

## Multi-Dimensional Decision Making (or Beyond the Calculator)

By: Nina Coil

As a leader you get “the big bucks” because you are responsible for decisions. You face decisions all day long, from putting out fires to determining the new strategic direction for your organization. Small wonder, then, that a Google search for the phrase “decision making” combined with “leadership” yields 26 million results. Most of those links take you to sites that eventually get around to recommending standard analytical tools such as cost-benefit analysis, decision trees, and Gant charts. Data analysis is what most people believe enables good decision making. This approach focuses on sequential processes yielding data such as numbers, weights, timelines and probability statistics, and offers the comforting illusion that you are dealing with facts that will yield the right answer if only you deliberate carefully and thoroughly enough.

Many managers, and in fact the leadership of most organizations in the United States, tend to over-rely on these so-called “rational processes.” This over-reliance puts them at risk of making poor decisions because it ignores other critical data. It also puts their organizations at risk of failure; what we think of as “facts” is usually based on highly subjective preferences and unexamined assumptions. Malcolm Gladwell’s recounting of the Getty Museum kouros debacle<sup>1</sup> is instructive here, as an example of what can happen when you put too much faith in number crunchers. The Getty invested nearly \$10 million in a Greek statue that was analyzed for fourteen months by scientists and lawyers through the lenses of reams of data. And yet art historians with deep expertise could take one look at the kouros and “know” it didn’t “look right.”

We have all learned that rising to a leadership level in an organization requires us to shed habits and practices that may have served us well in other roles. Becoming a leader is an identity shift. Along with all the other habits you may have reconsidered when stepping up to this role it behooves you to take a closer look at the way you make decisions. Most of us found earlier in our careers that spreadsheets and critical success factor analyses were reassuring. They seemed clear, they offered “proof” and a paper trail, and they enabled us to appear to have “truth” on our side. But given the subjectivity with which even the most quantitative analyses are riddled, this bias begs to be brought into the light of day and exposed for what it is.

As a leader you can no longer afford (if you ever could) to stay in your comfort zone, reaching instinctively for that calculator, to find the answer to each and every decision you face. Data analysis is certainly necessary as a *part* of a transformative change process or the development of an entirely new product, but the creativity that emerges through other approaches to decision making is the stuff of real breakthrough.

Today’s leaders, faced with constant pressure to devise new, faster, better solutions in a world of endless possibility and competitive challenge need to have a deep and wide toolkit of decision making approaches. Their toolkit should include a databank of decisions they have made, both with positive and negative outcomes. Clear-eyed and yet gentle assessment of what goes wrong in decision-making can enable great cognitive leaps. But you have to take some risks, and be willing to fail once in a while, in order to build this rich source of experiences. And it is fear of this kind of uncertainty that keeps many leaders and their organizations focused on data analytical methods.

As leaders we often strain to “prove our case” with numbers, and our example encourages others to do the same. There may be people involved in or impacted by a decision who are wrestling with a “gut sense” that something is “not right” or missing that they are loathe to express. Your job is to listen for and encourage these other voices, and to provide a crucible within which a full and balanced set of data is surfaced put to use. You are the one responsible for creating the climate for decision making, and for defining what a quality decision is. This involves making sure that all the available relevant data is surfaced and considered, including data you may not have known you had access to. Let me explain.

Many organizations fail because they continue to do what they do best without regard for whether or not it still meets customer’s needs. Certain types of decisions benefit from “big picture” thinking; others are enriched by whole new ways of looking at things – neither of which emerges from strictly rational processes. Using more creative visualization processes as an alternative starting point for decision making can enable the shedding of outdated organizational paradigms. These can be replaced by future-focused

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<sup>1</sup> *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell, NY: Little, Brown and Co., 2005.

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and outcome-driven perspectives that can gel an organization around a truly meaningful purpose aligned with real customer need. Diagramming, storytelling, and the use of metaphor can encourage the emergence of whole new ideas, and of connecting ideas in new ways. It is astonishing what all of us know and are unaware of “knowing.” A graphic facilitation or strategic visioning session can, in the hands of an adept facilitator, yield wonderful insights – literally seeing within – to crystallize what had been stray impressions.

Another rich vein of data is to be mined through experimentation and prototyping. Hands-on, real-world approaches to decision making can surface “rubber hits the road” information about what might happen in the real world. Given some gentle guidance and ground rules, groups and teams can “take a stab” at doing things differently, yielding critical feasibility data. This can yield information about potential glitches in the system and possible process improvements before full implementation. The wise leader would rather have this data before rather than after a decision has been reached. These sorts of experimental approaches also provide a mechanism for allowing colleagues to forge deeper working relationships, building resilience for the future of your organization.

All of these approaches to decisions have their value and their time and place. Research by Mintzberg and Westley at McGill University<sup>2</sup> confirms that the decision-making approach one begins with can have a real impact on the outcome of the decision. Certain decisions are ideally suited for a spreadsheet. Other opportunities and foreseeable problems are missed if that is where you begin or all that you do. More creative and experimental approaches in decision-making processes can yield additional data. This data – images, diagrams and stories that build a clear picture of where you are going and what you want the outcomes to be in the case of creative visualization; process improvements, team efficiency and effectiveness in the case of experimentation – add value, depth and richness to organizational decisions.

The types of decisions requiring a more robust approach are more and more what is called for in order to lead the agile organizations of today. Building practices that allow for these approaches will enable you and your organization to capitalize on the full potential inherent in the decisions that really matter. You can whip out your calculator to double check the results if you must, but take the risk of trying something new first.

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**About the Author:** Nina Coil is Director of Product Development and Research at Linkage, Inc. with more than fifteen years' experience in training facilitation, instructional design, and project management. She specializes in creative train-the-trainer programs, change and transition management, and leadership development. Nina is co-author of the Creative Training Techniques Handbook. She has worked with leaders and staff of domestic and global corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and small businesses. Nina also has led the design and development, and has masterfully facilitated a variety of programs, including: Decision Making: Strategies for Making the Right Call, Enhancing Your Emotional Intelligence, Essential Negotiation Skills, Leadership-Level Facilitation Skills, and Linkage's Management Skills Certificate Program.

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Mintzberg and Frances Westley, *Decision Making: It's Not What You Think*, MITSloan Management Review, Spring 2001, Vol. 42, No. 3.