An aerial photograph of a long freight train moving through a dense fog. The train is composed of several locomotives and numerous flatbed and boxcar cars. The fog is thick and white, obscuring the ground and distant structures. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The train is moving from the bottom right towards the top left of the frame.

Best Practice Guide Five Steps to Drive Decision-Making Downwards

As professional services organizations grow, decision-making often ends up being pushed upwards.

This can lead to a previously dynamic and agile business slowing down, bottlenecks arising, and opportunities to take timely action being missed.

In many businesses, the most senior people are regarded as the best decision-makers. They have the most experience and the greatest depth of knowledge. They may be the only ones who have visibility of all the information - such as the financial data about how the company is doing. They may also be the only ones who really understand the vision for the company. Therefore, they have to take the decisions.

But if the C-suite makes all the decisions, the company's ability to expand successfully will be impacted, regardless of what new technology is brought onboard. As this kind of organization grows, information has to be collected about what is happening on the ground, and then pushed up the hierarchy to the decision-making layer. The data has to be reviewed and a course of action selected which then has to be relayed back down to the team who will put it into practice.

It's slow, it's bureaucratic and it doesn't give scope for people across the organization to grow their skills and develop. Highly-skilled employees who are in customer-facing roles are generally most likely to understand a specific situation. Not only that, but they are also the main potential source of fresh ideas and innovations that will drive real value for customers.

But when deciding to divest authority across the organization, how does the management team ensure that appropriate actions are being taken? How are new staff members supported to deliver at the level of the most experienced and successful? How do colleagues access the information they need to make decisions which will impact the business's bottom line?

Having the facility to share up-to-date real-time information across the organization, such as is provided by an integrated professional services automation solution, is a precursor for empowering employees at every level to take appropriate decisions.

In this Best Practice Guide from Kimble, we describe five simple steps to driving decision-making downwards.

1 Create a clear structure of ownership of delivering outcomes

Make sure there is clarity about where the accountability lies for specific outcomes.

A golden source of information that everyone can access gives visibility and enables accountability to be shared across the business.

Having a PSA system means that up-to-date information can be shared across the firm in a single source of the truth that everyone can access. This forms the basis for sharing accountability right across the organization.

To get value from the information which is now easily accessible, it has to flow into decision-making. It is no use sharing live, real-time information across the organization if every action requires approval from one of five busy people before it is taken. For example, a project is going off track, risking both customer satisfaction and profitability, but nothing can be done about it until next month's management meeting.

This kind of bottleneck can slow down response time and impact business performance. But if the right processes are in place, everyone will be able to draw on the "golden source" of information to make decisions about their own areas.

Allowing people to take ownership drives this behavior. For instance, the managers of individual business units can become accountable for their profitability. Project managers can take responsibility for noticing as soon as their real-life engagements start to depart from the plan, and dealing with most issues swiftly.

A large, dark grey circular graphic on the right side of the page, containing a quote.

Driving decision making downwards is a better strategy for a growing business.





2 Give colleagues control of the levers they need to affect these outcomes

Baseline project revenue and cost, agree to reasonable targets, budgets, and metrics and allow each business area to monitor how it is delivering value for customers.

An expanding organization can decide to let the different business units and departments effectively run themselves, in line with general principles. Managers of business units can monitor the value they are delivering for both new and existing customers.

Project Managers can take control over resources, time, and approving expenses. They should begin each project understanding what the customer is looking for. They should also agree to deliver this against a baseline of the likely project cost and the predicted revenue. But people can't be accountable for things they can't control. For instance, when managing a budget for an international team, a project manager should not be held accountable for currency fluctuations.

Once the practices and processes that support decentralized decision-making are in place, they can be built on in many areas. Even fairly junior members of the staff can be given control of budgets for a specific area, but that budget should be looked at and reassessed on a regular basis, and the employee should have opportunities to seek advice and support.

Once the practices and processes that support decentralized decision-making are in place, they can be built on in many areas.

3 Ensure that everyone follows rigorous processes on sharing and managing information

A commitment to transparency and open communication will be necessary to ensure the success of empowered decision-making across the organization.

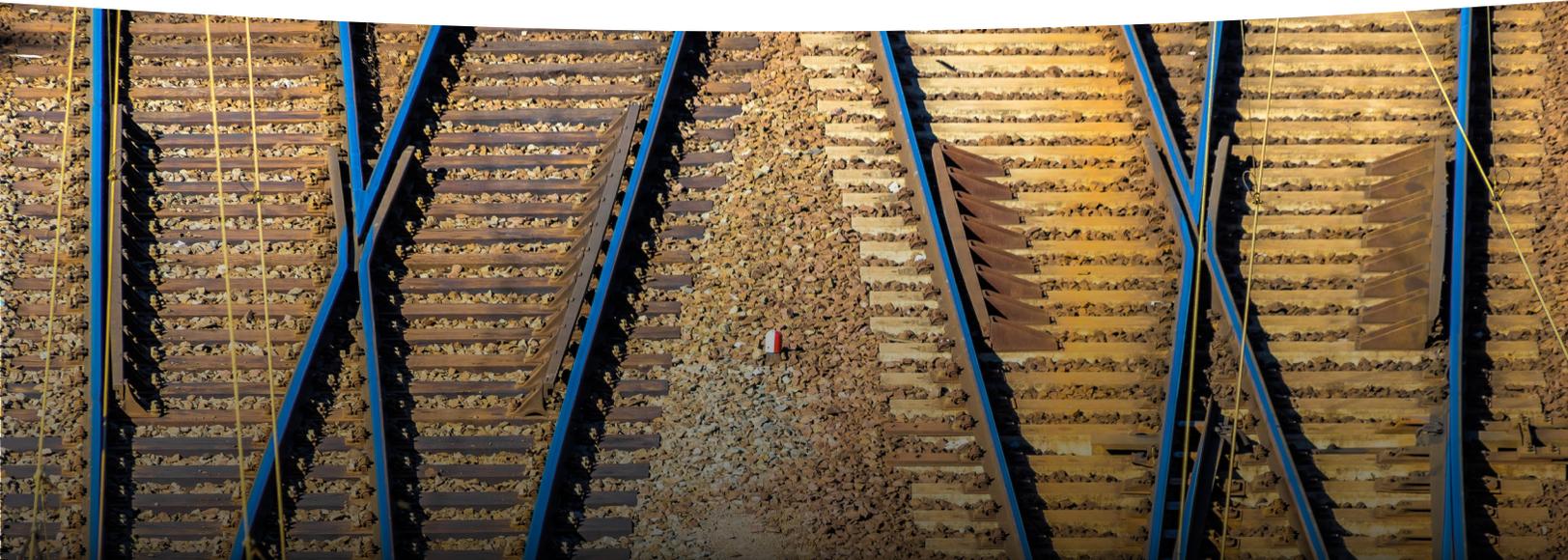
Sometimes 'transparency' is something business leaders pay lip service to but they don't actually understand why it matters and therefore they don't deliver on it. But it is the basis for informed decision-making.

When a project is at the proposal stage, there should be a clear and shared understanding of what 'done' looks like. Also, of what it is likely to cost to deliver and therefore what the expected margin is. Sometimes, where this process is not well understood or adhered to, projects may be sold which are likely to be very difficult if not impossible to deliver with both a high level of customer satisfaction and at a profit. Lack of clarity about what margin a project was sold at, is likely to create problems for the person who is accountable for delivering the value that the customer is looking for, at a profit.

But setting the expectation that projects have to be clearly baselined before being handed over to project managers will help the organization to deliver projects on or above target.

During the delivery phase, there will be a different set of processes which have to be followed to make sure that the business delivers the best possible performance time after time. For instance, adopting the practice that project managers close each week, means results are available on an ongoing basis. It also means it will be easier to close month-end within a few days, which will improve business performance.

Shared information is the basis for empowered decision-making across the organization.





4 Use automation to guide and support employees

Augmented intelligence-enabled professional services automation can guide and prompt employees. It can help to surface issues, prompt action and identify trends.

In the early stages, many professional services organizations are dynamic and agile. At this stage, organizations tend to operate in what business author Geoffrey Moore defines as “high-trust networks.” They are made up of people who understand the company’s culture and share its goals. But when an organization enters a period of growth, that culture is challenged.

New staff members will not be as familiar with the business, and bringing on board several at once can have the effect of shifting the culture towards a more “low-trust network,” where there is a lot more supervision and control rises to the top of the organization. That can be disempowering and disengaging for employees.

An automated system makes it easier to share accountability and support employees. For example, automation can prompt project managers, reminding them of the need to arrange more purchase order cover; consultants can be reminded to fill in and submit timecards and expenses. The visibility ensures that even new and inexperienced staff members can be trusted to know what to do. It can prompt actions, and instead of reacting to point in time data, business leaders can see trends.

Using collaborative workplace technology to share information, to guide employees towards the next expected action, and to highlight trends as they occur, means that managers can feel more confident about pushing decision-making down the organization.

Using professional services automation, which increasingly incorporates augmented intelligence, helps staff members effectively self-manage.

5 Have a team culture, not a blame culture

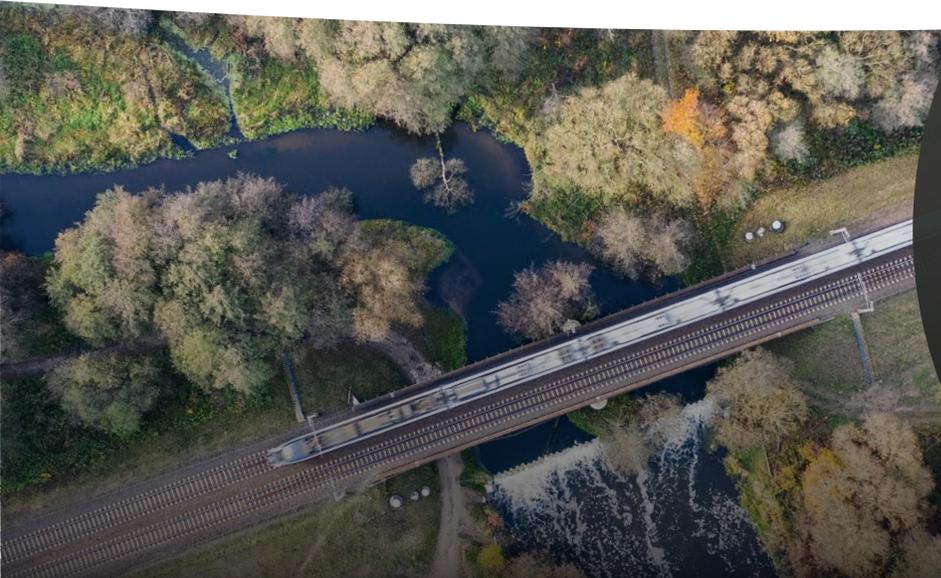
Where employees are responsible for most of the day-to-day decisions, sometimes mistakes will occur. Rather than looking for the “culprit”, it is better to take a team approach, and work together to improve the decision-making process.

A blame culture is one where single points of data are over-used and individuals are blamed for poor outcomes – as opposed to taking a more measured approach, where business leaders look for trends and take a team approach to improvement.

Rather than looking for the culprit when something goes wrong, it is more productive to focus on improving the decision-making process going forward, to try and understand the reasons why the incorrect decision was made. Even a bad process will sometimes lead to a good decision. But by focusing on the outcome and not the process you won't be able to create a more consistent outcome for the long term.

When the team is working together smoothly, employees are supported to manage themselves. Project managers undertake to deliver projects on budget. Consultants fill in timesheets promptly because they know they will be held accountable for meeting their own individual utilization targets. Salespeople know that if they log opportunities, they will be able to compare how they are doing against targets, and how much of their commission or bonus they are going to make.

Employees are generally a business' main assets. They are the people who are responsible for realizing the company's vision on a daily basis; they interact with customers and they are often the source of innovative ideas. Making sure that the business is doing a great job for both employees and customers is vital for success in today's competitive environment.

An aerial photograph showing a river winding through a forested area. A bridge with multiple tracks crosses the river. The trees are in various shades of green and yellow, suggesting an autumn setting. The river flows from the top left towards the bottom right.

*Support people to
do their best work,
encourage them
to innovate and
to take on more
responsibility.*

Conclusion

Organizations with empowered, autonomous staff members who are supported to self-manage will be able to maintain an agile and dynamic culture as they grow. Time is not wasted in decision-making bottlenecks. Information is acted upon as soon as it is available. Managers who are less occupied with day to day issues will be able to focus on leading the business in the right direction.

Example: Kainos

Award-winning IT consultancy Kainos, which has tripled in size since introducing Kimble, is a good example of a business which has successfully pushed decision-making down the organization.

Kainos uses the intelligence that is embedded in the Kimble system to decentralize decision making. Business unit managers are responsible for making decisions about their own business, while at the same time sharing information about group-wide performance through the Kimble system.

Group Head of Finance Peter McKeown, said: **"Kimble is a very powerful system. It allows me to capture a huge amount of relevant and timely data. Our business units now have much more operational visibility and control, and we've adapted Kimble to support each one of them."**

An aerial photograph of a dirt road winding through a dry, scrubby landscape. A red truck is driving on the road, leaving a trail of dust. The image is partially obscured by a large, dark circular graphic on the right side of the page.

"Our business units now have much more operational visibility and control, and we've adapted Kimble to support each one of them."

PETER MCKEOWN, KAINOS