

Three under-rated factors in decision making

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CONVENTIONAL wisdom has it that decision making is a function of policy based acts, rules, regulations, instructions and guidelines applied in a scientific manner. We are conditioned to visualising an ideal environmental framework for decision making. The decision makers are supposed to be rational agents free from human inadequacies and fallibility.

They proceed rationally, deliberately objectively, and opt for the best possible solutions. The decisions are not encumbered by the angularities of the decision makers and sensitivity of the environment and the gravity or uniqueness of the situation.

This does not tally with the real life situation. Decision makers are, oftener than not, selectively rational. They do not follow the algorithmic model in decision making.

Instead, they prefer to use instincts and predictions too often to arrive at the predisposed decision. In such circumstances decisions are hardly optimal; they leave much to be desired. The sub-optimal decisions nonetheless carry the usual force and implications of algorithmic decisions.

In most cases three factors, often unreported, influence the decision making process. They are situation factor, environment factor and personality factor. They are not mutually exclusive; they may occur

simultaneously to reinforce or offset the effect of one another. Ignoring these factors may lead one to miss the complex dynamics of decision making and land him with an erroneous inference.

Situation factor

The situation obtaining immediately before or during the time of decision making is very crucial to arriving at the decision. Situations create compelling demands that are apt to undermine the prevalent rules and regulations, thereby bushwhacking their way through.

Such compelling situations are engendered by natural calamities like earthquake, flood, drought, tornado, tsunami, tidal bore, landslide etc, semi natural disasters like epidemics, or man made disasters like war, strike, mass upheaval or civil commotion. Normal management practices and standards give in to the exigencies of the real situation.

The manager has to improvise and respond to save the situation. He cannot go by the rules, which are rendered irrelevant, to match the situation. He will be an utter failure if he cannot rise above the rules and regulations during such trying circumstances, and come forward to save the distressed humanity.

Those who consider rules and regulations as sacrosanct may, at a later time, arraign the manager for deviating from them without permission of the appropriate authority. This will be a slavish mentality

which should be done away with for the greater interest of mankind and, hence, the nation.

When an emergency situation or a special situation crops up, it consumes the interest of all concerned. Every one is poised to overcome the situation at any cost. No one is in a mood to listen to financial, legal or administrative constraints, however genuine those maybe.

Persons drawing attention to these constraints are looked upon with suspicion and are booed down by the enthusiasts around the table. The followers of rules and regulations find themselves helpless in the circumstances, and acquiesce to the proposals, which might transgress the legal remit, at times for no benefit to the sufferers or the common people.

The special interest groups often take advantage of the situation to serve their own purpose at the cost of legal and financial discipline. It is said, not without justification, that the greatest casualty in a natural disaster, say flood, is not resources but the discipline of the system that is undermined with impunity in the name of overcoming the disaster.

They suffer but the precedents persist, maybe with a different set of people to demand and to grant. The situation triumphs with its over-arching influence.

Environment factor

Every meeting or conference has its own environment. The place, the crowd, and the occasion define the environment. The participants are not free agents in these conclaves.

They may carry briefs from their organisations, and they may have prepared themselves well for presenting their points of view. The atmosphere of the meeting

may, however, prevent them from expressing their opinions in the meeting. The chairperson of the meeting plays a crucial role in this respect. He sets the tone of the meeting. He may manipulate things in such a way that opponents to a proposal do not simply get the chance to speak out their minds, while the advocates of the proposal get ample opportunities to present their case and create a favourable opinion for their proposal.

Sometimes the chair himself comes forward to support or oppose a proposal, creating an environment for or against the proposal. Decisions in these meetings are, thus, hugely influenced by the environment factor.

Outside the meetings, environment factor may also be called in to decide the fate of a case. A special interest group may prevent the other groups from participating in the decision making process by manipulation or by sheer application of force.

A vicious environment may be created such that only a particular type of people can operate in that place. Fair minded and innocent people are compelled to opt out. If there is a big change against the special interest groups, the rules of the game change, and new groups start operating in that environment. A different set of decisions emerges in that environment.

The environment factor's dominance in decision making is appar-

ent from these examples. The rational decision maker has very little to do to dominate the environment, unless he is in the driver's seat; he has to take the environment as given. The ingenuous people, therefore, first work to turn the environment in their favour before taking the matter for a decision in the meeting or by the appropriate authority.

Once the right environment is created, they find it easy to get the decision in their favour. Playing to the tune of the environment or creating propitious environment is very important for getting the desired decision.

Personality factor

The decision making process and the outcome thereof depend to a large extent on the personality of the persons involved in the matter. Personality includes stature, social and hierarchical position, physical attributes, reputation and expertise of the person.

Towering personalities dominate the proceeding, be it in the office, formal meeting, informal kaffeeklatsch, focus group discussion, or in public discourse. Ordinary mortals cringe before them.

They cannot present their viewpoints clearly before these towering personalities, even when they have a strong case. On the other hand, persons with towering, or at times overbearing, personalities establish their case by sheer force of personality.

They sometimes resort to bullying the crowd by what may be called "verbal terrorism" or "stance terrorism."

The position is aggravated if the overwhelming personality happens to chair the meeting, or he is the final authority to take the decision. Differing with him means inviting an unpleasant situation, which peace loving individuals will like to avoid.

If the imposing personality wields controlling power his presence can effectively silence all the potentially opposing views. The veiled threat of perceived punishment does the trick.

The author has noted that even persons with higher status do not like to cross swords with belligerent persons because the latter use unpalatable words much to the chagrin of the senior.

On the other end of the scale are persons with dwarfed personalities. They are usually peevish and reticent. They cannot articulate their points or press their cases to get them through. They backtrack at the slightest opposition to their proposal.

The chairperson in most of the cases goes with the truculent because he wants to follow the path of least resistance. In the process, good cases are shot down and in their places bad cases see their way through. The merit of the cases does not always matter, more important is the person who is holding brief for the case.

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Online shopping

Isn't it ironic that we have a corporate credit rating agency (CRISL) operating for a few years now, but not a single consumer credit agency to access the credit worthy consumers among 150 million people?

ASIF ANWAR

ONLINE shopping is growing rapidly in most developing and developed countries for obvious reasons.

Burma's regional partners have understandable concerns that the necessary political changes should not endanger regional stability. So the process must be broad-based and inclusive. And, as Aung San Suu Kyi has herself said, the military must play an important part in a future democratic Burma. But the military dictatorship must end.

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