

How to Make Peace with a Company Decision You Don't Like

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When Hurricane Idalia struck the northern coast of Florida last year, it wreaked havoc on the home-building company where Elisia worked as a project manager. Several partially completed projects were destroyed, and material in the company's warehouse and lumber yard were ruined. Management was committed to keeping the company going, but they had to lay off 10% of the staff and told all remaining employees that they would have to take a 20% pay cut for the foreseeable future.

Elisia was angry. She didn't agree with management's decision, yet it would be her job to defend their decision to the employees on her team, and she felt uncomfortable doing this. Initially, she couldn't get past her anger. She began planning an offsite therapy session with her team to give them space to process the loss, the shakeup, and to vent their emotions. But she quickly realized how counterproductive this would be. She felt stuck, and puzzled over how best to move forward.

Many of us find ourselves in these types of situations at work — we have to go along with, explain, and sometimes even carry out decisions we don't agree with. These situations can make us angry, anxious, and confused. Why wasn't I consulted? How will I explain this to my team? Am I even getting the full story?

We all want to be the captain of our own ship, but the truth is that we operate in a world where we are often impacted by the decisions of others. There are times when we lead but also times when we must follow — and we may not agree with the path we're told to follow. At the same time, we know it's more important to maintain a positive attitude for our team and a positive relationship with management instead of creating waves. So, how do we forge ahead and follow with grace?

Too often, I see clients commit to taking a positive stance on an uncomfortable situation only to undermine what should be a collaborative, prosocial experience. On the surface, they present themselves as aligned with the decision but underneath they haven't let go of their negative emotions. This was the position Elisia found herself in: She knew that she was going to have to publicly support and carry out management's unpopular decision, but she could feel her team's anger and hadn't fully relinquished her own.

Since Elisia and I were working together during this difficult period, I suggested that before she gathered her team, she pause and work through the lack of alignment between her emotions and the actions she knew she needed to take in order to move forward with the company. I gave her a list of eight questions — a tool that I call a Cheetah Sheet. I recommend this tool to my clients, as I consistently see it deliver positive results. These questions, which all of us can use when we face similar misalignment, are meant to act like speed-bumps, to slow down our often knee-jerk emotional reactions when faced with making uncomfortable decisions. My clients say these questions also act as a release valve when they feel "stuck" in their emotions, giving them greater confidence in their decision to support what may be a controversial plan.

As I've observed, when we need to make a difficult decision, we often rush through it to avoid sitting with uneasy feelings. As a result, we may end up making a sub-par decision that may not actually solve the problem we're faced with. Our emotions are not the problem here but our reactions to them may be.

Like the cheetah, whose hunting prowess comes from its ability to rapidly decelerate, the Cheetah Sheet encourages you to slow down and think again as you analyze information and process emotions. I have elaborated on each question to clarify how it helps with processing our thoughts and I've also provided Elisia's answers so you can see an example of how someone might work through the exercise.

1. What specific situation do I disagree with?

Many of us think we know what problem we're solving without ever fully articulating it. By taking the time to name and define the specific problem we're facing, we can fully understand its true parameters and ensure we're tackling the right problem.

Elisia: I disagree with the way the company suddenly, unexpectedly, and drastically cut everyone's pay in order to reduce layoffs.

2. How will setting aside my disagreement benefit me?

This question encourages you to think about the silver lining, and any upsides of going along with an unpopular plan.

Elisia: I'll keep the job I enjoy despite the shakeup.

3. How will setting aside my disagreement benefit my team?

Once you identify a personal silver lining, it's often easier to see how others may be positively impacted.

Elisia: I want my co-workers and the people who work for me to keep their jobs and their benefits. Anybody who leaves the company in anger now may have a very hard time finding another job.

4. What information might the decision-maker(s) have that I don't?

This question is very important because it typically surfaces empathy. We're often trapped within the confines of our own perspective and by asking ourselves what information someone else may have that we don't, we can often begin to see the rationale for an unpopular decision.

Elisia: I only see my department's financials; I don't have a detailed picture of what the whole company looks like after our losses.

5. What areas of alignment are there between my initial work goals and the company's goals for making this decision?

Now that you're beginning to think beyond your own perspective, it may be easier to notice other commonalities between your work goals and the company's goal for making the decision.

Elisia: I want to contribute to the company's success because I appreciate their mission and product, and working for a successful company benefits me personally. I trust that management and I share the same goals for the company's success: To continue making a good, reliable product and to treat employees fairly.

6. By accepting this decision, what specific actions am I committing to take?

You're now ready to chart a new course of action. By addressing your emotions first, redirecting them to a place of positivity, and thinking beyond your own perspective, you can act with intention.

Elisia: I am committing to putting aside my anger about how management made this decision without discussing it with senior leaders. I am committing to vocally supporting the decision because it means working toward a new vision of success for the company and keeping on as many employees as possible, even though we're all sacrificing to do so.

7. Gut check: Who can help me strength-test my intended course of action?

Identifying other people in your network with whom you may check and challenge your thinking can help you strengthen your decisions. Think about those people outside of your current work environment whose opinions you value and discuss the situation and your intended actions with them.

Elisia: I am close with many people on my team, but I don't think it's appropriate to commiserate with them and they might not be able to see the bigger picture. I'll reach out to

my friend Gabriel, whose travel company was also severely impacted by the storm. I'll also talk this through with my life partner.

8. Review your answers to Questions 1-7. How has this process helped me reconcile my negative emotions with my actions?

Review the steps you've taken and appreciate the distance you've put between your emotions and the situation at hand. You've identified advantages from a decision that you disagree with, you've looked beyond your own perspective, and you've solicited the feedback of others outside of the situation.

Elisia: I realized that I have the same core objectives as management. I wanted to believe that we were past the fallout from the hurricane, but we're not — and we're all in it together. It's a time of loss for all of us, but we can build back together. Looking at my own emotions also made me realize that management must be having a hard time, too. I need to check with the chief of staff and ask her how she's feeling.

By slowing down and working through these eight prompts, Elisia gained the important emotional distance that she needed and felt in better alignment with management's decision. By looking beyond her own perspective, she came to understand that the damage caused by the hurricane was even more extensive than she had previously thought: The company's viability was at stake. She still wasn't happy about the way that management had rolled out their plan, but she felt greater empathy for why management made the decision it did and felt better prepared to field questions from her team and publicly support the decision.

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If you strongly disagree with a decision that's been made at your company but ultimately want to remain with the organization, then decelerate and reflect. Use this tool to help process difficult emotions, articulate the problem, identify potential upsides, develop empathy, and visualize what executing an uncomfortable decision will actually look like. In doing so, you can demonstrate a good attitude to your team, maintain a positive relationship with management, and display resilience by pivoting and working toward a new definition of success.