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Take a Moment, Make a Decision

Andrew Ruppel, Feature Editor

I suspect that many readers will bristle at the above title. It's too cavalier. You feel that decisions deserve more than just a moment's consideration. As decision scientists, you want the opportunity to see a decision unfold revealingly, with opportunities for study and assessment. Certainly, if the decision is a personal one, you don't want to be accused subsequently by your conscience that you gave the choice process short shrift. Yet, there are times when very quick decisions are needed. Should we insert the cooling rods now or trip the emergency lever? Do we sell now or wait for the Fed's announcement? And what about situations where the time pressures are not so stringent, but where it is sensed that the decision at hand will set the tone for decisions to come? Here are two books that deal with such critical moments and critical decisions. Both give intuition its due. Both challenge the conventional rational model for making decisions that relies on a careful comparison of alternatives. Both come from publishers in Cambridge, MA.

the intuitive ability of some people to comprehend the clues and patterns in an emerging decision/problem situation and to somehow classify and match them so that a solution (not necessarily an optimal one) can be mentally tried out. If that solution works in the mind, even with some tweaking, then it is actually carried out straight away. Such powerful intuitive abilities are acquired through experience. They reside in experts—those who sense quickly and without self-awareness what novices do not. Klein sees pattern matching and mental simulation as the centerpieces of a cluster of decision-process behaviors ('sources of power') that he terms naturalistic decision making.

Human intelligence researchers have noted how hard it can be to get individuals to explain their decision behavior, particularly if those decisions were made under difficult conditions—time pressures, high stakes, incomplete information, volatile environment, physical stress, unclear goals, poor cooperation, and so on. One may describe the setting as tending toward high entropy. Not surprisingly then, firefighters and other emergency personnel are high on the list of Klein's study subjects. His research has found DOD support, since it obviously relates to the experiences of battlefield commanders. One particularly interesting chapter addresses the question of reading minds; that is to say, understanding what the order-issuer intends. It is through an understanding of the intent that the individual/team is able to adjust actions to a changing context. Evidence suggests that commanders do a weak job of communicating intent. Hence the soldier's oft heard lament: "But I was just following orders."

Though columnist Thomas Petzinger, Jr. of the *Wall Street Journal* has recognized Klein's work on two separate occasions, it might not get full recognition by that newspaper's readers. Most business decisions don't have the same time pressures



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Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions

By Gary Klein

MIT Press, 1998,
330 pages
<http://mitpress.mit.edu>

THIS IS A VALUABLE BOOK. For decision theorists, it challenges the classical rationalist approach and introduces a new perspective. For empiricists, it presents a number of real-world examples and takes pains to discuss its field-research methodology (deep interviewing). Based on more than 10 years of such study, author Gary Klein has developed a framework that he labels a "recognition-primed decision model" (see inset). The central tenet of his model is

as in fighting a serious fire or plugging a serious gap—though we use those events as metaphors for tough organizational situations. Most organizations try to ‘manage’ their decision environment through plans, programs, and established procedures. They try to hold down the volatility. Indeed, one way of looking at managerial activity is as a neg-entropic force. Thus, if there were a weakness to the book, it would be the lack of discussion of conventional business decision situations, e.g., new-product selection, hire/fire cases, and quality control. While these situations would admit intuitional input, most business decision-makers would be loath to base a final choice on it alone. To be fair, Klein does devote a chapter to the power and shortcomings of the rational approach to decision making, noting that it sometimes balloons to hyper-rationality.

Many of the 20 figures in the book are useful charts, such as the one inset. One important figure, however, is a poorly hand-lettered, jumbled array of the various sources of power. The author needs to redraw this figure. On the other hand, very helpful, and key to the overall exposition, are the 52 examples spread throughout the

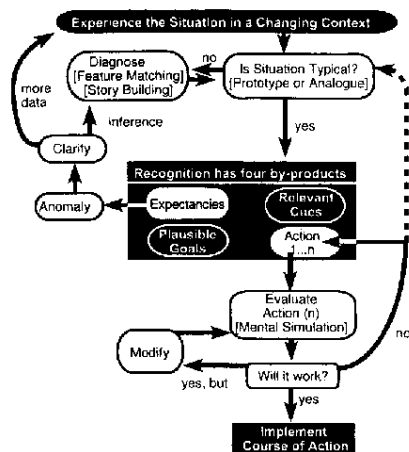


Figure 3.2
Integrated version of recognition primed decision model

17 chapters—one of which is a useful conclusions chapter. Notes, references (over 200), and an index round out the back of the book. This is a must-reading book for students in decision science, applied information systems (especially artificial intelligence), and organizational behavior.



Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right

By Joseph L.
Badaracco, Jr.

Harvard Business
School Press, 1997,
147 pages.
[http://www.hbsp.
harvard.edu](http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu)

PROF. BADARRACO SAYS a defining moment occurs when a right vs. right situation has three properties: “they reveal, they test, and they shape.” For the individual, the organization, or for the society, “the decision casts a shadow forward, and compel people to arrange their values in single files and reveal the priorities among them.” (This claim by the author reminds me of a quote from Kenneth Boulding: “Alternatives usually do not have the courtesy to array themselves in rank order on the drill ground of the imagination.”) Thus, “right vs. right decisions are often choices about life, not opportunities for technical analysis.” There are times when one “must do one right thing and leave another undone.”

After spending the first half of the book defining “defining moment,” the author proceeds to offer advice on how to deal with them. In doing so, he delivers cryptic phrases similar to those of the noted architect and teacher Louis Kahn (“what does this brick want to be?”). And so we get from Badaracco: “Become who you are,” and, “truth is a process.” Other turns of phrase from the author include: “ethics must often . . . cross-dress as economics and self-interest,” and “Aristotle seems to offer a way of domesticating Machiavelli.”

Badaracco uses three situations (one can sense “Harvard case” behind them) to play out his ideas. The first is at an individual analyst-level, the second at a mid-level manager level, and the third at CEO level. Over the course of his book’s nine chapters, the author crisscrosses discussion of these episodes to show effectively that decisions are oft times hard to make in that there could be several ways to go, each of which seems proper. Ah . . . but of course closer inspection reveals that’s not quite true. In deconstructing the three decision situations that he sets up, the author pulls

in some very heavyweight thinkers on matters ethical, intellectual, and practical. There’s reliance on Aristotle, Wm. James, Machiavelli, Nietzsche, with some Marcus Aurelius thrown in. Clearly, this author (a professor of business ethics at Harvard) is taking a philosophical stance. But he feels that the grand philosophical principles do not provide enough usable guidance to the individual wrestling with a right vs. right dilemma. Nor do mission statements or vision pronouncements. He wants to provide useful guidance, a framework. Is he successful? If by guidance, you mean rules or a checklist, then the answer is no. If you are willing to accept a set of questions to be asked when confronted with such right-right choice sets, then the answer is yes. Unfortunately, he doesn’t organize the set of questions in a way the reader can take them away readily.

In sum, this Harvard Business School Press book consists of case discussion aided by some heavyweight critical thinkers. One suspects that this slim book got its start as a draft *Harvard Business Review* article and that the author was encouraged to expand upon it. In my view, the expansion needs more summaries, perhaps in terms of a closing chapter or some accumulating bullet-point lists along the way. ■

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