Leaders and decision making

Author: Naomi Stanford . October 2021

Recently I got this email: 'I think our leaders make poor decisions because although accountability demands it, our world is too complex for those at the top to really grasp all of the information they need. Are you aware of any organizations employing a range of different methods of collective decisions?'

I answered the following day, with :

'Good to hear from you. Do you know Cynefin Framework, take a look at David Snowden's work (his article, A Leader's Framework for Decision Making, attached)? Without going into any detail, there's a lot of work going on about complexity, leadership, and decision making. Also attached is an interesting article, Taking Organisational Complexity Seriously, by Chris Rodgers.

Briefly, many organizations are stuck in a model (in my view) where hierarchical leaders a) think they should know the 'right answer' b) that there is a 'right answer'. Complexity doesn't work like that. In order to make sound decisions, you have to have a very diverse range of perspectives/expertise/hierarchical levels in the room (and listen to them/work with them).'

Answering your question more specifically, take a look at this blog that mentions several companies making decisions a different way.'

Having answered the question, I continued to think about it. It made me think further because there isn't any easy way to answer it, without tackling several aspects: decision-making processes, accountability, complexity, information flows/availability/reliability, individual v collective decisions, the context for the question, context for the decision making. Even tackling those aspects doesn't make any usable answer much easier to arrive at.

Looking at Harvard Business Review, it seems that decision-making is a topical discussion. Since December 2017 there's been:

How Systems Support (or Undermine) Good Decision-Making, by Ron Carucci, Feb 2020

Navigating imposed innovation: A decision-making framework by Amir Bahman Radnejad and Oleksiy Osiyevskyy, January 2020

10 Ways to Mitigate Bias in Your Company's Decision Making by Elizabeth C. Tippett October 21, 2019

Keeping Humans in the Loop: Pooling Knowledge through Artificial Swarm Intelligence to Improve Business Decision Making by Lynn Metcalf, David A. Askay, Louis B. Rosenberg August 2019

Organizational Decision-Making Structures in the Age of Artificial Intelligence, by Yash Raj Shrestha, Shiko M. Ben-Menahem, Georg von Krogh August 2019

What AI-Driven Decision Making Looks Like, by Eric Colson, July 2019

Briefing Sheet on Common Biases in Group Decision Making, by Hannah Riley Bowles, Logan Berg, Alyson Gounden Rock, Sam Skowronek June 2019

Avoiding Disruption Requires Rapid Decision Making, by George Stalk Jr., Sam Stewart, April 2019

A Good Meeting Needs a Clear Decision-Making Process, by Bob Frisch, Cary Greene, March 2019

Why AI Will Shift Decision Making from the C-Suite to the Front Line, by Alessandro Di Fiore, August 2019

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work: Human-AI Symbiosis in Organizational Decision Making, by Mohammad Hossein Jarrahi, July 2018

3 Ways to Improve Your Decision Making, by Walter Frick, January 2018

A CEO's Decision Making Is Shaped by Whether Their Parents Were Immigrants, by Duc Duy Nguyen, Jens Hagendorff, Arman Eshraghi, March 2018,

When to Decentralize Decision Making, and When Not To, by Frederic Wirtz, Herman Vantrappen, December 2017

In roughly the same period McKinsey offers eight articles on decision making.

Good decisions don't have to be slow ones, May 2019, by Iskandar Aminov, Aaron De Smet, and Dan Lovallo

Want a better decision? Plan a better meeting, May 2019, by Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost, and Leigh Weiss

Three keys to faster, better decisions, May 2019, by Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost, and Leigh Weiss

Effective decision making in the age of urgency, (Survey) April 2019

Decision-making: how leaders can get out of the way, June 2018, by Iskandar Aminov, Aaron De Smet, Kanika Kakkar

Keys to unlocking great decision-making, April 2018, by Aaron De Smet, Gregor Jost

Decision making in your organisation: cutting through the clutter (Podcast) January 2018, Aaron De Smet, Leigh Weiss.

Untangling your organization's decision making, June 2017, by Aaron De Smet, Gerald Lackey, and Leigh M. Weiss

I didn't go beyond these two journals/sites, but I'm guessing that, in that time frame, there are hundreds of other blogs, articles, points of view, etc on decision making.

Clearly, you can read, listen, and watch a lot about decision making but does that help answer the original question I was posed? The HBR and McKinsey approaches are generally looking for a 3-keys-type easy response. (I quickly glanced at MIT's Sloan Management Review list of decision making articles which are much the same as HBR and McKinsey's)

I'm not convinced by this desire for an easy response, but I decided to follow suit, and sifting through the above seems to reveal three themes that might be worth pursuing (none of them go far down the complexity route which is a failing):

- Leaders aren't always best placed to make the decisions
- AI could be used as a decision support tool
- Biases influence decisions made

Leaders aren't always best placed to make the decisions

In the piece [Decision Making How Leaders Can Get Out Of The Way](), the point is made that 'Layers of management often can slow actions with special initiatives, unnecessary upward reporting, status updates and the like. ... In organizations where competent people possess clarity of intent, maintaining control only slows decision-making and limits agility. Senior leaders should focus on what only they should do, such as setting intent, making strategic choices, and removing roadblocks.' To support effective decision making we could ask – are the right people making the decisions with the good information to hand?

AI could be used as a decision support tool

Yes, and beware the seductive sellers of AI decision-making systems, As Kyle Dent in Techcrunch (among many others) [points out](), 'AI developers make decisions and choose trade-o?s that a?ect outcomes. Developers are embedding ethical choices within the technology but without thinking about their decisions in those terms. ... The most basic assurances of algorithmic accountability are not guaranteed for either user of technology or the subjects of automated decision making.' To support effective decision making we could ask – are we putting too much faith in our automated organizational decision-making processes (e.g. cv sifting)? What is our response when they are challenged or questioned?

Biases influence decisions made

Yes, both human biases and AI biases. See a research article on this [Cognitive bias, decision styles, and risk attitudes in decision making and DSS](), 'Humans often make less than optimal decisions from a rational viewpoint ... decision aids can reinforce biases or improve the way that a person thinks about a situation. ... The way that information is presented and the way that analyses are conducted also impact the number of cognitive resources and information gathering that a person requires in a situation. To support effective decision making we could ask – how do we recognize and over-ride our own cognitive biases?

How would you answer the question on leadership and decision-making? Let me know.

*The post "**Leaders and decision making**" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/leaders-decision-making-naomi-stanford/*

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/leaders-and-decision-making