How bad decisions happen
Georgina Veldhorst and Fred Witteveen
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Consider the following; the management team makes a decision that turns sour or even worse results in disaster. After the fact, management hears the feedback, “I knew this was not going to work.” Sound familiar? If this has happened to you, you may have thought to yourself, “Why did they not say anything?” It is likely that one or more of the following dynamics was at play: they did try to tell you, but you could not hear them; they were too afraid to speak up; or, your own personal baggage got in the way. Unfortunately these scenarios happen in organizations all too often. In the ongoing post mortem of our current global financial crisis, we have heard people scoff at the notion that some people knew the financial meltdown was likely to happen. The sad fact is that there were unheard voices who predicted that the global financial markets were headed for trouble. At the root of most of these situations, decisions were made without considering all factors, pros and cons, and potential unintended consequences. The good news is that this information is readily available to us. This article will explore the makings of each of these dynamics and suggest tips and strategies for managers to use to avoid them.

They tried to tell you!
Many of us have a deep need to be part of the group and to be liked by our colleagues and bosses. This need makes it difficult to voice a different opinion within our teams and organizations. An interesting aspect of this dynamic is that exactly the same thing is going on in others around us. This magnifies the problem. While the popular view is gaining momentum, those with opposing views are inhibited from speaking up. Eventually someone in the group holding the opposing view may speak up—often with a lot of passion and emotion. The way the view is expressed makes it easy for the rest of the group to dismiss the view. The actual dynamic taking place has been well described by Lewis (2008) and Mindell (1992). The person who finally speaks up has picked up the energy of those holding an opposing view. The minority view, when it eventually is expressed, is magnified or exaggerated to a level that the core content of the perspective is hard to hear. It is often the same person who holds this role of speaking up. In fact we often scapegoat that person labeling him or her as difficult, negative, emotional, or not a team player. The reality is that this person is more sensitive to the energy within the group.

Tip #1: If the discussion seems to be slanted in one direction, create space for a different perspective by summarizing the discussion to that point and inviting the group to explore the other views on the question at hand.

Tip #2: When you see a different view being surfaced, ask the question, “Who else shares some of this view?” In this way you are creating space for others to own their piece of the alternative view decreasing the magnification dynamic. This will also encourage the group to more fully consider the multiple sides of an issue.

A recent article in the Economist (March 24, 2009) entitled “Managers do the daftest things” suggests that organizations need more people that swim against the tide and sites examples of companies who are intentionally seeking the alternative view on issues prior to decision making.

They were too afraid to speak up!
In a 2003 Harvard Business Review article, Perlow and Williams ask the question “Is silence killing your company?” These two authors outline the dynamics of silence—largely one of fear—and the impact of this fear driven silence on both individuals and the organization. Fear is a common dynamic in groups and organizations and has two parts—fear of saying what you really think or feel and fear of hearing what is really being said. The analogy of the iceberg may be helpful in understanding the impact of fear on the decision making processes.

The waterline on the iceberg is the level at which participants feel comfortable speaking up in the actual group discussion. Everything that is said for all the decision makers to hear is said to be above the waterline. That which is unspoken to the entire group is under the waterline and thus is information unavailable for use in the decision making process. This also means that gossip and lobbying are under the waterline.
The following organizational factors increase the level of the waterline and make it less safe for participants to say what you really think:
- dictatorial behavior by leaders
- risk of retribution by colleagues
- lack of transparency
- rank differences
- decreased predictability
- belief that surfacing view will not make a difference

Tip #3: Continuously reflect on the degree to which these factors are at play in your group and organization and take steps to decrease them.

Tip #4: Acknowledge the fear and the contributing factors and avoid the temptation to dismiss it.

Your own baggage got in the way?
We tend to think of our business decision making process as rational and objective. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each of us brings with us a bundle of complexity that we ourselves even at the best of times barely understand. At an unconscious level, each of us is driven by deep subtle belief patterns or scripts and triggers or stressors (Berne, 1964) that sets off a pattern of emotions and behavior that are often counter-productive for our teams and organizations. In fact, others may have greater insight into these behavior patterns than we do ourselves. Fear prevents others from sharing their observations and reflections about our behaviors and for those who attempt to tell us—our own fear prevents us from hearing what others are seeing.

If you are the boss, the reality is the fear is even greater because of the rank differences and your leadership tendencies. Susan Scott in her book “Fierce Conversations” (2004) says that subordinates often tell their bosses what they think the bosses want to hear—often perceived to only be the good news. That is correct—many subordinates believe that they cannot speak about failures or the ugly side of reality with their bosses.

Tip #5: When you are considering a decision, share your preferred position on the decision—and then say “I realize I probably am not seeing the whole picture or all the possibilities. I would like to hear what each of you really thinks about this.” Then shut up and listen to what each person has to say. Avoid the temptation to respond to each differing view with more rationale for your position (from Scott, 2004).

Tip #6: Ask your team, what perspective have we missed that maybe held by one of the stakeholders (or those impacted) of this decision.

Tip #7: Listen, Listen, Listen! Listen to what is both being said and what is not being said. Listen to what is underneath what is being said (Yankelovich, 1999).

Reflection Questions:
1. Does your meeting agenda allow enough time to fully discuss critical issues?
2. How actively do you seek alternative views and are you really open to considering them?
3. How “safe” is your team and organization? What are the factors that are decreasing the level of safety?
4. What is your personal baggage and how is it impacting your team and organization?
5. How much time are you personally spending working on both understanding and dealing with your personal baggage?

References and further reading


