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## Employee Participation in Decision Making in Extension: A Ladder of Participation to Reduce Cynicism

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## Employee Participation in Decision Making in Extension: A Ladder of Participation to Reduce Cynicism

### Abstract

There is much discussion in modern management, and in Extension, about "pushing decisions down to the lowest level." However, there is also much cynicism among employees in Extension about executive decisions and how employees are involved in decisions. A "ladder of decision making" is offered as a typology of seven levels of decisions. From highest to lowest, the ladder incrementally shifts the responsibility to make the decision from the executive to employees. Potential benefits of the ladder include improving the quality of Extension employees participation and reducing their cynicism.

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In the new management best seller, *The Deep Blue Sea*, author Wilfred Drath (2001) engages readers in the operations of a fictional piano manufacturing company. In the life of the company the senior Mr. Karl retires and is replaced by daughter, Elena, who doesn't feel comfortable with her father's "top down" leadership style. Her efforts to develop her own, more participatory, style are initially not accepted by staff, who see her effort to gain their involvement in decisions as "a false note at first" and "something of a Trojan horse, an idea that is perceived as nothing more than rhetoric" (p.65).

The problem, as Drath emphasizes, isn't one of participatory leadership not being a good idea. Rather, it is that leadership is a social agreement, "a sharing of a way of knowing leadership" (p.64). He explains that, "This shared creation of leadership was worked out through years of experience with one another...." and that social agreements take time to change.

In my 3 years as a Leadership Specialist with Extension, the single greatest plea I've heard from faculty and staff, other than for more time and resources, is for more participation in decision making. Extension leaders have heard this call, and Extension offices have, rather uniformly I suspect, included, as part of their vision and principles, having decisions made "as close to the work as possible."

However, pushing decisions down from executive to employees is complicated by Extension's "shared way of knowing leadership," which is, from what I can tell, most often "top down" in character. Efforts to engage faculty in decisions are often viewed by employees with cynicism, as "nothing more than rhetoric."

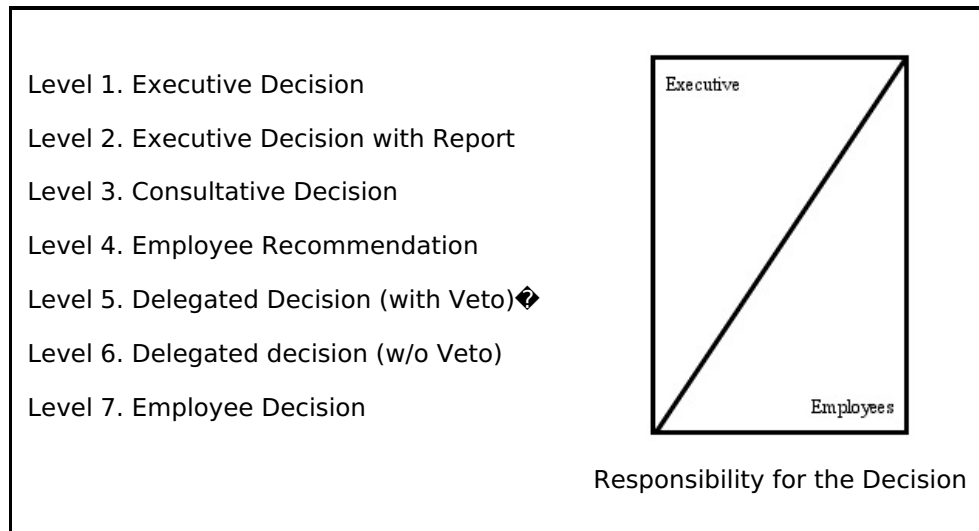
### A Ladder of Decision Making

I would pose that in Extension there is a way to begin to overcome this attitude and that it is to articulate the "terms of engagement" for the interaction of leaders and employees in decision making. Of course, I am not talking about leaders abdicating legitimate authority, or employees engaging in decisions beyond their knowledge, interest, or responsibility.

The terms of engagement should vary depending on the nature of the decision to be made. This variation gives rise to what I call a "ladder of decision making." The ladder provides an image and a conceptual model to help clarify the role of participants in the process. This tool builds upon a similar image and model, a "ladder of public participation," developed by Arnstein (1969).

In this concept (Figure 1) the responsibility for the decision shifts with each step from the authority (executive), to the affected faculty and staff (employees).

**Figure 1.**  
Ladder of Decision Making



### Description of Levels

**Level 1. Executive Decision.** The executive makes the decision and does not inform employees, except possibly through a future meeting or conference or in a periodic report or newsletter.

**Level 2. Executive Decision with Report.** The executive makes the decision and reports, in the near future, to employees. The timely report is significant as (whether as a courtesy or warning). It provides some opportunity for employee feedback prior to implementation of the decision.

**Level 3. Consultative Decision.** The executive asks employees for their ideas, at least in a general way. At best, the employees are engaged explicitly in the steps in the decision-making process (Gallagher, 2000) and can influence the decision with the strength of their statement of values, their information, and their alternatives. The decision, however, rests with the executive.

**Level 4. Employee Recommendation.** The executive assigns or delegates the responsibility to conduct the decision-making process, the four steps, to the employees. The employees offer their recommendation(s) to the executive who makes the decision.

**Level 5. Delegated Decision with Veto.** The executive delegates the authority to the employees to make the decision but retains the authority to exercise veto power if necessary. (Such a veto could indicate a flawed problem-solving process that failed to engage the executive in interim reviews.)

**Level 6. Delegated Decision without Veto.** This is the same process as above; however, the employees make the decision and the executive supports the decision through to a future evaluation period, perhaps a year or two for most programs.

**Level 7. Employee Decision.** The employees make the decision and do not inform the executive, except perhaps as part of the normal reporting protocols, such as in periodic meetings or annual reports.

### The Challenge in Extension

The challenge in Extension is complicated by the observation that some individuals--on both the executive and employee side--prefer a top-down decision-making style. As I've discussed in a paper on cultural values (Gallagher, 2001), some people are more hierarchical in their decision preference, others more collateral (group oriented), and still others more individualist (let's vote on it).

Anecdotal evidence, supported by current research (Saunders & Gallagher, 2002, submitted for publication) suggests that Extension is fundamentally a hierarchical institution with cultural norms that permit only a measure of collateral and individual decision making.

The challenge in Extension may be heightened by a history of poorly executed participatory processes. When executives call for employee participation but then don't design or manage an effective process of involvement, employees are quick to label such activity as placation at best and manipulation at worst. From Drath's view this history builds a relationship that becomes a "social agreement" that takes time to change. Certainly training is desirable for all parties to understand the rungs and their roles on each.

### Closing Thoughts

In the practice of decision making (e.g., Kneeland, 1999) and meeting management (e.g., Doyle & Straus, 1976) there is agreement that everyone engaged in a decision process or meeting should understand his or her role. The ladder of decision making helps to define that role. The ladder provides a way to articulate who makes the decision and offers employees more certainty about how their input, which consumes their time and resources, will be used.

From these benefits, the ladder offers the even greater benefit of improving the quality of decisions by incorporating employee values, information, and alternatives into the decision. It also increases the potential for decisions to be implemented as employees help make, and "own," the decision. And the ladder offers the possibility of reducing employee skepticism, indeed what I see as cynicism, about executive decisions and executive efforts to engage in more participatory leadership. And, not least, the ladder can help structure the decision process to help save employees' number-one issue, time and resources.

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