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Time alone and time together: getting your leadership team to make strategic decisions well

Now science proves it: some of the best strategic insights come to you in the shower

At the heart of each good decision are the quality of insights and the range of options that lead you to know the right thing to do. We can learn from recent neuroscience about how to better make decisions in leadership teams: what type of thinking is best done in groups and what is best done on your own.

Recent Nobel Prize-winning research focuses on “intelligent memory”, in which analysis and intuition work together to produce resolution and action. It suggests that to make successful, major, complex, strategic decisions requires four steps, where in common practice there is often only one:

1. **Absorb evidence alone:** Read material in advance but do not seek to come to conclusions.
2. **Discuss the evidence:** Ensure the evidence (plus examples of what has been done before and elsewhere) is fully understood. This is best done as a team, where knowledge and perspectives can be shared, and available options fully tested.
3. **Allow time to reflect alone:** Allow the brain to relax and wander, with evidence and options in the back of the mind. It will make its own connections and insights. ‘Flashes of insight’ are more likely while having a shower, driving to work, or going for a walk.
4. **Debate final resolution:** Having reflected alone, teams should come together again to share insights, debate in a robust and productive way, and reach a conclusion.

Nobel Prize-winning science has now dismissed earlier evidence that we have a right (creative) and left (rational) side to our brains. It is now clear that we do not need to actively unlock the creative side to make good decisions, nor do we need ‘creative stimulus’ to develop new ideas and insight. Instead, the brain needs downtime to process evidence and learnings, and to make new connections. Some of this is best done away from the communal pressure of meetings.

While the neuroscience is new (thanks to brain scans and computer modelling), the conclusions reinforce some long-standing practice. Von Clausewitz’s early book on war strategy said this two centuries ago. It is also close to the ‘Work Out’ approach GE introduced in the 1990s.

The science also suggests how different types of decisions benefit from different approaches to time together as a team:

- Routine decisions, based on a well-understood framework (for example a regular review of senior talent), are well-suited to a single group discussion
- Moderately complex decisions or ones involving new issues are also very well-suited to group discussion. But such decisions also require time to absorb evidence and information in advance, and reflection time before reaching a conclusion – and so will benefit from two separate team discussions (it may only need an overnight break in-between).
- Highly complex and important strategic decisions requiring fresh and open-minded insight and conclusions are best suited to a well-planned sequence of time alone and time in team discussion over a few weeks or even longer.

These are new insights into what contributes to effective decision-making are important - an often neglected subject that deserves more rigorous attention. Decision-making is a vital aspect of performance.