

Decision Making in Times of Crisis

By René Rosendahl, PMP

Introduction

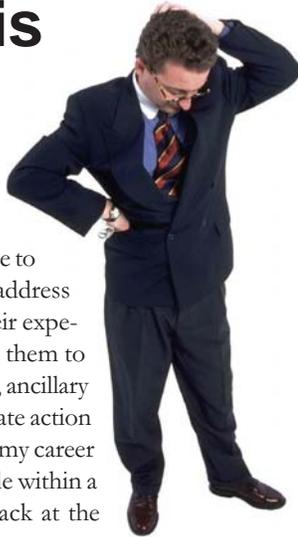
Working with different IT managers over the years, I have come to admire how especially during difficult times, they are able to arrive at and make decisions as to how to address often-times unique situations and how their experience and subject matter expertise allows them to quickly distinguish between key important, ancillary and irrelevant facts and devise an appropriate action plan. Now that I have reached the point in my career where important decisions need to be made within a short time frame, I would like to look back at the mechanics of that process.

PMI's PMBOK speaks to risk management quite a bit and provides guidance as to how to plan for risks and how to address them from a project management perspective. However, many of the problems and crises encountered in IT may be unpredicted and therefore not accounted for in the project plan (PMI refers to these responses as "workarounds"). Furthermore, most decision makers in IT today live a dual existence: On the one hand, we're involved in projects while on the other hand, we're also dealing with maintenance of systems or applications at the same time. For example, a project manager who is managing the development of a new or enhancement of an existing application will at some point inadvertently become involved with maintenance and operation of that application. More often than not, IT project managers find themselves splitting time between working on one or several projects as well as system operations and maintenance. It is not unusual that a significant percentage of one's time is spent with maintenance. As we know, a project is a temporary effort with finite scope and a defined start and end point. Maintenance is an ongoing, repetitive effort and only limited by the creation, and eventually retirement of, a system. Both efforts have their own methodology frameworks, e. g. PMI's project management framework and ITIL's operational framework. The approach for decision-making in times of crisis described in this article is meant to be somewhat general and can be applied in both contexts with little adjustments.

Decision-Making Styles

There are two major decision-making styles, which resemble general management styles as well. They are "extremes" on both sides of the spectrum and there is a continuum of blended styles in between. The two styles are *autocratic* and *democratic* (also referred to as collaborative or participative).

Autocratic decision makers seek little or no input from anybody when making decisions. The latter are purely based on the knowledge, expertise and sometimes instincts of the decision maker. This style may be appropriate if absolutely no time exists to seek team input or if the team is inexperienced in the subject matter at hand while the manager is very experienced and savvy. In today's IT world, this style is seldom found and practiced. Good managers know that engaging team members is usually a good idea.



When using the *democratic* decision making style, the decision maker consults with team members and seeks their input. If the team reaches a strong consensus, the manager may simply follow the team's decision instead of imposing his own opinion. The challenge with this style could be a situation where those providing input cannot reach a consensus and their opinions vary widely. The time required to reach a consensus decision may also be long or too long, depending on the situation. This style is especially appropriate if the manager himself is not experienced in the subject matter of the problem at hand, e. g. a (new) project manager with little subject matter or specific industry expertise.

In reality, both these extremes are not practiced very often. Instead, a blended approach that is appropriate for the particular situation and scenario is probably most effective. In the following paragraphs, we will look at an approach that uses team input, but leaves it to the decision maker to make the ultimate decision.

Recommended Approach

From my own personal experience, the following steps usually result in the best decisions in face of a particular problem or even crisis. They are:

1. Gather subject matter experts and key individuals
2. Define the problem
3. Determine and quantify impact
4. Prioritize the problem relative to other ones
5. Get all the facts
6. Sort through the facts
7. Inform stakeholders in the organization
8. Determine available options
9. Evaluate and analyze the options
10. Determine the most appropriate option(s)
11. Identify and assign tasks
12. Monitor task execution
13. Establish completion and communicate final status
14. Prevent recurrence

Let's look at these steps individually now.

1. Gather subject matter experts and key individuals

When a problem or even crisis arises, you probably require people's input in order to come up with the appropriate response. Start by identifying who the people are that hold key pieces of information, such as your "go-to" guys as well as other individuals who likely know important facts about the problem at hand. Remember to include those who may be affected by the issue you are dealing with, such as users of the system or applications affected, as you will need their input to determine the impact of the problem. Try to keep the list of people you involve at this point as small as possible, but as big as necessary.

2. Define the problem

Once you have brought this group together, use their expertise to define exactly what the problem is. This sounds very obvious and trivial, but when complex problems occur, nothing is more frustrating than addressing an issue that is not well-understood and defined.

3. Determine and quantify impact

Once the issue is well understood, use the team's input to determine what the impact of the problem is. Try to be specific and ask questions that will help quantify the impact, such as number of users affected, full or

partial loss of functionality, availability of critical system functions, loss of revenue, cost of workarounds, impact on customers, etc. Based on this information, rate the severity of the issue as critical, high, moderate or low.

4. Prioritize the problem relative to other ones

If the severity of the problem is high, you are likely dealing with a crisis that needs to be dealt with ASAP. However, if the severity is moderate or even low and you are dealing with several distinct issues at the same time (which unfortunately happens on occasion), you may need to pick your battles and focus your attention on the most severe issues first. Even if this is the only issue you are currently facing, its severity will determine how quickly a resolution needs to be found.

5. Get all the facts

Assuming you have decided to tackle the problem right away, you now need to get the facts that relate to it. Once again, the input from your key individuals will be very important in gathering all the information. Get all the circumstances of the occurrence, the sequence and timing of events, any people involved and their actions, etc. If a system or application that is usually stable and reliable suddenly displays unexpected behavior, it is often a good idea to ask “What changed?” At this stage, don’t try to evaluate or “judge” any facts yet, just collect them without review. However, you will want to ensure that rumors or “hear-say” don’t make it onto your list of facts, unless they can be objectively verified.

Experienced project / IT managers know that especially in case of very complex issues, it is simply not possible to get *all* the facts. While this may appear disconcerting, it is a reality. Instead of focusing too much time and effort on getting every last fact, concentrate on getting the key facts and resist the urge to spend too much time in this phase. On the same token, do not be so hasty that you miss out on critical pieces of information.

6. Sort through the facts

Now – with the team – go through your list of facts and group them by distinguishing between primary causes, contributing factors, irrelevant facts and impacts/effects. In this stage, experienced managers excel as their experience enables them to differentiate between important facts and ancillary or unrelated items.

You may also attempt to compare the observed behavior with past occurrences and see if a pattern exists. If possible root causes have been identified, it may also be possible to quickly confirm your theory by performing benign “experiments” with the affected system or, even better, in a test environment that doesn’t impact production systems.

A tool that can be used in this context is the Ishikawa (a. k. a. fishbone) diagram, which is a graphical representation of different factors that are root causes and contributing factors of a specific problem or issue.

7. Inform stakeholders in the organization

With all the facts present and irrelevant information eliminated, you may have to send a formal communication to the organization, senior management or specific departments affected. This is where the facts gathered will be helpful. Describe what the problem is and the impact. Assure the affected parties that you and your team are “on top of the issue”, are working on a resolution and that you will keep them posted. Stick to the facts and remain

objective. Keep in mind that finger pointing is *not* appropriate at this point.

If the problem has a less severe impact, you may prefer to pick up the phone instead and communicate less formally.

8. Determine the available options

With your key resources present, brainstorm what options exist to address the issue at hand. You should refrain from dismissing any options just yet; evaluation is the next step. Coming up with a list suffices for now.

While brainstorming options, consider ones that correct the root cause of the issue as well as workarounds or temporary solutions which may be required due to time constraints regarding putting a permanent solution in place.

9. Evaluate and analyze the options

In order to determine the best option(s), more information is needed.

The team should go through the list of previously identified options and evaluate each one. Listing pros and cons can be a very helpful exercise, as can determining impact on scope, cost, time and quality (in case of projects). Try to clearly quantify as many impacts as possible.

Apart from these most basic techniques of evaluating options, many others are available (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decision_making), e. g. [decision trees](#), [grid analysis](#), or [force field analysis](#). In practice however, especially when time is of the essence, these more sophisticated and formal methods or tools are not used very often. A pragmatic approach is essential as, more often than not, the business is impacted and impatiently awaiting a solution. While it is important

to not overly rush things under pressure and avoid a hasty and rash analysis, it’s also necessary to avoid “analysis paralysis.”

10. Determine the most appropriate option(s)

The previous step should help identify what option(s) seem most appropriate. I’m using the plural here since workarounds may be necessary as well as a permanent solution, which may take more time to implement. Also, if the root causes are not fully understood, multiple approaches may need to be attempted in parallel to address different scenarios and only further in their implementation can be proven which approach is correct.

Inexperienced managers may spend quite a bit of time considering the different options and may shy away from making a decision. Focus here needs to be on making an effective decision, not necessarily a perfect decision.

11. Identify and assign tasks

Once one or several approaches have been chosen, it is time to identify the different tasks required as well as their durations and dependencies. Owners should be assigned to each task based on required skill sets. Pick your best people. Often, the key people gathered in step 1 are the same ones to perform these tasks, but additional staff or support personnel may be required as well, e. g. key users for testing. More often than not, you will end up with a cross-functional team. This group is now the task force. Depending on the complexities of the action plan, it may be helpful to create a project schedule which will help guide the group and determine the timeline for the resolution process.

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12. Monitor task execution

The task force members will now need to execute the plan. It is critical to maintain constant communication about status within the team as well as with the business units affected and/or senior management. Make sure you are in the loop on task completion and exceptions (including variances of actual vs. initial task durations). Regular status meetings and/or meetings to regroup and share work results and coordinate the team may be necessary. Depending on complexity of the issue, these meetings could be anywhere from weekly, daily or even hourly. Make the necessary updates or adjustments to the task list and schedule.

In case multiple parallel approaches were chosen, work results may help determine which approaches are more appropriate than others. If and when that occurs, it might be best to abandon approaches which don't seem to prove correct.

13. Establish completion and communicate final status

Hopefully, the approach(es) chosen address the crisis at hand and provide a resolution. Once all tasks are completed and the effectiveness of the approach has been proven, it is time to declare completion. If workarounds were put in place, final completion should not be announced until a permanent solution has been established and implemented.

Communicate to the business and important stakeholders that the issue has been resolved and provide a summary of findings, impacts and steps taken to address it. If it's appropriate to recognize individuals from the task force for going the extra mile and laud them for their efforts, this is the right time and place to do it.

14. Prevent recurrence

Hopefully things have calmed down now, but before you allow life return to normal, there are a few more things to do. If human error or even negligence were determined to be the root cause of the crisis, it is time to have (serious) conversations with the guilty. To prevent recurrence, processes may need to be adjusted or "checks and balances" put in place to fill gaps. It can be useful for the future to make sure everything that transpired is well documented, in case a similar issue arises again. Think about lessons learned and discuss with the team if appropriate. Look at this also as a learning opportunity. As a project manager, you may need to update risk log, project budget, schedule, etc. and re-baseline your project. Now – relax and breathe deeply.

Summary

Decision making, especially in times of crisis, is a science, but also an art that can only be learned with time and experience. It is fascinating and instructional to observe managers in the process of reaching decisions and managing difficult situations. Hopefully, this introduction will prove helpful when facing crisis and important decisions in future and also spawn further thoughts on the topic of decision making.

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