

Sound Judgments Must Not be Stifled by Crisis Management Protocols

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The story is told that at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, the three reactors in operation began an orderly shutdown when the Great Tohoku quake of 2011 struck, even though the magnitude at 9.0 was significantly higher than the 8.3, the plant was designed for. But when the tsunami wave rolled in and all the 13 back-up diesel generators and all the emergency cooling pumps were knocked out, then an unprecedented and unforeseen chain of events was set in motion. It is said that the site management quickly came to the conclusion that sea water cooling was necessary even though this would render the reactors permanently inoperable. But it took a further eight hours for the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) management in Tokyo to agree. In the event the meltdown of the fuel rods may have been unavoidable in any case but an additional eight hours of cooling with sea water could not have hurt. A similar story is told about Hurricane Katrina where an operating engineer had the possibility of opening some valves and preventing flooding of some areas of New Orleans but did not do so because such a decision was explicitly excluded from his authority and his superiors were unreachable.

The question that arises is whether the culture of an organization helps or hinders individual managers to make judgments at times of crisis or impending disaster. Should the site manager at Fukushima or the operating engineer in New Orleans have had to wait for higher authority as they did or should the organizational culture have permitted them to bypass the chain of command?

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For judgments which must be made in times of crisis, the distinguishing and dominating feature is that time is of the essence. They remain cognitive processes even though there is no time to think!

In the managerial context, I take judgment to be that exercise of mind which leads to actionable conclusions. It is

the fundamental activity for a manager in his primary task of mobilizing actions towards his purpose. Judgment is a cognitive process. It is drawn from what is known or assumed or guessed or inferred or deduced to come to a predictive conclusion of what is to be done. However, the processes by which judgments are reached are as numerous as there are ways in which the human mind works.

The “goodness” of a judgment can only be assessed long after the judgment itself and therefore it is the soundness of judgment which must be sought rather than the intangible goodness of a future result. But a sound judgment must also be consummated by the willingness to exercise it.

A judgment in the managerial context is always concerned with a choice about the future – to do one thing rather than another, or to choose one course of action over another, or to choose one person instead of another, or to choose one desired result over another, or to choose one path instead of another.

Irrespective of country or organization or culture or language, every managerial judgment contains all the fundamental characteristics of all judgments:

- an objective with its conditions of satisfaction
- a review of the current status
- a conclusion regarding the future action.

A “sound” judgment is the most proper judgment possible at the time,

but whether it is the best possible judgment or not will always be uncertain. The soundness of a judgment is not dependent upon the success or failure of the subsequent actions. The variety of processes that a manager must employ to make a judgment means that it is futile to look for a single process as being “sound.” The quality of a judgment must be secured long before the outcome can be known; it is the quality of the process to come to a judgment which can and must be secured.

It is by ensuring the robustness of the process of coming to a judgment that it becomes possible to predicate for the soundest judgment possible, both for individual managers and collectively for the organization. For individual managers, this entails making the quality assurance of coming to judgment automatic and habitual. This is a matter not only of training but also one of ensuring that the environment is conducive to the application of the quality gates to secure the soundness of the judgments. At the organizational level, processes, procedures, protocols, and methodologies need to be designed to ensure that the quality assurance is carried out while coming to judgment. For judgments which must be made in times of crisis, the distinguishing and dominating feature is that time is of the essence. They remain cognitive processes even though there is no time to think!

Organizational arrangements such as crisis response or disaster management plans – by their very nature – provide for rigid procedures to be followed since there is no time in the heat of the crisis for developing a response. But these rigid procedures can smother the individual manager’s judgments. If such procedures are further constrained by inflexible limits of authority then the judgment

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ment of the individual manager on the front line of the crisis may not even come into play. And when unforeseen scenarios are encountered, it becomes all the more necessary that the individual manager’s judgments take precedence over inappropriate protocols or procedures.

Herein, I think are the lessons to be learnt from Fukushima and Katrina. In both, it would seem that the prevailing organizational culture hindered the judgments from being made in the field close to the disaster and shifted them to headquarters. In both cases, the organizational culture was such that it

did not encourage the operator at the front line to disregard the chain of command. In the case of Fukushima, it would seem to be a TEPCO-specific issue and not some inherent aspect of Japanese culture.

But in both cases, the lessons are that:

- a) Crisis management protocols must be flexible enough to cater for scenarios which have not been envisaged,
- b) The judgments of the competent manager in the field must, in times of crisis, be allowed to override the constraints of protocols and processes and limits of authority.

Sound judgments by front-line managers at the point of crises must not be permitted to be stifled by the rigidity of crisis management protocols. And that all managers at all times have the ingrained habit of going through a process to assure the soundness of their

judgments is self-evident.

Reference:

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