

Default to Yes and Defend No— One Decision at a Time

In keeping with Rule #4: aim for “safe enough to try” instead of consensus, the decision-making tables are turned to favor action rather than deliberation. The default action is “yes”—you can move forward if the ideas are safe enough to try. The objectors, skeptics, or naysayers need to defend their “no” or questions with data. Ideas can come in imperfect, even half-baked, and are still presumed safe until proved otherwise.

Instead of asking generic, open-ended questions like *“What does everyone think?”* ask, *“Does anyone have data that indicates this proposal is unsafe to try?”* For small decisions with a limited scope, think about using the simple language changes that we outlined in Experiment 8. For larger decisions that need more deliberation, the protocol of defaulting to yes and defending no can help you separate concerns that are valid enough to deal with in this moment or are just add-ons or considerations that can be returned to later, once you have more data.

Use this practice with your team—one decision and one proposal at a time:

After presenting a proposal, go around the entire team, and allow each teammate to answer the question: “Does anyone have data that indicates this proposal is unsafe to try?”

At this point people may offer a “Maybe this will happen . . .” or “Have you thought of this yet?” To move the discussion forward, you need to parse through which of these concerns are valid enough to deal with in this moment and which are just add-ons or considerations that can be returned to later once you have more data. To separate the urgent and valid concerns from the invalid ones, probe further by asking for the specific data or

information that they have in mind or asking them to describe exactly why they consider it unsafe. After allowing each person to answer this question, you can move forward with your proposal or stop and resolve any valid issues.

From a timing and momentum perspective, this is much more efficient and effective than open-ended discussion. It is rare that in a one-hour meeting you will be able to secure 100 percent consensus, but you might be able to obtain simple consent based on the notion that there is no presently known data that your proposal would be unsafe to try.

Instead of a goal of trying to make everyone happy, the approach of defaulting to yes and defending no allows a team to take one step forward, knowing the decision can be revisited and the direction shifted if indicated by future data.

Here's an example. Let's say you propose a new initiative where upper elementary school students will lead parent-teacher meetings this year. Your proposal includes the following plan: Students will prepare a reflection sheet covering their strengths, areas of improvement, a plan to address them, and the adult help they will need. Teachers will serve as guides for the meetings, offering questions and direction to stay on track. Parents can ask questions of the student and teacher to clarify what's being discussed, and they can take the reflection sheet home for further conversation. At the end of the fifteen-minute meeting, the student is dismissed and the teacher and parent spend ten minutes on any other points that need to be discussed.

Here are some of the concerns you might face:

"If you are going to address parent-teacher meetings, we also need to talk about the scheduling of the meetings."

"What if the students aren't prepared to lead these important discussions, and we end up wasting time?"

Here is where you can clarify:

"Do you have data that indicates this proposal is unsafe to try?"

If the answer is no, then redirect those people to work through those new topics after you've finalized this decision. Staying laser focused on moving forward with one proposal at a time can avoid the well-intentioned decision-making standoffs we often create when everyone has

something they want to add to make an idea better or more comprehensive. Also focusing on known data, and not just anticipations or theories, is important because often we let ideas die because of what we anticipate. There are things we'd never know if we didn't try them first.

In this example, if some of the students are unprepared for the discussions, will the harm be so severe that we won't be able to recover our relationships with parents? Or will we be able to salvage some meaning from the meeting and use it as a lesson for the next parent-teacher meeting? Sometimes we should embrace the chance of failure as an opportunity to learn and improve with real, concrete data. For the concerns with data that indicate it's unsafe to try, you can work to integrate that feedback into an updated proposal.