



When Leaders Stall

By Stephen C. Rafe

Having trouble getting a leader to make a decision? Don't despair. Here are proven steps to move you forward (even if you're the leader in question).

Do you know leaders who sometimes drag their feet, stall a project, bog it down, and drown it in paperwork? Are you mystified by their behavior, confused about how to deal with them, and frustrated in getting things done? If so, you're not alone.

“If you acquiesce, the organization may lose an opportunity.”

There are ways to work with reluctant leaders and help them reach a decision so that you can move forward. First, understand why they're the way they are.

Their Concerns

It's not that decision-making is a time-consuming or overly complex task for them. Their stalling almost always reflects their concern about possibly offending someone or being criticized. They often need others' approval. Thus, they tend to avoid decisions so they won't be judged as having made the wrong move.

Their Behaviors

Quite often, leaders who stall appear cordial but non-committal. For them, comfort may be a higher motivator than accomplishment and success. They justify their behavior by convincing themselves that they're doing "what's best for everybody." Consequently, of course, their indecisiveness and inaction often harm individuals and organizations alike. As a result, what seems good for the majority over the short run is detrimental in the long term.

Their Tactics

When you first discuss problems or new opportunities with reluctant deciders, they'll likely listen to all you have to say and ask questions that encourage your further input. Their faces and body language may seem to indicate agreement. If you discuss the matter further, you may believe you have their support, or even a mandate. In their efforts to be agreeable, they may say such things as "It sounds good to me," "Sure makes sense from here," "Let's see how it goes." These sound like approval statements — marching orders to proceed. To a staller, however, these comments are intended to do nothing more than placate — to postpone a firm decision.

Thus the dialogue may degenerate into details — the purpose of which is to give the staller more time to avoid a decision. If you're not careful, you'll find yourself coming out of such conversations on a mission to gather more information. That, of course, could take days or even weeks. And when you return with whatever the leader requested, you may find yourself on a new search for yet more details involving more people. After all, stallers don't want to shoulder the responsibility themselves.

When those who practice indecisiveness fail to act, the passage of time frequently removes the need to make a decision. Especially when decisions are linked to a timetable, a leader who stalls can get off the hook by doing nothing, while appearing to be caring and supportive. Soon, time weakens everyone's recollections of what happened. Nothing dire seems to happen, so nobody realizes that, by doing nothing, the organization is dying rather than growing and thriving.

Possible Outcome

Consequently, you may find that things haven't changed. If you try to act on what you believe was a decision, reluctant leaders may appear annoyed. And since "getting along with others" — affiliation — is important in any organization, other affiliators may become annoyed with you, too, if they're aware of your efforts to press the issue. As a result, either nothing happens or you find your follow-through efforts stifled by further questions, minor criticisms, and perhaps even objections.

Who's Involved

If reluctant decision-makers puzzle and frustrate you, chances are you're an achiever — someone who wants to get things done and likes quick results. The odds are also good that you're younger than the leader who stalls. Achievers usually are.

Your dilemma becomes finding a way to overcome the blockade without creating resentment. It's easy for an achievement-motivated person to get caught in this trap. You know that if you acquiesce, the organization may lose an opportunity. But you don't know how to move ahead without alienating people.

Before long, the opportunity may be lost. If you're not careful, you may find yourself shouldering the blame for not "getting back sooner." Stallers sometimes have a way of turning things like this around to serve their needs to appease others. Soon your exasperation can lead to rancor. Others may even begin to portray you as the villain for both your attitude and for not getting a job done.

Steps to Take

Since making a commitment is troublesome for reluctant leaders, here are some steps you can take to deal with them constructively:

- **Build a consensus of support from others** before asking for a decision. Even then, recognize that stallers (appeasers) in public may back away from positions they've agreed to privately.
- **Deal from facts.** Emotions — theirs and their concern for others' — frequently prevail in stallers. So help them address concrete details.
- **Give them some choices** but not too many. The fewer choices, the better. Help them rule out the least desirable alternatives before asking them for a final decision.
- **Show why a specific decision** is best. Have data to back it up.
- **Read their body language** and voice tones carefully. Stallers often shift moods rapidly when they feel pressed. If you see a change in posture, hear a shift in voice, or detect any transition in attitude, move both of you back to an area of comfort. Frustrated stallers can cause everyone to suffer.
- **Ask — but courteously.** "Is there a problem here that I may be missing? Can you help me out?" Or, "I know our organization would like to do what's right for everyone here. What's the best way for us to make this happen?" If you feel that won't work, try this: "I understand everyone wants to make the right decision. So what can we do in this case to move this forward?"
- **Probe for more information.** Keep asking for specifics. When leaders say, "I'm not sure it's such a good idea," ask what part

they're not sure of. Don't prompt them: Let them tell you, precisely, the cause for their uncertainty. Help them get to the root of their indecision by asking for whatever information you feel is missing.

- **Give feedback.** When you believe you've managed to get a clear and firm decision, restate it and ask whether you understand correctly.
- **Present them with firm plans** and solid timetables in writing. Seek their written approval (even if you can only get them to initial the document).
- **Provide reassurance.** Commitment-averse leaders often need to be reminded and assured that they've done the right thing by making a decision — any decision. Frequent reassurances as you move forward will help keep their actions from unraveling.

What to Do Next

Is any of this fair, justified, or even worth the effort? Perhaps, and perhaps not. Only your sense of commitment to your organization's success can determine this.

When you get tired of too many non-decisions, lost opportunities, and the like, you can always risk appealing to higher authorities. You could even quit and look for another job elsewhere.

However, the problem of ineffective leadership exists in almost all nonprofit organizations today. So, before you leave, consider whether staying and working through this process might be in everyone's best interests. Doing so will sharpen your negotiating skills, help your organization achieve success, and maybe even ensure the future of your organization. 

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