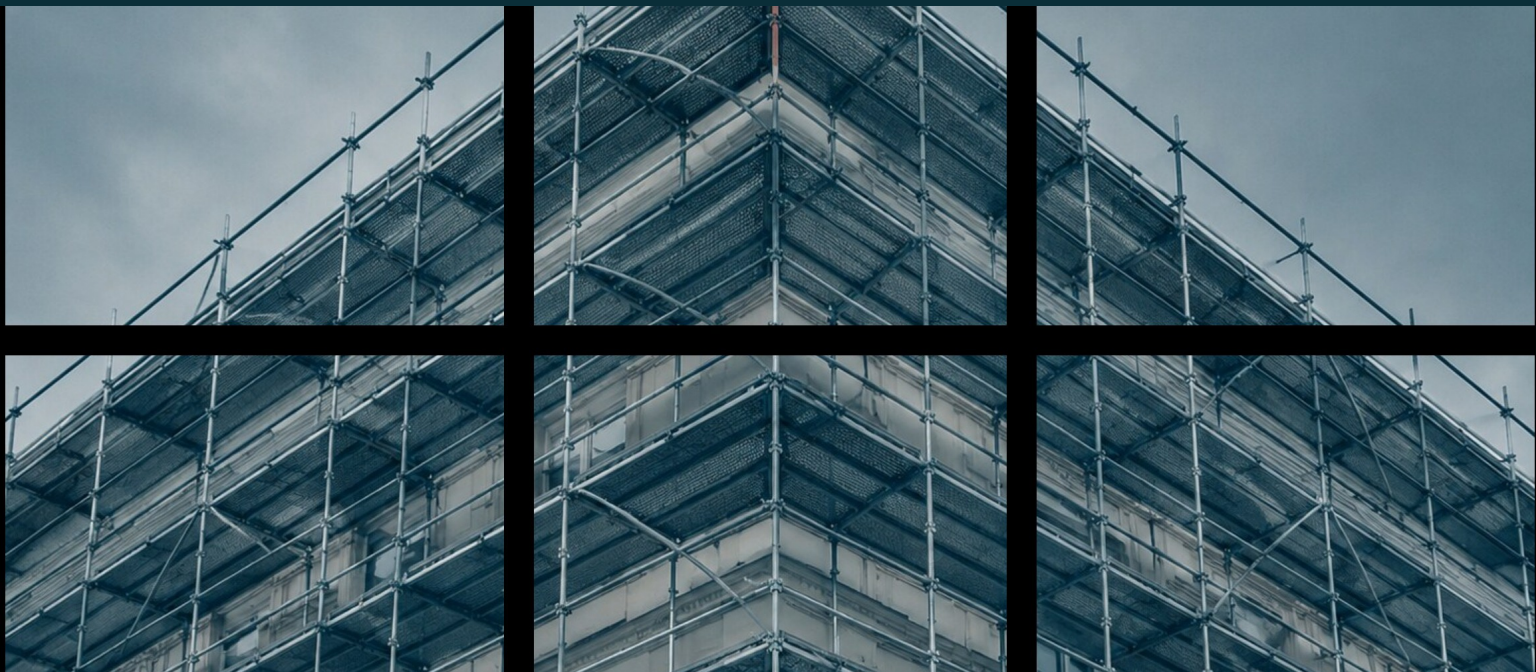


BEYOND BETTER DATA

# We Invested in the Information and Neglected the Decision

A Practitioner's Perspective on Treating Decision-Making as a Discipline in Complex  
Organisations



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# We Invested in the Information and Neglected the Decision

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*“We have built a discipline of data. We have not built a discipline of decision.”*

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## 1. The Question We Stopped Asking

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Over the past decade organisations have spent extraordinary sums to be better informed. Data warehouses have been built, dashboards commissioned, reporting layers stacked one upon another, all in the service of a single promise: that better information would produce better decisions. The information has largely arrived. The better decisions, in my experience, have not — or at least not in anything like proportion to the investment. Something in the chain between knowing and deciding has been quietly overlooked.

The pattern I have observed across large organisations is that we treat information as the hard part and the decision itself as the easy part — as though, once a manager has the right figures on the right screen, the decision follows of its own accord, and follows correctly. It does not. The act of deciding is itself a skilled, failure-prone process, and we have almost entirely declined to treat it as one. We have built a discipline of data. We have not built a discipline of decision.

## 2. Where the Value Actually Leaks

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Watch where a well-informed organisation actually loses value and you rarely find the loss at the point of information. The figures were usually there. The loss is at the point of judgement: the option that was never put on the table, the assumption no one tested, the number everyone saw and no one acted on, the choice made in a corridor and reverse-engineered into a business case afterwards. The reporting captured everything except the one thing that determined the outcome — how the decision was actually made.

There is a seductive belief, renewed with each new reporting tool, that the next layer of information will finally close this gap — that if the figures were only fresher, finer-grained or better presented, the judgement would take care of itself. It is a comfortable belief because it keeps the problem technical, and technical problems can be bought. The awkward truth is that the remaining problem is not technical at all. It is a problem of practice, and practice cannot be procured.

*We have become expert at supplying decisions with information and remained amateur at the decisions themselves. The screen is full; the discipline is missing.*

This is why the return on so much information investment disappoints. Better inputs into an undisciplined process yield, at best, better-documented versions of the same errors. A

dashboard does not decide. It informs a human act that remains as intuitive, as political, and as unexamined as it was before the dashboard existed.

### 3. What a Discipline Would Mean

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To speak of decision-making as a discipline is to say it can be done well or badly on purpose — that there is craft in it which can be named, taught and improved. In practice a disciplined decision has a small number of visible parts, and their absence is what marks the undisciplined one.

- A frame. What, precisely, is being decided, and what is not? Most poor decisions are poor framings wearing the costume of a choice — the real question was never the one on the table.
- Genuine options. A decision with one option is a ratification. A disciplined decision generates real alternatives, including the uncomfortable one of doing nothing.
- Weighed evidence. Not merely the presence of data, but an honest account of what it does and does not support, and where judgement is filling the gaps the data leaves.
- A record. What was decided, by whom, on what basis, and what was expected to follow. Without this, an organisation cannot learn, because it cannot remember why it chose as it did.
- A review. A later, deliberate comparison of what happened against what was expected — not to assign blame, but to improve the next decision.

None of this requires new technology. It requires treating the decision as an object worthy of the same rigour we lavish on the data that feeds it.

### 4. Why the Textbook Fails on the Front Line

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The management literature has long assumed a rational decision-maker: a figure who assembles the evidence, weighs the options against clear objectives and selects the optimum. On the front line, this figure is nowhere to be found. Real decisions are made by tired people under time pressure, with incomplete information, competing incentives and an audience. The evidence is marshalled as often to defend a preference as to form one. Objectives are plural and in tension. And the organisation, having decided, promptly forgets the reasoning and remembers only the result.

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*“An organisation that cannot recall why it decided as it did is  
condemned to mistake its luck for its judgement.”*

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Consider how organisations treat their own decision history. A choice is made, defended, implemented — and then, whatever the result, the reasoning evaporates. If it succeeds, the success is claimed as foresight; if it fails, the record is reconstructed to show the failure was unforeseeable. In neither case does the organisation retain what it actually believed at the moment of choice, and so in neither case can it learn whether it decided well. Hindsight quietly rewrites every decision into either genius or bad luck, and a body that cannot tell the two apart cannot improve.

The textbook fails, then, not because rigour is wrong but because it locates the rigour in the wrong place — in the analysis feeding the decision rather than in the conduct of the decision itself. Decision intelligence, if the term is to mean anything, is not a smarter class of report. It is the discipline of the deciding: of how the choice is framed, argued, recorded and reviewed. That discipline is emerging on the front line out of necessity rather than theory, in the organisations that have noticed their information has outrun their judgement.

## 5. Beginning to Build It

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A practitioner need not wait for the discipline to be codified. It can be started, modestly, inside any decision one has influence over.

1. Name the decision before making it. State the frame and the options in writing, before the choice. The act of articulation exposes the framings that were doing the deciding unseen.
2. Write the expectation down. Record what you believe will happen as a result of the choice. This single habit converts every decision into a future lesson.
3. Return to the record. Weeks or months later, compare outcome to expectation. Most organisations never close this loop, and so never learn to decide better — only to report better.
4. Separate the quality of the decision from the quality of the outcome. A good decision can have a bad result and a bad decision a good one. Judging decisions by their outcomes alone teaches people to be lucky, not to be disciplined.

## 6. The Discipline Ahead

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The organisations that will pull ahead in the years to come are not, I suspect, those with the largest data warehouses. They will be those that have learned to decide well — that have taken the same seriousness they once directed at gathering information and turned it, at last, upon the human act the information was always meant to serve. The information age gave us the inputs. The discipline of using them is the work still in front of us, and on the front line it is the more valuable and the less finished of the two.