NORTHSEAT

Executive Authority
Tension Points

Behavioural Governance

12 Patterns | Immediate Recognition | Boards and Executive Teams

INTRODUCTION

A meeting ends without anyone stating what was decided. People leave with different understandings of the outcome, and work begins on those understandings. When the issue comes back, the work has already committed the organisation to a direction, and no one can say when that direction was decided or who decided it.

THE LINE

WHERE DECISIONS SIT

Decisions don’t sit where people say they do.

Work moves easily. The call doesn’t.

People contribute to decisions they won’t carry.

The outcome forms before anyone names it.

By the time it’s clear what was decided, no one decided it.

WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME

Formal authority may sit with the board, a committee, the CEO or another executive under law and the organisation’s governing documents, reserved matters and delegations. These tension points arise when the practical path of a decision no longer matches that authority.

The common assumption is that the board sets direction, the CEO makes decisions within delegated authority, the executive team carries them out, and when something needs a call, the person with authority makes it.

WHAT HAPPENS

WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS	WHERE THE DECISION SITS
The executive team owns it.	They talk it through, then wait.	With the CEO.
The CEO will call it.	The CEO waits to see where the board leans.	With the Chair.
The board has already decided.	Directors leave with different views.	Nowhere.
We're aligned.	People nod. No one commits.	Still open.
The meeting will resolve it.	It gets picked up later in side conversations.	Outside the room.
This sits with the CEO.	The founder's view changes it afterwards.	With the founder.
Everyone has bought in.	Each team runs it their own way.	Split.
We just need more detail.	They ask for more. No one calls it.	With whoever decides to stop asking.
It's been agreed.	Someone questions it later. It opens again.	Back in play.
We'll escalate if needed.	It sits there. No one takes it up.	With no one.
The CEO is leading this.	The room waits for the CEO to signal a view.	With how the room reads the CEO.
The board gave direction.	The CEO takes it as a suggestion.	With how the CEO reads it.
This is straightforward.	It was lined up before the meeting.	With whoever set it up.

WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME	WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS	WHERE THE DECISION SITS
We'll come back to it.	They leave it. When it comes back, there's only one way left.	With what's left.
Someone will take ownership.	People wait for a signal.	With whoever acts first.
This sits at executive level.	It gets pushed up when it gets uncomfortable.	With the board.
The board will challenge this.	No one pushes it.	With whoever proposed it.
The CEO owns the outcome.	Pieces of it sit with other people.	Across a few people.
This needs a proper discussion.	It gets shaped in quick conversations instead.	With whoever was in them.
The structure is clear.	People check informally before acting.	With the person they check with.
The CEO will step in if needed.	The CEO holds back. No one else does.	With no one making the call.

HOW THE PATTERN REPEATS

When the next decision comes up, nothing about how decisions are made has changed. The same pattern usually appears, and the outcome forms again without anyone making the call.

THE TENSION POINTS

12 patterns. Each one recognisable. Each ends with a question to ask before further work proceeds.

01 DELEGATION ILLUSION

SITUATION	Work is handed to the executive team.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	You've got this.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	They move it forward, then wait for the CEO's view before the main call.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It slows or shifts mid-way.
THE ISSUE	The decision itself was never handed over.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Before this moves further - who's making the final call on this?

02 THE MEETING 'YES'

SITUATION	A decision is discussed in a meeting.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Are we all aligned?
WHAT'S HAPPENING	People nod. No one states a position.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	Teams move in different directions after.
THE ISSUE	No one said what they would back.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Before we move on, what is each of us supporting?

03 DECISION DRIFT

SITUATION	A decision sits open.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	We're getting there.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	It forms through side conversations and partial moves.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It lands without anyone calling it.
THE ISSUE	No one named the decision.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	What decision are we making here, and who is making it?

04 DECISION BY MOMENTUM

SITUATION	Work is already moving.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Let's just keep going.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	No one stops to make the call.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It becomes hard to stop.
THE ISSUE	Movement replaces a decision.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Who has approved this going ahead?

05 RESPECTFUL SILENCE

SITUATION	A decision is discussed.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	I'm fine with that.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	People hold back what they think.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	Concerns surface later.
THE ISSUE	No one said it out loud.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	What concern haven't we heard yet?

06 ESCALATION VACUUM

SITUATION	An issue sits unresolved.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Let's keep working on it.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	No one takes it up.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It stays open longer than it should.
THE ISSUE	No one steps in.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	This needs to sit with someone - who's taking it?

07 SHADOW AUTHORITY

SITUATION	A decision is being prepared.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Have you run this past [X]?
WHAT'S HAPPENING	People check with them before acting.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	The outcome follows their view.
THE ISSUE	Their informal view has become an approval step.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Who has formal authority for this call, and what role does [X] have in it?

08 THE PRE-DECISION

SITUATION	A decision goes into a meeting.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	This should be straightforward.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	The outcome is already lined up.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	The meeting goes ahead and the outcome doesn't change.
THE ISSUE	The outcome was settled before the meeting, which then carries the formal decision process.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	What would change the outcome?

09 SPLIT OWNERSHIP

SITUATION	Two people are leading the same decision.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	We're both across it.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	They act in different directions.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	Work splits.
THE ISSUE	No single owner.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Who has the final call and owns the outcome?

10 THE INFORMATION SHIELD

SITUATION	A decision is sitting there.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Can we get a bit more detail?
WHAT'S HAPPENING	They delay the call.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It goes around again.
THE ISSUE	No one has named what further information would change the call.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	What are we waiting to see before we decide?

11 CLEAN NARRATIVE

SITUATION	A decision has already played out.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	That's what we agreed.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	No one can point to when that was said.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	It sounds settled.
THE ISSUE	No one called it at the time.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	When did we decide this?

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12 ESCALATION SUBSTITUTION

SITUATION	A call sits at executive level.
WHAT PEOPLE SAY	Let's take this to the board.
WHAT'S HAPPENING	They pass it up.
WHAT THIS LEADS TO	The decision moves out of the room.
THE ISSUE	No one here is taking it.
THE QUESTION TO ASK	Is this within executive authority? If it is, who owns the call? If it crosses a reserved matter or escalation threshold, take it to the board.

USING THE GUIDE ON A LIVE DECISION

Name the decision: Choose one that is open, keeps coming back, or has started moving. What decision needs to be made?

Locate formal authority: Who has authority under the relevant delegation, reserved matter or governing document?

Locate practical authority: Whose view, silence, approval or intervention is currently determining what happens?

Name the pattern: Which tension point best describes what is occurring?

Ask the question: Ask the intervention question before further work proceeds.

Close the decision: State what was decided, who owns it, why, what happens next and where the decision will be recorded.

This guide does not determine where formal authority should sit or assess individual performance.

If the pattern keeps coming back

Look at the delegation behind the decision: who holds it, at what threshold, and when it goes to the board. NorthSeat's Delegation of Authority framework sets that out in writing for your organisation. northseat.com.au.

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