

# Authority on paper

Why delegating decisions doesn't change how they actually get made.

**It's always the people:**

The hard, joyful, human work of leading nonprofits

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**People  
Centered  
Change**



Hi, I'm **Julia**

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**People Centered Change**

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# Today's purpose & intended outcomes

Why are we here, and what do we hope to accomplish?

## Purpose

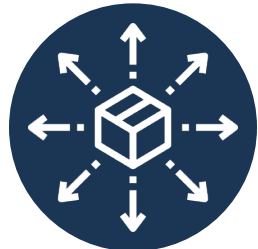
The **purpose** of this session is to help nonprofit leaders understand why decision-making authority often stays concentrated at the top even when there's a genuine intention to distribute it, and to explore what it actually takes to build an organization where people use the authority and agency that they have.

## Intended outcomes

In service of this purpose, **together we will...**

- Explore why organizations develop patterns of upward deference, and why those patterns persist even when leaders want or intend for them to change;
- Identify three common failure patterns that explain why good intentions around "pushing down decisions" don't play out in practice; and
- Examine the conditions required for successful delegation; and
- Discuss practical approaches for redesigning decisional pathways and building the organizational culture that makes them stick.

# Why this? Why now?



Many nonprofits are actively trying to **distribute decision-making authority** – through structural redesign, leadership development, or culture change work.



Despite real investment and genuine intent, **decision-making patterns often don't shift**. Authority stays concentrated even when the org chart says otherwise.



The gap between intention and reality **creates frustration at every level** – for leaders who want people to step up, for staff who don't feel safe to act, and for the organization as a whole.

## Checking in

Think about a decision in your organization that technically sits with someone other than the most senior leader.

**How does that decision actually get made in practice?**



**What does it look like when attempts at distributing decision-making don't work?**

# What this looks like from different vantage points

## Senior leaders

*I've been clear that this is their call to make. I've said it directly. But nothing changes – the same decisions keep ending up on my desk.*

## Middle managers

*I've been told this is my decision. But the last time I made a call like this...*

- *...my boss jumped in at the last minute and changed course, or*
- *...they weren't happy with the outcome and I heard about it for weeks.*

*So now I just check in first – it's not worth the risk."*

## Individual contributors

*I can see what needs to happen. But the last time I tried to move on something...*

- *...it had to get routed through three levels before anyone could say yes, or*
- *...I watched a colleague act on something that seemed squarely in their role, and their manager wasn't happy about it.*

*So I just don't try. It's not worth it."*

# Pattern #1: The override

Authority is distributed through words, policies, or structures, but then reclaimed or re-centralized as a result of norms and behavior.

A leader says "you decide" – and then signals through their reaction, second-guessing, or even visible frustration that the decision wasn't really yours to make.

It only takes a few rounds of this before the organization learns that **"you decide" actually means "you come up with a first draft, and then I'll tell you what I want you to do."**

# Pattern #2: Gravitational pull

A culture that highly values collaboration or expertise can sometimes let decisions default to whoever is involved in the process with the most power or expertise.

Senior leaders are smart, engaged, and genuinely want to be helpful. They see themselves as collaborative – "we're all on the same team, and I have ideas that could make this better."

Or in organizations where there is a natural deference to expertise and knowledge – and senior leaders often have a lot of both – there's a natural pattern to go to senior team members for input.

In both cases, senior staff are keen to be helpful and offer perspective – **but sometimes without awareness of the impact of power dynamics** and how that shapes how people receive their ideas. The intent might be to be collaborative and supportive, but it might be experienced as requirements or expectations that need to be addressed.

# Pattern #3: Accountability mismatch

Decision-making authority was delegated or shared – but whoever holds ultimate accountability for execution and outcomes **stays involved**.

Leaders may try to delegate a decision, but formally or informally the accountability for the consequences of that decision doesn't (or can't) move with it.

This means that the person who still holds that accountability is heavily incentivized to shape the decision. They are the one managing the execution or potentially cleaning up the mess if things don't go as planned – so it makes their work make more sense if they stay involved.

**Why attempts at distributed  
authority get stuck**

# Organizations build decision-making cultures over time, often without realizing it.

Through years of centralized leadership, accumulated norms, and the way risk and accountability get handled, many organizations develop a pattern where every level looks upward before acting.

This isn't because people lack competence or initiative – it's because in that system, deference is a rational choice.



## And our brains aren't helping.

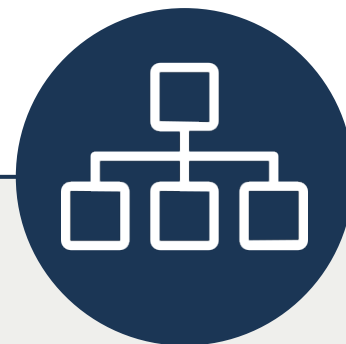
Patterns become deeply ingrained habits when they are repeated over years. The **neural pathways that grow to support these behaviors persist even when the conditions that created them change** – which is part of why stated intent alone doesn't produce behavior change. You're asking people to override years of learned response and literally rewire their brains in real time.

# Three conditions for distributed decision-making

## Structural delegation

Decision-making authority is formally placed at the right level, with clear ownership of who decides what.

This is done through things like job descriptions, policies, or decision-making process documentation.



## Behavioral & normative alignment

The way leaders and staff actually behave matches the stated structure.

When decisions don't go well, the organizational response treats that as an opportunity to learn, not as evidence that the decision should have been made by someone else.



## Accountability– authority alignment

Accountability for outcomes is aligned with decisional authority. The person who holds authority over a decision also holds accountability for how it plays out – and conversely, the person who holds accountability has genuine authority over the decision.



When one of these conditions isn't in place, it becomes the rational, natural choice for individuals in that system to **defer back to centralized decision-making** – regardless of what the structure says.

# Diagnosing what's happening

If you're observing decision-making not happening where you intend it to in your organization, these questions might help you figure out which of these conditions aren't in place.

- 01** When someone makes a decision within their stated authority, what happens next? What does leadership's response actually look like?
- 02** How often do senior leaders offer input on decisions that formally sit with someone else? When they do, how is that input treated?
- 03** When a decision doesn't go well, who ends up dealing with the consequences? Is that the same person who made the call?
- 04** If you asked staff what it feels like to make a decision without checking in first, what would they say? What would *you* say?
- 05** Would senior leaders describe their involvement in others' decisions as "helping"? Would staff use the same word?

**So what do we do about it?**

# Matching the intervention to the pattern.

IF YOU'RE SEEING

## The override

### THE WORK IS BEHAVIORAL

This means leadership examining how they actually show up around decisions they've delegated.

- What signals are you sending when a decision doesn't go the way you'd have chosen?
- How are you responding to risk?
- Are you creating space for decisions to play out, or are you intervening at the first sign of discomfort?

IF YOU'RE SEEING

## The gravitational pull

### THE WORK IS NORMATIVE & CULTURAL

This requires building awareness of how positional power shapes the way input gets received – regardless of intent.

It also means you need to explicit agreements about which decisions senior leaders don't weigh in on, and building organizational norms around how that boundary is respected and reinforced.

IF YOU'RE SEEING

## The accountability mismatch

### THE WORK IS STRUCTURAL

Then your work is around aligning accountability with authority so the person making the decision is also the person who owns the outcome.

And where that alignment genuinely can't happen, it means being honest about where the decision needs to sit – rather than delegating authority while keeping accountability centralized.

# Being honest about where decisions sit

We want to push decision-making authority and accountability to the levels of the organization closest to the work – that gets us stronger ownership, role satisfaction, and organizational outcomes. But that means some types of accountability will sit at different levels, and that's okay.

**The real dysfunction isn't that some decisions are centralized. It's when we say a decision sits at one level but accountability, norms, or behavior means it functionally sits at another – and so people behave according to what functionally happens. And this misalignment is deeply frustrating.**

Being explicit about which decisions sit where – and why – is harder than delegating everything on paper. But it's more honest, and it produces less organizational damage.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

# Thank you!

If today's conversation gave you something to take back to your team, here are two ways to keep it going.



## PRO BONO OFFICE HOURS

Apply this at your org.

Bring a current decision-making question. We'll think through it together — no charge.



## SHARE FEEDBACK

How was today?

I'd love your reflections on this session and what topics you'd find valuable next.

