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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 a strong decision are the insights and options that lead you to know the right thing to do. We can learn from recent neuroscience about how best to work with your leadership team: what type of thinking is best done in groups and what is best done reflecting on your own.

We looked a range of publications from Harvard Business Review articles and Booze & Co blogs to Von Clausewitz's 1832 classic *On War*.

Recent thinking on effective decision-making has been very influenced by the Nobel Prize-winning research of Kandel Milner and Squire, which focuses on "intelligent memory". This shows how the brain enables analysis and intuition to work together to produce resolution and action.

It suggests that to make successful major, complex, strategic decisions requires four steps, when in practice there is often only one:

- 1. Absorb evidence alone:** Read material in advance but do not seek to come to conclusions. The material should be wide-ranging, from different sources and of different types.
- 2. Share discussion about 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. A team with a range of skills and experiences will be more productive in ensuring the evidence is understood. Options can be discussed, but again, conclusions should not be sought yet.
- 3. Time to reflect alone:** This allows 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 on a Saturday, rather than in a formal and planned setting such as a meeting or choosing to sit behind the desk looking at material.
- 4. Shared debate on resolution:** Having reflected alone, everyone in the team arrives together to share their insights, debate in a robust and productive way, and come to a conclusion.

Brief

The important 'new' point here is Stage 3: time for reflection alone. The research shows that there are two very important aspects to this. First, time alone works because the brain is quietly sifting evidence. Without the previous time spent looking at the evidence it would not work. It also appears that the act of having the 'flash of insight' whilst alone, means you are more likely to be resolute in acting on it.

This most recent neuroscience thinking has now dismissed the very widely-known earlier evidence by Roger Sperry (also Nobel Prize-winning) 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 our creative side to make open-minded decisions, nor do we need 'creative stimulus' to develop new ideas and insight. Rather, there is only learning and recall in various combinations across the brain.

So, instead, the brain needs downtime to process a range of evidence and learnings, and make new connections. Some of this is best done away from the communal pressure of meetings, discussions or brainstorming.

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, which analysed Napoleon's campaigns, described this thinking process two centuries ago. (It is in these early studies of Napoleon that the word 'strategy' was first used in its broadly modern sense.)

A similar approach was behind the successful 'What Works' approach GE introduced in the 1990s to improve strategic decision-making. (See also our article on the Bank of England interest-setting Monetary Policy Committee, for another example of working this way.)

Additional research by scientists in Germany, also suggests that different types of decision benefit from time together as a team, based on identifying how and when the brain finds it beneficial to relax and stop focusing on the problem. There are three categories of problems each benefiting from a slightly different approach:

- **Routine decisions** based on a well-understood framework (for example a regular review of senior talent, or the monthly review of financial performance) are well-suited to a single group discussion. Everyone arrives with a clear understanding and will benefit from hearing each others' views. If someone has a 'flash of insight' between meetings they can always bring it to the next meeting.
- **Moderately complex decisions** or ones involving new issues are also very well-suited to group discussion. However, complexity and novelty also require time to absorb evidence and material in advance of the discussion, and reflection time before making a conclusion. In these situations the team may benefit from two separate team discussions. (It may only need an overnight break in-between).

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- **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 discussions over a few weeks or longer. So the process described earlier is the right one in this case.

These interesting new insights into what contributes to effective decision-making are timely and important. This is an often neglected subject that deserves – and is only recently gaining - widespread rigorous attention. Decision-making is a vital aspect of organisation performance.

Sources

Sources used for this article include:

Publications we looked at included: Von Clausewitz: *On War*; Duggan: *Strategic Intuition: The Creative Spark in Human Achievement* (2007); Duggan: *Four Steps to Unleashing Your Best Ideas* (The Business Times, 2010); Favaro & Yacteen: *The Right Ideas in All the Wrong Places - How strategic intuition unlocks innovative solutions to your biggest problems* (Booz); Laburn: *Strategic Intuition – A Brief Summary* (Strategic Consultant Blog, 2010); O’Connell: *Sometimes it’s Better to Brainstorm Alone* (HBR Blogs, 2010);