

(In)decision

Years ago, my wife and I picked out 5 wallpaper patterns for 5 rooms in about an hour. We needed to decide on wall coverings so that we could move back into our house as a renovation was being completed. We rounded up our 3 young children, drove to a wallpaper store, and made our selections. Luckily the store wasn't busy, so we had most of the staff's attention as we worked through what each room needed. Had we had more time, we probably would have made some different choices. But time was limited, the kids were restless, and the decisions we made were more than adequate. That was over 20 years ago, and two rooms still have the same wallpaper. Another one changed just last year.

The saying "perfection is the enemy of progress" is attributed to Winston Churchill. It certainly applies to picking wallpaper for our renovation. We needed to make progress, so making adequate selection was more important than making perfect selections.

The same dynamics apply to business and engineering. For example, there was a business leader responsible for defining the requirements for a product we were developing. Each time he visited a customer, he would change the requirements to reflect what he learned. Then the engineering team would have to change aspects of their design. Some changes were modest, some were significant. The result was delay after delay in the completion of the product. We would have been better off finishing a product with an early set of requirements and selling it into a subset of potential applications. First, it would have generated some revenue, which is always helpful. Second, putting it in the hands of customers and potential customers would get us helpful feedback on performance and capabilities. A real product is always more effective than discussing needs with a customer in the abstract.

A caution, not everything should be rushed for the sake of expediency. As an example, take the DC10 crash in 1974 that claimed 374 lives. The DC10 was put into production despite a concern with a cargo latching system and nearby hydraulic lines. Similarly, we don't want lingering quality problems in microwave product development. Releasing products that fail can result in lasting damage to a company's reputation, or worse.

A company's reputation can also be damaged by indecision. I worked for a large semiconductor company that was trying to develop a wireless product line, just as the mobile phone business was taking off. This was the era of 2G. One of the major handset companies asked for a quick estimate on a prospective product. It took weeks of meetings to get them an answer. We had the affliction known as analysis paralysis, worsened by the organization failing to have anyone with authority or the inclination to make a decision. Just a few months later I was working for a much smaller, rapidly growing semiconductor company. The same customer worked with us too. They knew exactly who to ask for an estimate in this company, someone that was knowledgeable and authorized. We could give the customer an immediate answer, or worst case, a respond in an hour or two. You can guess which of these semiconductor company the handset manufacturer bought hundreds of millions of parts from, and from which they bought none.

Management indecision can also harm organizational effectiveness. Sometimes companies need to reduce their workforces, but instead of a single decisive reduction, they opt for laying off a few people here and there over the course of weeks, months or years. The result is obvious and predictable, as employees work on their resumes and worry about who may go next and when. With a single decisive reduction, in contrast, there will be a single painful period, but then the organization stabilizes and can move forward again.

I've also had a situation where a manager couldn't decide on what organizational change to make. He knew a difficult decision needed to be made. The organization knew that a decision needed to be made. No matter what decision was made, some people would be upset. He struggled with the decision for close to a year. Then it seemed he chose to wait to see, if with time, the need to make a decision would go away. It took years, but eventually it did resolve itself. But what happened in the meanwhile? There was ambiguity in a large organization. That led to frustrated individuals, unclear leadership and lots of inefficiencies. Just like the example of workforce reductions, it would have been best to make a quick decision and let everyone move on. It may not have been a perfect decision, but it wouldn't have been a wrong decision either.

I started this column with an observation from a renovation we did on our house. I have an acquaintance that has been working on a house renovation more recently. This home owner strives for perfection. Each detail needs to be considered carefully, investigating and weighing all options and alternatives in a classic case of analysis paralysis. Each step is taking weeks or even months. I'm sure the outcome will be terrific, but it's already been several years. I would rather live in a finished house, not perfect but fully functional, than live in a renovation project for years.

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