

BUREAUCRACY THREATENS OUR FUTURE

by

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“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope“ – Jeremiah 29:11.

Our future is in the hands of public and private sector individuals whose mandate it is to provide the necessary leadership skills and set objectives for managers to achieve. These executives, both leaders and managers, must be good at timely decision making to be effective. Decision theory teaches us to make decisions, by maximizing utility and minimizing losses, when we are faced with the choice of proceeding in one of at least two different paths. As we process information leading to the making of a decision, it should be noted that uncertainty is reduced rather than eliminated.

Unfortunately, however, there are far too many executives who find it very difficult to make timely decisions. They are scared, for whatever reason, to make a mistake and hence they set out to protect their anatomy. They ignore the advice of the many sages who have said ‘it is better to try and fail than not to try at all’. The evil of bureaucracy sets in to complicate matters and inhibits the peaceful progression towards a future and a hope. They seek solace in procrastination as if, by magic, new information will suddenly appear to give them greater comfort to move along a given path. Sometimes formal processes, standardization, hierarchic procedures and written communication make it virtually impossible to make a decision on a timely basis. We must break out of this system and seek less bureaucratic ways of proceeding.

I was copied on an email message recently where a relatively small organization was negotiating with a large multinational. I was rather impressed by the following excerpt from a reply from the representative of the smaller organization to a message of frustration of not getting the representative of the larger organisation to make a decision. “...While I understand the restrictions, we would like to err on the side of optimism. We have worked through this in the past and I believe that an agreement can be reached based on the mutual trust and strength of our partnership”.

A refreshing approach. An appeal for optimism, not the protection of the anatomy. A reminder that a precedent had been set, it was not a new situation. Above all, the magnetism of mutual trust and strength of partnership replaced the evil of suspicion and over protection.

I have encountered many examples of poor decision making over the years. I recall the precipitous decision of an executive to cancel a meeting at the last minute because an emergency prevented him from attending. There was no consideration of the time

of the others who had committed to attend nor the impact of a delay of that meeting on the decision making process. In the end, he was persuaded to delegate the authority to a capable colleague. The meeting took place without the executive and without any loss to the decision making process. No one is indispensable. Why was delegation rather than postponement not the preferred choice in the first place.

Then, and this is quite prevalent, there is often the decision not to embark on the implementation of a new idea because 'it has never been done before'. The reaction here is again timidity in the decision making process, because the first reaction is that one needs to protect the system from being a guinea pig rather than to regard it as an opportunity to lead the world with this innovative idea.

Another refreshing moment was observed recently, when an executive cut the red tape about the selection of a consultant and said 'we were so happy with your performance the last time around that we want you to do this next assignment without competitive bidding'. Competitive bidding by the way, while defended on the grounds of transparency, consumes a lot of resources since only one bidder will be selected. It also results in time delays and sometimes does not lead to optimal results. This is practised more in the public sector than in the private sector even though in the public sector executives are now exhibiting greater discretion in their decision making to speed up the implementation process.

I further recall a situation many years ago where an executive delayed a decision for several weeks waiting on the return of a colleague for his advice. The consultant working on the project was advised not to proceed any further until the decision was made. The clock kept ticking. When the colleague eventually returned, there was not a single change in the document and the consultant was asked to proceed with the project. Could that executive not have taken the decision to go ahead initially. Why was he put in charge of the project in the first place, if he was not prepared to take calculated risks and at least save the organization the cost of the extension of the consultant's contract?

There are many opportunities missed due to delays in making decisions and it is often not recognized that these opportunities only come in a specific time slot and may be lost to the future forevermore.

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