

# Supporting decisions in a time of uncertainty

Rules and procedures cannot cover every situation we face on the railway, particularly with additional challenges from COVID-19 impacting the railway. We will need to rely on the professional judgement of our frontline staff and managers.

Operational decision making is important to keep vital rail services going. People need to feel empowered to make difficult decisions and be given the tools to do so. Here are some tips for staff, managers, and organisations to help support us all to stay calm and make effective decisions.

## Tips for staying calm under pressure when making decisions

### 1) Avoid or manage negative thoughts

Pressure and the risk of infection with COVID 19 affects our emotions and can cause us to think quite negatively about our ability. It can also distract us from undertaking important tasks thoroughly. For example, washing our hands systematically in line with government guidelines. It's important to stay in a productive and safe mindset and following guidelines set out by the government for hand washing and social distancing and your organisation will help achieve this as it can keep your mind focused on the task in hand rather than wandering into a negative space. As part of this remind yourself of each task. Recall previous examples of where you have dealt with pressure to maintain the productive mindset.

### 2) Break down your tasks and prioritise

Break down your tasks into a smaller set and write them down into a "to-do" list. For example, to facilitate social distancing breakdown each task that is needed, in which order and when they need to be done. Washing your hands is the same and a set of steps has is provided to systemically and thoroughly wash hands. Doing this can help you think more clearly, reflect on what you need to do and manage each task at a time. Writing down the tasks will also give you time to think and take a breath. Prioritising your list can then help you work out where to begin and help you to review your list and re-prioritise as things change.

### 3) Avoid multi-tasking

When under pressure it is better to try and focus on one thing at a time. Multitasking when under pressure can cause us to loss focus and can increase the feeling of pressure as we try and to do much. Instead keep to the "to do" list and complete one task before you move into the next.

## Tips for good decision making under pressure

1. **Stop and think** – stopping gives you a chance to think through why you're making a decision. It sounds simple but can be difficult, particularly when you are under time pressure. Try to spend a couple of minutes gathering your thoughts when you can, as this will help you form a rational decision.
2. Look for things that **challenge** what you think and see. As humans, we tend to look for information that confirms what we already believe. Make an effort to question your beliefs and challenge your assumptions.
3. Consider how **reliable** the information you have is. Has the situation changed since you received this information? Is this the full picture, or only part of it?
4. Consider other **alternatives** than what you default to and come up with a range of options. It is good to have a plan A, a plan B and even a plan C. Keep evaluating these options as the situation unfolds.
5. Reflect on previous decision making – do you tend to rely on hunches or fact?  
**Think about how you have made decisions in the past**
6. There is a very simple structure you can run through when you need to make a decision that will help you to do these things. It is called G-FORCE and is explained below.

## What can line managers do to support their staff's decision making?

- Talk to people you manage about decision making and let them know you support them
- Speak to staff about the G-FORCE model of decision making and make sure they understand it
- When looking back at staff decisions, think about the information available at the time, not the outcome

## What can organisations do to support decision making?

- Share good news stories and celebrate good decisions
- Implement a decision-making tool (see G-FORCE below)
- Provide training on decision making
- Promote a fair culture that supports decision making

## G-FORCE

RSSB have designed the 'G-FORCE' decision making tool and an accompanying training package to support operational decision making. We developed the tool and training with input from front-line railway staff and managers faced with difficult operational decisions, and through exploring what is done in other safety-critical industries including aviation, emergency services and the military.

G-FORCE is a decision-making tool that provides a logical, structured decision-making process. It will help you decide on a course of action when:

- There is no rule covering the situation
- The procedure specifies asking for permission or advice, but the responsible person can't be contacted
- More than one rule applies, but they conflict with each other
- following the applicable rule would be either impossible, unsafe, or have overall negative consequences.



**G** – go/no-go      **F** – facts      **O** – options      **R** – risks      **C** – choose      **E** – evaluate

1. **G – go/no-go:** First consider whether there is a rule or procedure that can be followed. If so, you should follow it. If there is no rule or procedure, or for some reason it cannot be applied, then you may need to make a decision
2. **F – facts:** Next gather all available information. Don't forget to consider contextual information such as time of day, weather conditions, whether people are trapped on trains, and the level of comfort they are experiencing
3. **O – options:** Based on the facts, consider what options are available to you. Come up with as many options as you can.
4. **R – risks:** Consider the potential consequences for each option. What are the risks to you, other staff, and the public? Are there any wider system risks?
5. **C – choose:** Decide on the best option. If there are multiple safe options, which will cause the least delay?
6. **E – evaluate:** As the event unfolds, consider whether your option is still the best option. After the event consider whether you or the organisation can learn from it.

## Case Study: G-FORCE and social distancing

Scenario: You are contacted by Control to inform that the end coach of an HST required the door locking out of use due to an operational issue. The DOTE (defective on train equipment) plan requires the coach to be locked out of use but the train has a significant number of people on it and if the last coach were locked out, it would cause people to be within 2m of each other. What would you do?

Go/no-go	Go- the existing procedure is not compatible with social distancing
Facts	The end coach of a HST needs the door locking out, the DOTE requires the whole coach to be locked out, the train is quite busy (given social distancing rules)
Options	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Follow DOTE and lock the coach out of service</li> <li>2. Arrange for member of on-board staff to remain at the door so it could be unlocked and used for evacuation purposes in an emergency</li> </ol>
Risks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Crowding of passengers who are pushed into less space. This would lead to passengers being close together, and could lead to the spread of COVID 19.</li> <li>2. No probable risks</li> </ol>
Choose	Option 2
Evaluate	Monitor the situation as it unfolds

Now more than ever, railway staff may be faced with difficult decisions that have widespread safety implications. If you want to know more about G-FORCE you can [access resources on our website](#). RSSB is currently trialling G-FORCE with several partners across the industry. If you are interested in implementing G-FORCE in your organisation, please email us at [G-FORCE@RSSB.co.uk](mailto:G-FORCE@RSSB.co.uk) to see how we can support you. While classroom training is not possible at present, we are happy to provide training over videoconferencing platforms.

## Supporting passengers and members of the public

Passengers and members of the public will be experiencing high levels of stress and many people may be anxious when accessing transport services.

Stress and anxiety can impair problem-solving and social skills, contributing to inappropriate behaviour (for example: abusive language, threatening behaviour, substance abuse).

Sometimes our own stress gets in the way of our being able to manage the person in as calm a way as we would like.

When dealing with passengers and members of the public try using the steps in the RAILS model:

### Remain Calm

Check in with yourself first.

As a rule, you are much more able to help others if you can remain calm yourself. If your brain feels under threat, it will be very difficult to problem solve. If a situation seems very challenging, taking a few deep breaths can make a big difference before you decide to approach someone.

### Approach

Plan the best way to approach the person you are concerned about. Ensure you undertake a dynamic risk assessment. Where is the best place to talk to them?

Watch for signs that they may be experiencing a crisis situation:

- Alcohol or substance abuse
- Suicidal thoughts and behaviours
- Aggressive behaviours
- Trauma after an incident
- Medical emergency

### Inquire

Engage the person and ask them: 'How can I help you?'

Frame the conversation. You may have noticed they are:

- Seeming stressed

- Fatigued
- Anxious

Explore, be curious. Empathise with them. Where possible, talk them through potential options to facilitate their problem solving.

## Listen

Validate their emotions, no matter how wrong you think they are. Listening works best if you can be non-judgmental. This is called authentic listening. To do this:

- Try to put your judgments aside
- Treat the person with respect and dignity
- Keep an open mind

Give them space to tell their story.

## Support

The support you provide can be practical and emotional. Your role is to facilitate their problem-solving.

Ending and bridging: if you are concerned about a passenger or member of the public's mental wellbeing, encourage the person to seek appropriate professional support wherever appropriate.