

Deciding Under Pressure

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One of the things that project managers do is to make decisions. If you make timely and well considered decisions, you are likely to be successful as a project manager. If not, you could end up with a cruelly short career as a project manager. Decision making techniques such as the Pros and Cons, Prioritisation and Kepner-Tregoe are likely to help any budding project manager.

All of the above decision making techniques, however, assume that you have plenty of time to gather information and weigh pros and cons before taking a decision. As any practicing project manager would know, that is hardly the reality. Project managers are often required to make quick and effective decisions in the face of inadequate or missing information, high stakes, fixed deadlines and large variations in the skill levels of their team members. How do you decide in such scenarios? Are there any findings from cognitive or behavioural research that we as front line project managers can use to hone our decision making skills under pressure?

The short answer is yes. There is a well regarded 'Recognition-Primed Decision' (RPD) Model that fits the bill.

What is the 'Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) Model'?

The Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) Model was created by the well regarded research psychologist Dr. Gary Klein. It was first published in his 1999 book "Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions".

The essence of the RPD Model is that the standard 'laboratory' models of decision making could not describe decision making under uncertainty. Through his study of experts such as the fire fighters and intensive care nurses in their natural environments, Dr. Klein devised his Recognition-Primed Decision Model of decision making.

RPD combines two ways of developing a decision:

- Firstly, recognising which course of action seems to make sense, and
- Secondly, testing the course of action against the known constraints to see if the course of action still makes sense. The very first course of action that meets this test is considered to be a reasonable response.

Behavioural research reveals a significant and critical difference between experts and novices when presented with the same problem situation. Experienced people are generally able to come up with quicker and better decisions than the novices. This is because the experienced people are able to match their decision to a prototypical situation that they have faced in the past. Novices have to visualise and then cycle through different courses of action, which takes time. Given the time pressure, novices also tend to pick the very first course of action that they are able to come up with.

How does the RPD Model work?

There are three variations of the RPD Strategy:

In Variation 1, project manager recognises the situation as typical. This is the scenario where the details of the situation as well as the details of the necessary course of action are known. The 'typical' situation will immediately lead to an established and known response. In other words, Variation 1 is an "If....then" response. Obviously greater the experience of the project manager, greater is the likelihood that she would know the prototypical situation as well as the necessary course of action.

Variation 2 is the more common scenario where a project manager is faced with a situation involving various gaps of information, and she has to choose from a known selection of courses of action. In other words, Variation 2 takes the form of an "If (???) then" response. In this case the project manager has to model the situation by filling in the blanks using her experience and then choosing the course of action that best matches the known constraints. Experienced project managers are more likely to correctly model the situation, and are therefore more likely to choose the more appropriate course of action.

In Variation 3, the project manager knows the details of the situation but is not aware of the appropriate course of action. The project manager is now required to quickly undertake a trial and error regimen to develop the best course of action. Variation 3 takes the form of "If (???) then" Due to the time pressure inherent in the situation, the project manager will pick the first course of action that meets the existing set of constraints. Experienced project managers are likely to come up with a suitable course of action more rapidly since they would be able to use their expert knowledge to quickly discount inappropriate courses of action.

How do you apply the RPD Model?

In the end, the RPD Model is a blend of intuition and analysis. The intuition is the prototype matching process that enables one to quickly come up with appropriate situations and viable courses of action. The analysis is the conscious and the systematic review of the possible courses of action.

So what can you do as a project manager:

- Gain experience. Vast body of research suggests that there is little alternative to the experience that project managers gain at the trenches. Sharing of experiences will not replace gaining of experiences.
- Test a possible course of action against the known constraints. Choose the first course of action that makes sense.

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