

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

***This thought
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Projects and programmes need good quality decisions – well informed, timely, clearly articulated and well communicated. It's the job of senior management and an organisation's governance structures to provide the 'right' decisions for the business. But how often do we find life's not like that, and the decisions we need simply don't happen. Something happened while I was on holiday which made me think...

You may recognise this narrative from one of my favourite episodes of 'Yes Prime Minister'. I watched a re-run of it recently on a wet afternoon in Devon.....

Prime Minister: "So far my premiership has been a great success and I've been asking myself, what can I do to continue this run of success?"

Sir Humphrey: "Have you considered masterly inactivity?"

Prime Minister: "No I haven't. The Prime Minister must be firm".

Sir Humphrey: "Indeed, how about firm, masterly inactivity?"

We laugh at the notion of 'firm, masterly inactivity' and choose rather to think of the right thing to do: to make a decision, take an action, do something. Whatever that might be – it's almost counter-cultural to delay. The same is often said for planning. Far better to do 'something' (generate an output, do 'stuff') than simply to 'think' or 'plan'. That way, failure comes as a complete surprise rather than something we see coming.

The notion of 'masterly inactivity' is, perhaps, not such a bad one. There is evidence from the medical world (actually surgeons) that very, very fast decisions are better delayed by the few moments that are available for delay. This has been found to result in a 'better' decision and in that case, an improved surgery result. The idea of 'masterly inactivity' actually exists in the surgery room and we are all better off as a result. Of course, decisions often do need to be made quickly – whether you are a tennis player deciding on your next shot, or the airline pilot considering options to land safely in an emergency situation – but deciding on the *time frame available* for a decision is an important part of the decision making process.

Culturally, we feel proud – and see it as a strength - to be able to make decisions 'on the hoof', to 'go with our gut' (the Lehman Brothers approach) or to 'get things done now' (the Peter Drucker mantra). Conversely, we see hesitation and even worse, procrastination as a bad thing. A negative. To quote Thomas de Quincey:

"If once a man indulges in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and procrastination"

Actually, 'procrastinate' simply means 'to put off till some future time' and like risk (which we assume to be bad but actually comprises *threat* and *opportunity*) putting off till sometime in the future (even just the 500 milliseconds for that tennis shot) may actually be a positive. It may interest you to know that in the days of the Greeks and Romans – and as evidenced in Hamlet – procrastination was apparently seen as a Good Thing. The trick seems to be deciding on the time available to make a decision.

Partington and Pelligrinelli (2004) conducted some research into programme management competence and identified 17 attributes of programme management work, each conceived in four 'levels of thinking'. One such attribute was 'Disposition for action'. A Level 1 thinker (concerned for delivery of programme scope) was described as a 'trouble-shooter and 'procedural' whilst a Level 4 thinker (concerned for development of strategic capabilities) had a broader understanding of both the internal and external context. The decision making process found at these different levels of thinking varied in terms of both the type of information involved, the time taken and the context in which the decision was framed. The authors argue that people need to be operating at the 'right' level of thinking if they are to make the 'right' decision.

Other factors come into play, not least of which is the diversity of approach to decision making (and risk, and scheduling) that a multi-cultural team inevitably involves. In his milestone research at IBM, Hoffman (1984) identified five dimensions to culture, one of which – Uncertainty Avoidance – reflects the extent to which different cultures think of, and deal with uncertainty. High uncertainty cultures (e.g. Japanese) will take a lot of time to gather information, review options and build consensus before taking a decision. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g. British) are rather more comfortable with unknowns, and incomplete information and less than complete buy-in to a decision. I'll return to this theme at a future date, but right now, you'll appreciate I'm sure the impact that cultures can and do have on decision making. So, which culture is 'right'?

Clearly, there is no single answer, and no silver bullet. When teenagers decide at the last minute to tidy up a room, or students to complete an assignment, or each of us in reflecting on when best to make an apology (too soon is often as bad as too late), or making that all important decision about the new job, we are all applying the same decision making thought process: the 'pause point' just happens to vary. I do think there's something in the idea of 'don't just do something, stand there'.

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