Decision Performance in Complex Organizations

John M. Budd
Professor
School of Information Science & Learning Technologies
University of Missouri

Mark Winston
Assistant Chancellor and Director
John Cotton Dana Library
Rutgers University

The complexity of libraries in the 21st century means that the leaders of these complex organizations face a range of decisions regarding resources, personnel, facilities, technology, governance, users, and competition, among other issues. While some of the decisions are recurring, others arise at certain times, such as in relation to a fiscal downturn or an even more immediate crisis. In all of these instances, the decision maker must keep the library's purpose and vision in mind. The process of making informed, appropriate decisions, amidst competing priorities, and decisions that can be defended represents a constant challenge. The research on decision making is extensive and added to almost daily.

The particular study we propose here builds upon the work of Gary Klein (2009). In that work he tests some claims and assumptions that are frequently associated with the background of decision making. He (2009) writes, "I have identified ten [actually eleven] typical claims about how to think more effectively. In ambiguous and shadowy situations, I believe the claims are misleading" (p. 7). The claims are presented in the Appendix. The claims actually represent assumptions that, Klein says, are widely held and taught (and he provides a wealth of evidence for his assessment from a variety of literature). Those claims form the basis of the inquiry that we are engaged in. Throughout his book he offers evidence and rationales suggesting strongly that, when the complexities of organizational action are such that many factors can influence the future, the claims do not hold up. The purpose of the inquiry proposed here is to investigate the strength of agreement with the claims in our profession.

Reasoning and rationality do not imply "automatic" decision making; they entail the full range of data collection and analysis, interpretation (including possible interpretations by those other than the library leader), and weighing the implications of each decision for the other aspects of the organization. For our purposes, we must emphasize that we begin with the premise that decision making is an intentional act of consciousness. First of all, "intentional" has a particular meaning here. John Searle has written about intentionality at length and his (2002) definition is that it is "that feature of certain mental states and events that consists in their (in a

special sense of these words) being *directed at*, being *about*, being *of*, or *representing* certain other entities and states of affairs" (p. 77). So intentionality is more than "meaning to do" something; it signifies a connection between our minds and the world around us. In fact, the connection is embedded in our being. Philosophers claim that each of us has a background that is shaped by our beliefs, educational, family, physical characteristics, and social milieu that is at least somewhat unique to each of us. The background is even more extensive, though, and we can add ideas, propositions, values, and fitting into a community. This conception of intentionality is certainly pertinent to the lives of decision makers. A reason for the pertinence is that the connection between our minds and the world is accentuated by the meaning of "consciousness;" which, as Alva Noë (2009) points out, "Consciousness isn't something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us" (p. 24).

Klein (2009) provides a mechanism to assess the effects of prevailing management thought on the consciousness of decision makers (including those in libraries). He has identified a set of claims (see Appendix) that people tend to agree with strongly, according to research the he and others have conducted. Toward that end, in the Columbia, Missouri area the professional staffs of the University of Missouri (MU) Libraries and of the Daniel Boone Regional Library will be asked to respond to the matrix in the Appendix by marking levels of agreement with each claim. Also, students in a course offered by MU's School of Information Science and Learning Technologies ("Planning and Evaluation of Information Services") will be asked to respond to the claims at the beginning and at the end of the course. In the New Brunswick, New Jersey area academic and public librarians will also be surveyed.

The results will be compared across environments (public and academic libraries, and professional librarians and students) and will be analyzed according to appropriate goodness-of-fit tests. The results will also be interpreted according to Klein's (2009) analysis of his own research. Our ultimate intention is to situate this research within the understanding of leadership and management, especially decision making, in libraries and information agencies.

References

Klein, G. (2009). *Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Noë, A. (2009). *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness*.
    New York: Hill and Wang.
Searle, J. R. (2002). *Consciousness and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

Claim	1 Completely disagree for any situation	2 Strongly disagree for almost all situations	3 Tend to disagree for most situations	4 Hard to tell	5 Tend to agree for most situations	6 Strongly agree for almost all situations	7 Completely agree for any situation
1. Teaching people procedures helps them perform tasks more skillfully.							
2. Decision biases distort our thinking.							
2a. Successful decision makers rely on logic and statistics instead of intuition.							
3. To make a decision, generate several options and compare them to pick the best one.							
4. We can reduce uncertainty by gathering more information.							
5. It's bad to jump to conclusions—wait to see all the evidence.							
6. To get people to learn, give them feedback on the consequences of their actions.							
7. To make sense of a situation, we draw inferences from the data.							
8. The starting point for any project is to get a clear							

description of the goal.							
9. Our plans will succeed more often if we ID the biggest risks and find ways to eliminate them.							
10. Leaders can create common ground by assigning roles and setting ground rules in advance.							

Klein, Gary. *Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009, p. 8.