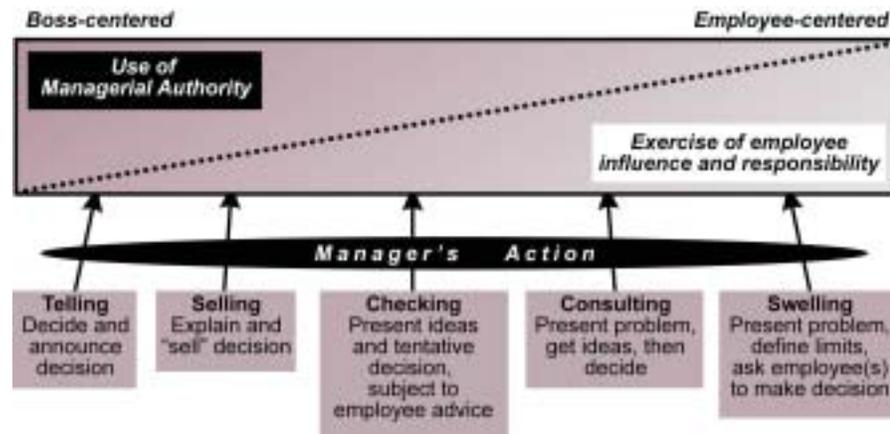
Figure 4.4 defines five points along a continuum of approaches to decision making. Each represents a type of action characterized by a different degree of participation solicited from employees.

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.”*

Figure 4.4. Participative decision making.



Adapted from R. Tannenbaum and W. Schmidt

3. **Checking:** Ranch operator presents a decision as an idea and invites questions and comments. In this situation, the boss who has arrived at a tentative decision provides an opportunity for subordinates to get an explanation of his or her thinking and to influence it directly. Initiative for diagnosing the problem remains with the boss. He or she reserves final decision but is open to change based on reactions from the employees. *"I'm thinking of buying that new XK tractor. It has plenty of power for the money, and Smith says that his has been very reliable. What do you think, given what we have to use it for?"*
4. **Consulting:** Farm patriarch presents a problem, asks family members for ideas and suggestions, and then makes his decision. Again, the manager ultimately decides, but the family (and perhaps some employees) provides and analyzes much of the information on which the decision is based. He capitalizes on their knowledge and experience, and they expand his range of thought on the issue. *"Our records show that we had twice as many back injuries in the contract crew during harvest this year as in any of the previous five. Why do you think it happened, and what can I do about it for the next year?"*
5. **Swelling:** General manager passes to employees the decision making responsibility. He or she points to the existence of a problem, outlines constraints on solutions, and essentially commits him- or herself to accepting whatever the employees decide (within the prescribed boundaries). The employees actually diagnose the problem and consider alternative ways of handling it. If the boss participates in the decision making process, it is as an equal member of the group. *"We have to plant*

all twenty sections by Wednesday, and only six of our rigs are working. Let me know if you guys can possibly get it done, how, and what extra expenses we'll have to incur."

Regardless of the approach, there are real-world practicalities for the manager to keep in mind. An overriding consideration is that he or she is responsible for the method's result.

It is important for subordinates to know what their role is in any given decision making process. Problems can arise from the boss' failing to communicate what is expected and how supervisory authority will be used. If a grower only wants to check out a decision that he or she will make, but workers get the idea that it will be delegated to them, confusion and resentment are likely to follow. When a foreman who knows from the outset exactly what he wants to hear and tries using a "democratic front" to get workers to think that the idea is theirs, the act will probably be smelled from "the back forty."

Even if they want to involve employees as much as possible, supervisors cannot delegate any more responsibility than they have been given. Employees ought to be told clearly about their discretionary limits when asked to take any role in decision making. And if no action results from the decision they help make, it should be no surprise when they lose their taste for involvement

The Right Approach

As usual in these matters, different approaches tend to be more practical under different circumstances. While there is no formula for determining precisely how to act, several factors bear on whether a given level of employee involvement makes sense. From instance to instance, the factors have varying weights, but the grower or supervisor who is sensitive to them can better decide on an appropriate mode of decision making in any given situation.

Attributes of the Manager

A grower's own beliefs and personality can usually predict more or less employee involvement.

- **Value system.** Some managers believe strongly that employees should participate in decisions that affect them, and others feel that involving workers in what managers get paid for is passing the buck. Such views would obviously influence the approach to decision making. Another personal key is the importance that the manager attaches to short-term organizational efficiency relative to long run employee development; the latter is usually served by more involvement.
- **Need for control and certainty.** When a manager releases some control over decision making, he reduces the predictability of the outcome.



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