



CREATING CONFIDENT COMMUNICATORS

The Leader's Decision Making Dilemma Part 1 of 2

Bad judgment calls are popular in the media: *USA Today* (11/7/07) featured a cover story "Even Good CEOs Pick the Wrong Direction" while *The Harvard Business Review* (HBR 11/07) dedicated a lead story covering the decision making process. While leaders are often remembered for "heroic" attributes and the ability to inspire and motivate, their effectiveness and ultimate success boils down to the skill of making sound choices.

Like the rest of the world, decision making has evolved beyond the day of best practices. As David J. Snowden and Mary Boone point out in their article, "*A Leader's Framework for Decision Making*," (HBR 11/07) best practices come from the past. And most leaders are facing new, complex situations that require a different strategic approach.

Snowden and Boone have designed a cyclical frame for decision making. **The model features five stages: Simple, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic and Disorder.** In your role at FEMA, no doubt you have experienced all of these stages. It takes skill to determine which stage is happening, and as Snowden and Boone point out, a bit of risk and courage to address new complexities with new ideas – sound familiar? *New circumstances require new ideas and efforts...*

This article approaches the first two stages: Simple and Complicated contexts. Next week we'll address the Complex and Chaotic contexts. All of you excel at the Simple Contexts or you wouldn't be where you are today. The trick is not to succumb to complacency, or the Simple becomes Complicated.

Simple contexts are easy to identify – they have a direct cause-and-effect relationship. This applies to many of the governmental regulations or union practices. At this stage, a leader senses, *categorizes* and responds. Pretty cut and dry; however, three problems can arise.

- 1) Troubles occur if an issue is incorrectly classified or oversimplified. Leaders who request condensed information regardless of the complexity can experience this.
- 2) Leaders may rely on ingrained habits, called "entrained thinking." Relying on the past can blind new solutions or processes. You may encounter this with staff – "we've always done it this way."
- 3) When all becomes routine with little alteration, you may be tempted to become comfortable or complacent with processes. And because it worked in the past, you may be reluctant to change or flex in the new circumstance. Complacency frequently leads to chaos because we didn't stay on top of the game and foresee obstacles.

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How do you respond to danger signals of Simple Situations? According to Snowden and Boone, there are four actions to take:

- 1) Create communication channels to challenge orthodox or stagnant thinking. Another way to avoid this is to constantly ask your team – How can we do this better? What do we need or need to do to be more effective? And, ask these questions *before* a crisis arises, not just after.
- 2) Stay connected without micromanaging. Your team members can handle most of the issues that arise and this frees you to spot new changes or possibilities.
- 3) Don't assume things are really simple. Aristotle wrote that "*Genius lies in simplicity.*" Usually, just the surface is simple...
- 4) Recognize both the value and limitations of best practices.

As you have no doubt discovered, charting new territory is rarely simple. Most of your situations move into Complicated, Complex or Chaotic. Let's explore the Complicated context.

A **Complicated context** is one that may contain multiple right answers. Plus, while a cause-and-effect relationship exists, not everyone is able to see or understand it. At this stage, the leader must sense, *analyze* and respond. So, unlike the Simple where there is one solution, the Complicated stage requires research and investigating several options. Often this stage requires expert knowledge.

Be aware that entrained thinking can kick in at this level, too. Many times "experts" (rather than the leaders) become emotionally invested in their knowledge and can bog down the process or create "analysis paralysis." At this point, it's important to remember that "good practices" are just as effective as "best," and because reaching decisions in the complicated domain can take a lot of time, there is always a trade off between finding the right answer and simply making a decision.

Snowden and Boone have two action steps to respond to these danger signals when dealing with Complicated situations:

- 1) The first is to branching out past your comfort zone and using exercises and games to force people to think beyond the familiar. They suggest encouraging creativity with activities such as "Opposite Thinking" or "What If?" These two exercises are from one of my favorite references, Conquer the Brain Drain by Judi Moreo. In the "Opposite Thinking" activity, the group approaches problem-solving by determining the opposite of the problem. For example, what is one way NOT to solve the problem or how has the problem been solved in the past and then proposing an opposite solution. Oftentimes examining a problem from the opposite direction exposes data or sources not easily recognized in the normal approach.

A more advanced level of this activity is to apply the challenge to a completely opposite situation, glean a solution and then apply that solution to the original problem. For example, Snowden and Boone supplied marketing executives with military research on ballistic missiles. The executives were instructed to analyze the data to identify weak signals or small trends. The outcome was a process that could be transferred to the marketing firm to identify potential loss of a loyal customer.

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If “Opposite Thinking” sounds too time consuming, try one of my favorites, “What If.” It’s best played as a game but you can do this as a brainstorming session, too. The idea of what if is to *generate* possible ideas and solutions – *not* critique. When done routinely, this exercise is excellent for creating a positive environment for team members to contribute ideas. I use a Nerf® ball with a group seated around a table; someone is appointed as the scribe to keep notes of all the ideas. All ideas are valued, no matter how mundane – that’s important. Stress to the group that critiquing takes place after ideas are generated.

After introducing the problem, the leader solicits possible solutions by tossing the ball randomly to a team member. The team member must propose a solution starting with the words, “what if?” Then they toss the ball to another team member, who can add on to a previous comment or introduce a new one. You continue until all members have submitted several different solutions. While this one sounds a little silly, it’s one of the most effective and most popular at workshops and retreats.

- 2) Snowden and Boone also encourage external and internal stakeholders to challenge expert opinions in order to overcome entrained thinking. Again, the idea is to make sure the data or expertise is appropriate for your specific concern and not just an accepted “one-size-fits-all” solution.

So, as you go through the week, take a minute to reflect how many of your decisions are Simple vs. Complicated. In the next article, we’ll explore the Complex and Chaotic, which require a different set of skills and approaches.

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