Chapter XXIII
Several Simple Shared Stable Decision Premises for Technochange

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ABSTRACT

This study explores decision premises that were used to manage and stabilise a complex technochange programme in a financial institution. Decision premises were extracted from business maxims, principles and rules using linguistic techniques. In the paper, the premises are juxtaposed with their consequences. The evidence of documents, observable practices and software configurations supports the analysis. It is found that decision premises form a hierarchical, self-causal as well as self-contradictory system of reasoning that was applied over any individual situation, particularly a conflict. By virtue of being several but not many, decision premises reinforce the 80-20 rule of many consequences stemming a few causes. In the case firm, decision premises were used in order to make technochange efficient as well as institute cost-saving and business ownership of software development. But there were drawbacks of intensified politics, software development delays, short-sighted capability decisions and work fragmentation for the front-line employees.

INTRODUCTION: DECISION PREMISES AND IT MANAGEMENT

In organisations, many decisions and processes are based upon premises that go without question. Everyone is familiar with decisions, which appear irrelevant or inefficient at the moment, but turn out to be wise. The wisdom, in part, is about the benefit of continuity. Good decisions are typically made within a system of premises, be it an explicit
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corporate strategy or not-so-obvious top managers’ beliefs about how to run a business. A list of beliefs can be short and simple, but they usually comprise a densely connected system with certain hierarchical relations between beliefs.

Having the benefit of hindsight, after the exploration of top managers’ decision premises, I propose that their disregard of circumstances and workplace issues is an outcome of dynamics rather than intention. Critical management researchers observed that organisational growth does not provide opportunities to improve the contemporary workplace that is characterised as tense and fragmented (Marchington, Grimsnaw, Rubery & Willmott, 2005). Organisation behaviour researchers observed the self-contradictory expression and double-bind of middle management’s position, as managers needed to demonstrate sympathy and make necessary changes at the same time (Huy, 2002).

What makes it harder to make good decisions is a degree of lock-in that occurs in complex projects of technology implementation, because ‘small’ decisions mount up and make future changes expensive. Also, organisation-wide implementation of information systems or any other high technology is inseparable from change in business processes, culture, and strategy. In order to conceptualise this, Lynne Marcus (2004) introduced the idea of technochange. Central to technochange are the ideas of interdependence and diversity of initiatives and outcomes. In highly interdependent circumstances of technochange, it is difficult to either forecast the results of individual decisions or follow a logical and elaborate strategy. It is also difficult to forecast how much of resources will be spent, committed, or gained. Scientific and operational research methods provide only limited assistance in such forecasting. Therefore, a study of ‘primitive’ but practical ways of complexity managements of operations would be a contribution. This chapter makes an initial step towards the objective. It utilises understandings of applied linguistics and coaching practice in order to identify a system of decision premises as ‘a map of the world,’ within which managers make decisions in technochange projects.

DEFINITION AND DYNAMICS

The term ‘decision premises’ was introduced by March and Simon (1958). Other names were ‘business maxims,’ interpretative schemes, and cognitive maps. I consider three dimensions to a definition of decision premises that shed light on how decision premises operate. The dimensions are presuppositions, frames, and beliefs.

Presupposition is an implication of a statement that remains logically true, whether or not the statement itself is true (Bandler & Grinder, 1975). For example, a business process might or might not have an owner, but it is presupposed that there is ownership. For another example, a decision might be made to fix a flaw in software because it will save future costs, or the same flaw can be left based on the same premise of the necessity of making the most economical decisions about costly IT.

An epistemologist would say that every activity or communication is made within a frame that defines its meaning (Bateson, 1972). Alternatively, meaning of a communication can derive from its context and surrounding communications. Frames are a construct of a higher logical order. For example, the frame of a strategy-away day is different from the frame of a board meeting. The term ‘technochange’ is a frame itself as it regulates broader consequences than the term ‘software update’ would.

Term ‘decision premises’ presupposes, literally, that decision premises do not exist in isolation. Typically, there are several, but not many, decision premises and they form a system with its own self-developing (sometimes self-referential) logic. Therefore, personal development literature talks about ‘belief systems’ and ‘value systems.’ In this study, beliefs are treated as something that
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