

Leader's Intent-Based Decisions

Introduction

At OCFA, we promote the concept of *Leaders Intent-Based Decisions*. This approach calls for decisions to be made at the lowest level by communicating the leaders intent. It allows all of us to take the initiative and use our best judgment to meet our leaders intent and best serve the mission. Our goal is to ensure that decisions are made by the right people at the right level for the right reasons.

Decisions that need to be made quickly can be made with the organization's full support. By permitting us to exercise judgment, this model allows us to take ownership of a situation and have the freedom to think creatively when experiencing unexpected challenges. Taking the initiative makes us accountable for explaining our decisions and actions. The organization stands behind us when we show that the leaders intent guided us.

Regardless of whether we are participating in day-to-day activities or responding to emergencies, these key assumptions of *Leaders Intent-Based Decisions* apply to all of us:

- **Our members come to work to serve and do their best.** We subscribe to the ideals outlined in *The OCFA Way*. As we align with these ideals, we have confidence that we are supported by the organization, even when mistakes or missteps happen.
- **Our members are competent professionals.** Leaders delegate decisions, share responsibility, and provide the appropriate level of supervision. As a result, our people can determine how best to execute the assignment with full accountability for their actions.
- **All decisions and actions must align with the leaders intent within our organizational values.** Leaders intent is the basis for our decisions and our authority. When decisions or actions are outside these boundaries, they cannot be supported.
- **Decisions and actions should be delegated to the lowest practical level whenever possible.** In promoting initiative, we want to ensure that our members have opportunities to gain experience in taking on more responsibility. Therefore, when it makes sense, we want to delegate tasks or assignments in all aspects of our organization.
- **Our members closest to the problem or situation can act quicker and get better results than if they elevated the decision to others above them.** This is because we expect actions to be appropriate for the circumstances, with people applying common sense solutions.

- **Exercising disciplined initiative is an expectation for all of us.** In accordance with the core value of the individual initiative, we are empowered to act to accomplish the mission within the scope of the leader's intent. In addition, we are expected to bring critical judgment to our assignments and offer innovations or solutions when needed to gain efficiency, reduce risk, or provide better service.

Leaders Responsibilities

Those in leadership roles must be prepared to provide clear understanding through leaders intent so team members have the information they need to make decisions and act with initiative. Leaders also must delegate and supervise through mentoring to balance the needs of the mission and the individual. In delegating action, leaders provide the support, authority, and resources to the team so they have the tools to take the appropriate measures on their own.

Leaders want to prepare team members to think and act decisively instead of taking a passive approach as a "follower." When encountering ambiguity, *followers* seek permission before acting. This permission-seeking posture reinforces passiveness and inaction. As a result, *followers* can quickly become more afraid of making mistakes and miss an opportunity to make a difference.

Organizationally, we want our team members to be able to act independently, exercising judgment and adapting to achieve the desired end state. Therefore, we are expected to exercise disciplined initiative as a priority within well-known boundaries as we accomplish our mission.

To maintain the necessary state of readiness to act confidently, we must prepare in these ways:

- Have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to make appropriate judgment calls and decisions in real-time.
- Take initiative to solve problems and to innovate when given opportunities.
- Understand our organizational values and the intent of our leader.
- Accept accountability for our actions.

Leader's Intent

Leader's Intent is how we transition a decision into action. It focuses on action and situational awareness to execute an assignment successfully.

Leader intent is a clear, concise statement that should be communicated so that everyone understands the expectations to succeed in their assignments. It delineates three essential components:

- **The Task** to be completed, including the objective or goal of the assignment.
- **The Purpose** of the task, including situational awareness, providing the context for the task.
- **The End State** of how the situation should look when completing the assignment.

In fast-moving, dynamic situations, top-level decision-makers cannot always incorporate new information into a formal planning process and redirect people to action within a reasonable timeframe. The leader's intent is provided so people closest to the issue can adapt plans and exercise initiative to accomplish the objective when unexpected opportunities arise or the original plan no longer suffices. A leader's intent is crucial to effective organizations because it reduces internal friction and empowers subordinates.

Within the defined end-state framework, leaders can develop plans and make decisions that include an agency's mission, objectives, and priorities.

Knowing the leader's intent helps subordinate decision-makers choose new courses of action wisely. They know what success looks like and understand the rationale behind their assigned tasks. When they encounter a barrier, they can make informed decisions aligning with the mission's goals.

Much of leader's intent already exists within our training, SOPs, and other doctrines that are well-known by members. However, to ensure that we all stay consistent and focus on meeting the end state, OCFA leaders must communicate the parts that have changed or are new or non-standard.

Decisional Authority

To be successful, we delegate appropriate decisional authorities to our members. From the start, our organization sets the expectation that every member works to solve problems at their level.

In the following, we describe the principles and constraints of decisional authority so that we can understand and follow *consistent decision-making practices*. This consistency generates predictability—both for decision-makers and those affected by the decisions—which enhances trust throughout the OCFA.

Three concepts of OCFA decisional authority are:

- **Inherent Authority**
- **Warranted Deviation**
- **No Surprises**

Concept of Inherent Authority

OCFA members inherently have the authority to decide how to accomplish their assigned responsibilities for which they are accountable. These responsibilities include those outlined in our job description or assignments defined by organizational leadership.

Concept of Warranted Deviation

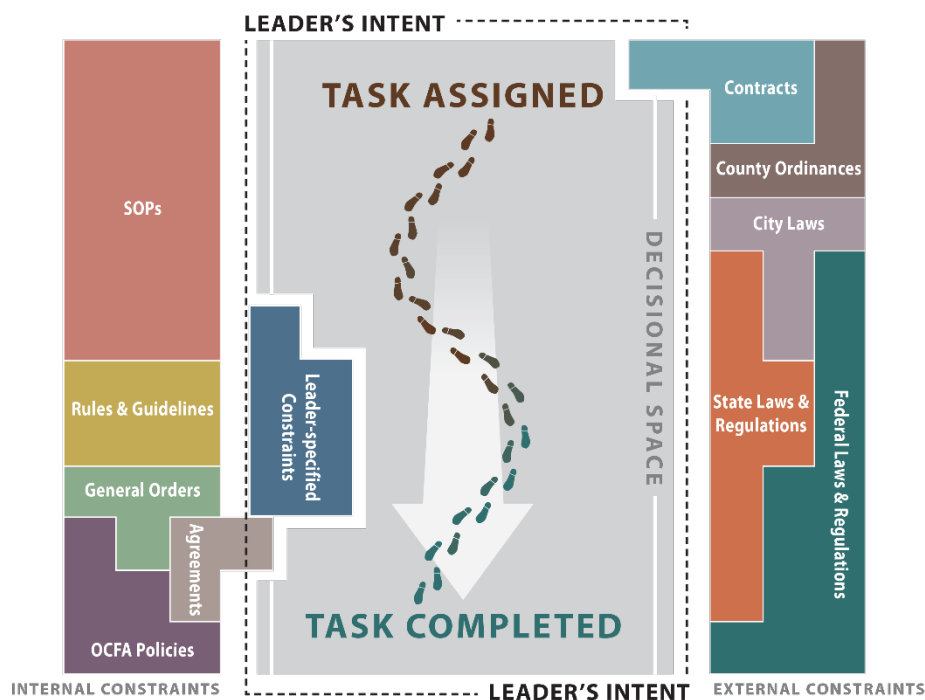
At times, the demands of our position or our understanding of the leaders intent may conflict with the constraints of rules, policies, or other written guidance. In these instances, the need for immediate action means that there is not sufficient time to resolve the perceived discrepancy through the normal process. In these cases, we may deviate from the constraints to accomplish the leaders intent, using disciplined initiative and doing our best to lower risk to a practical level as long as it is within our organizational philosophy and morally and ethically responsible.

Navigating Constraints

Departing from policies, rules, guidelines, or SOPs inevitably brings us into gray areas where the best course of action may not be clear. Our organizational philosophy offers a lens to navigate these gray areas to balance risk vs. gain.

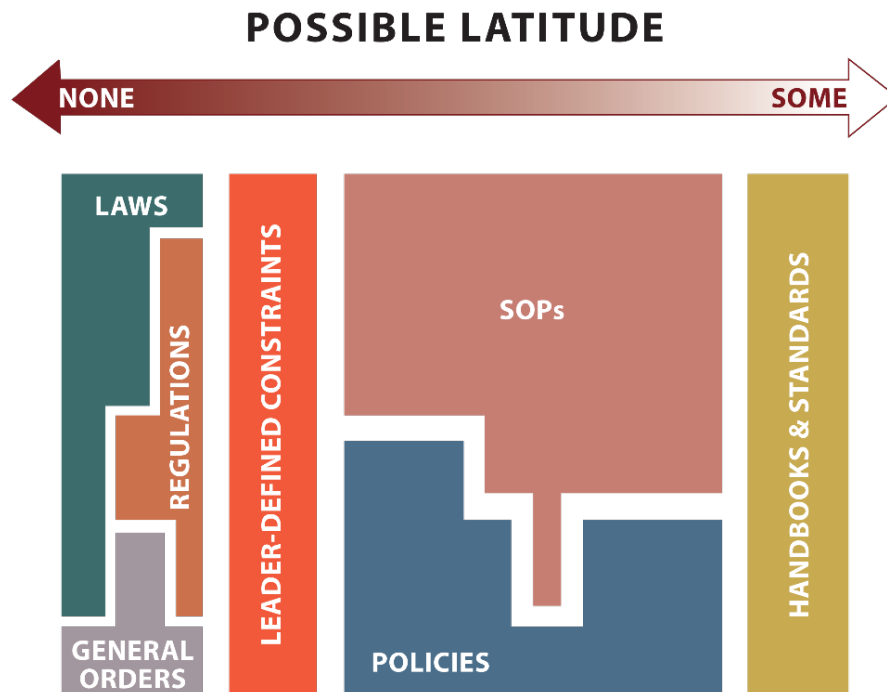
In every given assignment, we work within the boundaries of numerous decisional constraints. We have internal controls (OCFA policies, agreements, general orders, SOPs, handbooks, manuals, and guidelines) and external controls (contracts, agreements, city and county laws and ordinances, and state and federal laws and regulations).

In addition, our leaders sometimes add constraints to an assignment to mitigate risk or account for factors specific to the situation. All these constraints form the framework for our work, helping to define the “decisional space” (or lane) for our assignments.



Applying Latitude

We usually work within these constraints quickly, but circumstances may require us to take a disciplined initiative outside accepted parameters. We have varying degrees of latitude for deviating from different kinds of limitations. Some constraints do not allow for deviation, while others provide more freedom. Understanding how much latitude we have is essential for navigating this space.



Laws and Regulations

We have the least latitude to deviate from external constraints in the form of local, state, and federal laws and regulations, which are the basis for the existence of OCFA. These laws and regulations provide the limits and authorities of the legal framework of OCFA.

As we pursue the OCFA mission, it is exceedingly rare to contend with a situation where there is a need for actions that counter the law. The bar of proof is exceptionally high for taking such action, so the justification to bypass a law or regulation must be connected to extreme circumstances or situations.

General Orders

Likewise, we have no latitude regarding General Orders, which are legally-based directives covering topics such as alcohol at the fire station, conflict of interest, workplace violence, and other fundamental mandates that cannot be compromised or violated.

Leader-Defined Constraints

While providing the intent for an assignment, a leader may specify constraints (e.g., Don't go further than X. If you see Y, talk to me for further instructions, etc.). Because they are conveyed at the time of the assignment, these constraints are generated based on present conditions and have an immediacy pertinent to the current situation.

These additions to the leader's intent are often intended to mitigate new risks or address evolving conditions, so these constraints provide detailed situational awareness that should not be disregarded. For these reasons, less latitude is afforded when deviating from a leader-defined constraint, and the accountability level is higher. When an operator cannot meet the leader's intent due to a constraint imposed by the leader, the operator has an obligation to communicate the issue to the leader.

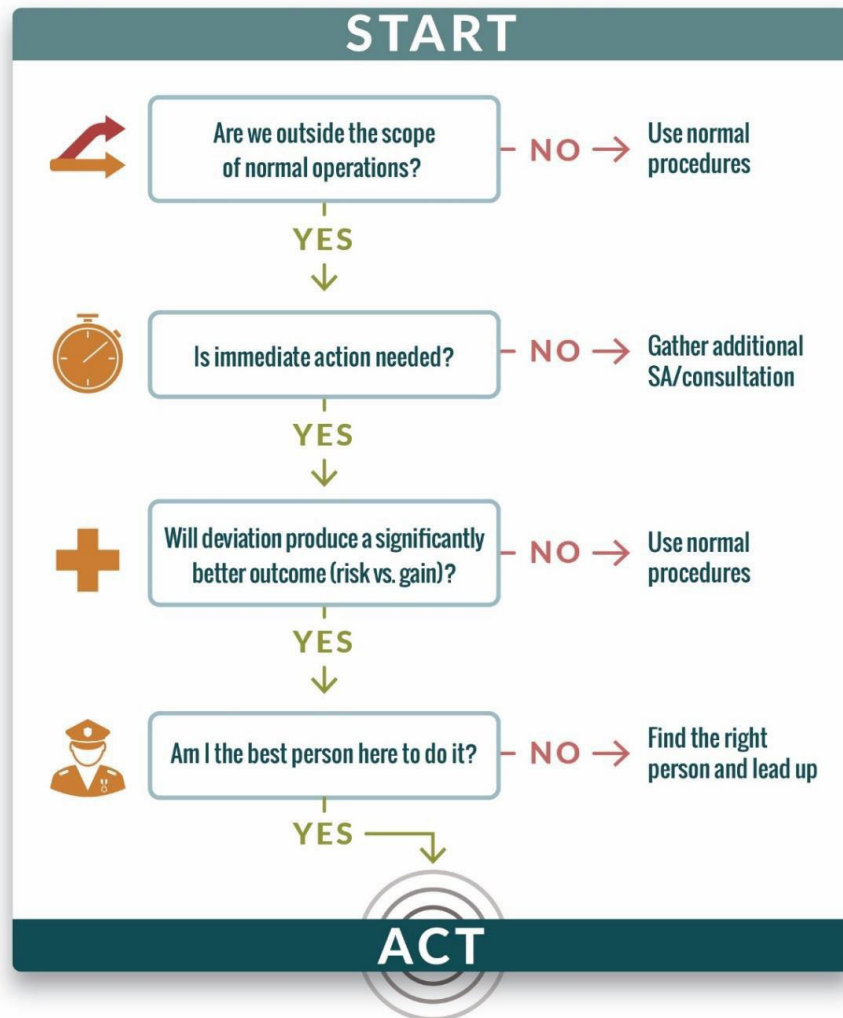
Standard Operating Procedures

We have some latitude to deviate from the largest category of internal constraints, OCFAs SOPs. These constraints cover subjects such as communications, operational procedures and guidelines, best practices, uniforms, and vehicles. They describe how we generally do business. Our SOPs constitute our best practices so that deviation may be appropriate dependent on the circumstances. When we are under pressure, and the mission is at odds with the written guidance, we cannot afford to be paralyzed because the SOP does not fully apply. As a general rule of thumb, we follow established guidelines/SOPs unless they prevent us from accomplishing the leader's intent. When they do, the leader's intent should prevail. We use thoughtful, legal, ethical, moral, and disciplined initiative and take action based on our best judgment, even if this means some guidelines/SOPs must be temporarily set aside to resolve the situation.

Other types of written guidance—department manuals, handbooks, memos, and other standards—comprise a combination of training guidelines, procedural instructions, and reference manuals. These are usually managed and maintained at these are usually managed and maintained at the program level.

When do we have the authority to deviate?

The following flow diagram is an aid to visualize our responsibilities when there may be a need to deviate from standard policies in time-constrained situations.



Accountability for Deviation

We are fully accountable when deviating from established guidelines or SOPs to serve the mission better and achieve a more favorable outcome.

Whenever we do so, we are responsible for providing the rationale for our decision. Walking through the decision enables others to understand the perceptions that caused us to do things differently.

Providing this rationale demonstrates our willingness to be held accountable for our decisions and actions. It enables the organization to stand behind us when we take disciplined initiative, even when we take an approach that is not "by the book" or does not yield success.

In addition, the rationale reveals whether the action is *initiative or freelancing*. If it is *freelancing*, the explanation will not link to leaders intent and is more about serving self-interest rather than the interests of OCFA. Decentralized decision-making in no way condones freelancing and walking through decisions ensures that any non-standard actions were taken to accomplish the leaders intent better and serve the mission.

Ultimately, our actions are evaluated through the following questions:

1. Were the actions taken in good faith to benefit the customer and the organization?
2. Were the actions aligned with the Leaders Intent of the assignment and with the mission and values of the OCFA?
3. Were the actions reasonable when considering the individual's level of experience and training?

Answering these questions promotes transparency and builds a solid foundation for accountability. We also learn by talking through our decisions and thinking with others. Sharing our thought processes reinforces others' willingness to take the initiative and innovate in accomplishing the mission.

Concept of No Surprises

Only some of our decision-making takes place in time-constrained situations. In day-to-day business and operations, our decisional space has known boundaries that enable us to determine whether we have the authority to make the decision or whether we need to elevate the decision to the next level.

In following the *Concept of No Surprises*, we have an obligation to keep supervisors and team members in the loop when making decisions that significantly impact others. Doing so enables team members to anticipate and synchronize their actions with ours.

When we make a decision that has impacts outside our authority or sphere of control, we have an obligation to bring others into the decision-making process to inform and collaborate. We have a duty to de-conflict, coordinate, or, if needed, elevate the decision when appropriate to ensure we involve the right people from the proper levels.

Following are some examples of decisions that must be elevated through the chain of command:

- Decisions that incur costs beyond authorized limits.
- Decisions that change the configuration or organization of OCFA resources (not just their temporary use).
- Decisions that affect adherence to or interpretation of an agreement, MOU, or contract that the OCFA has in place.
- Decisions that generate the potential for political ramifications affecting the OCFA or its communities.

Summary

The foundation of our organizational philosophy is the power and speed created through delegated action. We are always accountable for our judgment and actions as we pursue our mission. Whether innovating with a new approach or adapting to an unexpected problem, we keep our actions aligned with the leader's intent and values. Guided by these principles, we know that even if things go wrong, we will stay consistent and hold the trust of the OCFA.