Avoiding disaster

Christian morel, *Les decisions absurdes*, Gallimard,2002
Reviewed by Jean-Jacques Lambin

A large number of management books and articles are devoted to the analysis of individual and organisational decision making in a high risk or uncertain environment. Numerous case studies have been written which highlight and explain major strategic errors.

This book is different, however, in that it concerns the intellectual logic that leads to what the author calls 'absurd' decisions. Based on fourteen fascinating examples from the worlds of technology and management, as well as from everyday life, it considers the cognitive mechanisms that lead individuals or groups of people to act with persistency in a way that directly contradicts their goals while appearing to be in line with established practice.

An 'absurd' decision is different from a wrong decision in the sense that the discrepancy (or gap) between the objective and the result is drastic. How was it, for example, that the Challenger spaceship was launched despite awareness among engineers that key joints were defective; that two oil tankers collided having changed course specifically to avoid the collision; or that business people persistently use illegible transparencies during presentations (while acknowledging as much to the audience)?

The author makes a distinction between four different types of situation which lead to an unsatisfactory result: (1) the accident, i.e. the partial or total destruction of a technical system due to an unknown factor; (2) a 'composition' effect which arises when individuals collectively respond to a piece of information (eg a traffic warning) with negative 'knock on' consequences; (3) a mediocre solution far removed from the hoped for result; (4) a decision (typically the output of an absurd decision making process) that produces a solution drastically opposed to the intent.

What is the intellectual logic that leads scientists, managers and educated people in general to behave in a way that is totally at odds with their objective? In each case presented Morel comes to the conclusion that absurd decisions do not happen at random, but are the results of a comprehension or representation error which is different from more classic errors like lack of attention, disregard of rules or simple ignorance.

With a representation error the event is not properly understood or decoded by the individuals in charge; they become captives of a biased mental model of reality and are unaware that they are heading towards disaster or absurdity. Another cause of absurd decisions, according to Morel, is sloppy thinking (bricolage cognitif), the adoption by an individual or team of an heuristic information processing system less intellectually demanding and time consuming, but less analytical and therefore more risky.

Absurd decisions are not limited to individuals but are the outgrowth of a collective system composed of three types of actors - the manager, the expert and the naive. Each participates in the decision process leading to absurd decisions and can adopt one of the five following actions: create the decision, ask for, follow, abstain or oppose the decision. Morel identifies eleven different models of interaction between these three actors and the five types of action, which help us understand how a particular decision-making process can lead to an absurd decision. The comparison of these models also helps identify which organisational model can minimise the risk of persistent collective errors.

This is an excellent book covering an important topic not much discussed in business circles. The text is easy to read, fully documented and very well organised around the case studies presented in the first section. The author – a Docteur en sciences politiques and a graduate from the Institut d'études politiques de Paris who is Director of human resources of the utility vehicle division of Renault – brings both his academic training and his business experience to bear on the topic.

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