

# DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS

MAKING EXPERTISE MATTER.



ARTICLE

DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS

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## 7 COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT “THE NEW WAY OF WORKING”

– Which Are Hampering A Wider  
Adoption Of Its Potential Benefits By  
Existing Organisations

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— Which are hampering a wider adoption of its potential benefits by existing organisations

### Summary

The “new way of working” encompasses new ways of organising, performing, and leading. These are set to overcome the downsides of the “traditional” way organisations operate (e.g., strict hierarchy, control, no freedom, no creativity, slow to adapt) in, especially, dynamic environments. The promise of this new way of working is a combination of improved organisational performance and the resolution of a range of employee frustrations.

What this new way of working looks like is demonstrated by a range of “pioneering organisations” (e.g. , Buurtzorg, Patagonia, Haier, Spotify). These pioneering organisations tend to have a range of organisational features in common, which — in absence of underlying principles explaining these features — have become “characteristics” of this new way of working. These include self-management, flat organisational structures and “trust”.

In this article it is put forward that *the essence* of the new way of working is creating the conditions to optimally utilise the expertise available to the organisation. Utilising expertise resolves work place frustrations and results in optimal organisational performance.

Creating the conditions to utilise expertise involves defining non-ambiguous aims, identifying expertise, and establishing two crucial preconditions: 1) minimising all forms of decision making (hierarchical, and as found in rules, protocols, procedures, etc.), and 2) the clear communication between experts and experts-in-something-else (to prevent mechanisms of control to “kick in”).

This article argues that the typical “characteristics” of the new way of working are, in fact, on the *extreme end* of a spectrum of organisational solutions, and that by focusing on these extremes the wider adoption of the new way of working is hampered.

Following the underlying principles of the new way of working — based on logic and as laid out by the approach of Decision Free Solutions — the following misconceptions about the new way of working are addressed:

1. Change must be radical
2. Hierarchy must be flattened
3. It is all about trust
4. Just try something!
5. Self-management is key
6. Control is part of the problem
7. It is all about people

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## What is “the new way of working”?

“The new way of working” isn’t a well-defined concept. It encompasses new ways of organising, performing, and leading which overcome the downsides of the “traditional” way organisations operate. This traditional way tends to be characterised by strictly hierarchical structures where leadership and managers tell employees what to do and how to do it, pursuing narrowly defined (financial, short term) targets, with plenty of control going around.

In these “traditional” ways of working most employees have little freedom and autonomy, and end up feeling frustrated and demotivated. The traditional way of working also is characterised by slow decision making, and an inability to adapt to a dynamic world with open boundaries and limitless data and rapidly changing values.

Freedom, responsibility and trust are core values, and the organisational structure associated with it tends to be flat

The new way of working, typically, is associated with organisations pursuing a broader (more meaningful) purpose, with the ability to quickly adapt and change if required, seeing and treating its employees as a key asset in achieving its purpose. They measure performance differently, and have different approaches to recruitment and employee engagement. Freedom, responsibility and trust are core values, and the organisational structure associated with it tends to be flat.

## What are the characteristics of the new way of working?

The new way of working, because of the many potential benefits, has generated a lot of excitement. It has resulted in multiple platforms sharing tips and experiences, in academia studying organisational structures, and in plenty of publications either focusing on a particular organisation or trying to capture the essence by looking at trends and features shared by various successful “pioneering organisations”. Frequently mentioned examples of such organisations tend to include Semco, Zappos, Haier, Spotify, Netflix, Buurtzorg and Patagonia.

Unsurprisingly, as organisations are complex and have their own unique context, there isn’t a well-established set of structural or organisational characteristics which can readily explain the success of those pioneering organisations.

An organisation is much more than its values and its structure, and patterns offer no explanation

Organisations pursue goals which may or may not be well defined, in environments which may or may not be complex, changing and competitive, employing people with varying and often unknown skills, talents and motivations, who work in a culture which often has been shaped over many years and is in constant flux.

To make sense of this complexity, it is only human to focus on common visible features and trends in how pioneering organisations operate. Seeing patterns is something we, as humans, excel at. But

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an organisation is much more than a combination of values and its structure. And patterns may be of interest, they offer no explanation.

Pioneering organisations are characterised by embracing purpose, shedding hierarchy, empowering their employees, organisational experimentation and transparency

In 2015 A. Sachs and A. Kundu wrote [a blogpost](#) ([1]) about organisational transformation, with the aim to allow the organisation to “inspect and adapt”. They proposed that organisations are to “find the *balance* between the following opposites (see figure below) enabling it to respond with urgency”.

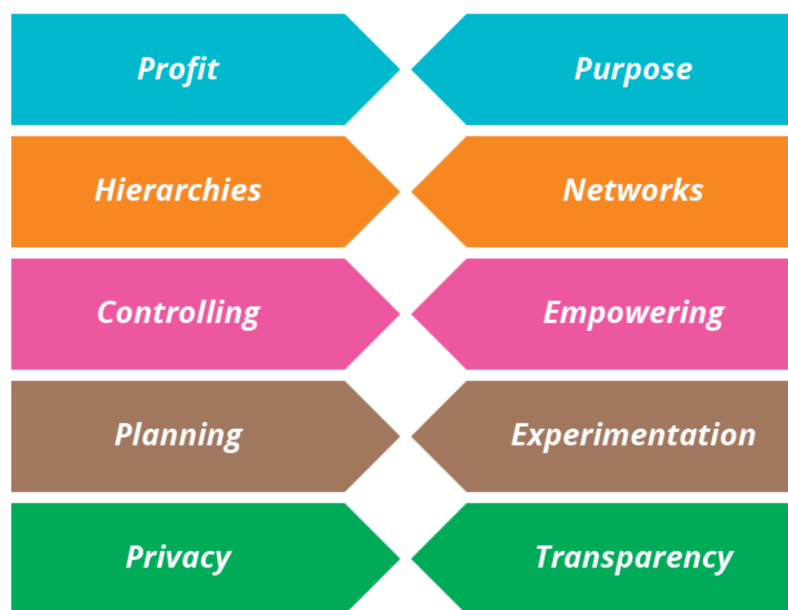


Figure 1. Opposites an organisation is to find a balance between.

Where Sachs and Kunda write about finding a balance between opposites, many advocates of the new way of working identify a trend away from the left column and towards purpose, networks, empowerment, experimentation and transparency.

Pioneering organisations — sometimes confusingly called “progressive” organisations — tend to be those organisations which are on the extreme end of this spectrume. They are thus characterised by embracing purpose, shedding hierarchy, empowering their employees, organisational experimentation and transparency.

However, as exciting these pioneering organisations are, and how appealing these extreme characteristics seem, neither the (structures of the) pioneering organisations nor these extreme characteristics define the new way of working.

## What is preventing existing organisations from embracing the new way?

The benefits associated of the new way of working are manifold, and there are thousands of organisations which have embraced several or all of its aspects. Many of these organisations started from scratch, or were forced to make a transformation because they were on the brink of failure, and had either “visionary” leaders at the helm, or were helped by experienced and no less visionary consultants.

Yet, there are millions of organisations which haven’t adopted the new way of working. Organisations which are not run by visionary leaders, which can’t build a new culture from scratch, are not pushed to change by impending failure, and don’t have the resources to “experiment” and drastically restructure. Most of these organisations can’t even tell whether the new way of working is actually for them, and if so, where to start.

### In absence of underlying principles, focusing on pioneering organisations has a downside

So how should existing organisations approach the new way of working? Today’s publications and platforms tend to focus on a relatively small group of pioneering organisations. They share exciting ideas and provide valuable support for a much larger group of interested organisations. But, in absence of underlying principles, their focus on, especially, the structural characteristics of these more “extreme” examples has a downside, also.

Haier (a Chinese home appliances and consumer electronics company) operates in an extremely dynamic environment and has a flexible organisational structure consisting out of thousands of networked micro-enterprises which come and go. Buurtzorg (a Dutch neighbourhood care provider) consists out of about a thousand teams working in parallel to each other, with each team serving a single unchanging neighbourhood while part of an organisational structure which is extremely stable.

Both organisations don’t have a layer of middle management, both work with autonomous teams. But does this mean that getting rid of middle management and working in autonomous teams thus needs to be embraced? And if so, given the promised benefits of improved organisational performance and resolution of work place frustrations, why isn’t it happening?

### The majority of organisations don’t want radical change, and shouldn’t attempt it

One simple reason is that “traditional” organisations neither have a big appetite nor great potential for change. Which is only compounded by the fact that many proponents of the new way of working argue that the change required must be “radical”. In their view organisations need completely different models to get rid of their formal structures. They should just begin, experiment and persevere, and give their employees freedom, autonomy and trust.

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By far the majority of organisations doesn't want radical change, and they should not attempt it either. It will only usurp resources and end in chaos. Traditional organisations are better served by gradual change, at a pace the organisation can manage. But this is not what advocates of the new way of working have to offer.

## “Freedom” and “trust” aren't organising principles

The real reason for the slow proliferation of the new way of working is the absence of underlying principles. Only with underlying principles in hand would it become possible for change to become both gradual and substantiated.

Buurtzorg and Haier operate in very different environments, and have very different organisational dynamics. Both lack middle management and employ self-managing teams. But that doesn't make “self-management” or “absence of middle management” essential to a new way of working.

Employees in pioneering organisations tend to have more freedom, and generally feel that the company has trust in their performance. But “freedom” and “trust” aren't organising principles.

There are several common misconceptions about what is needed and what must be done to arrive at a new way of working. To explain this, it is pivotal to arrive at a definition of the underlying principles of the new way of working.

## The underlying principles of the new way of working

It has been convincingly shown that, given the right circumstances, also very traditional and hierarchical organisations can adopt a new way of working and be successful (and without getting rid of hierarchy) [3]. But even then there are still two challenges remaining: replication and sustainability.

The new way of working is unlikely to be widely adopted,  
replicated or sustained

Buurtzorg's approach and success in providing neighbourhood care hasn't achieved the same traction in other countries. Haier's RenDanHeYi-model is widely studied, but hasn't been successfully copied. As it is, both companies still have their visionary leaders at the helm. What happens when they leave? What happened to Semco? What role does leadership actually play in the context of autonomous networked teams?

As long as there is no fundamental understanding of the principles underlying certain trends and features — principles which also take the (complexity of the) environment in which an organisation is to achieve its purpose into account — the “new way of working” is unlikely to be widely adopted, replicated, or sustained.

The starting point for arriving at the underlying principles of a new way of working has to be logical:



- Successful organisations are organisations which achieve their organisational goals with minimal use of resources, and hence by minimising risk.
- To do so they have to make optimal use of the expertise available to them.

### To optimally make use of expertise two preconditions have to be fulfilled

To make optimal use of available expertise throughout the organisation, first the goals to be achieved (as an organisation, within a team or project) have to be both transparent (understood the same by all involved) and objective (it should be clear when it is achieved). The best available expertise to achieve these goals has to be identified, and then the conditions have to be created to optimally make use of this expertise.

To optimally make use of expertise — of the skills and talents employees take to their job — two preconditions have to be fulfilled:

1. All forms of decision making is to be minimised (hierarchical, and as found in rules, protocols, procedures, etc.) — as these ignore or suppress available expertise
2. The communication between experts and experts-in-something-else must be clear — to prevent mechanisms of control to “kick in”.

Ad 1: Whenever choices are made which are *not fully substantiated* to contribute to achieving a goal, the *risk* this goal will not be achieved *increases*. This is what is so often problematic about hierarchical decision making, and rules and protocols. These often are, or contain, choices which can't be fully substantiated, and which in turn hamper or prevent the utilisation of available skills and talents. These different types of decision making both cause frustration and negatively affect organisational performance.

### In many organisations control is like a teacher on a playground telling kids not to climb the climbing frame

Ad 2: Organisations which heavily control their employees don't do so out of sadism, or tradition. They do so because they find the organisation's course and performance to be unpredictable. Unable to tell whether things go right, control becomes a “risk mitigation tool” to limit unknown damage from occurring when things go wrong. Organisations which rely on control tend to have unclear goals, little idea about the skills and talents their employees bring to the table, and no way of telling whether their employees are achieving these unclear goals. In many organisations “control” is like a teacher on a playground telling kids not to climb the climbing frame. Not because it is beyond them, but because there are simply too many other kids running around who also need the teacher's attention.

To do things right, most importantly, goals need to be non-ambiguous. Then, in order to prevent the organisational reflex of control kicking in, the communication between experts (i.e., employees with the right skills for the task at hand) and non-experts (e.g., managers or leadership responsible for the outcome) needs to be transparent. A prerequisite for this is the measurement of relevant outcomes. In absence of transparency control will always kick in.



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## It is the responsibility of leadership-roles throughout the organisation to create the conditions to utilise expertise

The required conditions to optimally utilise expertise include a clear purpose (goals), an environment of no-decision-making, and transparency with respect to communication and outcomes.

Furthermore, the organisational culture must be safe for everyone to contribute their ideas, and all relevant information needed to substantiate the choices which have to be made has readily accessible. It is the responsibility of all leadership-roles throughout the organisation to create these conditions.

Organisations wanting to embrace the new way of working have to create the right internal conditions. But the “balance” they have to find, and the particular solutions and structure that work best for them, are also dependent on external conditions: the type of environment the organisation operates in.

The more dynamic the environment, the greater the importance of the swift utilisation of expertise to minimise risk becomes. In dynamic environments “expertise” relies *less* on experience and *more* on a high level of perceptiveness. Someone’s level of perceptiveness — someone’s awareness and understanding of change — is a trait. Which means that not all people are equally suited to work in any environment (let alone be suited to take on leadership-roles in these environments [4]).

In summary:

- High performing organisations are organisations which manage to achieve their goals through the optimal utilisation of the expertise available to them.
- This requires that these goals are non-ambiguous, and that the right conditions to utilise expertise are in place.
- The two central challenges are the avoidance, for as much as possible, of all types of decision making, and establishing clear communication between experts and non-experts.
- It is the responsibility of the various leadership-roles throughout the organisation to create, sustain and communicate these conditions.
- What works best for a particular organisation depends also on the environment in which it is to achieve its organisational goals.

Based on this logic the following misconceptions about the new way of working can be identified and explained.

### **Misconception #1: Change must be radical!**

If organisations are to transform themselves into today’s “pioneering organisations,” this would indeed be a radical transformation for almost all of them. Radical change is also proposed because traditional top-down change initiatives tend to be gradual, modest, watered down, and ultimately unsuccessful. Traditional “gradual change” typically doesn’t amount to much. But with the underlying principles of the new way of working in hand, change can, in fact, be gradual.

Organisations are successful when they achieve their desired outcomes at minimal risk, using the minimal amount of resources. In achieving desired outcomes the organisation constantly has to make choices, and there only two types of them. One, choices which *increase the risk* the desired outcome will not be achieved (or only using many more resources than minimally required), and two, choices which *don't increase this risk*.

The latter type of choice is made by experts. Experts are able to substantiate why what needs to be done next. To them, in their field of expertise, the situation is transparent. What needs to be done is obvious, and, in fact, no longer involves a choice. In an organisational context, choices which don't increase risk aren't in need of anything, except, perhaps, an approval or a go-ahead.

## Organisations have a special word for choices which increase risk

Which leaves organisations with the choices which *do* increase risk. Organisations have a special word for this *type of choice which is not fully substantiated to contribute to achieve a desired outcome* and thus increases risk. They call it a decision [4,5].

That decisions always increase risk is, in fact, the underlying paradigm shift of the new way of working. And a paradigm shift is required because the existing dominant paradigm — decision making is a strength, a token of power, an earned right, an indication of boldness and incisiveness, a skill, an organisational necessity, “the way of running things” — is failing organisations and the people operating within them. It is failing, because it stands in the way of utilising our skills, talents and motivation. All of which needs to be utilised to create as much transparency as possible, and to achieve optimal organisational performance.

This is not a paradigm shift merely reserved for higher management. It can be made by everyone within the organisation. It is neither top down nor bottom up. Identifying decisions (hierarchical, and as found in rules, protocols, procedures etc.) can be done everywhere throughout the organisation. Avoiding decisions, and minimising and managing the risk associated with the decisions which can't be avoided, can be done throughout the organisation.

Creating the conditions to replace decisions with the utilisation of expertise doesn't have to be radical. It can be done gradually, locally, even reversibly. How to do so, following steps and adhering to principles, is explained by the approach of Decision Free Solutions [6] (see also [Figure 1](#)).

## Misconception #2: Get rid of hierarchy!

There is no inherent problem with hierarchy. Hierarchy can be practical, provide clarity, be efficient even. The problem is not hierarchy, but the anachronism of hierarchical decision making.

Hierarchical decision making is, at first sight, a simple and also practical way of organising work. It may be slow at times, but at least everyone knows how it works. What makes it so harmful, however, is that the “power of hierarchy” makes these decisions incontestable. In today's organisations, decisions tend to be God-given. And all of these incontestable decisions increase

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organisational risk by failing to tap into available expertise, and by failing to reduce, manage and mitigate the risks they are associated with.

### Hierarchal decision making is the problem, not hierarchy itself

For many, hierarchical decision making also creates an unsafe environment. They acutely sense the decision making biases at play, especially the social biases. They are the ones who suffer the greatest frustrations caused by decision making. Decisions affecting recruitment, invitations to meetings, speaking time, opportunities to represent the company, and, of course, promotions. It is how racism and discrimination enters the organisation [2].

That hierarchal decision making is the problem, and not hierarchy itself, is also beautifully and dramatically shown by Marquet's interesting story as the captain of a submarine [7]. Also Buurtzorg can be said to have three hierarchical layers: teams, coaches, and leadership. It is just that this hierarchy is not a power-structure but a support-structure, and that neither coaches nor leadership make decisions for the teams.

### Misconception #3: It is all about trust!

There is an important distinction to be made between the "trust" that is asking to have faith in someone or some organisation, and the trust that is an extrapolation of past performances. The former is the type of trust organisations can do without, the latter requires that performances are actually measured.

#### "Trust" in absence of clear goals and the measurement of relevant outcomes is going to end in disaster

The key message is that trust is not an organisational principle. Simply "trusting employees" does not result in performance. What improves performance are clear and objective goals, the availability of the right skills and talents, and the measurement of relevant outcomes. If those are in place, control and decision making have to be avoided in order to let people use their expertise.

In another aspect it *is* all about trust. Trust is a key element in building an environment of no-decision-making. Trust is like motor oil. It is indispensable to the engine's smooth operation, but if the engine is not designed well, putting in more oil will not increase its performance.

As those who have a high level of perceptiveness are both *trustworthy* and have a natural tendency to *trust others* (see Figure 4 in [4]), if the engine is well designed then all that is needed to achieve great organisational performance is identifying the right people to take on leadership-roles.

Avoiding control and decision making can be labelled as "trust". But "trust" in absence of clear goals, relevant expertise and the measurement of relevant outcomes is bound to end in disaster. In the case of Buurtzorg the organisational purpose is clear, the employees are qualified nurses, and

relevant outcomes are measured and accessible to all within the organisation. It doesn't make sense to tell nurses how to best do their job. But it doesn't make sense either to assume they do their work well merely because somebody "trusts" them to.

The CEO of Buurtzorg shows many behavioural characteristics which are aligned with a high level of perceptiveness. He makes it frequently and abundantly clear that he fully trusts his employees. This trust is the organisation's motor oil, it contributes to creating a culture where people feel safe and confident, which are important prerequisites to speak out and share your expertise. But, again, in absence of clear goals, alignment of expertise, and measuring important outcomes, "trust" alone isn't going to automatically and magically produce good results.

## Misconception #4: Just try something!

Experimentation with different ways of doing things, to learn lessons, to adapt these different ways to the local context, is *essential* to reduce complexity and to get on top of things. But experimenting in the sense of "just try something and see what happens" is to be avoided. Experimentation may be essential, but rather than being embraced it needs to be *guided*.

When a change is needed — and it never takes long before there is — instead of "experimenting" with an idea and just see what happens, one can also first define what needs to be achieved, and second use guidelines (the understanding of underlying principles) and whatever information is available to devise the change. This way the risk associated with change is reduced, and from whatever doesn't work as expected something useful will be learned.

You want to embrace experimentation as much as you want to  
embrace ignorance

Organisations which step away from hierarchical decision making (or even from hierarchy itself), and which no longer have prescribed job descriptions, will still need to identify the right people to take on "leadership-roles". They still need to come up with a compensation scheme for their workers. But they don't have to "experiment" with this. There are simple guidelines to follow. An example of this — creating a salary structure in absence of traditional hierarchy — can be found in [8].

## Misconception #5: Self-management is key!

A self-managing team (SMT) has been defined as "a group of individuals with diverse skills and knowledge with the collective autonomy and responsibility to plan, manage and execute tasks interdependently to attain a common goal". About twenty years ago SMTs were recognised as a leading innovation in work structures, and even as a management paradigm shift.

In 2018 N. Smith and P. Pazos published an article which looked at the various factors affecting the effectiveness of SMTs. The picture is decidedly mixed, with some implementations resulting in

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adverse outcomes such as conflict escalation and reduced awareness of changes outside the team [9].

### Self-managing teams may be near-essential in dynamic situations, and optional or even ill-advised in others

Self-management is not a prerequisite to realise the potential of the new way of working (much like the absence of hierarchy isn't either). But self-managing teams with a high level of autonomy can be ideally suited to quickly respond to e.g. changes in customer demands.

Self-managing teams may be near-essential in dynamic situations, and optional or even ill-advised in others. For self-management to be successful a clear purpose and sufficient autonomy to utilise the team's expertise are essential. Self-management also requires a group dynamic which tries to prevent the establishment of hierarchy and especially (hierarchical) decision making. This in turn hinges on sufficient team members bringing the right mind- and skill-set to the team.

At Buurtzorg self-managing teams are the best solution to establish relationships with patients to quickly assess and provide the care they need. Great care is taken to prevent anyone from taking decisions affecting others, and, if need be, coaches can be asked to assist the team in solving any issues they may have. Also, at Buurtzorg self-management is helped by having a clear purpose, understood the same by all involved (all are nurses), and the measurement of all relevant outcomes to assess the team's performance.

Self-management is not a generic solution. It is a powerful solution in certain environments when certain boundary conditions are fulfilled.

### **Misconception #6: Do away with control!**

As mentioned before, organisations tend to control their employees — by telling them what to do and how to do it, through frequent “progress” meetings, rules, the need for reports, regulations, hierarchy making incontestable decisions, etc. — not because they are intent on wasting resources, but because of widespread ambiguity. Ambiguity with respect to the goals, the talents and skills of the people who are to achieve them, and the “progress” made.

### Giving up control is what happens when the right conditions are in place

If goals aren't transparent, when there is no way of telling whether the skills and talents available are properly aligned with the tasks at hand, and relevant outcomes aren't measured let alone monitored, then “giving up control” isn't going to result in performance.

Giving up control is what happens when the right conditions are in place. Even then, one can argue, there is some level of control through the measurement of relevant outcomes.

At Buurtzorg the teams are extremely autonomous and there is no hierarchy telling the teams how to do their job. But for all of the teams relevant outcomes are measured, and these performances are transparent and accessible for all teams across the organisation. If a team under- or overperforms, the entire organisation knows about it. Even in this example of extreme autonomy, there is still “control” of some sort. The key difference here is that this type of control does not interfere with the utilisation of available expertise.

## Misconception #7: It is all about people!

It is, of course, all about people. But more importantly, it is all about the skills and talents of people. And still more importantly, it about the alignment of the right skills and talents to take on a particular task. This matters in teams and projects, and it most certainly matters in leadership-roles [4].

### Not all people are created equal

Identifying the right people to take on a task depends also on the environment in which they have to operate. The more dynamic the environment (e.g, when working in self-managing teams) the greater the importance of perceptiveness. This is what is behind Spotify’s “hire for culture, train for skills” — where Spotify’s self-managing culture requires a high level of perceptiveness [8].

The new way of working is about getting the best out of people, utilising their skills and talents and motivation. But not all people are created equal. Some become experts in a stable environment, others bring the skills to become experts in dynamic environments. To create the conditions for everyone’s skills and talents to be identified and optimally utilised is not easy, but it can be done.

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# The Approach of Decision Free Solutions

*Resolve frustrations, Utilise expertise, Free up resources, Make change happen*

A generic and systematic approach, providing guidelines for new and existing methods to utilise all available expertise to achieve the goals you believe in

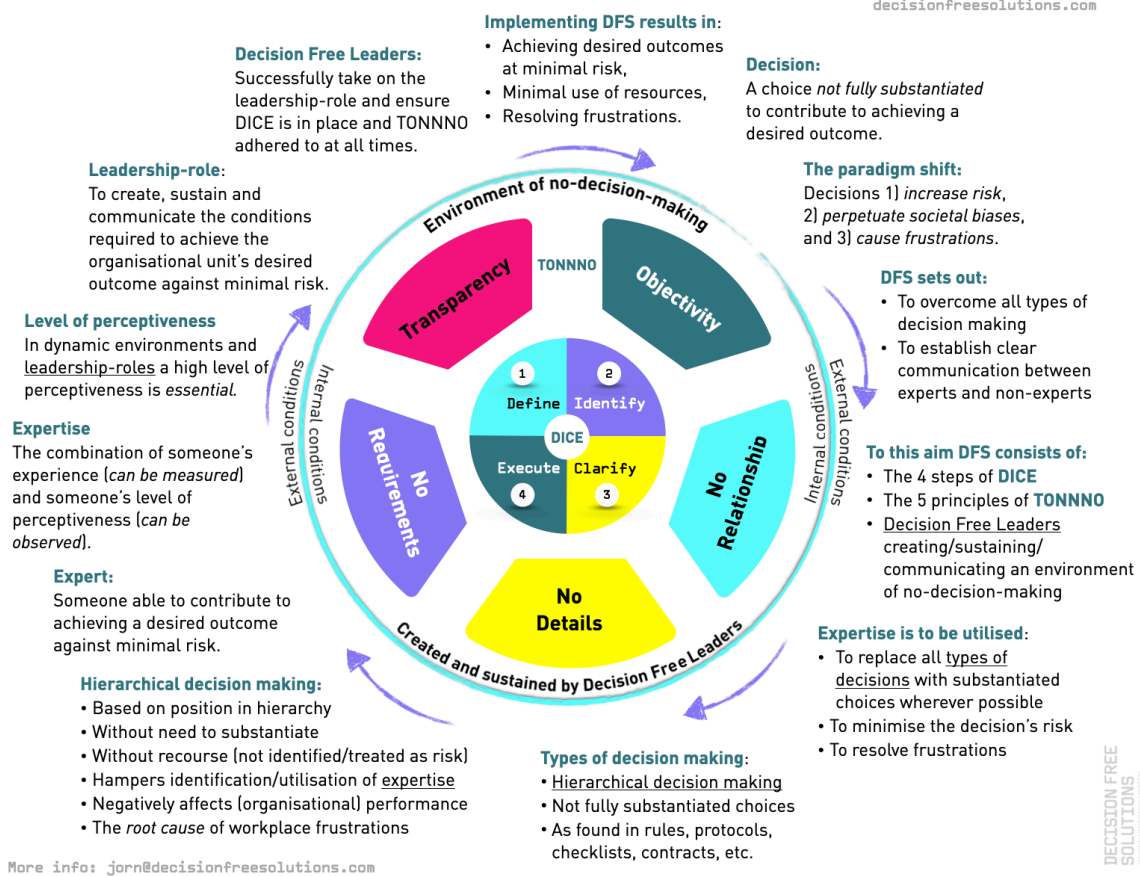


Figure 1. Graphical summary of the approach of Decision Free Solutions.

The [approach of Decision Free Solutions](#) (DFS) provides guidelines for new and existing methods to utilise all available expertise to achieve desired outcomes. Its motto: "Resolve frustrations, Utilise expertise, Free up resources, Make change happen". Implementing the approach of DFS results in i) Achieving desired outcomes with minimal risk, ii) Minimal use of resources, iii) Resolving frustrations.



DFS

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