

RYP Quarterly

The Hardest Decision Is to Act



An Article
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"The hardest decision is to act." – Amelia Earhart

*These words from Amelia Earhart capture a timeless truth about leadership. Earhart, who pushed beyond fear, convention, and uncertainty to chart new frontiers in aviation, understood something that remains profoundly relevant today: **progress rarely comes from waiting.***

It comes from courageously stepping forward when outcomes are unclear.

Leadership has never been about comfort. It has always been about responsibility. And responsibility ultimately demands action.

THE ERA OF DELAY

In today's political and organisational climate, Earhart's words feel especially relevant. Across government, business, education, and community leadership, we increasingly see patterns of deflection, delay, and deferment. Difficult issues are parked in "reviews," "consultations," and "working groups." Responsibility becomes diluted. Decisions are postponed in the hope that time, circumstance, or someone else will resolve the problem.

Choosing not to act is itself a decision. And it always carries consequences. The most significant organisational failures rarely occur because leaders acted too soon. They occur because leaders waited too long.

THE COMFORT OF INACTION

Inaction is seductive. It feels safe. It avoids immediate criticism. It protects leaders from backlash. It creates the illusion of prudence. When nothing is done, nothing can be directly blamed. But in reality, inaction often creates greater harm than imperfect action.

- Problems grow quietly.
- Opportunities disappear.
- High performers disengage.
- Communities lose trust.
- Momentum stalls.

When leaders consistently delay, they send a clear message: "This issue is not important enough to confront." Over time, this erodes confidence, credibility, and culture. **Decisive leadership**, by contrast, says: "We are willing to face reality, take responsibility, and move forward." And that message builds trust.

DECISIVENESS IS NOT RECKLESSNESS

Decisive leadership is often misunderstood. It is not impulsive. It is not authoritarian. It is not inflexible. It is not action without consultation. True decisiveness is disciplined. It is the ability to:

- Gather relevant information,
- Weigh competing interests,
- Consider risks and consequences,
- Exercise judgement,
- And then commit to action.

It blends courage with competence. Credible leaders understand that perfect information rarely exists. At some point, leadership requires judgement, the willingness to say: "We have enough to proceed."

Waiting for certainty is often a sophisticated form of avoidance.

THE DECISION-MAKING COMPASS

Effective leaders do not rely on instinct alone. They develop a Decision-Making Compass, an internal framework that provides clarity in complexity. This compass rests on four core elements.

1. Purpose: Clarity of purpose is the foundation of decisive leadership. Leaders who know why their organisation exists and what it stands for find decisions easier to make. When purpose is clear, questions become simpler:

- Does this serve our mission?
- Does this align with our values?
- Does this benefit our people and community?

Without purpose, every decision becomes a political negotiation.

With purpose, decisions become directional.

2. Principles: Credible leaders operate from clear personal and organisational principles: integrity, fairness, accountability, transparency, and respect. Principles act as filters. They prevent short-term convenience from overriding long-term credibility. They ensure decisions are not merely expedient, but ethical and sustainable. And here is the truth. Principle-driven teams always outperform policy-driven teams. And when decisions are anchored in principle, they build enduring trust.

Policies manage compliance. Principles guide behaviour

3. Perspective: Decisive leaders step back before stepping forward. They seek multiple viewpoints. They understand context. They distinguish between urgency and importance. They identify root causes rather than treating symptoms. Perspective protects leaders from reacting to noise. It allows them to see patterns, not just pressure. **Doing nothing is rarely neutral.**

"In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

- Theodore Roosevelt

4. Personal Courage: Ultimately, no framework replaces courage. Many leaders know what should be done. Fewer are willing to do it when it is unpopular. Courage means:

- Having difficult conversations, without avoidance.
- Addressing underperformance early.
- Making calls that may invite criticism.
- Accepting responsibility when outcomes are imperfect.
- Standing firm under pressure.

Without courage, leadership becomes management by avoidance. And avoidance always compounds problems.

THE HIDDEN COST OF DEFERRED DECISIONS

Deferred decisions create organisational debt. Every unresolved issue consumes:

- Emotional energy,
- Time,
- Focus,
- And trust.

Staff learn quickly when nothing changes. They stop raising concerns because “nothing ever happens.” High performers become frustrated. Mediocrity becomes normalised. Innovation slows. In political and community leadership, deferral fuels cynicism. Citizens lose faith in institutions that appear more focused on optics than outcomes. **Over time, indecision becomes culture. And culture always shapes performance.**

Leaders must understand this clearly: The cost of inaction is rarely visible immediately. But it is always accumulating

ACTING WITHOUT MICROMANAGING

One of the greatest fears leaders have about acting decisively is that it will require constant oversight. They worry that if they decide, they must then control every detail. This is false. **Decisive leadership and micromanagement are opposites.**

Decisive leaders are clear about:

- What needs to happen,
- Why it matters,
- What success looks like,
- Who is accountable.

They then trust capable people to deliver. Key here is facilitating empowerment through by coaching and encouraging the Three C’s and One P

WHEN COACHING IS APPROPRIATE, AND WHEN COUNSELLING IS NOT

Commitment:	Build a person's commitment through engagement and belief in the purpose, vision, mission and a compelling rationale of why
Competence:	Coach and develop a person's competence by developing their skills and acumen to ensure they know what to do in all circumstances, and predict and act on issues
Confidence:	As people gain experience, they gain wisdom and confidence. This is acquired through learning experiences, and practice and application of skills.
Permission:	Make it clear you support people in making decisions and practicing good judgement. This must be an expectation. Poor decisions can always be fixed through training and development. Avoiding decisions should not be tolerated

Micromanagers, by contrast, are often indecisive at a strategic level and over-controlling at an operational level. They avoid big calls and compensate by interfering in small ones. No staff member has ever said they perform better and enjoy their job more when they are being micromanaged.

Credible leaders decide direction, not every step.

PRACTICAL TOOLS TO STRENGTHEN DECISIVENESS

Leaders can build decisiveness as a discipline. It is not personality-dependent. It is practice-dependent.

SOME PRACTICAL TOOLS THAT WE REGULARLY USE IN OUR RYP LEADERSHIP AND COACHING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS:

- **The 70% Rule:** If you have approximately 70% of the information required, you are usually ready to decide. Waiting for 90–100% often means waiting too long. Momentum matters.
- **The “What If We Do Nothing?” Test:** Before deferring a decision, ask: “What happens if we don’t act for six months?” Often this reveals that inaction is the riskiest option.

- **Decision Rights Framework** Clarify:
 - Who recommends?
 - Who decides?
 - Who implements?
 - Who reviews?
 - When decision rights are unclear, delay becomes default behaviour. Clarity accelerates action.
- **Time-Bound Decisions:** Set deadlines for decisions — not for reports, not for consultations, not for reviews — for decisions. Time discipline creates organisational rhythm.
- **One-Page Decision Briefs:** Require major proposals to fit on one page:
 - What The Problem or Issue Is
 - What are the Options
 - What are the Risks
 - Your Recommendation
 - The Impact on the Organisation

This forces clarity and prevents analysis paralysis.
If it cannot be explained simply, it means it is not understood clearly.
- **A “Disagree and Commit” Culture:** Encourage robust debate. Invite diverse perspectives. But once a decision is made, align behind it. Unity in execution builds momentum and confidence.
- **Post-Decision Reviews:** After action, review:
 - What worked?
 - What didn’t?
 - What did we learn?
 - Review without blame strengthens judgement and builds institutional wisdom. Learning organisations act first and then refine.
- **Decisiveness and Credibility:** Leadership credibility is built on symbolic alignment: What you say matches with what you decide, which aligns with what you tolerate, which then informs what you do. When leaders signal priorities but fail to act on them, credibility erodes. When leaders address issues consistently and visibly, credibility compounds. People do not follow rhetoric. They follow behaviour. Every decisive action reinforces seriousness. Every deferred decision signals hesitation. And hesitation, repeated often enough, becomes identity

THE PERSONAL LEADERSHIP MIRROR

Every self-aware leader must periodically ask:

- What conversation am I avoiding?
- What standard am I tolerating?
- What issue am I deferring?
- What decision have I parked in “later”?

Self-awareness is the starting point of decisive leadership. The greatest risk to performance is rarely external competition. It is internal hesitation.

THE TENACITY THAT FOLLOWS ACTION

Acting is only the beginning. Once a decision is made, tenacity sustains it. Resistance will come. Criticism will arise. Doubts will surface. Tenacity means holding steady. It means reinforcing the decision through communication, role modelling, and accountability. Many leaders falter not in deciding, but in staying the course when discomfort appears. Progress requires both courage and endurance.

LEADERSHIP IS MOVEMENT

Every day, leaders face a choice: To act or to avoid. To confront or to defer. To lead or to manage decline. The easiest decision is always to do nothing. But doing nothing destroys credibility. Because in the end, leadership is not measured by intention. It is measured by movement.

*Organisations advance when leaders act.
Communities strengthen when leaders decide.
Cultures improve when standards are upheld.*

Across boardrooms, schools, councils, sporting organisations, corporate environments and government institutions, the call is clear. We do not need louder leadership. We need credible leadership.

Leadership that:

- Clarifies direction.
- Makes principled decisions.
- Communicates transparently.
- Holds standards consistently.
- Persists when resistance emerges.

The most toxic leader is the do nothing, see nothing, stand for nothing leader stifling progress

Leadership Lesson:

If you are a leader today, in any capacity, the longer you delay making decisions and taking action, the more your brand as a leader is damaged. The hardest decision is to act. And the most important one is to lead. It is also the most defining. Because leadership is never defined by what we planned to do. It is defined by what we choose to do

FACTA NON VERBA – DEEDS NOT WORDS

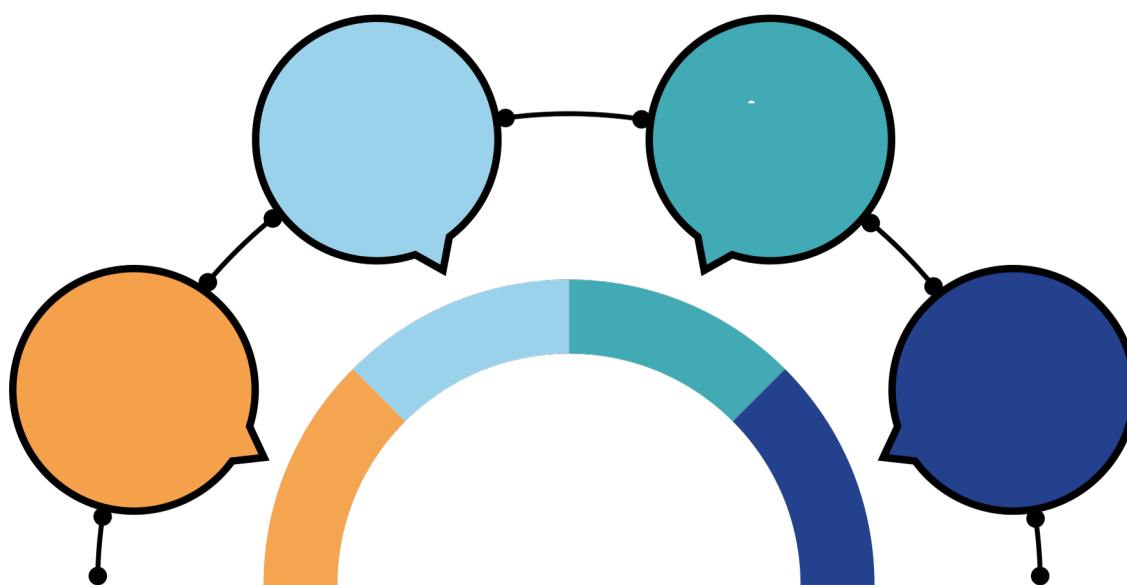
At RYP International, we work with leaders who understand that leadership is not a title — it is a responsibility. Across regional communities, corporate organisations, schools, boards and executive teams, the pattern is consistent: performance shifts when leaders choose to act.

Cultures strengthen when standards are upheld. Trust grows when decisions are made with clarity and courage. If you are navigating complexity, stakeholder pressure, cultural drift or strategic stagnation, the solution is rarely another review. It is decisive, principled leadership.

RYP partners with leaders and leadership teams to:

- Clarify purpose and direction
- Strengthen decision-making discipline
- Build credible, principle-driven cultures
- Develop courageous leadership capability
- Align strategy with consistent execution

**The question is not whether your organisation is capable of progress.
The question is whether its leaders are prepared to act.**



David Stewart is the Founder and Principal of RYP International, a Coaching and Advisory Practice. For over 40 years he has worked globally with organisations, communities, sports teams, CEOs and their leadership teams to develop their capability and culture to maximise performance.

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