

Making decisions when the heat is on

Doing the right thing under pressure is a situation where both personality and professional training come into play, says **Ivan Robertson**

In a fire on Storm King Mountain, Colorado, in 1994, 14 firefighters lost their lives. A later analysis of events¹ revealed that some of the leadership decisions made during the incident were less than optimal. As the authors noted, the decisions of team leaders in fire zones were unusually clear-cut and consequential ... not unlike decisions faced by managers of most organisations.

The authors concluded that three critical factors – under-preparation, acute stress and ambiguous authority – contributed to the decisions. Think about the decision-making processes that took place around the Stockwell shooting and you can see the relevance of the analogy.

For some people (including firefighters), tough decisions have to be routinely taken when the heat is on. For firefighters the heat is literal, but for most of us it's metaphorical as we try to do the

right thing under the influence of different pressures. This month I'd like to discuss some of the key issues that come into play when people have to make decisions under pressure. There are various parts to this equation, including the different types of pressure that people experience; the impact that pressure has on decision-making and what can be done to help people take better decisions in these situations.

The pressure that people experience when making decisions is quite varied and examining this area is made more complicated by the fact that two people in the same decision-making context may experience different types and degrees of pressure. There are many reasons why pressure occurs in a given context, but the sources of this pressure fall into two broad categories – pressure that starts with the person him/herself and pressure that is related to the situation that he or she is in.

Let's start by looking at the situational factors that are important. First and foremost the significance or the importance of the decision is a major factor. Some decision-making experts use the probability of failure (p) and cost of failure (c) to help to evaluate the importance of decisions. If $p \times c$ is large – the decision is a big one and if it's small the decision is relatively minor.

The time available to make the decision is also a major influence because when important decisions have to be made under time pressure things start to get challenging. In fact, this is probably the most common decision-making scenario that occurs in the workplace – people face too many sources of information, and/or too many things that are unknown to be able to take completely rational decisions. Indeed Herb Simon, the leading management thinker, invented the term “bounded rationality” to describe just this set of circumstances.

When Alistair Darling made decisions about funding support for the ailing Northern Rock he would have been well-aware that the decisions were significant (high $p \times c$). At the same time he, almost certainly, would have found it impossible to take account of all of the key factors and to predict how the future would unfold – a situation of bounded rationality – but he had to make decisions anyway.

Other situational factors that influence people's experiences when making decisions include whether the pressure is acute (for example, police officers dealing with public disorder incident), or ongoing – such as dealing with a colleague or group of colleagues who consistently make unreasonable demands. Pressures may also come from resource constraints, the demands and expectations of others, unpredictable environmental changes and a range of other factors.

Once the situational pressures start to be explored in this way it is clear that people are different in their capability to cope with different types of pressure when making decisions. Some people may be able to make good decisions when under extreme time pressure (they have great

mental agility and can process information quickly) but find it very difficult to make balanced decisions when there are competing demands from others (they lack the interpersonal and prioritisation skills to deal with others in a way that allows the right decision to be made). So, although some people are generally better decision-makers than others, everyone will have strengths and risks when it comes to different types of pressure.

Overall, the main impact of pressure on people is to stimulate emotional responses (apprehension, anxiety, excitement, fear). Most researchers feel that it is these responses that make decision-making under pressure difficult, mainly because they interfere with the efficient application of cognitive skills. Interestingly, some research suggests that when people become overloaded cognitively, their decision-making becomes even more dependent on emotion.

Other research suggests that when people experience the negative emotions often associated with decision-making under pressure (anxiety, fear) their information processing narrows. By contrast, when people are experiencing positive emotions their information processing broadens and people take a wider view of problems. In acute pressure situations, particularly when there are time constraints, it is actually very functional for attention to narrow – but it has to be focused on the right things! In many other situations narrowing attention is probably not helpful – again, the Stockwell analogy comes to mind.

So what can be done to improve decision-making under pressure? First, since different people will have different capabilities to cope with different types of pressure, it makes sense to match the pressure profile of the role with the strengths and risks of the person performing it. This means taking the pressures of the role into account when selecting and placing people.

Secondly, training and development activities to equip people properly for decision-making under pressure. These may include broad “personal resilience” training or more specific training to prepare people for what awaits them in the role. Finally, the demands of the situation should be managed, so that people are not placed under unreasonable pressures. This may be unavoidable from time to time in certain roles, but should not be allowed to become routine. The responsibility here is on managers to manage the job demands and support those who are regularly placed in acute, high-pressure situations. Imagine an organisation where decisions made under pressure were 20 per cent better – more disasters would be averted and more successes attained – who wouldn't want that?

¹ Useem M, Cook J, Sutton L (2005). Developing leaders for decision making under stress: Wildland firefighters in the South Canyon fire and its aftermath, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 4, 461-485



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