

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



The Drama of Decision Making (Knowledge Management, Part 8)

Season 7, Episode 8 – originally released 25 October 2022

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

When we make tough decisions, those that require some thought or judgment, we are naturally conflicted. Otherwise, they would not be tough decisions and maybe not decisions at all. But the conflict may stem from different sources. Perhaps there were multiple alternatives available and it was hard to pick one. Or none are particular good and one is trying to minimize harm. Then, perhaps the difficulty comes in potential harm each alternative may impose on the reputation of the decision maker. The decision maker may be calm and collected on the outside but may be torn apart and stressed on the inside – yet, we may only see the manifestation of the decision alone and may know little about the paths not taken in the minds of the decision maker. In other words, we often only know about half the story of the decision. Is it possible to reconstruct the other half?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

You'll recall that I started this series after I did a project by which I went through a closet full of DVDs and started to sort through what was on them, trying to revitalize the corporate knowledge that was captured in them, but sort of tucked away. One of the things that struck me was that these DVDs sort of were the output of a process, in essence. They were the collected results of decisions made regarding what was important and what was not important. What I didn't see in the DVDs was all of the discussion or all of the draft work that went into putting those materials together in the first place.

So in essence, I only saw half the story and I'd been wondering what was the rest of it?

Because I knew in my times past that not everything that was put onto those DVDs was uncontroversial. They were all the results of some very significant, important discussions, the consideration of various alternatives, etc. And I'm always influenced by my own experience, of course, where I remember that when some organizational decisions are made, that they're not always made with full knowledge of all alternatives just made available.

So for example, if you were to come up with three alternatives A, B and C, there is this rule of thumb that I remember that you always want the preferred one, the one that the staff prefers to be the first one given. And that one of them is going to be a throwaway, literally presented to show that there were alternatives considered. But you just make it seem so bad that you steer the decision maker away from it. Or in other settings where literally there is no real decision made, there is only one alternative ever given, and that alternative is either accepted or rejected.

There are many ways to narrow the decision space to make things easier. So, in my Describe Explain Decide Act framework from earlier in this series (Episode 7-4), this episode is about the Decide factor and how we generate alternatives and how we sort them into good ones, bad ones, and ultimately make a choice which is then put forth in the environment.

When I originally crafted the series, I was thinking in terms of a system-based metanarrative, and this is because systems thinking was the key inspiration. It was associated with how we navigate complexity, how do we try to sort through where we are, where we want to go, and knowing that factors of complexity will get in the way. But the more I thought about it, I found that it really wasn't so much the system that the maiden narrative was about, but it was about the mind of the decision maker who's standing at a particular place within this complex space and is trying to decide, Well, do I move around this present obstacle that's directly in front of me and just do it sort of in an iterative fashion? Or do I look out to the long term, keep an eye on a goal, and make decisions that favor reaching that goal? Despite the obstacles, I always would come back to the preferences of the decision maker in how the decision maker weighs the alternatives and in some ways how their preferences serve as a shortcut. Even though we may be making judgments that appear on the outside to be of some difficult, equally weighted choices, the actual reliance or the actual decision made might actually be some sort of an automated process that is reflective of the personal preferences of the decision maker.

I actually have several examples of this from earlier in this program, from previous seasons. There's the episode that I did on the Story of the Four Commanders (Episode 3-1). And you notice I've been using the term "story" several times, and the idea in the story of the four commanders was I took a chapter of a book by Chin and Benne (1984), who did a meta-analysis of about 100 years worth of organizational change literature. And what they did was came up with major streams of approaches to organizational change. Now, the three streams were called *power-coercive*, *rational-empirical* and *normative-re-educative*. So power-coercive was about the incentive schemes. The rational-empirical was like scientific management and that variety. And normative-re-educative used either training methods or participative methods to try to bring about change.

Now, these represent not just three separate alternatives, but there is a range of hybrids in between. ... When I look at organizational change, I see little bits and pieces of each in being involved, that there is rewards, that there's empiricism, trying to measure progress, [and] there are various ways in which you have different levels of participation. You have different uses of expertise. So in an ordinary change effort, there is sort of a mix.

But what these streams kind of showed is that one of these represent a primary driver of change. And I used the Story of the Four Commanders to suggest that, well, commanders will have a preference as to which approach they're going to be the most comfortable with, based on their own personality, based on their own experience and expertise. And so if you are a participative style leader, then, yes, you're going to use rewards, you're going to use measures of merit, you're going to use all sorts of different tools. But then ultimately, your measure of success is going to be, "Was everybody consulted?" So the preference kind of weights one approach over another. And when you're talking

about three different streams, you could have an infinite array of choices about how you go about using these tools for bringing about change.

I also had the Change Story (Episode 1-4), which is really just a two alternatives to say whether we change or not -- with the idea of trying to paint one alternative as bad and one alternative is good to say that we need to do organizational change. There are others that I've used and they all kind of come back to this same thing where rather than think of it as a system-based metanarrative, I'm thinking of it as more of a preference based metanarrative. And the preference base made a narrative is a story structured around the facing of choices in order to cope with complexity. That's kind of what this media narrative is about. How does a leader go with their gut or their intuition or generate alternatives but narrow it down to those that they're most comfortable with?

Now, my use of models is really just a way of trying to lay out the possible range of alternatives that have been used or could be used, and there could be an infinite array of hybrids. So another good example to use is what we call the Strategic Choices Model in defense management. And this is to say that you've got basically a three-way decision of where you're going to put money into current readiness, investing in future readiness, that is modernization or procurement and force structure, basically your sunk costs of personnel, real property, etc.. And those three, they're not either-or cases. It's really just a matter of what percentage of money do you put in one bucket or another? And that offers up a very significant range of options because there are many, many ways you can divide a pot of money three ways. But there's one important factor to consider. There's a conflict at the at the center part of it that the demand for resources is always going to exceed the supply. And so then no matter what you do, you're going to if you aren't actually shorting somebody, shorting one of those buckets, you feel like you're shorting one of those buckets. There's always going to be a dissatisfaction with the end result because there's some priority that is probably not getting as much as a decision maker would think.

The preference-based metanarrative has, at its essence, a paradoxical tension. I mean, it's not enough that this tension is significant, but it has to be paradoxical. Otherwise it doesn't become a tough decision. And the reason why I say that is because without a without a sense of paradox, there's a very good chance that the decision could be a final decision. That is, it never has to be revisited. Whereas in a paradoxical tension, every decision is temporary, it's transitory. The situation will change that will trigger the tension once again and potentially cause a decision to have to be revisited. So there's always a decision point.

And then the question becomes, how does the story start? And it can be itself. It's like a paradox. Within the paradox, it either begins that there is a disruption to a state of equilibrium in which the tension has been triggered and therefore presents a barrier or a problem to the decision maker who may desire to restore stability or the opposite. The. decision maker may be faced with the need to disrupt the equilibrium because of complacency, some misalignment with the environment, etc. So in essence, the trigger point is itself a paradox of continuity versus change, which draws from Lewis (2000). So that's how the story starts.

You then are faced with a decision point based on a particular paradoxical tension. And those that decision point gives you the alternatives to consider. What this meta narrative can do is provide us with what the range of possible alternatives were and then potentially try to reconstruct which ones were taken seriously based on whatever material you have or what you know of the situation and what were utterly dismissed because they were not preferred or seen as unsuitable, unfeasible, whatever.

Now the generation of alternatives using some sort of a model is only part of the story itself, because what makes such decisions space is so compelling are the emotions that are often attached to it. So it's not necessarily just a rational decision – “well, I prefer A over B, and so I'm going to follow A” -- but there is a natural inner tension that we also want to understand about the decision maker or about those who are advising the decision maker. The emotional states are really important.

And this brings me to another tool that was very inspirational to me as I analyzed decision making. It's called *dramaturgical coding*, and it's a coding method that's used in qualitative research. And I did, in fact, use it for a study that I did on what is known as responsible command and dramaturgical coding is a way of trying to take the emotions and the tensions and the conflict felt by a protagonist as they're navigating either a difficult situation or in this case, a difficult decision. And it allows one to think not just about what the alternatives are, but how the decision maker feels about them. So the dramaturgical coding and I'm using Saldana's book on qualitative research methods dramaturgical coding is actually a fairly easy coding scheme to use in my in my view, because it basically is all geared around picking up evidence of how the conflict manifests itself in the face of a decision maker.

And when you're coding, you basically break it down into six factors that corresponds to what he refers to as the terms and conventions of the character, of the script, and of how the characters express themselves as they go through the story. So the first factor is the *objectives*. What's the motive of the decision maker? The *conflicts* are obstacles which are presented by the paradoxical tension. The *tactics* are strategies to deal with the conflicts or obstacles, which is essentially the preferences. The *attitudes* towards the setting, others and the conflict. So that's the fourth factor attitudes, and that's something that can be brought out in anything that captures any conversations or alternative views that surrounding the decision. The *emotions* experienced by the participant or actor, and the *subtexts* which are unspoken thoughts, impression management often in the form of gerunds. I, in my responsible command study, had enhanced this piece a bit because I was using oral histories, which meant that there wasn't very much to capture in terms of unspoken thoughts, but there were elements of surprise at the outcomes or unexpected or emotional reactions to the outcomes that would not have been manifest prior to or going into the decision. Those elements can help us think about, well, if I'm trying to understand what makes a particular decision tough as opposed to easy, well, that may be a reflection of either the strength of the preference that says that one set of alternatives is just good a range of alternatives is just bad.

I will not consider those whatsoever or perhaps as a geared towards understanding how a decision maker may go back and forth over a decision. And I use the I use kind of this approach a lot as I'm trying to tease out what's the story behind the story in tough decisions, what are the things that are

unspoken? Chris Argyris written about this quite a bit. What is the part of the story that's not being told.

Now, I know that I've been talking about the decision maker throughout, but it. It's not confined to the decision maker. This metanarrative that I'm discussing can also apply to anybody who is witnessed at the decision. I have also used this same thought process of understanding resistance and ambivalence towards the decision, such as questions about Is this really the right decision? Has the problem been defined correctly? Are we using the right methods to solve a problem or whatever? The different ways in which people then respond, feel conflict about, feel emotional about a decision that has been made. And so the nice thing about this approach is that the same tension that generated all of these range of alternatives is the same one that allows you to think about, well, where is the reactions to the decision going to come from if the range of alternatives is here along this paradoxical tension and the decision favors one side, the other side becomes a source of anguish or complaints on the one side or celebration on the other.

But then, having used the metanarrative to understand the possible sources of resistance, we can then use the metanarrative to develop a story about how the decision maker can communicate the decision that mitigates the impact of resistance to come up with the themes and messages that acknowledge the paradoxical tension, acknowledge the other sides, and to try to come up with messages, with ways of communicating that might be more effective. This is not to say that it would totally negate the impact of resistance, but it would posture to the decision maker to be more effective in communicating the decision, at least.

Consider the alternative, which we covered in the Talking about Organizations podcast episode on whistleblowers (Episode 45), where the decision on how to communicate is essentially to ignore the complaints, just ignore any bad news. Obviously this is not what we want. So, [what] we want to be able to do is to allow for the leader, the decision maker, to navigate what is a very uncomfortable situation, but to do so in a more open fashion.

So now what I've done is I've completed the meta narratives associated with decisions, and the next episode is going to cover the mayday narratives associated with acting. This is going to be a chance for us to talk about the mayday narratives associated with finding the one best way as opposed to other ways. And so, I'll see you next time.

And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

ALL THE BEST!
TOM GALVIN