

Advances in Project Management

The burden of making good decisions

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Introduction to the September Advances in Project Management Series Article

The burden of making good decisions

Making good and informed decisions has featured in many of the articles published in this column. Indeed, decision-making is increasingly recognised as a key competence that both defines and underpins many aspects of modern management and leadership. The process of decision-making and its application thus appear to provide a common interest in many disciplines and domains of enquiry.

March and Simon recognised that the understanding of decision-making was essential for deriving an understanding of the behaviour of organisations. In that tradition, behavioural studies of organisations often embody a descriptive understanding of the processes and influences required to make sense of organisational behaviour patterns. Moreover, Simon has subsequently reasoned that decisions account for the majority of what executives do within organisations, thereby justifying an intense focus on the processes and dynamics surrounding the identification, elaboration, search and choice stages involved in decision making. Many researchers have concluded that management and leadership are fundamentally about making good decisions.

So what is a decision?

Decisions imply choice from between a number of possible courses of action. They are action oriented as making a decision often necessitates some form of planning and committing to a strategy that involves action. The decision situation is bound by a set of constraints that are associated with the situation, and the resolution process may add to the set of constraints as particular action sequences are accepted, rejected, assumed, implied or committed to.

Many decisions occur in complex, dynamic, novel and uncertain situations. Context is crucial as judgement rest on the way the world is viewed, analysed and interpreted. Any perspective that is adopted is therefore selective and limited. The scarcity of information is also related to the speed needed to reach agreement and finalise the decision.

Stress in projects

In temporary environments, decisions often have to be made in speedy fashion. The implication is: that decision makers do not have sufficient time to analyse and review all the options; that only partial information can be gathered; and, that part of the context will not be explicitly stated and understood. Human attention is some times described as a scarce commodity and management by exception requires the making of decisions when a mismatch is identified.

Decision making under stress often provides a trigger for urgent decisions that need to be made. The article by Kaye Remington considers the role of stress in making decisions. Kaye looks beyond the fixation with panic, identifying the potential role of stress in improving performance. Indeed, stress can play a part in the search for adaptation and in the building of added resilience, which can strengthen the performance and behaviour basis.

The article provides a new lens for considering the role of stress and the potential impacts on the project team. Given that stress is an increasingly common condition in project environments, the lessons for leaders, and indeed, the discussion on different styles and approaches offer new ways of thinking about and engaging with decision making under stress.

Further insights into complex projects, communication, governance, innovation and culture are available in Kaye's recent book: *Leading Complex Projects*, published by Gower in 2011. The book draws on original empirical research into the successful leadership of complex projects, which included in depth interviews with seventy leaders involved in the successful delivery of complex projects, meticulous collection and analysis of existing sources and thoughtful synthesis of the insights into useful lessons.

Decision-making under stress will continue to be a challenge in project environments. Leaders are expected to develop the requisite resilience and adaptability required to guide complex projects towards a successful conclusion. Reflective thinking and active engagement will pave the way to developing a new understanding, and a healthier appreciation, of the role of stress in decision making, and in turn will highlight the crucial impact of rapid and effective decision making in leading, directing and guiding complex projects.

Editor's note: Darren Dalcher is the editor of the series of books on Advances in Project Management published by Gower in the UK. Information about the Gower series can be found at <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/advancesinprojectmanagement>. The above article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ by Gower author Dr Kaye Remington on the subject of "Decision-making under stress – advice for project leaders." You can find previously published articles by Prof Dalcher and Gower authors at www.pmworldlibrary.net.

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Darren Dalcher, Ph.D. HonFAPM, FRSA, FBCS, CITP, FCMI is Professor of Project Management at the University of Hertfordshire, and founder and Director of the National Centre for Project Management (NCPM) in the UK. He has been named by the Association for Project Management (APM) as one of the top 10 “movers and shapers” in project management in 2008 and was voted Project Magazine’s “Academic of the Year” for his contribution in “integrating and weaving academic work with practice”. Following industrial and consultancy experience in managing IT projects, Professor Dalcher gained his PhD in Software Engineering from King's College, University of London. Professor Dalcher has written over 150 papers and book chapters on project management and software engineering. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Software Process Improvement and Practice*, an international journal focusing on capability, maturity, growth and improvement. He is the editor of the book series, *Advances in Project Management*, published by Gower Publishing of a new companion series *Fundamentals of Project Management*. Heavily involved in a variety of research projects and subjects, Professor Dalcher has built a reputation as leader and innovator in the areas of practice-based education and reflection in project management. He works with many major industrial and commercial organisations and government bodies in the UK and beyond. He is an Honorary Fellow of the APM, a Chartered Fellow of the British Computer Society, a Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute, and the Royal Society of Arts, and a Member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Academy of Management, the Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and the Association for Computing Machinery. He is a Chartered IT Practitioner. He is a Member of the PMI Advisory Board responsible for the prestigious David I. Cleland project management award and of the APM Professional Development Board. Prof Dalcher is an academic editorial advisor for the *PM World Journal*.