

Reminder to leaders: "you are not smarter than the group"

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Poor decision-making from the top is common and costly, according to an executive coach who reminds leaders, "you are not smarter than the group".

Whether they're defining a key element of their organisation's strategy for the next three years, or making a determination on an issue that's escalated to their team, a CEO or team leader will have "tremendous influence over the quality of the decision", says **Bryan Whitefield**, former president and chair of the Risk Management Institution of Australasia, in his new book [Team Think](#).



Bryan Whitefield

Leaders can gain insight into past decisions by asking themselves how they initiated decision-making meetings, whether they put their own opinions forward before seeking those of others, and whether they advocated for a single view.

They can also ask themselves whether, when alternative views arose, they facilitated "robust and constructive and not polarising" conversation and when concluding, whether they made sure everyone had made a significant contribution.

As for rules of thumb to keep in mind, he says the first is: "You are not smarter than the group". Rule two is that "true consensus", while "great", is hard to achieve – but by breaking up a strategy, they might be able to get consensus on as many "elements" as possible. Rule three is that "great teams love being averaged".

If a leader has a great team, the "best" decision is "highly likely to be the average of everyone's views", Whitefield says. This means that if they're deciding on the price to bid in a competitive tender, a leader might invite anonymous suggestions and then average them, while if it's a yes/no decision, they'll consider a vote.

In line with the first rule, Whitefield urges leaders faced with a decision to first ask themselves, to what extent it's their decision or the team's decision.

"If yours, how much are you willing to listen to information and opinion from your team members before making the decision?" Whitefield asks.

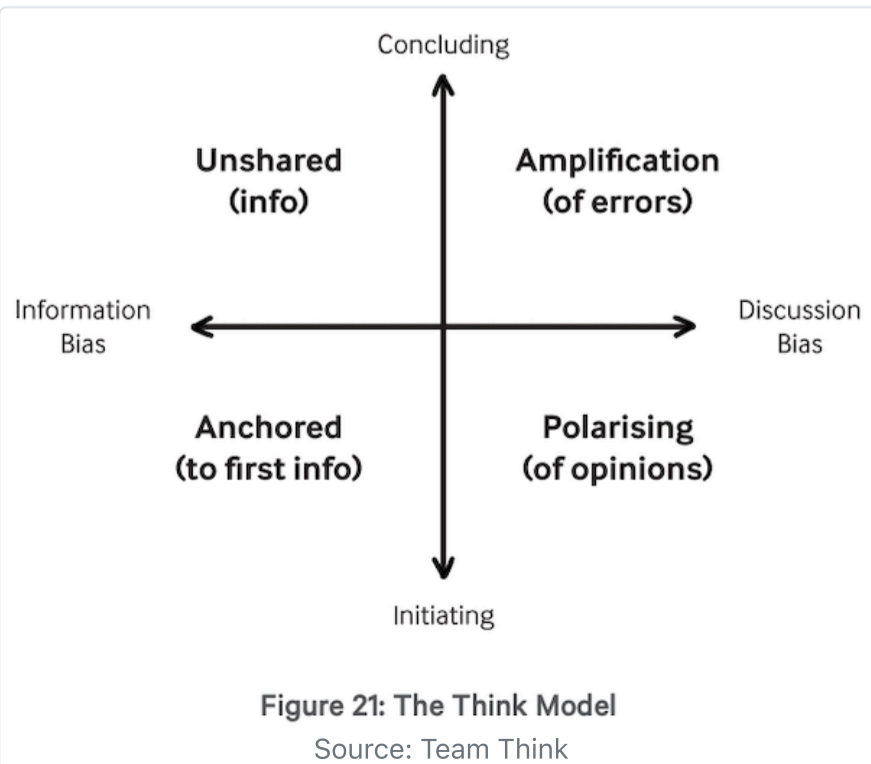
"If it's to be the team's decision, are you looking for consensus or are you happy to go with the majority or average of all opinions?" In some cases, they might consider letting a team member make the decision on their behalf.

Four common occurrences in a team discussion

Discussions precede important decisions, and Whitefield uses the "Think Model" to break down team thinking and deciding by process and by bias sets.

He says the model shows four of the most common occurrences in a team discussion: the first few comments **anchor** the conversation; opinions are **polarised**; bias is **amplified**; and information remains **unshared** or "crowded out".

When it comes to bias specifically, Whitefield warns of people:



- preferring the view of someone they trust or admire to that of the *most qualified* person;
- anchoring to one point of view, which makes others' views less likely to be raised;
- assuming that an outcome is more likely if they've experienced it;
- subconsciously seeking to confirm their first position rather than consider others;
- tending to identify a firm cause for a person's behaviour, when other possibilities abound;
- remembering most clearly the last significant statement or event over all the preceding ones; and
- assuming "this time" will be different, despite evidence to the contrary.

Whitefield says leaders can share the decision-making load by identifying "strong collaborators" who are suited to making strategic decisions with as little interference from bias and noise as possible.

They can also make time for "a last opportunity to consider possible mental blockers that could have led to poor thinking" before concluding a discussion.

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