4 Ways CEOs Can Overcome Decision Fatigue



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CEOs are in the business of making decisions. Leaders make dozens of decisions every day, many of which could have major and lasting impacts on the success of their companies and teams. Whether it’s deciding to make a change in a key position, to take a chance opening in a new market or to test out a different product line, great CEOs know that decision-making often involves a nuanced and thoughtful approach.

Most leaders don’t take the decision-making process lightly. And sometimes the fear of making the wrong decision can lead to leaders making no decision at all. When looking at a wide variety of possible solutions, leaders can feel stuck. That’s when a sense of decision fatigue can set in.

Decision fatigue is ambivalence at its core, and while it may not be preventable, the good news is there are solutions to overcome it. Below are tried-and-true methods – from some of the best leaders I've met in my career – to combat decision fatigue.

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1. Build a foundation

Decision fatigue occurs when leaders don't use strategy as a guide. Before leaders can make any decision, it's important to first have a strong foundation by defining the company's mission, vision, values, purpose and operating principles. Then, when presented with several options, it becomes crystal clear which choice best aligns with the company's mission.

Successful leaders don't just create the company's principles and values and then leave them on the wall; they use them to evaluate each decision they make. As they make a decision, they weigh whether the outcome supports the company's mission and honors its principles and values. Pinpointing these principles also creates clarity among employees. When employees are able to apply the company's values to their own decision-making, it ensures alignment throughout the organization.

2. Identify your biases by connecting with peers

It can be difficult to identify blind spots and self-monitor how biases are playing a role in the decision-making process. Having a trusted group of smart, supportive individuals who can offer diverse perspectives allows leaders to challenge biases and gain new insights. Learning to ask for and accept feedback is one of the biggest hurdles – and most important aspects – of being a leader.

One similarity between all the great CEOs I've known is that they want to get better as leaders. Instead of immediately becoming defensive, the best CEOs lean into diverse points of view. Even if they disagree with someone's assessment, they ask questions, and they explore it with curiosity and humility. They leave their preconceived notions at the door and approach these conversations with an open mind. These leaders work hard to avoid confirmation bias or presenting information in a way that is slanted toward their desired outcome. When CEOs have the opportunity to honestly discuss issues with peers who have faced the same challenges, their peers help them to frame what the *true* issue is.

3. Create space to make a decision

Effective CEOs know it's critical to delegate decisions to their team and empower them to make decisions aligned with their strategy. But there are some decisions that only the CEO can make. And when that's the case, it's okay to take time and space to make a decision. I used to think it was a weakness to say, "I need more time," but now I've learned it's a strength. Taking the time to carefully consider the solution with a fresh perspective always ends up leading to a better outcome.

4. Understand no two decisions are the same

Part of what makes the business environment so challenging and exciting is that no two situations are ever exactly the same. Great CEOs evaluate each situation against the company's mission based on the present factors rather than just relying on what did or didn't work last time.

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The stakes are high. In this current environment of inflation

and economic uncertainty, set against a strong labor market, it has never been more difficult, nor more important, to be skilled at decision-making. Leaders may be afraid to make the wrong decision. But decision-making is not always black or white – there can be an infinite number of right decisions. Instead of thinking there's a right or wrong decision, effective leaders consider that there may just be a better or best solution.

So much of the success of any decision connects to applying rigor and diligence upfront and then fully believing in the decision and putting effort toward ensuring it's successful. It can be tempting to abandon a decision the moment it doesn't go quite as planned. But successful leaders are those who can push through the noise, fear and decision fatigue to rally the team around the mission and move the business forward.

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