LearnWell.com

Leadership Alignment: Decision Rights

A practical guide to clarifying who decides what—and accelerating your team's execution velocity

LEARNWELL

Helping Tech Leaders Build High-Performing Teams

What Are Decision Rights?

Decision rights define who has the authority to make specific types of decisions within your organization—and who needs to be consulted or informed.

In high-performing teams, decision rights are explicit, documented, and widely understood. In struggling teams, they're ambiguous, constantly renegotiated, and a source of friction.

> **The Core Question:** When a decision needs to be made, does everyone know who has the authority to make it?

Why Decision Rights Matter

Without clear decision rights, organizations experience:

- **Decision paralysis** — Issues stall while people wait for unclear approvals
- **Duplicate work** — Multiple teams solve the same problem differently
- **Escalation overload** — Everything flows up to executives who shouldn't be deciding
- **Accountability gaps** — When everyone's responsible, no one is
- **Rework cycles** — Decisions get reversed when the "real" decision-maker weighs in late

The RAPID Framework

One proven model for clarifying decision rights:

- **R**ecommend — Who gathers input and proposes a decision?
- **A**gree — Who must sign off before implementation?
- **P**erform — Who executes once decided?
- **I**nput — Who should be consulted for expertise?
- **D**ecide — Who has final authority?

The key insight: **only one person should have the "D"** for any given decision type.

6 Common Use Cases for Decision Rights

These are the scenarios where unclear decision rights cause the most damage—and where clarifying them creates immediate impact.

1. Headcount and Hiring

Who approves new roles? Who decides on candidates? Can hiring managers make offers, or does HR have veto power? Ambiguity here delays critical hires by weeks.

2. Product Roadmap Priorities

When Engineering, Product, and Sales disagree on what to build next, who breaks the tie? Without clarity, roadmaps become political battlegrounds.

3. Budget Allocation

What spending can managers approve independently? When does Finance need to weigh in? Unclear thresholds create bottlenecks for routine purchases.

4. Cross-Functional Projects

When Marketing, Engineering, and Ops collaborate on a launch, who decides on tradeoffs? Shared ownership often means no ownership.

5. Customer Escalations

Who can approve exceptions, discounts, or custom terms? When Support escalates to Sales to Product to Legal, customers wait and trust erodes.

6. Technical Architecture

Who decides on new technologies, vendor selections, or technical debt priorities? Engineering teams often stall waiting for consensus that never comes.

Pattern: In each case, the solution isn't more meetings or better communication. It's explicitly naming who has the authority to decide—and trusting them to use it.

Where Decision Rights Matter Most

Not all decisions are equal. Focus your decision rights work where ambiguity causes the most damage.

High-Stakes, Cross-Functional Decisions

These decisions involve multiple departments, significant resources, or strategic direction.

Warning signs you need to clarify decision rights:

- The same decision gets revisited in multiple meetings
- People say "I thought you were handling that"
- Executives get pulled into decisions that should be handled two levels down
- Teams wait for permission that nobody realizes they're waiting for
- Post-mortems reveal "we didn't know who was supposed to decide"

The Decision Rights Heat Map

Decision Type	Frequency	Ambiguity Cost	Priority
Strategy & direction	Quarterly	Very High	**Critical**
Resource allocation	Monthly	High	**Critical**
Cross-team tradeoffs	Weekly	High	**High**
Customer commitments	Daily	Medium	**High**
Team-level operations	Daily	Low	Standard

The 80/20 Rule for Decision Rights

You don't need to document every possible decision. Focus on:

- The **20% of decision types** that cause 80% of the confusion
- Decisions that **cross team boundaries**
- Decisions where **escalation patterns** have emerged
- Areas where **new leaders** are most likely to overstep or under-step
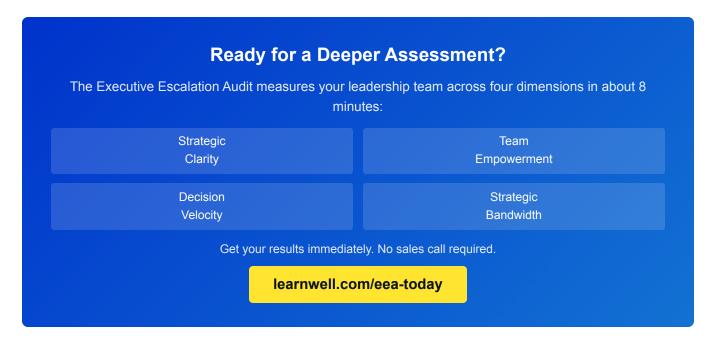
Quick Diagnostic: How Clear Are Your Decision Rights?

Rate each statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

1   **When cross-functional issues arise, everyone knows who has final decision authority.**

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

2   **Decisions rarely get reversed because someone more senior weighs in late.**

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

3   **Our executives spend time on strategic decisions, not operational ones.**

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

4   **New leaders quickly understand what decisions they own vs. require escalation.**

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

5   **We rarely have the same decision debated in multiple meetings.**

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

☐ 1   ☐ 2   ☐ 3   ☐ 4   ☐ 5

TOTAL SCORE (add values from all 5 questions):   [_____]

Scoring Guide

21-25: Strong decision rights clarity. Focus on edge cases and new hires.

14-20: Moderate clarity. Likely have pockets of ambiguity causing friction.

5-13: Significant opportunity. Decision rights work could unlock major velocity gains.

10 Signs You're Making Progress on Decision Rights

1 **Fewer escalations to executives**
Issues resolve at the appropriate level

2 **Faster hiring decisions**
Offers go out within days, not weeks

3 **Meetings have clear owners**
"Who decides?" answered upfront

4 **Decisions stick**
Less reopening of resolved issues

5 **New leaders ramp faster**
Clear guardrails on authority

6 **Cross-functional projects flow**
Tradeoffs made, not debated

7 **Customer response times improve**
Fewer escalation chains

8 **Budget cycles simplify**
Spending authority is clear

9 **Less "waiting for approval"**
Work proceeds with confidence

10 **Accountability is clear**
"Who owns this?" has an answer

Ready for a Deeper Assessment?

The Executive Escalation Audit measures your leadership team across four dimensions in about 8 minutes:

Strategic Clarity	Team Empowerment
Decision Velocity	Strategic Bandwidth

Get your results immediately. No sales call required.

learnwell.com/eea-today

About LearnWell

LearnWell supports executives and senior managers in growth-stage tech companies who need leadership systems that keep pace with scale.

We've worked alongside 125+ leadership teams to increase decision velocity, lower escalation drag, and clarify how leadership actually operates day to day. Roughly 60% move forward independently using the insights and structure we facilitate.

Others engage us to embed those systems more fully, accelerating adoption and strengthening repeatable leadership capabilities that scale beyond the executive team.

LearnWell.com