

The Project Manager's Guide to Making Successful Decisions

By Robert A. Powell & Dennis M. Buede

(A book review by R. Max Wideman)

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Introduction

Last month we reviewed *Project Decisions: The Art and Science*, by authors Lev Virine & Michael Trumper, published in 2008. Therefore, this month it seemed like a good idea to publish a review of *The Project Manager's Guide to Making Successful Decisions*¹ by Robert A. Powell & Dennis M. Buede published in 2009. The authors of the latter book have observed that successful decision-making significantly contributes to project success but that project managers appear to receive very little education or training focused on the decision-making required to successfully manage complex, large-scale projects.

Indeed, these authors note that in the course of a project's life span, faulty decision-making at any time can have huge financial consequences. That is to say nothing of the negative effects of demoralized staff, wasted resources, and missed opportunities.² In the text, as well as a multitude of "failed" projects", the authors also point to projects that were completed successfully, yet the resulting products were not successful in so far as generating the return of intended benefits. One such example is the two-wheel Segway personal transportation system. This little machine worked surprisingly well but failed to catch the public's imagination and went on to become a marketing failure.

Was that a project management failure or a technology management failure? Either way, decisions were involved. Therefore, with this book, the authors set out to provide a resource that helps project managers, and others, become better decision makers in the pursuit of project objectives.

Book Structure

This book has ten chapters and three appendices arranged as follows:

Preface

Acknowledgements

1. Good Decision-Making: The Key to Project Success
2. Managerial Decision-Making
3. Decisions and the Project Management Life Cycle
4. Overview of Decision-Making
5. Project Management Decisions
6. Framing the Decision
7. Generating Decision Alternatives
8. Analyzing the Alternatives in Terms of Values and Uncertainty
9. Handling Risk and Uncertainty
10. Training Project Managers as Decision Makers

Appendixes

- A. Project Success Case Studies
- B. Project Management Decisions
- C. An Introduction to Decision Trees

References

Additional Reading

Each chapter starts out with a one-page overview of the contents of the chapter and a list of the ensuing sections. It ends with a summary of what the chapter contained. Relevant tables, diagrams and case studies support the text.

What we liked

We found the authors' discussion in Chapter 4 of applying different decision approaches in three types of situation quite valuable. Here, authors Robert Powell and Dennis Buede reference Mintzberg and Westley who suggest that there are three ways to approach decisions.³

1. Thinking first
2. Seeing first, and
3. Doing first

These are briefly described as follows:

- "Thinking first" is the traditional analytical process, i.e. Define the problem; diagnose its causes; identify objectives; brainstorm solution alternatives; perform an analysis; and decide.
- "Seeing first" is a four-step creative discovery process: Preparation>>incubation>>illumination>>verification.
- "Doing first" involves experimentation by trial and error. In other words try out several options and see which one works out best.

Of course, this last assumes that either the decision is reversible, or the option can be conducted independently and then only applied to the project once it has been performed, validated and selected.

Under what circumstance should you adopt one of these three approaches? The table in Figure 1 provides the necessary guidance to selecting the most appropriate approach in different situations.

Think	See	Do
Select "Thinking First" when:	Select "Seeing First" when:	Select "Doing First" when:
The problem or situation is simple.	The problem or situation is complex.	The problem or situation requires innovative ideas.
The issue is clear.	Many elements have to be combined into creative solutions.	The situation is novel and confusing.
The data are reliable.	Commitment to those solutions is key.	Complicated specifications would get in the way.
The context is structured, thoughts can be pinned down and discipline can be applied.	Communication across boundaries is essential.	A few simple relationship rules can help.
The outcome is probably not reversible.	The outcome is probably not reversible.	The outcome probably is reversible.
Example: Should we design the structure or the foundations first?	Example: Should we consult all of the stakeholders or only a select few?	Example: Will this novel idea work and, if so, will it be useful?

Figure 1: Selecting a decision-making approach in three different situations⁴

Of course making the decision is not the end of the story. The decision then has to be implemented. On this stage of the overall process, the authors observe that:⁵

"The implementation of the decision is perhaps the most important task for the project manager. Managers are sometimes more interested in making a decision and then evaluating the result to determine if the decision achieved the stated purpose than they are in implementing it. There is often an obsession with making decisions and leaving the implementation to the lower levels in the organization. Decisions often require interpretation by management to be adequately implemented; if management doesn't do that, the decision can be improperly implemented and can fail. Implementing a decision requires as much planning and management oversight as planning the decision and making it."

Assuming that the decision has been approved, goals have been set, personnel have been assigned and funds allocated, then the authors suggest the following four rules should be followed:⁶

1. Verify that the decision you have chosen is a good decision.
2. Work out how to implement your decision.
3. Work out how to monitor its effectiveness.
4. Commit yourself to your decision and act on it.

What constitutes a "good decision"? The authors are not clear on this point but we suggest that every decision should at least make sense – and "feel" right. Rule #4 is interesting because it implies that many people happily make decisions but fail to act on them!

The Authors' discussion of *Framing the Decision* in Chapter 6 is also useful because it includes a section: *Suggested Decision Frame Format for Project Management*.⁷ For the uninitiated, the authors explain that:⁸

"A decision frame defines the context for the decision and the elements (alternatives, objectives, uncertainties) that are part of the decision situation . . . it is becoming clear to many people that creating some sort of audit trail for decisions is a wise thing to do [for scrutiny by] management, auditors, an Inspector General, regulators, or a court . . ."

And of course, having created the decision frame content, keep it as a part of the project's management record. Project managers of construction industry projects in particular take note, because decisions in the light of limited knowledge can look fine, but in the light of subsequent risk events may look much less so and open to litigation!

For those not familiar with the impact of "Biases and Heuristics" on decision-making, Chapter 7 contains a brief introduction to this topic and the impacts that those described might have on the decision-making process. Unfortunately, neither term is defined in the context of project management, nor otherwise, so that some readers may be left a little nonplussed with regard to appropriate action.

Downside

Having reviewed the 2008 book *Project Decisions: The Art and Science* last month, we were hopeful that this 2009 book, described as a "Guide to Making Successful Decisions", would shed even more light on the subject of decision-making. Unfortunately, aside from the parts noted in our previous section, we were disappointed in the content. Rather than a "Guide", the book is made up largely of what other researchers have observed about decision-making. In other words, the book is mostly descriptive

(i.e. "What is") with extensive quotations, rather than prescriptive (i.e. "How to") which we feel is the essence of a useful "Guide".

In between, we were inclined to feel that the text was unnecessarily padded with verbose, shallow, or sweeping and repetitive statements. For example, in the previous section we quoted the text: "A decision frame defines the context for the decision and the elements (alternatives, objectives, uncertainties) that are part of the decision situation". This sentence is preceded by Chapter 6's opening statement: "A *decision frame* is an aid that can be used while making a decision to capture important information, and it presents a snapshot view of critical elements the project manager should consider in making a decision."⁹ Are these two consecutive statements really necessary?

Another example: "That natural tendency is for project managers to place strict emphasis on the management of a project instead of focusing on the type, nature, and impact of the decisions made in the project management process." Isn't the "management of a project" and "the project management process" the same thing?

Or this example: "Project managers must keep decision quality high while locating limited project resources and performing other highly visible tasks." Such as? And what is a high quality decision anyway? Unfortunately, the book does not include a Glossary of terms to provide clarity.

Another unfortunate shortcoming is that the authors do not differentiate between decisions associated with management of the project (i.e. the project management processes referred to above) and those associated with the management of the technology involved. However, failure to differentiate between project management and the management of the principal technology encompassed by the project is quite common among many authors – including those authors quoted extensively in this book.

In the Preface we learned that "Chapter 5 is the heart of the book: It identifies those decisions required for successful project management."¹⁰ However, when we turned to Chapter 5, titled "Project Management Decisions", we were disconcerted by the opening statement that:

"We have already established the fact that success is the primary objective in project management and decisions are the 'yellow brick road' that leads to success."¹¹

Really? We suppose that there must be some projects whose primary objective is failure rather than success, but in any case, what constitutes "success"? As for the "yellow brick road", the authors do not explain the meaning of this particular term and we had to look it up on Google. For those like us who are not familiar with this phrase, evidently a road of yellow brick is an element in the novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, with additional such roads appearing in *The Marvelous Land of Oz* and *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*.¹² Apparently, it implies that it is "A proverbial path to a Promised Land of one's hopes and dreams."¹³ It seems to us that this is a somewhat euphoric view of decision-making in project management.

Unfortunately, the authors do not make it clear what part or type of project management is the target of the decisions being described in the chapter. From our reading, it appears that most of the decision topics and subtopics relate to systems engineering in particular and to the management of the technology rather than to management of the project.¹⁴ If true, this is hardly surprising since both authors have systems engineering backgrounds.

Summary

For those who are looking for an introduction to some of the concepts underlying systematic decision-making in a project environment, this book provides a lightweight overview. The book draws extensively on the work of others and the text is supported by some classic case studies reflecting good and bad decisions. The authors also provide a lengthy list of references for further reading.

However, we found we had to wade through many pages of banal, or common knowledge to project management practitioners, and even contradictions and misinformation, before arriving at valuable advice half way through Chapter 4.

We have noted that the back cover of the book states:

"This practical guide helps project managers and their teams become better decision-makers by focusing on the key issues associated with decision-making. You will learn how to frame the decision, gather information, close the decision, get approval within the organization, and start implementing."

We feel that this claim is only true if readers are willing to construct their own approach steps based on the descriptive material in the book.

Footnote

Sadly, Col. Robert A. Powell, PhD, passed away shortly before this book was published in 2009.

R. Max Wideman
Fellow, PMI

¹ Powell, Robert A., & Dennis M. Buede, *The Project Manager's Guide to Making Successful Decisions*, ManagementConcepts, VA, 2009. Sadly, Col. Powell passed away shortly before this book was published.

² Ibid, p xiv

³ Ibid, pp90-103

⁴ Note: The contents of this table have been abstracted from Table 4-3 on p92. The purpose of this transformation is to turn the contents into more useful advice for the reader.

⁵ Ibid, p104

⁶ Ibid, p105

⁷ Ibid, pp145-147

⁸ Ibid, p137

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p xvi

¹¹ Ibid, p113

¹² Source:

<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&defl=en&q=define:Yellow+brick+road&sa=X&ei=FfhaTO3vMoO8sQOHzqkP&ved=OCBIQkAE> accessed 8/5/10

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See *The Project Manager's Guide*, Chapter 5, in particular: Table 5-1, Decision Topics and Subtopics, p118.