



Joe Moore

# Has hubris hijacked safety?

**S**ometimes people make decisions without seeking expert advice despite such advice being necessary to achieve the best outcome.

Why do some people choose to act in that manner? Why do some people let hubris get the better of them?

Good question. Maybe we already know part of the answer. Have you ever bought software applications for your work laptop without referring to your organisation's IT people? Have you ever bypassed HR expertise to hire an employee?

The directors of Permanent Erection Constructions Pty Ltd (PEC) in Victoria went a step further and failed to seek expert advice about the load-bearing capabilities of a floor. As a result, one of PEC's employees fell and was crushed to death under falling blocks and panels. The directors were prosecuted and fined.

Sadly, hubris and the resulting flawed decision-making can be deadly.

**Individual and collective tendencies**  
Flawed decision-making can be attributed to the characteristics and/or psychology of the individual and/or to the politics or social dynamics of the workplace.

From a psychological perspective, there is something about all of us that influences how we decide, interact and behave as individuals. It may be our personality traits: for example, Type A personalities tend to be controlling and ambitious and often pick up the tag of 'know-it-all'.

There is a wealth of literature about the traits and characteristics of individuals who make flawed decisions. Studies in fields as diverse as biology, child-rearing practice, psychology,

emotional intelligence, cognitive style and temperament all yield knowledge about the various traits that may influence our decision-making.

For the most part, however, individuals don't operate in vacuums. When you are at work and depending on the size of your organisation, you may operate in a number of different contexts: organisational, departmental, team and informal – usually referred to as 'the way we do things around here'.

And each context can influence individual decision-making differently: In different contexts, for example, you may make very different decisions about the same problem.

## Flawed decision time

Studies of individual psychology and social dynamics suggest that you, your colleagues, your boss and your subordinates are prone to knowingly make flawed decisions when you think:

- the decision(s) will help you to get what you want, here and now;
- you can live with the costs or the negative consequences; and
- the potential benefits outweigh the potential costs.

If you and/or others reject any of these conditions, flawed decisions are less likely – it is that simple.

It is perceptions that matter here: your perception and the perceptions of others who are involved in the decision-making.

To prevent flawed decision-making, the key issue is how to influence perceptions about the value of decisions.

As such, you need to be convinced that at least one of the following statements is true:

- Making flawed decisions is unlikely to help you attain your goals.
- Making decisions before obtaining the facts because you/others believe you have all the answers will not help you obtain respect, a promotion, a good reputation or a bonus.
- The cost of flawed decision-making is high. Knowingly choosing to go ahead without obtaining the relevant facts will see you and others held accountable – by anyone in your organisation – and you may be counselled or disciplined as a result.
- Even if flawed decision-making gets you and others what you want, the potential costs outweigh the potential benefits – alternatives exist that have a much more favourable cost-benefit ratio.

## Strategies to strengthen decisions

- Make it very clear to all employees and managers the decisions for which they are accountable.
- Set decision-making boundaries, sometimes called 'delegations', around money, people, the use of consultants, changing strategies or plans, pricing and other duties.
- Clarify the 'go-to' people for information and for sign-off.

Setting and monitoring clear processes or frameworks for decision-making will influence perceptions about the benefits of following good procedures:

- Audit how people make decisions, then close the gap between what information is used and what information is needed to make sound decisions.
- Identify decisions in which expert advice is needed, identify the advice required to make the decisions and where to obtain such advice – for

example, from legal, engineering, sales or human resources departments and/or external advisors.

- Provide the budget for securing advice.
- Get the most accurate picture of an issue by bringing together everyone who has critical information about the issue and hearing their views.

Insisting that all managers and employees speak up about their concerns will influence perceptions about the costs of flawed decision-making:

- Help people stop any 'yes man' behaviour.
- Expect, insist on and train employees and managers to tell it as they see it, regardless of rank. Uncertainties need to be tabled; bad ideas and making decisions outside the established framework need to be called out.
- Reduce the practice of second-guessing (criticising after the result is known). Let employees and managers know that everyone knows Saturday's race results the following Monday – you are interested in trying to get more certainty before the event.

## Help your people stop any 'yes man' behaviour.

Socialising and praising the effective use of the agreed-on decision-making process will influence perceptions about using that process to meet needs:

- The best way to learn something is to get in and roll in it. Talk with employees and managers about the most effective ways to decide, to promote the framework or the process, to train people in the best ways to decide, to tell stories about how the process works, to praise those who follow the process, and to applaud those who provide the information critical to making good decisions.
- Celebrate good decision-making as well as good decisions.

Flawed decision-making happens when discussion of how decisions are to be made is absent. Employees and managers must also be held accountable for following decision-making processes. Once established, these must be used rigorously.

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