

# When You Have to Carry Out a Decision You Disagree With

By: Art Markman  
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## *Executive Summary*

If senior leaders in your organization have made a decision you disagree with, how can you carry it out? To start, resist the temptation to communicate to your peers and supervisees that you're not convinced this is the right way to go. Your job is to help your organization succeed. You won't be fulfilling that role if you — intentionally or unintentionally — undermine the decision. Then ask yourself whether you trust senior management. Assuming you do (and if you don't, it might be time to look for another job), then put yourself in the shoes of someone who believes deeply in the decision that was made. Ask yourself why someone would make this choice. Look for factors you may not have considered before that would make this option a good one. While you're at it, also be explicit about all of your objections — this will help you anticipate any obstacles you might face in carrying out the decision. Once you've wrapped your head around why this decision was reasonable, convey that belief to your team. After all, how much effort your team puts into making a plan succeed depends in large part on how much they believe in it.

One of the great frustrations of being a middle manager is that senior leaders make decisions that go against what you would have done had it been up to you. Sometimes you are part of the decision process, and other times the decision is simply handed down. Either way, you are now responsible for ensuring that the plan is carried out.

A natural reaction in this situation is to begrudgingly go along with the chosen course of action. You might even be tempted to communicate to your peers and supervisees that you're not convinced this is the right way to go.

Resist that temptation. Your job is to help your organization succeed. You won't be fulfilling that role if you — intentionally or unintentionally — undermine the decision. Instead, start by asking yourself whether you trust the organization you work for. If — deep down — you don't feel that senior management makes good decisions, it's probably time to start looking for another job.

But if you do trust the organization, then begin by convincing yourself that the decision is actually a good one. This is what I did early in my academic career when I received peer review comments on a paper I'd submitted for publication. Without fail, there would be at least one reviewer who hated the paper. They did not get the point of my argument or they had reservations about the studies I had done.

When this first started happening, I hated those reviewers and assumed they hadn't read my paper carefully. Eventually, though, after I served as a reviewer on enough papers to realize that the authors whose papers I was reviewing probably wanted to dismiss my comments as well, I began to trust that

the reviewers had valid points. Perhaps those points reflected my own bad writing, or (perish the thought), perhaps my experiments were not as brilliant as I thought they were. Ultimately, trusting that they had valid points made my papers better.

To convince yourself of the decision, put yourself in the shoes of someone who believes deeply in the decision that was made. Ask yourself why someone would make this choice. Look for factors you may not have considered before that would make this option a good one. While you're at it, also be explicit about all of your objections. Those will be useful as well.

Once you've wrapped your head around why this decision was reasonable, you're ready to start working with your team to carry out the new plan.

This approach helps you – and your team – in two ways.

First, how much effort your team puts into making a plan succeed depends in large part on how much they believe in it. If you communicate a new course of action halfheartedly, you'll get less than peak effort because people will sense that you're not enthralled with the job to be done.

Also, even the best plans run into some difficulties for a variety of reasons: the plan might be failing, more effort might be required, or the team needs to innovate to find the right way to implement it. How the people you work with interpret inevitable problems and what's required to remedy the situation depends on their commitment to the plan. If, spurred by your trepidation, they're already looking for reasons why the option will fail, they are much less likely to be motivated by difficulties they face than if they believe deeply that the plan will succeed. Communicating a plan with confidence can help create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Second, the reservations you have about the decision can strengthen the plans you develop with your team. That list of objections you made when convincing yourself the plan is a good one comes in handy here: it reflects your beliefs about the potential obstacles to success. You are already aware of some of the reasons why the plan could fail. Use this list of obstacles to develop contingencies to handle what you think can go wrong. Research suggests that the better prepared you are for problems before they happen, the better able you'll be to handle them when they arise.

Finally, teach this method of dealing with disappointing decisions to the people who work for you. When you move up in the organization, you are likely to make decisions that fly in the face of what some of the people believe is right. You want them to treat your choices with enough respect to give them the best chance to succeed.

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Art Markman, PhD, is the Annabel Irion Worsham Centennial Professor of Psychology and Marketing at the University of Texas at Austin and founding director of the program in the Human Dimensions of Organizations. He has written over 150 scholarly papers on topics including reasoning, decision making, and motivation. He is the author of several books including *Smart Thinking*, *Smart Change*, and *Habits of Leadership*.