

In the eye of the crisis - and now what? Decision Making and Solving Problems II

One essential element of good decision making in challenging situations is the methodical approach, i.e. the conscious organisation of one's own actions, as outlined in Part I. Equally important - if not even more so - is the organisation of our thoughts.

Insight 2: Organisation of thoughts - making us aware how stress works

There are particular situations that put us under stress. How one reacts to certain stress depends, amongst other factors, on our degree of knowledge, the duration of the stress situation and the personal need for competence. Stress can manifest itself in purely physical symptoms but can also lead to a limitation in thinking and behaviour – a so called "cognitive emergency reaction"¹. These limitations make it difficult to be goal-oriented, forward thinking and reflective – critical factors when making decisions.

Over stressing due to a complex situation means an overload of conscious thinking. In such a situation, people concentrate on eliminating the immediate threatening problem. There is less time for reflection and typically action is taken (too) quickly. There is the feeling "we must do something now, so let's do this...". If, however, the problem cannot be solved with the quick solution, there is a risk of loss of control. Such a loss of control leads to a perceived decrease in competence. A perceived decrease in competence leads to more stress... – it's a vicious circle.

So typically, what factors show up because of stress and what can we do about it?

1. Externalisation of Action

Fewer internal processes (reflecting, planning) take place, instead the focus is on decision making and action. Because of less internal reflection and planning, any action is more driven by external factors than by internally set goals. This results in erratic, ad hoc decisions and actions.

Tip

- Broaden the perspectives: Get new perspectives by involving others in the process, and in this way not losing control of the situation. Don't be afraid to admit you do not yet fully understand the situation.

2. Jumping to Quick Solutions

Falling back to well-known patterns of thinking and acting. Deriving quick and easy solutions.

Tip

- Seek and encourage "out-of-the-box thinking". It does not have to be "Design Thinking". Often, it is enough to have a devil's advocate – one or more colleagues whose role it is to question the solution(s).

3. Complexity Reduction „by the mallet“

Simple and reductionist thought models are formed. Dogmatism and bossiness dominate, as well as ignoring criticism and doubt.

Tip

- Listen to your language: downplaying the issue, cynicism and attacking criticism are the most common signs of this trap. Ask questions, get feedback, look for the similarities and connecting things within the differences.
- Promote and endure diversity: a complex problem might easily be solved. However, the way to finding the right solution often isn't.

Conclusion

In complex and stressful problem solving situations, paying attention to these few points will help you make well-founded and thus, better decisions! Consciously, and repeatedly, ask yourself the following questions:

How do I or we in the team organise our actions - how methodical is our approach?

- Are the goals clear?
- What information do we have about the situation and what overall picture does it give us?
- Do we plan alternatives?
- Do we have buffers? Have the risk assessments been carried out?
- How do we monitor and measure results - how do we recognise side effects?
- Do we consciously take time for reflection?

How do I or we in the team organise our thinking - how do we act under stress?

- Do I notice a loss of control and how do I react to it?
- Are there goals that are no longer discussed?
- Is the collection of information interrupted?
- Are there enough critical minds and thoughts?
- Are truly new approaches/solutions being discussed - or is methodism prevailing?
- Are management structures becoming authoritarian - or is there a diffusion of responsibility?

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