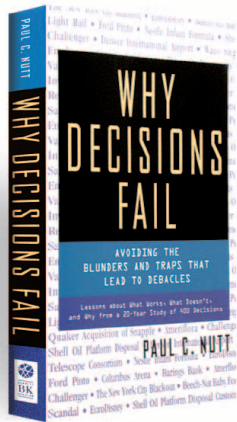


SOUNDVIEW Executive Book Summaries®

FILE: STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT



By Paul C. Nutt

Avoiding the Blunders and Traps That Lead to Debacles

WHY DECISIONS FAIL

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

For more than 20 years, Ohio State University Professor Paul C. Nutt has studied how decisions are made and has written extensively about what works, what doesn't and why. His key finding in all this work is startling—decisions fail half of the time. Organizations spend vast sums of money and commit significant amounts of resources without realizing any benefits. Failures can be traced to three blunders and seven traps that ensnare decision makers; avoiding these blunders and the traps they set will cut one's failure rate significantly.

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What You'll Learn In This Summary

In this summary, you will learn how to do the following:

- ✓ **Navigate around potential blunders.** Learn how using failure-prone practices, making premature commitments and engaging in unwise investments can derail your decision-making process, and why these blunders are so easy to make.
- ✓ **Identify ensuing traps.** If you are unable to avoid making a decision blunder, you will likely be ensnared in one of seven traps that lead to failure. Whether you fail to manage opposing forces, provide ambiguous directions, choose only evaluation data that supports your point, or fall into any of the other ensuing traps, the decisions you make will be compromised, usually at great cost. Getting around these traps is imperative.
- ✓ **Learn from others' mistakes.** Nutt provides many examples of individuals and companies that fell into traps that turned their decisions into debacles — from stalwart organizations like Disney and Ford, to lesser-known businesses and people. These case studies provide a bevy of lessons for you and your organization.
- ✓ **Make the right decisions.** Nutt does more than show you what others did wrong; he also gives instructions on how to avoid each blunder and trap, providing tips and techniques on consistently using the right tools and procedures to make the right decisions, every time.

WHY DECISIONS FAIL

by Paul C. Nutt

— THE COMPLETE SUMMARY

Blunders to Debacles

Why is there so much failure in corporate decision-making processes? Can companies take corrective action to prevent future failures? The answers can be found in three blunders: failure-prone decision-making practices, rush to judgment and poor allocation. The chain of events that leads to failure begins with one of these blunders, which leads decision makers toward traps that ambush them.

Failure-Prone Practices

Two of every three decisions use **failure-prone practices**. Decision makers seem oblivious to the poor track record of these practices. Without help in determining what does and does not work, the widespread use of these practices will continue, for a number of reasons:

Decision-making practices with a good track record are commonly known, but uncommonly practiced. Nearly everyone knows participation prompts acceptance, but participation is rarely encouraged.

Managers often play the “blame game.” For example, bad but low-cost practices are pushed to avoid blame for increased costs.

Failure is often placed at the doorstep of things beyond the manager’s control. Government regulations or unexpected budget cuts offer convenient excuses to not pursuing better practices.

Premature Commitments

Decision makers often jump on the first idea that comes along, make **premature commitments**, then spend years trying to follow through on those commitments and make the idea work. Decision makers, like most people, fear the unknown and seek self-gratification, two circumstances that run counter to the sometimes lonely endeavor of making difficult decisions. When answers are not readily available, grabbing on to the first thing that seems to offer relief is a natural impulse.

Wrong-Headed Investments

Blunders are made when decision makers make **wrong-headed investments** of their organizations’ time and money for costly evaluations and little else. To make matters worse, these evaluations are often defensive — carried out to support an idea someone is wedded to, trying to show it will work. Such decisions often

breed suspicion from those who suspect a hidden agenda at work, a circumstance that results in even more evaluation expenditures, which increase as more justification is demanded. Little time or money is spent to investigate claims, set objectives, measure benefits and risk, or manage the forces that can derail a decision. Decision makers blunder when they fail to see any of these things as a worthy undertaking. ■

DECISION-MAKING TRAPS

Debacles follow a chain of events that unfolds as blunders create traps and traps bring about failure. The blunders of using poor decision-making practices, rushing to judgment, or misusing available resources point unsuspecting managers toward seven traps that can ensnare them:

- *Failure to Reconcile Claims*
- *Failure to Manage Forces Stirred Up by a Decision*
- *Ambiguous Directions*
- *Limited Search and No Innovation*
- *Misuse of Evaluation*
- *Ignoring Ethical Questions*
- *Failure to Learn*

When caught in any of these traps, managers are apt to make a bad call that can become a debacle. ■

Failure to Reconcile Claims

Imagine that a board member is alarmed by a loss in market share, because it matches with the amount that a competitor’s share has grown in the same time period. The board member issues a call for action, such as improving the quality of the company’s products. The

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The author: Paul C. Nutt is a professor of Management Sciences and Public Policy and Management in the Fisher College of Business at The Ohio State University.

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For more information on the author, go to:
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Failure to Reconcile Claims

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call for improved quality is a “claim” and points to an “arena of action,” product quality.

Decision makers get trapped when they buy into such a claim without looking further. In this case, before making a decision, the decision makers must ask themselves, “Is product quality the real reason for loss of market share?” The relationship of the original concern — the falling market share — and the subsequent claim — low product quality — is dubious. In many cases, however, the original concern is not made clear, so that a claim is accepted without question.

The Waco siege shows the disastrous results that can occur when claims are not carefully investigated.

Debate at Waco

In 1993, a rumor surfaced that the Branch Davidians, a religious sect led by David Koresh, were building an arsenal in their Mount Carmel compound, just outside Waco, Texas. When the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) attempted to serve a search warrant, a shootout ensued, leaving four agents and two Branch Davidians dead and 20 agents wounded. The bungled warrant attempt prompted Attorney General Janet Reno to call in an expert team of FBI negotiators and behavioral experts, who initiated talks with the Branch Davidians, as SWAT teams and the FBI’s elite Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) surrounded the compound.

The standoff ended when the SWAT and HRT units stormed the compound. Fires of unknown origin swept the wooden structures, killing 87 people.

During the standoff, unresolved disagreements created one trap after another that ensnared Reno and her agents. Motives were never questioned. Conflicting or unsubstantiated concerns, motivations and claims (from the desire for revenge for the agent deaths to the claim that Koresh had molested children) were never sorted out. Rather than trying to reconcile these claims, Reno chose to pick the one that seemed most compelling.

Avoiding the Trap

In order to avoid this trap, decision makers need to uncover the concerns — in many cases there are hidden or conflicting concerns among stakeholders — that motivated the claim. To avoid making decisions based on unsupported or misleading claims, decision makers should:

- Seek out stakeholders with different points of view and ask each to provide a list of his or her claims and the concerns and considerations that prompt them, before selecting an arena of action.
- Reconcile contradictions in the claims being offered by exploring the concerns and considerations sup-

How Blunders Prompt Traps			
Traps	Failure-Prone Practice Blunders	Premature Commitment Blunders	Misuse of Resources Blunders
Failing to take charge by reconciling claims	Support for claims and its arena of action assumed by the decision maker	First claim (or claimant) that seems important is accepted	Failure to look for hidden concerns or considerations and the more pressing claims that they suggest
Ignoring barriers to action	Power and persuasion used to implement decisions	Action taken before social and political forces are understood	Interests and commitments of stakeholders go unexplored
Providing ambiguous direction	Direction assumed and never clarified	Unwilling to acknowledge a concern without offering a remedy	Little time spent to identify desired results
Limiting search	A quick fix or what others are doing is adopted	Pressure for answers makes the conspicuous solution seem timely and pragmatic	Little spent on a search for ideas or for innovation
Misusing evaluation	Evaluation used to measure costs, ignoring benefits	Defensive evaluation used to justify the conspicuous solution	Money spent defending ideas and not in exploring their risk
Overlooking ethical questions	Values behind ethical questions are overlooked	All decisions are seen as ethically neutral	No time or money spent uncovering values
Failing to learn	Fail to see how perverse incentives operate to cover up outcomes	Expectations demand good outcomes	Few resources used to learn or to do so without removing perverse incentives

porting each. Refashion a claim that embraces the crucial concerns and important considerations.

- Find common themes in conflicting claims to make a diagnosis. ■

For more on stakeholders, go to: <http://my.summary.com>

Failure to Manage Forces Stirred Up by a Decision

If a decision is perceived as jeopardizing one’s turf and the needs for achievement, self-esteem, recognition, security, social relationships, values practices, and the like, people become aroused.

However, the reasons for opposing a decision are not widely shared, so they are lost on the decision maker. Opposition takes shape in subtle ways through delay,

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Failure to Manage Forces Stirred Up By a Decision

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token compliance and attempts at negotiation to hold up a decision or limit its use. If opponents are powerful enough, there may be a pitched battle to block a decision.

The savvy decision maker heads off both types of resistance by shaping the decision to practices, resources and relationships valued by people.

Failure and Success Tactics

When a decision maker encounters resistance, he or she can use one of many tactics to make the decision a reality. Two basic tactics are commonly seen in debacles and failed decisions:

Persuasion calls on the decision maker to collect arguments that support a preferred course of action and to garner endorsements of experts, then combine them with salesmanship to achieve the desired effect. When the best available arguments are unable to sway people, however, failure is likely.

An **edict** issues a directive without the decision maker consulting the people who have a stake in the changes the decision would bring.

Decision makers in more successful implementation efforts employ one of two more positive tactics than persuasion and edict:

Intervention is the least employed tactic and the most successful. To carry out an intervention, you must demonstrate the imperative to act to the problematic stakeholder and others with interests not yet managed. To do this, you must do the following:

Benchmark current performance against norms, to demonstrate the inadequacy of that performance.

Offer illustrations of how business practices can be improved. Committees are sometimes used as a sounding board for ideas.

After a decision has been installed, show how the actions overcame the performance deficiencies.

Decision makers use **participation** by delegating aspects of the decision to others, such as a task force. Participation can range from comprehensive participation — when the decision is completely delegated to a fully representative task force — to token participation. ■

For more on the different types of participation, go to:
<http://my.summary.com>

Ambiguous Directions

Decision makers must have a clear direction set for the decision. Where is this decision going? What is it meant to accomplish — in other words, what are the

Burn Care: Intervention at Work

Convincing hospital stakeholders to accept a burn care center demonstrates how intervention can overcome resistance.

Hospital trustees are wary of offering high-cost services like burn care because third-party payers (Medicaid, HMOs, etc.) do not insure the full cost of treatment. To overcome this objection, a hospital CEO must show how the cost for burn care could be covered by a variety of sources — endowments, reimbursements, cheap resident manpower, etc. The CEO must present trustees with a demonstration of financial feasibility and a description of how other hospitals have enhanced their image (and, thus, their endowments) with this service. A candidate for the burn care director position must then demonstrate to trustees treatment procedures and staffing, showing how resident recruitment has been enhanced at other facilities that have added such a service, stressing that future recruitment might be compromised if burn care is not offered.

If the trustees buy in sufficiently to warrant a pilot test, the hospital CEO must, at the conclusion of the pilot, report back to trustees. His or her report must provide data on image, resident recruitment and costs, resulting from the pilot test of the unit.

expected results? A joint venture between The Ohio State University and the University of Arizona illustrates the importance of clear directions.

From Dream to Boondoggle

When The Ohio State University (OSU) and the University of Arizona entered into a partnership to build a new telescope, it seemed like a match made in the heavens. The two universities would share the cost of building the telescope in Arizona, providing the schools' astronomy departments with valuable "viewing time" and national prominence. Over the span of three years, however, the project grew to include an international partner and another college. The size of the proposed telescope grew as well, and the cost of building it doubled.

In a short time, due to other circumstances, OSU found itself in a budget crisis, which saw the resignations of both the university president and the chair of the astronomy department, the two main champions of the project at the university. State legislators stepped in to head off a "boondoggle" that was draining tax money from Ohio to build a telescope in another state. Eventually, the new university president canceled the telescope, leaving OSU with payments due its partner, the University of Arizona, and lots of planning costs.

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Ambiguous Directions

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What Happened?

A direction can liberate, limit or conceal. It liberates when it opens up possibilities. It limits when it sets boundaries. It conceals opportunities when expectations are ambiguous.

What was the purpose of the telescope? Each of the OSU champions had different claims. The university president wanted the project to enhance the university's reputation. The chairman of the astronomy department was looking for a better astronomy facility.

Had "national reputation" been clearly defined as the direction of this decision, decision-makers would have been faced with a broader set of options when considering their decision. Was an expensive telescope the more cost-effective — and effective — way of enhancing the university's reputation?

One problem is that the Ohio State University decision makers focused on an idea (a new telescope) instead of an objective (enhancing the university's reputation). An objective identifies specific, quantifiable desired results. It works as a direction because it focuses a search on those expected results, thereby giving everyone involved freedom to look at any solution that can realize those intended results. ■

Limited Search and No Innovation

"Keep your options open" is sage advice. When making a big-ticket expenditure, such as buying a car or a house, we identify several options before settling on one. Yet, many decision makers making weighty decisions drastically limit their search for different options. Others embrace the idea found in a claim and avoid search altogether. Opportunistic behavior drives our search when the pull of a quick fix or the push of a pet idea — such as John Wolf's pet idea of a flower show to commemorate a historical event (see box at right) — take precedence over the objective search for the right solution.

Avoiding the Trap

Decision makers must take the time to search for different options and solutions before deciding on a plan for action. The best searches include:

- **Integrated benchmarking.** Benchmarking becomes difficult when there are difficulties fitting a benchmarked idea to the borrowing organization's situation. It is better to look for ideas in several organizations, seeking best practices to be amalgamated into a plan.

- **Repeated Solicitations.** In a multi-cycle solici-

Why AmeriFlora Never Happened

Columbus, Ohio, set out to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of America by Christopher Columbus with the largest Quincentennial in the U.S. John Wolf, a local businessman and community power broker, had the idea to create a celebration against the backdrop of an international garden exposition, which came to be known as AmeriFlora. The show was seen by local politicians as an attention grabber that would enhance the city's image, and by Wolf as an opportunity to cement his position as a community leader.

Controversy and spiraling costs plagued AmeriFlora almost immediately. Organizers were secretive and controlling, making a shared vision impossible to realize. New infrastructure that the public would be able to use after the event (for example, a monorail) never materialized. Local residents opposed the event for traffic and other inconvenience reasons. Event commissioners went on lavish junkets to Europe.

AmeriFlora never happened, for a number of reasons. Artificial deadlines and group think cajoled commissioners into buying into the event without giving it much thought. The event's aims were never clear (the commemorative element of the event was lost as soon as Wolf began pushing the floral expo). Dealings with neighbors (who were also stakeholders) were adversarial and bullying.

tion, decision makers set out to learn about possibilities and apply this knowledge to fashion a series of more sophisticated searches; each search incorporates what is learned from previous searches. A repeated solicitation calls upon you to engage in a process of reflection in which possibilities are carefully studied as understanding about possibilities grows, offering opportunities for learning. Repeated solicitation produces superior results, but, as a tactic, it is rarely used.

- **Innovation.** Decision makers look for a new idea without references to ready-made plans, practices of others, or the ideas of vendors. The prospects of this approach having success improve considerably when an objective is used to guide the design effort, and when multiple options are developed.

None of these were considered in the case of AmeriFlora. The agendas of John Wolf and his fellow organizers and their predetermined solutions stifled any kind of broad search or innovation, resulting in a costly, embarrassing disaster for the city of Columbus. ■

For an example of integrated benchmarking, go to:
<http://my.summary.com>

Misuse of Evaluation

Decision makers who set out to support a preferred idea get drawn into defensive evaluation. Vast sums invariably are spent to find evidence that validates what a decision maker wants to do or must support. Little, if anything, is spent on claim investigation, implementation, direction setting, or searching for new ideas.

These kinds of evaluations ignore possible risks, painting a rosy picture in order to support a presupposed conclusion. For example, AmeriFlora's proponents made favorable assumptions about ticket sales to conceal the project's risk from those who funded it. Disney's analysis of its EuroDisney deal — a notorious debacle in recent decision making — drew top management away from questions about its risk.

Evaluation tactics used by decision makers differ in the type of information collected and how an inference is made. Two tactics that tend to work best are analytic and bargaining evaluation. Each provides convincing information to support a proposed choice, which is more apt to lead to success.

In an analytical evaluation, data is gathered from various sources (archives, pilot tests and the like) and inferences are made from the data using analytical tools. Archival information gleaned from records can be manipulated to estimate benefits of options. Pilot tests enable decision makers to try out an idea in a field setting to estimate a benefit.

Bargaining tactics in evaluation bring stakeholders to agreement about the choice to be made by following a course of action that all can support. Ranking or voting follows a period of negotiation and information sharing. When using this tactic, it is imperative to give all involved parties a voice. Users and stakeholders in a position to block a decision will be less inclined to do so if asked about their preferences before a decision is made. ■

Ignoring Ethical Questions

A person's ethical stance is rooted in his or her standards of fairness and justice. What one believes to be fair and just is imposed on a decision and how the decision is made. Decision makers apply standards of fairness and justice to what they see, which may or may not capture what actually takes place. Both the appearance and the reality of an ethical lapse can spell trouble.

Ethical issues can erupt at any point in the decision-making effort. Claims can seem wrong-headed and provoke opposition. Decision makers feeling pressure to act may barge ahead and run over people whose interests could have been served or preserved. Adopting an idea that pops up outside of a formal search may seem to be a clever way to take decisive action. To others, the idea

Ford's Pinto Fiasco

Defensive evaluations that lack a clear direction produce argumentative and misleading conclusions. In 1970, Ford had a problem with the gas tank in their Pinto model; the tank was located in the back of the car, six inches from a flimsy rear bumper, which made it susceptible to devastating fires when impacted from the rear. When a Federal investigation revealed dozens of deaths and injuries as a result of the tank's location, Ford was pressured to fix the Pinto, or recall it — two courses of action that ran counter to CEO Lee Iacocca's vision of providing "a 2,000 pound car for \$2,000."

Instead, the company conducted a cost-benefit study, placing monetary values on lost lives, injuries and damaged cars. The study deemed that paying "benefits" to injured parties or families of deceased drivers was cheaper than fixing the cars, so they opted to not fix the cars.

Ford officials focused on the cost of a recall, indicating that this was all that mattered. Critics contended that more should have been spent on measuring the consequences of not fixing the defective gas tank. The company's defensive evaluation had perilous consequences, for the company, its customers and the American auto industry in general.

may raise questions about your vested interests — even if there are none. Whose interests are being served and whose are neglected will always pose an ethical issue.

Failure to apply personal standards when making decisions at work sets an ethical trap. People who suspend personal ethics and substitute the ethic to serve the organization are driven by four things:

- **Self-indulgence.** The lust for power and the lure of greed corrupts both public officials sworn to a higher standard of conduct and private sector managers expected to act in the best interests of their company. John Wolf's actions in the AmeriFlora debacle — from the idea of the flower expo to the selection of managers and location — were based around the self-indulgent motivation to cement his influence in the community.

- **Self-protection.** People in organizations get caught up in doing what is asked. "Going along to get along" persuades people to support choices they would otherwise oppose out of fear that opposition would be costly to their careers. They fudge data in order to support an idea; they line up to tell higher-ups what they want to hear.

- **Self-righteousness.** The "rightness" of a cause seduces zealots, and organizations have lots of people with causes. Together, they fashion a cache of solutions, with a champion who will do whatever it takes to secure

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Ignoring Ethical Questions

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the adoption of an idea he or she believes to be right or needed. Disney officials acted as if any means available to realize the concept of EuroDisney was justified, regardless of the facts of culture and economics.

● **Self-deception.** People slide into the posture of advocate through many small endorsements over the years, eventually easing into the firm belief that the superior's agenda merits their steadfast support. While being loyal to the boss seems reasonable and expected, this requires that subordinates treat every situation as requiring them to do whatever it takes to support higher-ups. ■

Failure to Learn

Decisions produce outcomes with consequences. Learning requires an assessment of these consequences and the actions taken to realize them. The ideas extracted from such assessments codify best practices and how issues were resolved.

Hoping to deflect blame and protect prerogatives, some decision makers maneuver to keep their decisions from receiving a post-mortem. There is also a natural reluctance to reveal information that could expose mistakes and errors. Perverse incentives, misleading outcomes and a “hindsight bias” also coax people to conceal information, forging a climate in which one tells others as little as possible.

Perverse Incentives

Perverse incentives coax subordinates to do things higher-ups insist they do not want. A perverse incentive can be implicit or explicit — explicit perverse incentives reward the wrong things, while implicit perverse incentives lurk in the climate in which decisions are made.

Misreading Outcomes

Windfall successes and bad luck failures also set a trap. A windfall outcome can hide bad practices, but many find it difficult to separate outcomes from the decision-making practices applied to generate those outcomes. Bad practices can be present in decisions that turn out well due to good luck; conversely, good practices can be present in decisions that turn out poorly due to bad luck. You must distinguish between them in order to make any assessment meaningful.

When practices are appropriate and outcomes are good, assessment is directed to context — the time, topic, urgency and other aspects in which the good results were realized. Failing to appreciate context can lead you to export a good practice to a situation for which it is ill suited.

Better forecasts are needed when decision-making

The Challenger Disaster

Another example of hindsight bias occurred in the aftermath of the Challenger space shuttle disaster of 1986. There was a known risk in low-temperature launches — the O-rings in the rocket booster did not seal properly in temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Engineers in several reports documented these concerns, and NASA decision makers were aware of the reports. NASA administrators, however, contended that nothing would ever get launched if they listened to the advice that comes pouring in from all quarters during a countdown.

From the vantage point of hindsight, the shuttle disaster seems preventable — a prior prediction was made and verified, but ignored. Before you buy into this explanation, though, consider how creeping determinism emerged from the hearings investigating the disaster. Once critics listened to testimony, the risk of O-ring failure became far more certain than it was at the time of the launch. This determinism makes the explosion seem preordained, the failure to heed warnings the sole cause of the disaster, instead of one of many contributing factors.

practices are good and the outcome is bad. Learning stems from uncovering assumptions buried in the forecasts to detect risk. Both decision-making practices and forecasts can be faulty. Addressing one without the other leads to incomplete learning. Begin by assessing the forecast and its assumptions, then select tactics with a good track record that fit your circumstances.

Hindsight Bias

Once a decision and its results fall far below expectations, observers sometimes blame the decision maker for ignoring warning signals that might or might not have been apparent at the time the decision was made. If, for instance, a parole board releases a prisoner with an exceptional behavior record and that person commits a crime shortly thereafter, critics may accuse the parole board of overlooking key evidence that might have prevented the prisoner from being released.

Decisions must be reviewed with all of their ambiguities and uncertainties to set aside the biases in hindsight. To conduct an impartial review of a decision, first you must disguise the outcome, since people are remarkably adept at gathering facts consistent with a known outcome. Give a reviewer access to the same information originally provided to the decision maker, under the same conditions; this will help you avoid the bias that hindsight typically engenders. ■

For another example of hindsight bias, go to:
<http://my.summary.com>

AVOIDING THE BLUNDERS AND TRAPS

Decision debacles follow from being caught by one or more of the seven traps set by making one of the three blunders. When you are able to avoid the blunders and sidestep the traps, your chance of success increases by 50 percent. There are three essential moves you can make to avoid blunders: stay issue-centered, use resources wisely and adhere to best practices through each stage of the decision-making effort. ■

Stay Issue-Centered

In debacles, decision makers often make premature commitments by grabbing onto the first idea that pops up, an idea that often is, at best, misguided and, at worst, wrong-headed. Even when decision makers try to contemplate possibilities before taking action, the pressure for rapid action can become intense. To deal with this pressure, decision makers must stay “issue-centered” by maintaining an exploratory mindset and pausing to reflect.

The urge to “fix” something is out of sync with the needs of decision-making. Making the decision calls for an exploratory mindset, an appreciative inquiry, in which skillful questioning is used to get to the bottom of things. Discover what gives life to the issue being contemplated. Get various points of view in meetings and other forums, and challenge those listening to reflect and make sense of what is heard.

The urge to “fix” something is out of sync with the needs of decision-making.

Pausing to reflect when one is pressured to act can be difficult to begin and harder to sustain. When challenged to “get on with it,” remind people of the alternative. Ask them to recall the last time people in the organization rapidly “got on with” fixing a problem, and how much follow-up work was required to fix the fix. Ask the critic to visualize the chaos, the squandered energy and the smoldering resentment. Ask if spending some time to pause and reflect today is a good investment to avoid all this tomorrow. ■

Use Resources Wisely

In debacles, little time or money was spent on anything but defending the quick fix with a defensive evaluation. Evaluations become tainted and suspicions arise when observers see a preoccupation with what the decision maker wants to do or must do to satisfy others. The cycle of suspicions provoking defensive evaluations grows until huge sums of money have been spent on

evaluation and little on anything else. This pulls funds away from other decision-making activities, such as investigating claims and reconciling different views.

A key message to take away from the debacles discussed here is to make your decision-making investments wisely; to do so, make most of your investments early on. Spend time and money to stay issue-centered by uncovering and exploring claims and the concerns and considerations that prompt them. Use groups or network with people who can block the decision to find out their interests and ways to manage them. This introduces you to political realities early on, so political rationality can be incorporated into your actions. ■

Adhere to Best Practices

Debacles are riddled with failure-prone decision-making practices. Best practice calls for a discovery process that emphasizes process stages found to have the greatest impact on success. Use the following sequence of tasks called for by the discovery process:

Manage forces that can block action. Implementation brings social and political issues to the forefront by uncovering the interests of people who can block action. Opposition can be expected when these interests are threatened.

Set a direction. The direction indicates the results wanted, guiding the search for ideas with an outcome in mind.

Search widely for ideas. If claim, implementation and direction have been attended to, the remaining steps are much easier to carry out, and there will be far less controversy in doing so.

Evaluate options. Evaluation is straightforward in a development process. The direction specifies what is wanted, such as lower cost, making a cost criterion an appropriate and reasonable way to measure benefit. It takes away the political overtones of using evaluation to defend a course of action, replacing it with an evaluation that documents benefits and the likely risk in realizing them.

Confront ethical questions. Decisions often pose ethical issues for people; a decision that seems ethically neutral to a beneficiary may have a very different look to others. These ethical issues can be neutralized by finding actions that embrace the values stakeholders believe are crucial.

Learn about missed opportunities. Learning helps you find out what worked, what didn't and why. Various obstacles complicate learning by hiding the information required to make such assessments. Learn to get around these obstacles. ■