



Good leaders, Bad decisions

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Abstract

Leaders make decisions for all types of commerce, including military as well as commercial commerce. All leaders make decisions based on personal experiences and some decisions are not always as successful causing incidents costing the United States and other countries lives and memories. Neuroscience has studied how a human brain reacts in the decision-making process affecting final decisions, such as during tragedies like Pearl Harbor and the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders and organizations may benefit from understanding how the brain reacts when a crisis arises, how training and knowledge may help to avoid making repeatedly bad decisions, and how to turn a bad decision into a successful decision-making process in the future.

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Introduction

For years companies and organizations have developed and created leaders and team environments where leaders are accepted as great leaders and relied on to make good decisions, even in a crisis, yet not all leaders in the face of a crisis make good decisions. Some leaders are based on rank and hierarchy whereas a designated leader is ultimately held accountable to a company or organization while other leaders may be ignored, which can result in a crisis. Gaining an understanding of how good leaders make unwise decisions in crisis situations may assist others in being prepared in the decision-making process when facing a crisis.

History brings forth lasting memories in which the ramifications of decisions may never be known of the results of making decisions. A forward-looking view from neuroscience may aid in the understanding of the critical decision-making process.

Background of the Problem

The date was December 6, 1941, the day before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. According to the Pearl Harbor Fact Sheet in the WWII Museum, a missed warning included an intercepted message and on the morning of December 7th radar detected a large fleet of airplanes headed toward Oahu. On December 7, over 2,400 Americans lost their lives and thousands were wounded. Warnings of the impending attack were not heeded, and leaders entrusted to employ and use knowledge and skills may be viewed differently in light of the evolution of neuroscience and the decision-making process in a crisis situation. Fast forwarding to 2019 brings in a new crisis, but unlike the attack on Pearl Harbor which lasted 2 hours, a deadly virus emerged from China that would create a world-wide crisis for 3 years.

January 29, 2019, the Threat Assessment report of Daniel R. Coats, Director of National Intelligence, addressed global health and stated:

We assess that the United States and the world will remain vulnerable to the next flu pandemic or largescale outbreak of a contagious disease that could lead to massive rates of death and disability, severely affect the world economy, strain international resources, and increase calls on the United States for support. (p. 21).

Although we may never know how the warnings were interpreted, providing a closer look at understanding what undermines decision making in a crisis situation may be beneficial for companies and organizational leaders. How people perceive and react to a notice or important communication can make a difference, as with the pandemic, as to whether action should be taken earlier, which may have avoided a crisis decision affecting the entire world. In 2024, people are still feeling the effects of the pandemic crisis decision as businesses that failed during the pandemic have never recovered. Leaders may benefit from leading and listening; as Peter Drucker stated, “*The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said*” (Drucker, n.d.).

Leadership effectiveness starts with understanding and empowering people in crisis situations to make decisions while maintaining good managerial and business practices. Leaders may benefit by varying behaviors and decisions when situations, such as Pearl Harbor and the Pandemic of 2020, occur. Pearl Harbor and the pandemic were both incidents in which many individuals lost loved ones and were personally affected by the decisions made during the crisis events. Leaders making decisions during crisis situations may benefit from recognizing self-bias and appreciate the discoveries of neuroscience on how the brain reacts under stressful situations. Neuroscientists believe the complexity of the brain is unknown and there may be substructures in the decision-making process.

Problem Statement

Leaders making a crisis decision has resulted in global crises in the United States and around the world. Good leaders make some bad decisions, but some are minor and have little to no direct effect on sustainability of living. Campbell et al. (2009) discussed various crisis situations where leaders made poor decisions, such as with hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The New Orleans leaders' decisions about the seawall were not totally vetted thus the seawall collapsed. Although many crisis situation decisions ended in failure, many were corrected yet only a few took the lives of many. Some crises come without warning, such as the 911 attack, yet Pearl Harbor and the pandemic came with warnings. Campbell et al. (2009) stated quick decisions leaders make are based on brain pattern recognition from previous experiences and sometimes acting on those patterns individuals may not make a logical decision.

Scientific Evidence

Innovative thinking of turning a bad experience into a good resolution for a future leader may take lessons learned from bioscience and apply them to make good decision practices in the future. Sutil-Martín and Rienda-Gómez (2020) concluded neuroscience research has helped to understand the human brain by investigating subliminal messages in marketing, which generated great controversy, however the same finding showed making a good sound decision depends on the association within the formed limbic brain structures. McGregor et al. (2001) stated delusionally prone individuals exhibited cognitive bias and also found hasty decision making created more errors in judgement during the process.

Dr. Lee Daeyeol (2011) from the Department of Neurobiology and Kavli Institute for Neuroscience at Yale University of Medicine, stated:

The essence of the thinking during decision making is mental simulation—you are trying to predict before you take an action what outcome may occur based on your previous

experiences, or by observing and remembering the outcomes of other people's behaviors.
(para. 6)

The leaders, or decision makers, during the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor and on 9/11 made decisions they felt were the most appropriate at the time. Could the attack on Pearl Harbor been avoided? Maybe not, as history has shown there were many ships docked at the time and without any warning, the Japan attacked. The location remains standing as a memorial of good leaders making bad decisions, yet questions arise as to why the leaders made the decisions they made.

Leaders and decision makers may have been able to act earlier with the COVID-19 pandemic yet the virus began in the fall of 2019 and was in full force in 2020 with lockdowns, closed businesses, schools, churches, and many lost lives globally. The global economic impact of the pandemic is currently being evaluated and may not ever become fully realized (World Bank Group, 2022). Could the crisis have been avoided or maybe lessened? Can neuroscience discoveries benefit leaders and decision makers to avoid future calamities?

Collaboration may have ignited the neuroscience understanding and reactions of the brain during critical decision-making processes yet even good leaders' decisions may result in failure. Patterns of previous experiences and decisions may include assumptions that the patterns are the same, but the results of a bad decision can be heard "around the world." Leaders making critical decisions may benefit from developing new skills beyond personal views and patterns and apply the new skills prior to making decisions that affect businesses, employees, and people globally. Leaders are sometimes faced with crisis situations requiring preparedness, resilience, conflict management strategies, yet more importantly, readiness (Jin et al., 2024).

Readiness

Jin et al. (2024) defined ‘readiness’ as a mental state of being willing to engage in a crisis situation. Response and the constant change of a complex world have added to the complexity to better understand readiness in light of the ability to make a good decision in the face of a crisis (Ezzahid et al., 2022). The leaders and people of the world were not ready for the COVID-19 pandemic and the repercussions that followed, yet gaining an in-depth understanding of “the world will remain vulnerable to the next flu pandemic” (Coats, 2019, p. 21) and understanding what might happen may better prepare leaders to avoid another global crisis (Osterholm & Olshaker, 2024). Businesses, communities, and schools should have a readiness plan to assist in the event a crisis occurs.

Many schools have implemented policies and procedures to prevent another Sandy Hook crisis and have taken the new patterns of experience and applied to the decision-making process to avoid future crises (Hoagwood et al., 2017). Decisions based on research and collaboration with community stakeholders, law enforcement, and local emergency responders should include listening and creating a readiness plan in the event of a crisis. Individuals who experienced the Sandy Hook massacre have completed research and agree: “Comprehensive research and analysis reveal that key warning signs precede violence and that recognizing the signs is essential to violence prevention” (Sandy Hook Promise, 2024, para. 2). Daily decision-making in businesses is not reflective of the ability to be ready and respond to an incident, a crisis, or tragedy. Moving forward, leaders and future leaders of companies, businesses and organizations may benefit in the decision-making process by listening to individuals who experienced or lived through a crisis situation in an effort to work toward a common goal of making good decisions and also forming a collaborative effort with community leaders and stakeholders, i.e., police, fire

and emergency personnel. The need to listen, research, and make decisions based on fact instead of personal bias, rank, or hierarchy is essential to achieve a consensus for a readiness plan.

Conclusion

Communication is something ignored in the world of today as decisions are made fast and sometimes not sufficiently researched to achieve an outcome beneficial for the majority. Neuroscience has identified that individuals think differently in a crisis situation yet for leaders to become informed and educated may take some time. The need to research various crises experienced may help to engage leaders in crisis management and readiness decisions. Leaders may benefit from listening to those who may be able to give them insight as to what is going on and defer making a decision until further research has been completed. Neuroscience findings may be a consideration when training and collaborating on a decision affecting many individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities.

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