

The *Lee* Moment: *Decisiveness in Leadership and Management**

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Decisiveness is a hallmark of expert performance in martial arts and other aspects of life that require leadership and opportune action. If one is reluctant, hesitant or lacks determination and focus, or if one is rushed, impetuous and rash, one is bound either way to be defeated in combat and in life, no matter how skilled, strong or agile one is. Will translates into energy, and if energy is rushed out too soon, one will stumble¹, and if energy is left unused, it will soon dissipate.

Decisiveness can be defined as taking action at the precise moment. It is the quality of effective leadership in as much as it is the quality of an adept martial artist—a quality that is critical in managing and executing strategic plans as it is vital in the art of war. Delivering results is about taking decisive action at the right moment. If one is reluctant, it will probably be too late for any delayed reaction. While different researchers have different definitions of leadership, as it is always the case with most concepts, the body of professional literature teases out common traits that identify leadership as a process which involves influence and common goals, and occurs in groups. Without influence there is no leadership.²

In *Thinking Fast and Slow*³, Daniel Kahneman, presents two systems of individual decision making: system (1) is automatic, emotional and fast, where most of our daily decisions are made. System (2) is deliberate, logical and slow. It is only when we need to consider our actions and decisions more carefully that we evoke system 2. While all decisions have two dimensions: *focus* and *the amount of information utilized*, a decisive style of decision making uses a minimal amount of information to produce one decisive option. The decisive-style decision maker is fast, efficient and consistent.⁴ Spending too much time in System 2 will result in indecisiveness, weak leadership and chaos that perpetuate the status quo and “the traditional ways of doing things around here.” If an organization is entrenched in outdated practices and processes, and if managers are cautious to a fault and leaders are too worried about pandering to their “political” stakeholders and “partners”, it will continue to suffer from inefficiencies and waste, and business transformation initiatives will be short-lived, or worse, the laughing stock of the workforce, including the conventional stakeholders. Business sustainability in such conditions becomes a real issue as the organization falls into inertia and gradually loses its ability to respond and recover. But some managers not only fall into such psychological traps of decision making because of reluctance and a natural disposition to

* A chapter in *Management Styles of the Mediocre World*, Darwish, Ali (forthcoming).

procrastinate, but they also use equivocation as a *modus operandi*. This is a stratagem usually adopted by those who are employed in jobs they are not qualified to do.

Some managers may have the gift of the gab, walk the walk and talk the talk, and sell the world to senior management, but are often unable to deliver. Their inability to separate their managerial responsibilities from the technical knowledge for which their staff are hired is one such manifestation of lack of decisiveness and leadership. This is an observed problem with first-line managers who rise from the ranks of technical staff and who have no experience, training or aptitude as managers.

Not being able to trust their staff is seen as a sign of insecurity. To trust is an act of courage and an exercise in leadership. Leaders who cannot trust their subordinates are ineffective leaders. Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown, is a well-known quote from Shakespeare that sums it all up. Inability to trust prevents the manager from delegating responsibilities to subordinates and direct reports and sooner or later leads to disengagement and high staff turnover. These are the habits of self-defeating organizations and performance-undermining managers. Many managers want to be the center of attention, arguing and opposing for the sake of argument and opposition to prove a point and one point only —that they are right, without foundation or authority except being in the position of manager. The more they talk, the more they reveal how little they know. These are the imposters and pretenders who by virtue of their positions of authority cheat their way through on every occasion. In the absence of effective leadership, they are allowed to continue to wreak havoc and throw the organization into disarray. As American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) once advised, “Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great.” This is the quality of mature professionals, sure-footed managers, and good leadership. A manager’s role is to facilitate and not to militate against his or her direct reports. Often, managers of this ilk will do exactly that to “divide and conquer” instead of trying to bring out the best in their staff. Insecurity is one of the root causes of managerial lack of trust. When a manager is incompetent, they will be unable to utilize the talent in the team, and feel overwhelmingly insecure. Any suggestion, proposal or action from the team is met with equivocation, opposition, rejection or sheer incivility. The shortcoming of this shortsighted approach is that it fails to identify the strategic capabilities of the team members and differentiate their capabilities to create a strategically performance-focused team.

To emphasize the point again, many first-line managers are unable to separate themselves from their technical specializations (their comfort zone) and find they are doing the actual technical work and managing or barely managing at the same time. Self-interest and a chronic misunderstanding of the function of management drive their behaviours and shape their management styles. This is a perennial problem that will not go away by simply promoting people to managerial positions solely by virtue of their length of service in a workplace or because of their social connections with the powers that be in an organization. Indeed, one of the failings of the modern enterprise is that it hires managers who are basically incompetent and unfit to manage and everyone should suffer fools gladly. While organizations may have state-of-the art human resources policies and declared values showing they are concerned with the wellbeing of their employees, these policies and values get distorted and diluted at first-line management level. At this level, managers often display inconsistent behaviours and implementations of these policies. Whether inconsistency is a sign of indecisiveness or indecisiveness is the product of inconsistency, the fact remains that parity across the board in terms of the work conditions and remuneration is a fundamental principle of good management and honest leadership. It fosters a sense of fairness and justice

among the workforce. While enterprise bargaining has become the way employers negotiate remuneration and benefits with their employees, the principle of good faith remains the cornerstone of enterprise bargaining. Yet employers, at first and second management levels flout this principle. When discovered or detected by employees, such inconsistency will cause them to be disgruntled, dismayed and disengaged. Inability or unwillingness to recognize talent and expertise and reward it appropriately and commensurately is also a symptom of a sick organization and dishonest leadership and management.

Moreover, another example of abuse of power and violation of corporate policies is the exclusion of team members from relevant team meetings. Little do managers know that exclusion is shunning and shunning is a form of tacit bullying that is in sheer violation of stated anti-bullying policies; for a team member can only be a full-fledged team member or not at all. When challenged, managers justified their decision to exclude members of their team from pertinent meetings willy-nilly as an “executive decision” — a call they have had to make there and then. This kind of breach of policy happens all the time and nobody is any the wiser.

Incivility in the workplace is another form of tacit bullying and another dimension of managers on a power trip who resort to bullying to cover up their incompetence. Incivility is defined as “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms of mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others.”⁵ Incivility is rude, disrespect, discourteous and impertinent behavior. Open outbursts and melodramatic reactions to work situations, with the impact of embarrassing subordinates and putting them on the spot, with the specific intention of undermining the opposition, and manifest impatience, are behaviours that fall into the category of incivility in the workplace. Such uncivil managers have been observed to treat their direct reports with such open disdain, contempt and condescension, causing their employees so much distress and anxiety. Such distractions affect productivity and quality of performance.

Incivility seems to know no bounds among “senior” managers, who feel they have the right to violate basic social norms, not to mention professional protocols. We were once about to start a workshop with the stakeholders in a large organization to present our proposed approach, when one such megalomaniac manager gatecrashed the meeting, asked to have five minutes to *enlighten* us, took his jacket off and started drawing nonsense on the whiteboard, and then walked out without even extending the courtesy to hear what we were about to present. As the old Chinese martial art proverb goes, if a man be not enlightened within, what lamp shall he light? Of course, these are social semiotic displays that are open to interpretations! Uncivil behavior in the workplace is sometimes defended by the perpetrator by accusing the victim of assigning meanings to words and actions, misconception and confusion shifting the burden of proof by resorting to logical fallacies such as *tu quoque*. Words have meanings. Unless you make your intentions clear, people will go by what you utter and what they hear. And when your words and actions tell the same story, the claim that people assign meanings to your words does not hold—it is a load of nonsense!

Furthermore, creating teams and alliances within the same team for no functional or operational reasons, where the manager aligns him/herself to certain individuals, is also a sign of poor management and poor leadership. Why? Because it is the role of management to manage and apply corporate policy and the role of leadership to monitor the performance of management and step in where and when needed to take corrective action. Otherwise,

organizations become chicken farms and free for all. As Karen Martin⁶ observes, when organizations, owing to performance-undermining habits, prevent their employees from either producing work they can be proud of or deny them the type of recognition and encouragement that really matters, they send a clear message to their employees to disengage and stop caring about their work and the organization. In a similar vein, Ken Blanchard, author of the best-selling book *The One Minute Manager*, observes that when an organization is not tenacious and resilient, employees start to disengage because they don't think they can make a difference. This occurs when management do not involve their employees, do not respect them and do not realize that without their employees they are nothing. They start to disengage because management do not involve them and do honour them and because employees do not think their future will be any better with the leaders that are in charge. Disengagement is sometimes demanded by management. Employees who have a great deal to offer and who can make a real difference are sometimes asked to keep a low profile and disengage. So instead of addressing the root-causes of the organizational and group pathology, middle management supports disengagement and turns a blind eye to the dysfunction and malpractice that continues to undermine the strategic goals of the organization.⁷ In such self-defeating organizations, management will characteristically support managers in a *them- and-us* paradigm that will perpetuate the rift and disconnect between management and the workforce.

The debate about the differences between manager and leader and the differences between management skills and leadership qualities occupies a large space of management studies and research. There is consensus that these two roles or functions are different. A manager may have the skills to manage but not the qualities to lead. While not every manager is expected to be leader, managers are expected to have leadership qualities. According to Change Management guru John Kotter⁸, management is about coping with complexity. "Its practices and procedures are largely a response to the emergence of large organizations. Without good management, complex enterprises tend to become chaotic in ways that threaten their very existence [...] "Leadership by contrast is coping with change." To cope with change, it follows, it is critical to be decisive in defining moments. Yet, as Henry Mintzberg confirms, as the organizational unit's formal authority, "only the manager can commit the unit to important new courses of action; and as its nerve center, only the manager has full and current information to make the set of decisions that determine the unit's strategy."⁹ If the manager lacks the will to take decisive action, their reluctance and indecisiveness will throw the unit into chaos. Both leader and manager are executives who make decisions that impact the organization in a variety of ways. A manager's decisions are not always necessarily major or strategic ones, but their effects are incrementally the same. Changing an organization's focus from product to service for example, is an executive decision of leaders, but in translating such strategic change, managers make their own decisions based on their own interpretations of what constitutes the correct course of action to achieve the strategic objectives of change. However, decisiveness and decision-making are not quite the same. Eventually, even a no decision is by default a decision not to take action. It is the timeliness of the decision or action that decisiveness is all about. Making decisions takes place within a finite timeframe. "Decision making is a time-bound, forward-moving process. Every decision we make is unique in the sense that it points to a future event. It does not point to the past, although its motives and causes may be in the past or in the present."¹⁰ The temporality of the action determines its effectiveness and decisiveness.

In *The Outstanding Organization*, Karen Martin observes an alarming trend in the corporate world; that most organizations have become so accustomed to chaos that they do not even

recognize it. Chaos is business as usual and “tolerance for ambiguity” is now a job requirement for these organizations. Clarity and structure are most likely seen as weakness. But this is not so surprising in cultures of ambiguity that guide and inform this “new” trend. As I observe in previous work¹¹, certain social and organizational cultures are characteristically ambiguous. In such cultures of ambiguity very little useful knowledge is shared to enable managers and leaders to be decisive. Today, ambiguity is celebrated in organizations that belong to these cultures. Where ambiguity prevails, there is no accountability as the responsibility is so diluted and spread across the organization, much to the delusion of managers that is not so. In the chaos that ensues, there is confusion between ambiguity and uncertainty and the average person cannot discern the difference, as these two terms are often used interchangeably.

Decision making usually takes place in one of four conditions: *certainty*, *uncertainty*, *risk* and *conflict*. These conditions, which are also called states of nature, are created by the environment in which the decision maker operates. The environment includes the decision maker’s perception of the goals to be achieved, the alternatives available, and the relationship between choices and outcomes. It also includes his or her ability to process the information available. All four conditions of decision may be acting during the decision making process. For example, where there is uncertainty, there is risk.¹² *Uncertainty* is defined as the nature of the doubt which has to be resolved in order to act¹³ and as “unknown probabilities”.¹⁴ The Meriam-Webster English language dictionary defines “uncertainty” as the quality or state of being uncertain – that is, not able to be relied on; not known or definite. From a decision-making perspective, uncertainty is doubt about courses of action that lead to certain outcomes or doubt about outcomes of certain courses of action. Almost every aspect of human life involves some kind of decision making under uncertainty. Whenever an action entails a moment of hesitancy or doubt about the outcome, we are basically operating under the condition of uncertainty.¹⁵

In contrast, *ambiguity* is defined as the quality or state of being ambiguous especially in meaning, and *ambiguous* as (1) doubtful or uncertain especially from obscurity or indistinctness; and (2) capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways. So, one could argue that uncertainty is inherent in the observer and ambiguity is intrinsic to the situation or problem or the information or language describing it. Thus, ambiguity is essentially semantic, and one of the fallacies of logic. A word is ambiguous if it is open to different interpretations in a given context.

If one does not have the requisite information to understand the situation, one is unable to know the problem and ascertain the course of action. This may be caused by two types of ambiguity: fallacy of suppressed evidence and fallacy of equivocation. Joel Katz¹⁶ recognizes five types of information: (1) information (complete for its purpose), (2) uninformed (probably not true or important; possibly interesting), (3) noninformation (possibly true or false, probably not important, possibly confusing), (4) misinformation (definitely not true, vitally important to avoid), and (5) disinformation (deliberately not true, misleading). Whatever the type of information, it is invariably captured or expressed in language or illustration, which are both open to manipulation and ambiguity. While some managers harp on the importance of using simple language, dumbing it down to the lowest common denominator, they refuse to use standard definitions of terms and opt for jargon, their own of course, or for non-standard terms that can be interpreted in various ways. Consequently, they introduce ambiguity to a clear situation by using ambiguous language.

In management terms, ambiguity means that the goals to be achieved or the problem to be solved is unclear, alternatives are difficult to define, and information about the outcomes is unavailable.¹⁷ Ambiguity (also known as *wicked decision problem*) is associated with manager conflicts over goals and decision alternatives, rapidly changing circumstances, fuzzy information, and unclear linkages among decision elements.¹⁸ “Sometimes, managers will come up with a “solution” only to realize they hadn’t clearly defined the real problem to begin with.”¹⁹ Often, ambiguity is self-inflicted and induced by the manager’s own incompetence and indecisiveness about delineating the team’s roles and responsibilities, and providing an enabling structure for the team to work within, for a host of conflicting goals and inability to trust and delegate and separate their management role from their former technical role, as I have already discussed. Where strong leadership is absent, managers step in to fill the void with all sorts of malpractices and take the enterprise in a totally different direction, often leading it down the garden path.

Today, we have an alarmingly increasing number of project managers who do not believe in project management — they believe project management frameworks are too draconian — and Six Sigma Black Belts, and other certified professionals,²⁰ who don’t practice what they claim to know, managers who don’t believe in team structures or in the need for clarity of roles and responsibilities, major consultants hiring graduates to cut and paste and populate preset templates, without a great deal of understanding of the problems they are trying to solve, while they are too taken by their fancy proprietary methods and approaches, and organizations all too willing to spend huge amounts of money on short-lived business improvement initiatives, after a fashion, engaging household names in the consultancy world to transform their business into some kind of centrality: be that customer, service, product or whatever that may be. While there is a tacit acknowledgement that the management standards have taken a nosedive in recent years, no one seems willing enough to shed light on the root causes of the problem, and managers who cause all sorts of problems and violate almost every single value that organizations seem to espouse go scot-free. In fact, most of these inept and incompetent managers are rewarded for the mess they create. The paradigm seems to be the worse you are as manager, the better your chances of climbing up the ladder. This may be termed *upward risk mitigation*. Any wonder ambiguity has become the latest management fad? Simply put, inept managers and lousy leaders are forever looking for ways to justify their ineptness and incompetence. Ambiguity is the latest excuse.

Decisiveness is certainly a quality of strong leadership and effective management. Decisiveness must however produce controlled outcomes. As it is in the case of the adept martial artist, decisiveness in management must deliver precision at the critical moment. Many managers do not understand “the critical moment”²¹ to intervene and take decisive action at the right moment and in the right location. They dilly-dally and expend so much unfocused energy appeasing and ingratiating themselves to their stakeholders, seeking status and public relations over achieving results and solving problems. They quickly lose credibility with their employees and stakeholders alike, and it doesn’t take much to test one’s integrity. The epic fight between Bruce Lee (Mr Lee) and Bob Wall (O’Hara), in the classic movie *Enter the Dragon* is an excellent illustration of decisiveness. At the end of the fight, the defeated O’Hara, beaten down to his knees by Bruce Lee’s powerful signature side kick, smashes two bottles together in a last ditch attempt to attack Mr Lee, as he walks away with his back to O’Hara. On hearing the sound of the glass breaking, Mr Lee turns round in a defining moment and with decisiveness and determination finishes O’Hara off. This is the *Lee Moment* and the essence of decisiveness. Many fighters, leaders and managers lack this quality and end up revelling in ambiguity and chaos and eventual defeat.

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About the Author

Ali Darwish, PhD, MIS, MBII, MA is an award-winning expert communication and business improvement consultant, delivering best-in-class solutions. He is also an active scholar, researcher and published author of international renown, specializing in cross-cultural social semiotics and communication. He has published more than 25 books on business process management, enabling methodologies, translation, communication, and knowledge management. He is also the founder, head of style and world chief instructor of Dynamic Shotokan Karate-Do International (Yakushin Shotokan Karate), currently holding the senior rank of 8th Dan, with presence in more than 18 countries. When Ali is not working, you will find him in the dojo practising and teaching what he loves to do most.

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Notes

¹ Soul of Samurai: Modern Translations of Three Classic Works of Zen and Bushido, Thomas Cleary.

² Darwish, Ali (2011), *Knowledge Management: Myth and Reality*.

³ Kahneman, Daniel (2011), *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York.

⁴ Driver and Mock (1975, reported by Wright, 1985:47).

⁵ Anderson and Pearson (1999), quoted in Cortina, et al (2001).

⁶ *The Outstanding Organization*, p21.

⁷ Darwish, Ali (2011), *Knowledge Management: Myth and Reality*.

⁸ In the *Harvard Business Review on Leadership*

⁹ In the *Harvard Business Review on Leadership*

¹⁰ Darwish, Ali (2008), *Optimality in Translation*.

¹¹ Darwish, Ali (2011), *Knowledge Management: Myth and Reality*.

¹² Darwish, Ali (2008, 2012), *Constraints-Driven Decision Making*, Writescope Publishers: Melbourne.

¹³ Lipshitz and (1995), quoted in Darwish, Ali (2008, 2012), *Constraints-Driven Decision Making*, Writescope Publishers: Melbourne.

¹⁴ Bernstein (1996), quoted in Darwish, Ali (2008, 2012), *Constraints-Driven Decision Making*, Writescope Publishers: Melbourne.

¹⁵ Darwish, Ali (2008, 2012), *Constraints-Driven Decision Making*, Writescope Publishers: Melbourne.

¹⁶ Katz, Joel (2012), *Designing Information: Human factors and common sense in information design*, John Wiley & Sons Inc.: New Jersey.

¹⁷ Daft, Richard (2008).

¹⁸ Daft, Richard (2008).

¹⁹ Daft, Richard (2008).

²⁰ The craze for all sorts of certifications as evidence of competence is another symptom of a mediocre professional world, but this is the topic of another article/chapter. So much is the emphasis on certifications that there are now fake certification rackets online.

²¹ Pater, Robert (1989), *How To Be A Black-Belt Manager*, Thorsons Publishing Group: Northhamptonshire.