

Overcoming Decision Paralysis

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Too much information causes mental fatigue and inhibits decision making.

These days we are bombarded with superfluous data. People who subscribe to the more-information-is-better approach are either lazy, exhibit CYA behavior, or misunderstand the psychology of humans. I'll explain the reasons why TMI fails later. First, let's address these three reasons people assault us with TMI.

What I describe as "lazy" behavior is when someone fails to take the time required to consider the needs of the audience, whether one or many. They are indiscriminate and just "do a data dump" when they should instead choose only the most relevant information to include in the message. It takes more time to be brief.

Mark Twain wrote, "Anybody can have ideas – the difficulty is to express them without squandering a quire [24 pages] of paper on an idea that ought to be reduced to one glittering paragraph."

Also, human brains work best when context is delivered before details. That is, gist first, details second.

CYA behavior is the next most common reason for TMI abuse, after careless thinking. The goal in "cover your accountabilities" is to avoid liability or blame by including every conceivable circumstance. While this might be a good idea in the Mission to Mars Spacecraft Repair Manual, it is unhelpful in Earthbound circumstances. This can be a gut-check moment for a leader. Is your goal to serve the customer/client, or is it to give your attorneys talking points when some nitwit files a frivolous lawsuit? These two choices are often mutually exclusive.

Last, some well-meaning people are just misguided. They believe more data improves the quality of the audience's choices. They are wrong, bless their hearts, and here's why.

The reason TMI harms decision making is because of the way people make decisions. We make choices by reducing our focus to a few easy-to-understand factors. Excessive data inhibits this focus. The result? No decision at all, or at least a delay in making a choice.

Simple is more helpful than complex. For example, reflect on restaurant inspections by public health authorities. The inspectors cover many areas of sanitation and food preparation, but the most **useful** grading system for the public is simple A, B, C summary scoring. We understand these at a glance.

Moreover, we often need more than just raw data; we need expertise to provide context. The U.S. Tax Code is, according to Google, more than 60,000 pages. Is that your resource when preparing your income tax return? Not likely! Instead, many people consult a tax expert. In addition to knowledge, experts have the experience to make informed recommendations in areas of ambiguity.

Culture has much to do with how decisions are made within an organization. For example:

- Do people have the context they need to make and execute decisions?
- Do people know the organization's preferred decision style? (Directive, participative, democratic, or consensus)
- Are the best people where they can have the biggest impact on decisions?
- Do leaders at all levels consistently demonstrate effective decision behaviors?

The bottom line issue in this regard is: Does the culture reinforce prompt, effective decision making *and action* throughout the organization? It does in the case of Kraft foods, whose mantra is, "We discuss. We decide. We deliver."

Sound *processes* also help. These include the following.

- Frame a decision in reverse to help gain clarity. For example, "Can you prove it's a safe solution?" instead of "Can you prove it's not safe?"
- Make each decision explicit, and break big decisions into two or more parts
- Separate the actual decision from the discussion of choices. Seek clarity; avoid ambiguity.
- Use pictures and graphics to illustrate key points, or to summarize data.

Finally, remember **The Rule of Seven** (from Bain & Co. research): Every person added to a decision-making group over 7 reduces decision effectiveness by 10%.