JUDGMENT · CHARACTER

The Courage to Decide

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PETERSEN LEADERSHIP | PERSPECTIVES • JUDGMENT

What Would My Replacement Do? — Judgment, People, and the Willingness to Change

The hardest decision is not always the one for which we lack an answer. Sometimes we recognize the right direction but resist it because we helped create the current one. A simple question can expose that resistance: What would my replacement do?

Companion essay 1 of 2 • Judgment: choosing wisely. Read the companion essay, Beyond SMART Goals: Turning Difficult Decisions into Meaningful Results

The question that changes the room

In 1985, Intel confronted a painful strategic choice. Dynamic random-access memory (DRAM) chips had helped define the company, but competitive conditions had changed the economics of that business. Andy Grove, then Intel's president, later recalled asking Gordon Moore, its chairman and CEO, what a new chief executive would do if they were replaced. Moore's answer was immediate: get out of memories. Grove then asked why they should not return to work and make that decision themselves. Intel withdrew from the DRAM market while retaining other memory products. The underlying facts had not suddenly changed; what changed was the leaders' willingness to examine the business without the weight of its past. They did not wait for a replacement to recognize the problem.

CEO coach Eric Partaker uses a concise five-word version of the same question: "What would my replacement do?" His infographic, How Elite CEOs Make Hard Decisions: 20 Questions to Ask Before You Decide, groups prompts under four categories: Problem & Purpose, Facts & Options, Risks & Costs, and People & Action. I use those headings as a starting point, then develop a Petersen decision discipline that places judgment, people, and execution at the center.

An imagined replacement has no personal investment in an incumbent's earlier choices. That distance can expose sunk-cost thinking, normalized dysfunction, and assumptions no one has questioned in years. But outside perspective is not a substitute for evidence, ethics, or institutional memory. The exercise works when the incumbent thinks more clearly, not when a leader adopts change for its own sake.

"If I were hired tomorrow to replace myself, knowing what I know today, what would I change, and what would I deliberately preserve?"

Why capable leaders postpone necessary decisions

Most leaders understand that a decision is a choice among imperfect alternatives. Yet three obstacles regularly complicate that choice. The first is attachment: money, time, and credibility have already been invested, and changing course can feel like declaring those investments wasted. The second is identity: when a process or strategy is closely associated with the leader, criticism of the idea can feel like criticism of the person. The third is organizational habit: people adapt to recurring dysfunction until it begins to look normal.

This is why the replacement question is not simply about decisiveness. It is about intellectual humility. Leadership requires asking whether a practice still serves its purpose, whether the evidence has changed, and whether our reluctance is grounded in sound judgment or personal comfort. One of the most dangerous sentences in an organization is, “That is the way we have always done it.”

Four dimensions of sound judgment

Judgment—how we decide—is one of the seven elements of the Petersen Leadership Model, alongside Character, Style, Culture, Execution, Life, and Legacy. Partaker’s four categories provide a practical way to test judgment before it becomes action. They should be used together, not treated as boxes to check mechanically.

1. Problem and purpose: What decision are we really making?

Before discussing solutions, define the decision in a sentence that a colleague can understand. Distinguish the symptoms from the underlying issue. A company may say it has a turnover problem when its actual problem is a culture in which employees do not trust their leaders. It may say it needs more sales when clients are quietly leaving because service has deteriorated. A quick answer to the wrong question can deepen the problem.

Partaker’s graphic asks who should make the call and what happens if nothing is done. I would add two questions for a leadership or coaching conversation: Why does this decision matter now? And how will we know whether it achieved the intended purpose? Authority matters too. A leader who bears responsibility without the power to decide may need to influence a decision rather than issue one.

2. Facts and options: What are we assuming?

The replacement question belongs here. Write down the facts that support the current course, the assumptions masquerading as facts, and the alternatives that have not received a fair hearing. Then invite a credible colleague to argue the case for another course. The goal is not artificial debate; it is genuine learning. Ask what evidence would change your mind before new evidence arrives. Otherwise, the standard may shift every time the facts become inconvenient.

I would also ask what a successor ought to retain. A new executive may see a cost to eliminate

but miss the trust behind it. Sound judgment separates an outdated practice from an enduring value. We can replace a reporting process without discarding accountability, change an organizational structure without abandoning relationships, and adjust expectations without surrendering respect.

3. Risks and costs: What is the price of action, and of inaction?

Every important decision carries risk. Leaders should consider worst-plausible consequences, financial exposure, unintended effects, reversibility, and the cost of waiting. Some decisions are easy to reverse and justify a modest experiment. Others have lasting effects on people, reputation, or capital and deserve deeper testing. The size of the decision, not the leader's impatience, should determine the pace.

A leader must also count opportunity cost. Keeping a failing initiative alive consumes time, attention, and resources that cannot be used elsewhere. Likewise, delay can communicate a message: employees may conclude that stated values are optional. Yet there are times when waiting is wise: when critical facts can be obtained, legal or ethical obligations require care, or a short pause prevents irreversible harm. Courage and haste are not synonyms.

4. People and action: Who must be heard, and who will act?

A technically correct decision can fail through poor implementation. Before deciding, identify the people most affected, listen to those with firsthand knowledge, and consider who is missing from the discussion. Once the decision is made, explain the reason, the nonnegotiable expectations, and the room people have to exercise judgment. Assign a clear owner, a review date, and a few observable indicators of progress.

Dignity matters. So does accountability. Caring for people does not mean avoiding difficult conversations, and holding people accountable does not require public blame. The test is whether individuals understand the standards, receive a fair opportunity to meet them, and are treated with respect regardless of the outcome.

IQ, EQ, and AQ: the three intelligences in the decision

My experience in the Navy and in business convinced me that technical intelligence alone does not distinguish excellent leaders. I finished in the bottom half of my Nuclear Power School class, yet later returned to teach Chemistry and oversee the student-officer side of the school. That experience reinforced what I subsequently observed in leadership roles: knowing the material is important, but so are understanding people and adapting to circumstances. I describe the combination as IQ, EQ, and AQ—intellectual, emotional, and adaptability intelligence. IQ disciplines our assessment of facts and alternatives. EQ helps us recognize our own attachments, understand others, and preserve dignity. AQ enables us to change course when new evidence or conditions demand it.

Leadership lens	Question it contributes
IQ: Intellectual	What do we know, what are we assuming, and what evidence would change the answer?
EQ: Emotional	Whose perspective do I need, and how will this choice affect trust and dignity?
AQ: Adaptability	If the present course no longer works, what am I prepared to change?

These are not three boxes to check in sequence. They are interdependent capabilities. IQ without EQ can produce a cold answer that people will not support. EQ without IQ can allow compassion to obscure standards. IQ and EQ without AQ can leave a leader accurately describing a problem while doing nothing about it.

When I was the replacement

When I assumed leadership of a struggling district of a financial services company, I became the replacement. I inherited not merely disappointing results but the effects of a culture that had driven advisors away. The costs of offices and administrative support remained even after advisors departed. Another departure could have threatened the district's viability. A directive to sell more would not have repaired the underlying problem.

An outsider may notice habits that insiders have come to accept, but arriving with an agenda to change everything would have been another mistake. My first responsibility was to listen: to learn why trust had eroded, what people valued, and which strengths deserved protection. Among those whose leadership mattered was Pat Grimes, who helped build a more effective administrative team and a culture of mutual support. We clarified expectations, delegated responsibility, and made room for people to do their best work. "Fun First, Business Second" was our motto, but enjoyment never replaced accountability.

One advisor told me he intended to leave soon after I arrived. Given the district's financial exposure, losing him could have made it impossible to continue operating in its existing form. I chose to hear his concerns rather than assume the right answer was a new rule or a new sales target. He ultimately decided to stay. That decision did not solve every problem, but it gave us the chance to build something better—and reminded me that the people most affected by a decision often know what the decision-maker still needs to learn.

Over nearly twelve years, the district became a stronger operation and developed a culture in which people could succeed together. The more enduring lesson was not simply that an outsider could change things. It was that a newcomer eventually becomes the incumbent. Once the practices we introduced became our practices, they too deserved examination. Rebuilding trust required decisions, but it also required listening. Listening is not indecision; sometimes it is what makes a responsible decision possible.

The replacement test has limits

A replacement can bring perspective; a replacement can also bring ignorance. A newly arrived executive may lack knowledge of commitments, relationships, regulatory limits, or lessons learned at considerable expense. A clean slate is not always a wiser slate. Nor should the hypothetical replacement question become a justification for replacing employees who think differently. The relevant issue is alignment with the organization's values, legitimate standards, and mission, not personal similarity to the leader.

I therefore pair the original question with two others: "What would my replacement misunderstand?" and "What would a successor need to know before acting?" Together they help distinguish a change that is necessary from a change that merely looks fresh.

The Petersen decision discipline

For important decisions, I recommend an eight-step discipline that CEOs, leadership teams, and business coaches can use. It follows the four dimensions above: clarify the problem and purpose; test facts and options; weigh risks and costs; then listen, decide, and follow through.

- **Name the decision.** State the actual choice, not merely the crisis that brought it forward.
- **Clarify the purpose.** Connect the choice to values, mission, and desired outcomes.
- **Separate facts from assumptions.** Identify what is known and what would disprove the current view.
- **Apply the replacement test.** Identify what an informed successor would change, preserve, and question.
- **Compare action with inaction.** Include cost, reversibility, opportunity cost, and consequences for people.
- **Listen for disconfirming voices.** Invite relevant expertise and genuine disagreement.
- **Decide and assign ownership.** Communicate why, specify who acts, and establish a review point.
- **Revisit without defensiveness.** Evaluate results and adjust before momentum turns into inertia.

This is a discipline, not a reason to call eight meetings. Match the depth of analysis to the stakes. A reversible operational experiment may need a brief discussion and a clear owner. A major cultural change, business exit, or personnel decision requires greater care.

A closing challenge

The crucial question is not whether a replacement might do something different. Almost certainly, one would. The real test is whether a thoughtful outsider would see a problem that the current leader has learned to excuse—and whether the incumbent has the humility to examine that possibility.

Leadership requires the judgment to know when to act, the emotional intelligence to understand whom a decision affects, and the adaptability to change course when yesterday's answer no longer serves today's reality. Grove and Moore did not actually need to leave Intel to change their perspective. They could make the difficult decision themselves, and so can we.

"A leader should not have to be replaced for the organization to benefit from a fresh perspective."

Questions for a CEO or coaching conversation

- Which decision have I postponed because I am personally invested in the present approach?
- What would a capable successor change on the first Monday, and which strengths might that person miss?
- Whose experience is missing from my assessment?
- What is the actual cost of waiting another quarter?
- What evidence and review date would tell us that our decision needs to change?

Sources and attribution

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Petersen, J. (2026). The Three Dimensions of Leadership Thinking. Petersen Leadership | Perspectives. District experiences and performance descriptions in this essay reflect the author's firsthand recollections.

This is an original Petersen Leadership | Perspectives essay. The original infographic and its full twenty-question set are not reproduced. The Petersen decision discipline and district reflections are the author's own. Intel's exit concerned DRAM specifically, not all memory products.