

PROCRASTINATING MANAGEMENT. ©

The art of postponing critical decisions

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procrastinate

/prə(ʊ)'krastineɪt/ 

verb

delay or postpone action; put off doing something.

"the temptation will be to procrastinate until the power struggle plays itself out"

synonyms: **delay**, put off doing something, postpone action, defer action, be dilatory, use delaying tactics, **stall**, **temporize**, play for time, play a waiting game, **dally**, drag one's feet/heels, take one's time; [More](#)

Summary

Tough decisions are often times hard to take. And if there is a way to avoid such a decision, it might be tempting to do so. You see it all around you, and for sure you have some interesting examples yourself as well. It is not something that has to do with corporate life, it happens all the time. Kids are masters in this, and the ability sticks with you when you grow older. This whitepaper discusses the habit in the light of corporate decision making, where I call it procrastinating management.

Procrastinating management might happen unconsciously, especially if perceived valid reasons are at hand. But what is it, and can we do something about that? Should we?

Disclaimer: This document is my own story. By no means do I want to suggest it has any scientific value, there is no foundation of statistical material nor a formal psychological basis.

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Introduction

Every single day you make hundreds of decisions, consciously or not. You decide to get out of bed, have breakfast, chose clothes to wear, go to work. Or not. Many of these decisions are based on routines and don't require much thinking. And that is good news, you wouldn't get anything done if every single decision needs time for serious consideration.

On the other hand, there are choices to be made that do require thorough thinking and possibly brainstorming, consulting and advice before they are made. Choices that for example have an impact on your spendable income or your family situation. For some, this can be the purchase of a new washing machine, for others this buying a house or moving to a new location, but for all it is a decision to be taken with care.

There is also a category that is more difficult to classify, and also this differs for each of us. Sometimes a bold decision is taken in a second, and a relatively simple decision takes forever. An example; In an impulse you decide to take your family out for dinner. You enjoy every moment of it, and have no issues with the bill of USD200,-. However, the pair of shoes you want to buy, half that price, makes you go visit multiple stores, go home without them, come back and reconsider the purchase over and over. You might end up not buying the so much desired pair at that moment. I am not a psychologist, so I have no idea why this works the way it works, but for sure I suffer from it. "Penny wise, pound foolish," as they say.

Finally, we also notice a different category of decisions; those that are inevitable. You have to take them, sooner or later, but for some reason you don't. You postpone, even if your logical brain says that it's not smart and that you will regret your lack of strength or discipline. With sometimes big impact. You ignore the strange sound in your car, even though you know it is not right...."maybe it will automatically disappear" you tell yourself. But usually it doesn't. And then your motor brakes down...

It starts at an early age. When your dad tells you to go do your homework. You know he is right, but for starters, it's not his business, nor his responsibility, you tell yourself. So, first you want to finish your tea, which feels totally legitimate at that stage. Once that is done, you need to call Peter. Not sure why, but for sure it is important. By the time you can start your homework, dinner is only 30 minutes away, so it does not make sense to start now, does it? After dinner you need to get over your little after dinner dip and see the evening news first. Staying informed of what's going on in the world is important. By the time you realize you have to get started you are too late, so either you don't do what you are supposed to do and accept the consequences, or it gets to be a really late night. Or maybe you are one of those that then gets up really early. And regret you didn't do it earlier.

The next day, the routine repeats itself. Something in our brain seems to fail here, we don't learn.

This exact type of behavior can be noticed at daily work, in small and large corporates. Where the impact of not making a decision can be really impactful, for customers, employees or cost levels, just to mention a few. But as long as nobody brings it up, there is no issue. Right?

Many decisions are based on routine behavior within the mandate of the employee. Years of experience, sometimes enriched with Lean process improvement, lead to smooth running processes and teams. Decisions are understood, the impact is known and accepted. Other decision requests are brought to Steering Committees or management, supported by the right documentation and

potentially a business case. The request will be discussed and a decision is taken. Those type of decisions most likely are in line with strategy of a program, are necessary for progress to achieve a known goal.

The Purple Crocodile

However, there seems to be another category of challenges out there that need to be addressed, but are being avoided. People carefully dance around it. They are known to most of your team members, but nobody brings it up in public. Because you know there is little benefit to gain if you do so. The subject remains at coffee machine level. And if you have the guts to bring it up, chances are that your peers -whom you know agree with you in 1-1 situations- will let you down and stay silent.....These are known as The Purple Crocodile, The White Elephant or The Elephant in the Room. Do you know some of those?

It would be my guess that a core characteristic of such a challenge is that an immediate solution or interference is not absolutely necessary. If you don't do anything, if you don't act, nothing will immediately go wrong. The situation continues as is, the particular subject is purposely kept out of discussions.

Another characteristic is -almost without doubt- that addressing such a challenge contains a certain financial risk. The impact is big, the outcome uncertain. Most likely a project or program is required to properly address the challenge. A business case might be difficult to build up only on hard numbers, but instead contains assumptions towards the future. Assumptions that are always subject to a debate and those that struggle with change will use this as an excuse. "We need more details before.....".

Not only is there a financial risk, addressing this hot potato also implies a career risk. It is the subject that managers prefer to avoid. It is the subject that has been around for a while already, and predecessors successfully managed to move it forward without burning their fingers. It is the subject that can create fuss in your team. And in your career. So you rather prevent the subject from being at the table. Don't bring it up. A typical case of "if you don't like the answer, don't ask the question."

Managers postpone critical "risky" decisions that sooner or later have to be taken. And although everybody realizes it is more expensive if you wait, it still happens. And for some reason they even tend to have excuses that seem to kind of make sense..

You might recognize them: "We don't have the budget this year, we need to wait for the outcome of analysis x, y and z, we don't have the right resources, the agenda is already overloaded, there are other, more urgent issues to be solved". If you want, you will always find a reason to postpone and likely you can convince yourself of the idea that this is ok. That is what I call

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Justifiable procrastination

In my opinion this is a *contradictio in terminis*. No such thing. This might be the shortest paragraph of this paper. Either you have real valid reasons to postpone, or you don't. But you can't legitimately justify procrastination. If you do, it is not a case of procrastination. At least not the procrastination I describe in this paper.

Nevertheless, certain behavior can very well be understood, reasons to postpone are maybe outside your control. For the particular individual it might be logical to avoid a decision. That does not mean

that the procrastination is justifiable, it is however being addressed at the wrong level. There are explicit or implicit reasons that make you avoid to take a decision. You or somebody else can explain the reason why (not). And might be ok.

Where does this come from?

Stick to the status quo

One of the characteristics of this era is the high speed of change. As an organization you don't have much choice than to try and keep up with that speed. If not, you might become the next victim of disruption in your industry. However, lots of organizations have deep pockets and only die slowly, the impact of disruption might kick in over time, when it is too late to respond adequately. These organizations don't immediately feel the pain of not making decisions, they have long lasting service contracts and recurring income. They think -or hope- it is not as bad as some say. But as you know, hope is not a strategy. So what can be the reasons for such behavior?

"Don't rock the boat" or maintain the status quo is a preferred situation for a certain type of manager. A manager that does not really embrace change. You deal with daily issues, that you have been dealing with for some time and that you control well. Every now and then an issue pops up, you deal with it, and the situation returns to normal. "Control" might be a key word here. Don't understand me wrong, by the way. The above does not mean there is no stress, no pressure and no excitement. "Status quo organizations" can, like any other organization, be quite dynamic. However, this white paper is about avoiding a certain type of decisions, not all decisions. And also in status quo organizations decision need to be taken. If interference is absolutely necessary, it will be done. Because you really don't have a choice. But remember, the purple crocodile does not require immediate intervention. That is why you can postpone without feeling direct pain.

Managers that, consciously or not, like an environment with limited change can simply wait: either somebody else will pick it up, or it becomes a real issue. If the latter happens, you can take any decision because you will look good that you acted adequately. It is not likely that anyone will tell you that the issue emerged because of your lack of courage in the past. And nobody will tell you that the solution is now multiple times more expensive than if you had acted in the past. And maybe they won't tell you that, because they realize that they themselves did not act in the past either.....

Rest assured: chances are that employees around coffee machines will share such thoughts.....

Lack of a clear strategy

Another explanation of procrastinating management lays in strategy, or better, the lack thereof. Without a clear strategy it is difficult to think in appropriate solutions. You can conclude that action is needed, but without a clear vision on the future, such a decision is hard to take. As for all decisions referred to in this document, this is fine if the impact of not taking a decision or even taking a "wrong" decision is limited, but it gets worse if the impact is considerable.

I imagine that a mere decision has a series of following events, like (IT) project(s), involvement of external parties, budget allocation, resources, communication, target setting, governance set up, stakeholder alignment and more. In other words, there are consequences related to a decision. The bigger the size of following events, the harder it is to take make a choice without a view on the future.

Lack of (senior) support

I have seen situations where responsible managers are willing and capable of taking a critical decision, but their mandate is insufficient to decide by themselves. Approval of higher management is required. But not given. In that case you can't blame the manager, but you can certainly question the position of the senior manager. In larger corporations this is even more interesting, if successive managers all look up for a decision. Who do you need to question? It is too easy to say that at the end it is the CEO. If you are in *that* situation, your organization is in deep trouble.

Atmosphere of fear

Maybe you see the issue crystal clear, but are afraid to take a decision. Because you know how your manager will respond. And that response is not pleasant, experience has learned. If that is your situation, you are not likely to make a decision at all, you follow rules and procedures and shy away from risk. You leave any decision to your manager.

An atmosphere of fear is devastating for an organization. Not only that, it feeds procrastination. It is better to let somebody else potentially burn his or her fingers. Nobody will challenge silly choices either. You have learned to keep your mouth shut. However, if your organization is in such a situation, you have bigger issues to deal with. Forget about procrastinating management. Find a new employer.

Leadership

Although a number of different attitudes or reasons can be brought forward as underlying foundation for procrastinating management, in essence it might all be trimmed down to just one important element: Leadership. It is a way to large subject to address in this paper, lots of management books have been written about it, but the right leader would have a forward looking view, wants issues of the table and fosters an open and safe environment. Encourages continuous improvement and accepts the fact that difficult choices have to be made.

Is it a problem?

Yes. In the end it is....

At the end of the day procrastinating management leads to an increase of cost and frustration. That applies to the car example in this white paper, to commercial organizations and to governmental organizations. You want to move forward and don't get stuck with history, eliminate procrastinating management. Do what you need to do. Stand up. Take charge. Show leadership.

I fully appreciate that it might not be you standing in the way of a decision. For many good reasons you might just have to live with it, because that is how corporate life works. If you take the Triade-model of Theo Poiesz you might be able to understand what is holding you back (Prof.dr. Theo B. C. Poiesz, 1999.)

In his view behavior is based on three factors:

1. Motivation
2. Capacity
3. Opportunity

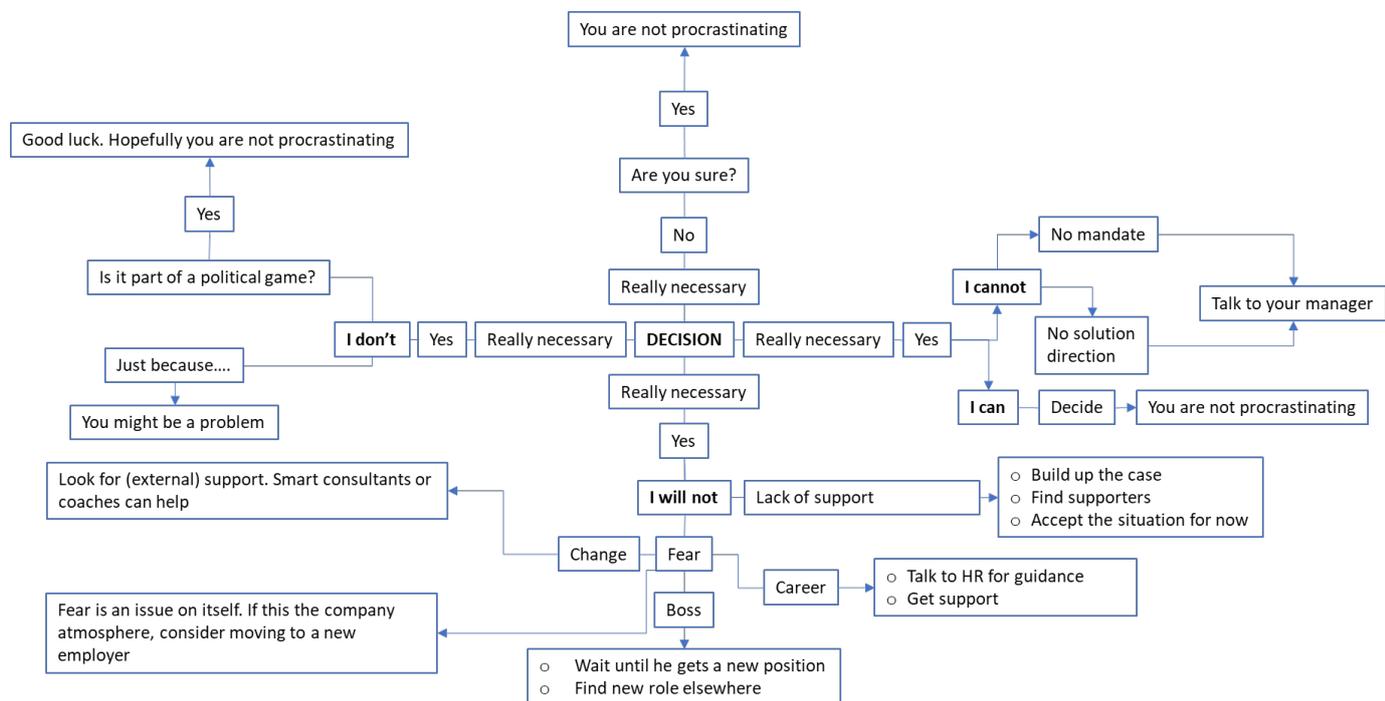
To change behavior, each of these factors needs to have a certain value >0 .

The T-score gives an impression of the level in which a certain behavior X simultaneously scores on each of the three factors.

T-score = M (otivation) x C (apacity) x O (ppportunity)

So if one of the factors scores low, the total score will be low and behavior will not change. Each of the factors can be activated by internal and external stimuli. For example, if you are internally motivated to jump 7 meters, the score could be high. If somebody offers you USD100.000,- jump 7 meters the external stimulus can help bring this score to a level close to 1. However, if you never will have the capacity to jump 7 meters, it still will not happen, even when you are highly motivated and if you have ample opportunities.

In the below picture a whole series of potential reasons is mentioned. The overview does not pretend to be correct nor complete. You can plot the Triade model on the various situations and conclude what the main reason is for certain behavior.



Is there a solution?

Well, I guess there is. But I don't feel like being the person to tell you how. Without any doubt lots of management books have been written about decision making, leadership, independent thinking, purple crocodiles, mind set and what have you. Go Google and take your pick.

The most important is to recognize if you suffer from this. If so, do something about it.....

Good luck