DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS

MAKING EXPERTISE MATTER.

ARTICLE　　**DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS**

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YOUR ORGANISATION UPHOLDS RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

— Why "Decision Making" Is The Cancer Of Organisations, And How Your Organisation Can Make A Difference And Improve Performance At The Same Time

Your Organisation Upholds Racism and Discrimination

— Why "Decision Making" Is the Cancer of Organisations, and How Your Organisation Can Make a Difference and Improve Performance at the Same Time

Management summary

This article sets out to show that wherever in the organisation choices are made which are "not fully substantiated to contribute to achieving a desired outcome," performance suffers and societal biases are welcomed in. Today's organisations are abound with these type of choices (a.k.a. "decisions") because of "hierarchical decision making" and the prevalence of rules, procedures, protocols, checklists and contracts — all of which tend to contain plenty of unsubstantiated choices.

To improve this situation — to replace decisions with substantiated choices — organisations are to utilise all available expertise. Where expertise is concerned, the thing of note is that it has no colour, gender, form, name, title or religion.

Before expertise can be utilised, it has to be identified first. Unfortunately, most of today's organisations identify "experience" instead of "expertise," disadvantaging the underprivileged (getting fewer opportunities to gain experience) even further.

This article argues and explains that the identification and utilisation of expertise is essential in drastically reducing decision making. It is this, and not traditional diversity programs, which is going to fend off societal biases from entering organisations, resolve workplace frustrations (e.g., lack of autonomy, freedom, trust, responsibility) and improve organisational performance — all at the same time.

This article goes on to describe how you can determine, by simple observation, to what extent your organisation allows societal biases to enter its culture, and what you and your organisation can do to make a difference.

Content

This is what it took

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man and a father of five, was killed by a white police officer who knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes. All of it recorded. I saw a video-still of the officer kneeling on his neck, his hand in his pocket.

I am a 48-year old white man and a father of three, living in the Netherlands. If I see an image of sickening violence I look away. Because I can.

It took me another ten days or so to realise that I can't. That I have to take my hand out of my pocket. Using it to turn pages and learn about racism is merely the beginning.

My perspective on racism changed in twenty minutes

The book I picked up was "So you want to talk about race" by Ijeoma Oluo [1]. It changed my perspective in less than twenty minutes. That is how little effort was required.

Ijeoma changed my perspective by clarifying the definition of racism. To "racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race," she added "when those views are reinforced by systems of power."

This definition now included me. I live and work within these systems of power. I consume, choose, receive, send, vote, act or remain passive within these systems of power. Systems which, among many other things, make it harder to get the job, to get promoted and to get equal pay on the basis of your race, your gender, your name, your religion, the way you look.

In her book Ijeoma writes about the importance of being aware of one's privileges. She writes that when you benefit from having certain privileges, then you are also automatically in a position of power to confront and ultimately change these privileges. Vice versa, when you merely accept your privileges, you are perpetuating the struggles of others who lack your unearned advantages.

I have been aware of my privileges, but I never consciously encountered them. Why is that?

I live and work in systems in which I am privileged for more reasons than I can list. I am white, a man, straight, able-bodied, tall, thin, neuro-typical, cisgender, university-educated, born, raised and living in the Netherlands carrying a Dutch name, and because of still other reasons too.

I have been aware of my privileges, but I never consciously encountered them. I never felt a finger tapping me on my shoulder, I never found myself raising an eyebrow, and I never felt uncomfortable when opportunities presented themselves.

Why is that? Through which "invisible" mechanism are our systems handing out advantages to the privileged? What is generating my tail wind? To what have I been so blind that — having no clue — Reni Eddo-Lodge would not want to talk about race to me [2]?

An urgently needed new perspective on decision making

I have known the answer for several years, I just never asked myself the question. My unearned advantages are handed to me through (hierarchical) decision making.

Where racism and discrimination are the cancer of society, decision making is the cancer of organisations.

Decision making is the cancer of organisations. Overcoming it will (also) improve performance.

Almost for as long as I have known the answer, I have been trying to come up with an accessible way to explain its logic. What has made this so challenging is that it requires a paradigm shift of how to look at decisions.

Unfortunately my line of reasoning and the arguments I like to make are too long for a casual read. The topic is also complex, and my writing not always up to it. I can only blame myself if I lose you along the way. But giving it a try may be worth it.

The term "decision" as used in organisations today has no distinct meaning, it is always in need of context

To explain the title of this article I first have to talk, at length, about decision making. This may seem nonsensical. You already know what a decision is, you make them all the time, big and small, good ones and also bad ones. Organisations do so too: if nobody would ever make a decision nothing would get done. The entire organisational structure is a reflection of who is entitled to make them. Yet I'll argue that decisions need to be avoided, that they have to be replaced with something else.

When talking about decisions we use adjectives as small, big, complex, important, bad, easy, smart, poor, wrong, right, hard and still many other adjectives too. It is not always clear whether the adjective refers to who is entitled to make them, to whether or not there is sufficient information to base them on, or to their eventual impact on what needs to be achieved. The term "decision" as used in organisations today has no distinct meaning, it is always in need of context.

The essence of almost all workplace changes proposed is a shift from "decisions which increase risk" to those which don't

But there is another, clearer, and much more powerful way to classify and distinguish between decisions: decisions which increase risk, and decisions which don't.

Decisions which <u>increase risk</u> are choices not fully substantiated to contribute to achieving a particular goal. Decisions which <u>don't increase risk</u> are fully substantiated (and thus become the logical next thing to do), or they indicate a formal action instead — like an "approval" or a "go ahead".

Making a distinction between decisions which increase risk and those which don't — and then identifying them — turns out to be crucial. It allows us to look at how organisations are run in a completely different way. Among many other things, it allows us to predict organisational performance, to understand why so many organisations have a need for resource-gobbling control, and to explain the mechanism by which racism, discrimination (e.g. the gender gap in leadership-roles [16]) and many other workplace frustrations are allowed to enter the door.

In fact, the essence of almost all workplace changes proposed today, and the underlying principle of "the new way of working," is creating the conditions to shift from "decisions which increase risk" to those which don't.

Decisions which don't increase risk aren't actually decisions

Where the decisions which don't increase risk are concerned: if something is either transparent, entirely logical and the obvious way forward, or merely a formal action, then, for clarity's sake — and following the dictionary definition of what a decision is — we shouldn't call them "decisions" in the first place. Because they aren't: they don't involve a choice.

The dominant paradigm about decision making is failing our societies, our organisations and us

That decision making needs to be avoided (or "replaced") is a paradigm shift. And a paradigm shift is required because the existing dominant paradigm — decision making is a strength, a token of power, an earned right, an indication of boldness and incisiveness, a skill, an organisational necessity, "the way of running things" — is failing our societies, our organisations, and the people operating within them. It is failing us because it stands in the way of utilising our skills, talents and motivation.

The dominant paradigm on decision making is not only failing us, it is also illogical. Starting with the dictionary definition of what a decision is — "a conclusion or resolution achieved after careful thought" — it follows that a "decision" is a special type of choice.

A decision is a choice made in a situation which is not fully transparent — at least not to the person making the decision (hence requiring careful thought). A clarified definition of a "decision" is that it is a choice which is <u>not fully substantiated</u> to contribute to achieving a desired outcome [3,4].

This implies that to avoid decision making non-ambiguous desired outcomes must always be in place. And the skills and talents needed to create transparency and substantiate the choices to be made must be both identified and utilised.

This is not something new. When organisations want to "distribute" or "share" decision making, or "push" decision making down the organisation, achieve it through consensus, or involve everyone affected by decisions in the decision making process, they generally strive to involve expertise and to substantiate decisions to a greater extent. What is new is the clarified definition of what a decision actually is, allowing for a systematic approach to identify and minimise decision making throughout the organisation.

Rules, procedures, protocols, checklists and contracts, they
tend to contain "past-decisions" which continue to increase
organisational risk

It goes without saying that, in many situations, making decisions cannot be avoided. Because there is simply no time to find the expert or to substantiate the choice. Or the situation is so dynamic that even an expert is not able to fully substantiate it. All of which is true, none of which changes the fact that decisions increase risk. A risk which can still be minimised.

Interestingly, with the clarified definition of a decision in mind, it becomes obvious that our organisations are abound with "choices which cannot be fully substantiated to help to achieve a goal". For example when the goal is poorly defined or ambiguous, or the choice was made in the past, in circumstances which have since changed.

The latter is frequently the case in organisational rules, procedures, protocols, checklists and contracts. They tend to contain plenty of "past-decisions". Because nobody can tell, or checks or verifies, whether they still contribute to whatever desired outcome they once were to contribute to. They are often used as measures of control. They are simply there. In the way. Blocking the utilisation of expertise. Causing frustration.

Decisions increase risk. But decisions do something else as well. Decisions are also the vehicle for societal biases entering our organisations.

Why it is in everybody's best interest to avoid decision making

That decisions increase risk is by no means new. It is, in fact, the raison d'être of a "decision making industry" offering books, methods, training and lots of consultancy.

The decision making industry recognises that to expect the people in decision-making-positions to routinely make "the right decisions" would be asking for the impossible. Even when all the required information is available to them — which it never is — they are, like the rest of us, only human.

We are incapable of recognising our own biases: the errors in
the judgements we make are intuitive

The human brain makes use of a long list of biases — among which societal biases — to make sense of the world around us. These biases are at work when making a decision. What is more, even knowing these biases exist is of little practical help. Humans are incapable of recognising their own biases: the errors in the judgements we make are intuitive [5,6].

Again, because it is such a crucial point: whenever we make a choice in a situation which is not fully transparent to us, whenever we are not able to fully substantiate how our choice will contribute to achieving something, then we intuitively make use of a long list of biases to arrive at this choice. These biases include societal biases, which is how society perceives the value, the quality, and the personal characteristics of people solely based on their race, gender, form, name, title and religion.

Tragically, given that decisions increase risk and perpetuate societal biases, today's organisations almost invariably have a pyramidical structure in which someone's position in the hierarchy determines whether they are allowed to make decisions. This is the principle of hierarchical decision making.

In today's organisations decisions tend to be God-given. They create an unsafe environment

Hierarchical decision making is, at first sight, a simple and also practical way of organising work. It may be slow at times, but at least everyone knows how it works. What makes it so harmful, however, is that the "power of hierarchy" makes these decisions incontestable. In today's organisations, decisions tend to be God-given.

This not only applies to the decisions managers make, but also the decisions which lie hidden in rules, procedures, protocols, checklists and contracts. And all of these incontestable decisions increase organisational risk by failing to tap into available expertise — or even by preventing its utilisation — and by failing to reduce, manage and mitigate the risks they are associated with.

For many, hierarchical decision making creates an unsafe environment. They acutely sense the biases at play. They are the ones who suffer the greatest frustrations caused by decision making. Decisions affecting recruitment, invitations to meetings, speaking time, opportunities to represent the company, and, of course, promotions. For the majority of us, none of this is likely to happen "on purpose". It happens intuitively, thoughtlessly, without conscious intent. As that is how biases work.

To arrive at some kind of a solution the paradigm shift has to be made

Taking everything together: if decisions perpetuate societal biases, increase risk, and hamper organisational performance, what is the alternative? How can organisations rid themselves of racism and discrimination and improve performance all at the same time?

Unfortunately, the "decision making industry" doesn't see decisions as something to be avoided. It merely tries to "improve" decision making [7-13]. In the context of trying to overcome decision making it offers few practical solutions.

If we want to make a difference, the paradigm shift has to be made.

But...

Decisions aren't the problem, we all make numerous small and big decisions throughout the day!

We make numerous choices during the day, which may be fully substantiated or not. Those which are not fully substantiated (a.k.a. decisions) may be associated with a small or a larger risk (of not contributing to achieving the outcome we are hoping for).

If decisions really increase risk, we would know by now!

Not everything we call a "decision" falls under the dictionary definition of a decision and as clarified here. The fact that a decision increases risk doesn't mean this risk will also materialise (the decision — although not fully substantiated — may still contribute to achieving the desired outcome). The risk may also materialise a long time after the decision was made, and a link with a decision may therefore no longer be made.

Which "decisions" aren't actually decisions?

If a decision is fully substantiated to contribute to a desired outcome, it merely becomes the obvious and logical next step: there simply is no "choice" to be made anymore (it would be sabotage). Many "decisions" are formal approvals or go-aheads. Other "decisions" — e.g. those made in absence of a desired outcome — are mere "choices" (e.g., picking a colour in a board game).

Decisions aren't actually the problem, the problem is how they are made!

If you let experts make the decisions, then they may end up "avoiding" decisions by fully substantiating their proposals. If they can't fully substantiate the choices made, then, as they are experts, they will at least minimise the associated risks. How decisions get made is, indeed, crucial. But decisions still increase risk (and are the problem).

It is not decision making which introduces societal biases, it is lack of diversity in leadership positions!

There is a strong and logical tendency to set quotas or define recruitment rules and protocols. But this doesn't address the reason why there is a lack of diversity in the first place. It also doesn't (necessarily) address the fact that proportional representation (e.g., with respect to gender, race, background) applies to leadership-roles throughout the organisation.

The alternative to decision making is utilising skills and talents

Hierarchical decision making is an anachronism. It is a construct belonging to the previous century. Today organisations have to achieve their desired outcomes using multidisciplinary teams operating in a dynamic environment. Long gone are the days when the team leader had all the answers.

> Expertise has no colour, is genderless, and without form, name, title or religion

To be successful, organisations need to achieve their goals, and do so against minimal use of resources (and hence minimal risk). To accomplish this, organisations need to be able to identify and utilise expertise throughout their organisation.

Here expertise is thus defined as "the ability to contribute to achieve a goal against minimal risk". Which "expertise" achieves by actually substantiating the choices to be made.

As mentioned before, the thing of note with "expertise" is that it has no colour, is genderless, and without form, name, title or religion.

The logical and hopeful conclusion is the following: **If organisations succeed at identifying and optimally utilising available "expertise," they will improve organisational performance and upend workplace frustrations — including racism and discrimination**.

This is something which bears out in practice, albeit — given that this concept is new and hasn't been academically researched — the evidence is often anecdotal.

Perhaps the best documented indication is the correlation found between women in leadership-roles and company performance. A large McKinsey study found that women are severely underrepresented in management and decision-making roles (representing on average just 11% of the membership of the governing bodies), but that the companies where women are most strongly represented at board or top-management level are also the companies that perform best [14].

The proposed logic explaining this correlation is simple. Those companies which utilise the expertise of their employees best, will both have superior organisational performance (as it utilises expertise) and a smaller gender-gap (as expertise is genderless). In other words, through the utilisation of expertise companies will automatically reduce the gender-gap in leadership-roles throughout the organisation — and reduce the prevalence of other societal biases at the same time as well.

<div align="center">
An organisation shunning expertise, run by the privileged, with
a culture of mediocrity which is unsafe and where societal
biases have free rein
</div>

An interesting example of an organisation which actively shunned and derided expertise was the very public experiment known as the Donald Trump administration. In absence of any attempt to identify and utilise expertise, and often in absence of non-ambiguous desired outcomes, the Donald Trump administration operated entirely by "decision making". The result was an organisation run by the privileged which injected risk into society with every action it took. Its culture of mediocrity was unsafe, and societal biases had free reign. An analysis of the privileges enjoyed by those in the administration, as well as how the administration's policies and directives benefitted some and deprived others, may offer clear pointers as to what — for a significant part of society — these societal biases (still) are.

Our organisations fail to identify our expertise (they hardly try)

If you agree, or are willing to consider, that decision making increases risk and intuitively allows societal biases into the organisation — and that decisions are to be replaced by substantiated choices through the utilisation of expertise — then the question becomes what "expertise" actually is, and how to identify it.

The answer to this question — again a lengthy one — will show that the selection and recruitment efforts of most organisations not only fail to identify expertise, but also disadvantage the underprivileged even further.

"Expertise" has been defined as "the ability to contribute to achieve a goal against minimal risk". But what does it take to minimise risk? What does this expertise consist of? And if it is to be identified, what to look out for?

In dynamic environments, if "experience" is not also accompanied by a "high level of perceptiveness" it doesn't count for anything

"Expertise" consists of the <u>combination</u> of someone's experience and someone's level of perceptiveness — where "perceptiveness" is the ability to discern and understand the interrelated dynamics of a situation [15].

We all have an area of expertise. We are all able to minimise risk in certain situations. In our area of expertise we perceive the situation, the dynamics, the patterns and the interdependencies. In our areas of expertise we know what to do next.

If the environment we operate in is predictable and doesn't change much, then we become experts predominantly through experience. But the more dynamic this environment is, the greater the importance of perceptiveness becomes [16]. In situations with many unknowns, with many stakeholders, with changing circumstances and unique conditions, experience which is not also accompanied with a high level of perceptiveness doesn't count for anything.

Our level of perceptiveness cannot be measured, but it can be easily observed

Experience is something that, generally, is easy to quantify. It is often measured in the number of times or years we have found ourselves in a particular environment with a particular responsibility. It is what we put in our professional résumé. Not so with perceptiveness.

Our level of perceptiveness — which to all intents and purposes is a trait — is not something we can measure, but it is something that can be readily assessed through observation.

Our level of perceptiveness — our (in)ability to see connections, to recognise how circumstance impacts outcome, to feel and take responsibility for what we do or fail to do — seeps through in everything we do. It determines our core values, the way we live our lives, and our behavioural characteristics.

Those in leadership-roles need to deal with change and require a high level of perceptiveness

Those who have a high level of perceptiveness readily treat others with respect, are willing to listen, and volunteer. They take responsibility, are trustworthy, honest, thoughtful, compassionate, non-abusive, accepting reality for what it is — and the list goes on and on. All of which is logically linked to a high level of perceptiveness (as explained in [16,21]), all of which can be easily observed, and all of which is also essential to make organisations thrive. In Figure 3 an overview of behavioural characteristics linked to a high and a low level of perceptiveness is provided.

Throughout our organisations, anything that is out of the ordinary lands at the feet of those who take on leadership-roles. People in leadership-roles have to deal with change. To do so successfully they need a high level of perceptiveness.

There may be no leadership-role taking place in a more dynamic and high risk environment than the presidency of the United States. To take this role on successfully — irrespective of political orientation — an extremely high level of perceptiveness is required. Also for this role the potential for success can be assessed on the basis of behavioural characteristics of the candidates (see [23]).

Organisations failing to take someone's level of perceptiveness into account amplify the effects of existing societal biases

Staying closer to home, whenever we enjoy working with and for someone in a leadership-role in our own organisation, it is because of something often called "soft skills" or emotional intelligence, making us feel appreciated and valued for our input, making us feel seen. This someone may be experienced, but managerial experience is of relevance only when results have been achieved in a demonstrably dynamic environment. It is never someone's "detailed knowledge," or the "number of years" in a particular role which makes us feel motivated and enjoy our work so much more.

But instead of selecting, or recruiting, on the basis of both experience and level of perceptiveness, the focus lies squarely on "experience" in most organisations. Which is perfectly fine for roles in static environments, but experience alone says very little about someone's potential for growth or ability to do well in today's increasingly complex world.

So on top of the decision making's societal biases — which already put the underprivileged at a disadvantage when selecting or recruiting for leadership-roles or job openings — the focus on merely "experience" adds insult to injury: it puts a finger on the scale in favour of those who have been given the most opportunities in our society.

Wherever decisions are made expertise is lacking

The identification of expertise is the beginning of the thread that really does need pulling. And in various ways and forms some organisations are already doing it. It is not easy, but is necessary, and it comes with high rewards. To overcome this challenge one can simply begin by identifying decisions: wherever decisions are made expertise is either lacking or not utilised.

The systems we live and work in are immoral by design

Even when our colourless and genderless expertise has been identified and is thus available to the organisation — and assuming the work culture makes us feel safe enough to express it — we still have to contend with the demoralising consequences of hierarchical decision making.

We all have had to deal with the disappointment of having substantiated choices and ideas ignored, overruled and discarded — without any recourse — simply based on the other person's position in the hierarchy. Decision making stifles our freedom, our autonomy, the use of our talent and motivation. We don't feel trusted. We are treated as children, yet no attempt is made to make work more fun.

> My frustration was real, yet I failed to see that I was privileged
> in my frustration also

It is out of a work-related frustration, too, that I started working on an approach to optimally utilise expertise. My frustration was very real, and it drove me to work on my approach over a period of four years. Yet all this time I failed to see that I was privileged in my frustration also. I always focussed on decisions increasing risk, never on decisions perpetuating societal biases.

I never before thought about how hierarchical decision making upholds racism and discrimination, because I have never been affected by it. Because I have been blind to the frustration of "not being given the opportunity". Because the system has always handed me plenty of opportunities. My sense of comfort, my unmoving eyebrows, and my forward looking attitude (because nobody was tapping me on my shoulder) were merely the side-effects of ignorance.

> Our systems are not amoral, they are immoral

I have never considered how decision making perpetuates societal biases, because the systems in which I live and work don't question decisions. They don't care about moral ethics. They couldn't care less whether decisions are biased or not.

And so when societal biases enter our systems through decision making, our systems have no mechanism to identify and purge them. In fact, the opposite is true. The only thing our systems care about is that decisions are made by the appointed person in the hierarchy. If so, the system will use all of its power to support and defend this person and the decision made. Our systems are not amoral, they are immoral.

Nothing is more frightful than ignorance in action

At this point — having made my arguments — we can revisit the disturbing scene I started this article with and see much more than just racial violence.

> Thoughtlessly accepting your privileges is ignorance in action

As Johan Wolfgang von Goethe famously wrote, nothing is more frightful than ignorance in action. Here ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge. "Ignorance in action" is: not caring, not taking into consideration, or not being aware of how we actively harm others.

When I looked away from the video-still, I looked away from "ignorance in action" in all of these three senses.

I looked away from someone applying deadly force unnecessarily and without a care.

I looked away from a system which "discouraged" colleagues from intervening because the deadly violence was applied by the highest in the hierarchy. A system which defines public safety as "the presence of justice" yet, in determining hierarchy, fails to take past racist behaviour into account. A system ready to use all of its considerable power against any bystander wanting to intervene. A system which so adheres to hierarchy, and is so impervious to any consequence of the decisions those in power make, that pressing one's knee on someone's neck for minutes can become something casual.

I also looked away from a system that has given me all these opportunities and unearned advantages which I have always thoughtlessly accepted. All these years I have been in a position to confront my unearned advantages. It never occurred to me. It took me twenty minutes of reading to realise that I also looked away from my own ignorance in action.

Yes, all of this also applies to your organisation

Every organisation lies somewhere on the spectrum between relying heavily on decision making (giving free reign to societal biases) and being virtually free of decision making. Between not making an effort to identify and utilise expertise, and successfully creating the conditions to utilise it optimally.

> To the privileged organisational cultures appear free of racism
> and discrimination

Your organisation's culture may appear inclusive and free of racism and discrimination — which is how most organisations appear to the privileged — but even exceptionally successful organisations which try to avoid all types of decision making may still be at risk of — unintentionally — turning less privileged but no less talented people away at the door.

To assess where on the spectrum your organisation (or your particular organisational unit) may be found is surprisingly easy. Organisations which lack a clear and or poorly communicated goal at every level, who strictly adhere to hierarchy, and who fail to identify let alone utilise expertise have no choice but to operate by decision making.

These organisations don't know whether the right people are doing the right thing to arrive at something that is ambiguous to begin with. The "solution" these organisations arrive at to limit the impact of the risk that is all around them is "control". It is an understandable reflex when nothing around you is transparent.

Control manifests itself in numerous ways. In rules, procedures and protocols, in layers of management, in directing, inspecting and coordinating, in the incessant production of lengthy reports filled with detailed information which nobody acts upon, in the drive to make and update plans pursuing targets created out of thin air, in numerous poorly prepared meetings with numerous attendees discussing numerous topics which ultimately can only be "resolved" by the one person entitled to make a decision.

The organisational "cluelessness" expresses itself also in "behavioural characteristics": a reflection of the organisation's "level of perceptiveness". These can be readily observed from the outside and allow both for the prediction of (non-)performance as well as the (lack of) inclusiveness of its culture (see [19]). A classic one is the need for periodic "reorganisations" in an attempt to reduce the debilitating cost of the system of control ("overhead"), which — as the need to manage the risk caused by decision making remains — is a predictably cyclical phenomenon. In Figure 4 an overview of organisational characteristics linked with a high and low level of perceptiveness is provided.

Ultimately and verifiably, the role decision making plays in the organisation expresses itself in the disparity between representation in the workforce and representation in leadership-roles throughout the organisation of race, gender, religion and cultural background.

Diversity programs, and how your organisation can really make a difference

So, concluding this article, what is it that can be done to stop organisations from upholding racism and discrimination? To end the frustrations felt by those who bring their heart, their talent, their skills and their experience to the table, or are simply denied to sit at it? To transform a system which blindly protects the decision making powers of those in certain positions at the expense, also, of organisational performance?

Diversity programs generally fail to move the needle in a lasting and meaning full way

Several things.

At a personal and individual level there are dynamics to be understood, observations to be made and decisions to be identified. Perhaps more urgently — as any solution begins by understanding the problem — reading about racism, discrimination and privilege may contribute to the identification of your own role (that you indeed have a role) in making a difference. Recognising the unearned advantages the system provides you with — and understanding how by merely accepting them you actively contribute to the head-wind and hardships endured by others — is a powerful place to start.

At an organisational level the reflex is often to create a diversity program, which generally fails to move the needle in a lasting and meaningful way [24]. Diversity programs often have targets to be met and often involve tools of control. Increasing the number of hirings or promotions of minorities can readily be achieved. Still, these changes don't always last, and they don't solve the underlying problem: a culture of decision making giving free reign to societal biases.

There are alternatives to defining a "stand alone" diversity program pursuing narrowly defined targets. An organisation's vision, mission or its "cultural values" or "core beliefs" can be defined in support of inclusiveness and safety for all. But unless the organisation requires any choices made (e.g., in hiring and promoting, but also generally) to be substantiated to live up to these statements, they will have no impact of note.

This article argues that organisations will achieve more diversity simply by better utilising the expertise available to them. Diversity programs could support this effort. They could, for example, track key indicators and assess how employees experience the (safety of the) organisation's culture. Diversity programs, by reporting this information, can create broad organisational awareness that there is, indeed, a problem. A problem which the privileged generally can't see otherwise.

So what is it that organisations can actually do? Organisations, too, are to understand the dynamics of their culture, have to make observations, and identify decision making. But then, where to begin?

Some organisations have a team select their manager from their midst

Not by reinventing the wheel. A great collection of the different ways organisations are trying to create the conditions required to utilise expertise and minimise all forms of decision making can be found in Corporate Rebels: Make Work More Fun [20].

The book contains examples of organisations taking decision making out of the hierarchy, and sometimes taking hierarchy out of the organisation. Of organisations finding ways to improve communication between experts and non-experts, managers and team members, and between teams or micro-enterprises across the organisation. Of organisations ensuring desired outcomes are understood the same by all involved, and making sure people entering the organisation and or taking up leadership-roles have a high level of perceptiveness.

These examples include the power of having a mission statement which is inclusive and provides a direction for almost all organisational choices to be made, and hiring people on the basis of their core values and cultural fit instead of skills. There is the story of Haier, which transformed itself five times in three decades, each time pursuing the organisational system which best suited its changing goals in a rapidly changing world, each time reducing decision making, and currently consisting of 4'000 self-managing micro-enterprises.

One organisation replaced all rules and measures of control
governing company expenses with the simple request to
operate in its best interest

Among the examples are organisations which take managers out of their offices and have them work among their teams, who have the teams evaluate management performance, and who have teams select the manager from their midst. There is the organisation which replaced all rules and measures of control governing company expenses with the simple request to operate in its best interest. Then there are organisations who have gotten rid of most of the hierarchy, and consequently have to come up with an entirely new, transparent and more simple salary structure.

As in so many other books considering new ways to run an organisation, "Buurtzorg" is mentioned also. Buurtzorg is a Dutch organisation founded in 2006 whose name translates to "neighbourhood care". Buurtzorg employs more than 14.000 nurses distributed over more than a thousand autonomous teams, with an office of no more than 50 people — which does not publish any directives or guidelines — and 20 coaches who are not allowed to make any decisions either. The teams themselves, who don't have a leader, have a meeting process which reduces decision making to an absolute minimum [21]. Buurtzorg's results are spectacularly positive across the board, both in terms of finance (in absence of any overhead), quality of care and job satisfaction.

"If you let go of the principles, Buurtzorg becomes a traditional
organisation within years."

Buurtzorg is headed by its founder, Jos de Blok, who once was a nurse himself and worked himself up to a regional director before starting Buurtzorg with just two teams. He wanted to provide holistic care, looking after the entire well-being of the patients, and determined that autonomous, self-managing teams was the way to achieve it. No manager, himself included, was to tell these teams how to do their work.

Overcoming the two Achilles' heels of organisational transformation

To give racism and discrimination no room within organisations, organisations are in need of transformation. There are plenty of examples of organisations which have transformed, at least in part, towards a way of working involving much less decision making, and much fewer rules and procedures [20]. But, at least till now, there is no recipe.

Many organisations which have made the transformation were at the brink of bankruptcy, and had a visionary leader which stayed the course. What they pursued was much improved organisational performance — resolving a range of frustrations along the way.

For these organisations it was all or nothing, existing structures were replaced with new ones, practically from scratch. They were pioneering. Still today, in management literature, a spirit of "experimentation" is regarded to be an essential ingredient in making a transition to "a new way of working".

The majority of organisations are not going bankrupt, don't want to rebuild their structure, and don't want to go "all in" all at once

But by far the majority of organisations is not on the brink of bankruptcy demanding drastic change, does not have an omnipotent visionary leader, does not feel the need to rebuild the organisational structure from scratch, and does not want to go "all in" all at once. For most organisations "experimentation" is not a viable or in any way helpful strategy either.

When it comes to organisational transformation there are two Achilles' heels to overcome: how to start it, and how to sustain it. Both can be overcome using the same approach.

Starting with the paradigm shift of how to view decisions, and the subsequent logical conclusion that expertise needs to be identified and utilised to overcome them, a series of steps, principles, and what is required of leadership-roles can be derived.

These steps and principles are to ensure all types of decision making are minimised, and that the communication between experts and non-experts becomes transparent. The latter is essential as any ambiguity in communication is likely to result in the common organisational reflex of wanting more control, invariably leading to the introduction of more decision making.

The approach of Decision Free Solutions empowers everyone within the organisation

Such an approach has the advantage that it can be used to improve existing organisational structures and methods, either whole or piecemeal, in any organisational unit of interest, and at a pace that suits the organisation's capability.

Buurtzorg is an excellent example of an organisation whose operation can be explained using this one single organisational principle: minimise all types of decision making to allow the nurses to optimally utilise their expertise [21].

But Buurtzorg is an organisation which had a visionary leader at the helm, which started from scratch, with only a handful of people. It learned many lessons, it experimented, and even after fifteen years, and in the words of Jos de Blok himself: "If you let go of the principles, Buurtzorg becomes a traditional organisation within years."

So, if even the founder of an organisation that was built from scratch, pursuing the same philosophy for almost fifteen years, expresses concern that its culture may not be sustainable, then what does that mean for other organisations? How are other organisations ever going to have a fighting chance to bring about a sustainable transformation? How can racism and discrimination and a range of other workplace frustrations not merely be thrown out, but also be kept out of organisations?

This can be achieved by using an approach which uses logic, a single organisational principle and clearly defined terminology. As this is what empowers everyone within the organisation to recognise

decision making, and to offer a helping hand in sustaining the conditions required to upend racism and discrimination, to resolve workplace frustrations, and to contribute to improving organisational performance.

The approach is called Decision Free Solutions [17], and is summarised in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below. The approach explains the inner-workings of organisations pioneering new ways of working, and can propose improvements as well, as documented in [25] The approach is from my hand. An ingrained video-still keeps it out of my pocket.

Figure 1: The transformation that can be achieved through utilisation of expertise.

The Approach of Decision Free Solutions

Resolve frustrations, Utilise expertise, Free up resources, Make change happen

A generic and systematic approach, providing guidelines for new and existing methods to utilise all available expertise to achieve the goals you believe in
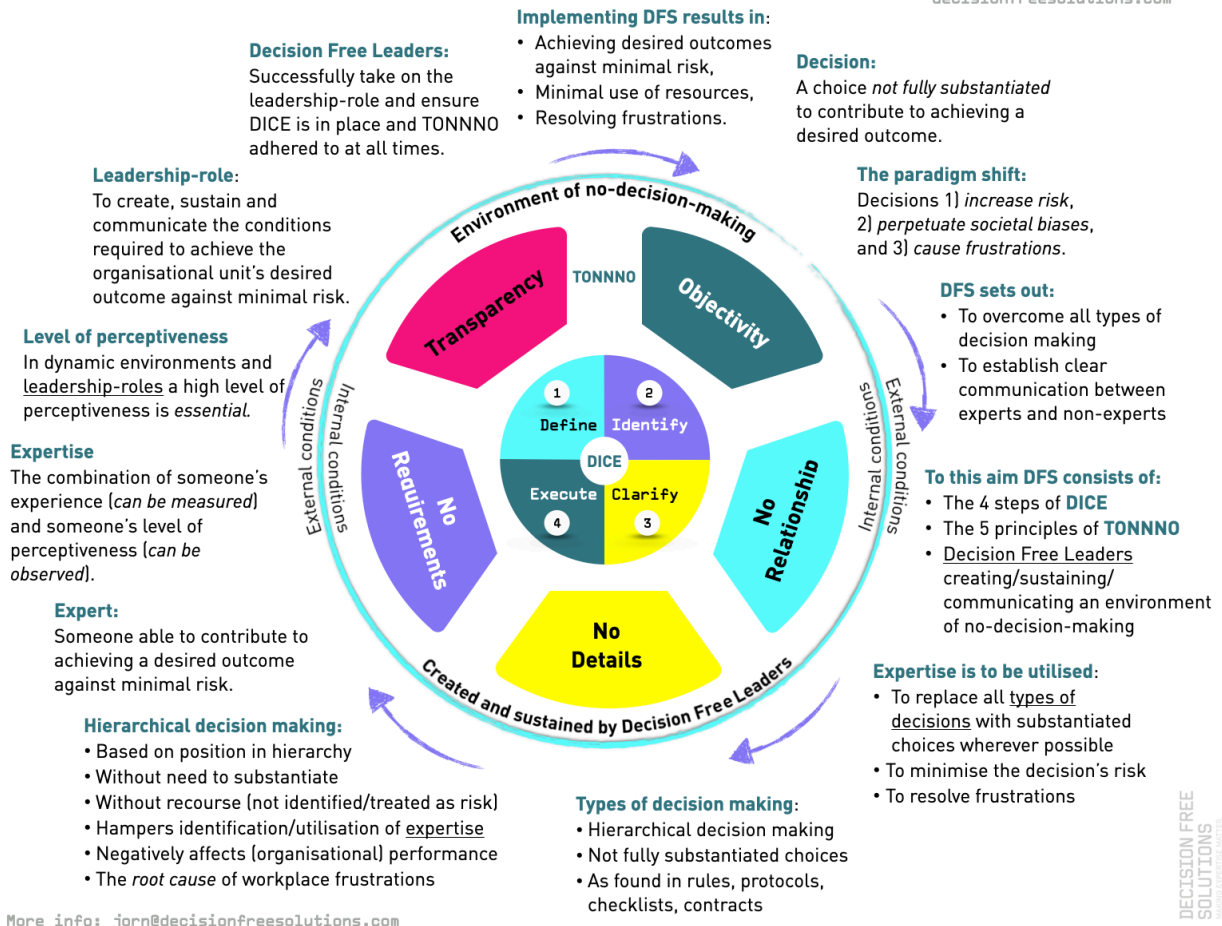
decisionfreesolutions.com

Implementing DFS results in:
- Achieving desired outcomes against minimal risk,
- Minimal use of resources,
- Resolving frustrations.

Decision Free Leaders:
Successfully take on the leadership-role and ensure DICE is in place and TONNNO adhered to at all times.

Decision:
A choice *not fully substantiated* to contribute to achieving a desired outcome.

Leadership-role:
To create, sustain and communicate the conditions required to achieve the organisational unit's desired outcome against minimal risk.

The paradigm shift:
Decisions 1) *increase risk*, 2) *perpetuate societal biases*, and 3) *cause frustrations*.

Level of perceptiveness
In dynamic environments and leadership-roles a high level of perceptiveness is *essential*.

DFS sets out:
- To overcome all types of decision making
- To establish clear communication between experts and non-experts

Expertise
The combination of someone's experience (*can be measured*) and someone's level of perceptiveness (*can be observed*).

To this aim DFS consists of:
- The 4 steps of **DICE**
- The 5 principles of **TONNNO**
- Decision Free Leaders creating/sustaining/ communicating an environment of no-decision-making

Expert:
Someone able to contribute to achieving a desired outcome against minimal risk.

Expertise is to be utilised:
- To replace all types of decisions with substantiated choices wherever possible
- To minimise the decision's risk
- To resolve frustrations

Hierarchical decision making:
- Based on position in hierarchy
- Without need to substantiate
- Without recourse (not identified/treated as risk)
- Hampers identification/utilisation of expertise
- Negatively affects (organisational) performance
- The *root cause* of workplace frustrations

Types of decision making:
- Hierarchical decision making
- Not fully substantiated choices
- As found in rules, protocols, checklists, contracts

Environment of no-decision-making

Internal conditions / *External conditions* / *External conditions* / *Internal conditions*

TONNNO

Transparency / **Objectivity** / **No Relationship** / **No Requirements** / **No Details**

1 Define / 2 Identify / 3 Clarify / 4 Execute

DICE

Created and sustained by Decision Free Leaders

More info: jorn@decisionfreesolutions.com

DECISION FREE SOLUTIONS

Figure 2: Summary of the Approach of Decision Free Solutions.

PERCEIVER			
No decision making	**No control and influence**	**Steadiness**	**Caring**
Conditions and universal rules determine outcome: utilise everyone's expertise	Understands outcome depends on conditions and can't be forced	Not easily surprised, accepts reality, doesn't feel threatened	Aware of interrelatedness role of environment, own responsibility to contribute
• Always aiming for transparency • Identifies decisions as risk • Approver and enabler • Embraces meritocracy • Focus on goal to be achieved • Doesn't micro-manage • Has overview • Welcomes support • Encourages creativity	• Doesn't try to persuade • Focus on identification of others' skills and talents • Focus on alignment • Accepts reality • Humble • Never blames individual • Results are produced by culture/entire team • Avoids dogged pursuit of unattainable goals	• Approachable • Doesn't compete • Doesn't abuse or discriminate • Responsible • Respectful • Honest • Informal • Thoughtful • Quiet • Communicates directly • Communicates openly	• Will make others feel at ease • Interested in the whole person • Achieves work-life balance • Volunteers • Compassionate • Patient • Supportive • Trustworthy • Good listener
NON-PERCEIVER			
Decision making	**Control and influence**	**Erratic and emotional**	**Lack of caring**
Conditions and universal rules are poorly perceived, event's outcome unclear	Fails to see outcome is pre-determined by conditions and universal rules	Lack of understanding, surprised by behaviour and outcome, insecure	Fails to see interrelated-ness, disregard for role of environment, not part of
• Likes decision making • Belief in "gut instinct" • Feels no need to explain decisions • Does not mind contradicting oneself • Does not prepare for meetings • Quick to make up excuses • Likes to talk instead of listen • Strictly adheres to hierarchy • Unable to change	• Preference for rules, protocols and contracts • Values relationships and loyalty over expertise • Links performance to the individual • Readily apportions blame and praise • Belief in incentives • Greatly values hierarchy, authority and prestige • Disregard for truth • Uses information strategically; hidden agenda	• Displays abusive behaviour • Cause of stress for those around • Sees everything as win-lose • Sees colleagues as competitors • Never responsible when things go wrong • Self-centred • Boastful • Opportunistic • Easily hurt/feel threatened	• Focus on self (as opposed to e.g. family) • No volunteering work that requires effort • Unable to take other people's perspective • No interest in other people's problems • Not moved by other people's fate • Focus on wealth as measure of self-worth • Belief that people get what they deserve

Figure 3: Overview of behavioural characteristics correlated with having a very high (Perceiver) or very low (Non-perceiver) level of perceptiveness. From [16].

Characteristics of a PERCEIVING (expert) organisation			
No decision making	**No control and influence**	**Steadiness**	**Caring**
Conditions and universal rules determine outcome: utilise everyone's expertise	Understands outcome depends on conditions and can't be forced	Not easily surprised, accepts reality, safe environment	Aware of interrelatedness with environment, own responsibility to contribute
• Loose or nearly absent hierarchy • Relatively few but well prepared meetings • Quick to respond • Issues get resolved quickly • Measure performances • Everyone shares sense of responsibility • Quality assurance instead of control	• Few rules and protocols • Few staff functions, staff functions have supportive role • Minimises the use of contracts • Facilitates work-life balance • Recognises performance is always collective • No-blame culture	• Low employee turnover • Few to no complaints of racism and discrimination • Informal culture • Easy access to leadership • Open communication • Not prone to litigate • Relatively high job-security	• Has clear vision and mission providing context for organisational purpose • Organisational purpose/mission/vision resolves frustrations • Uses profits to pursue organisational purpose • Interest of client is interest of organisation • Shares lessons learned
Characteristics of a NON-PERCEIVING (non-expert) organisation			
Decision making	**Control and influence**	**Erratic and emotional**	**Lack of caring**
Conditions and universal rules are poorly perceived, event's outcome unclear	Fails to see outcome is pre-determined by conditions and universal rules	Lack of understanding, surprised by development and outcomes	Sees organisation in isolation, as competing with outside world
• Strictly hierarchical • Many management layers • Long response times • Frequent and poorly prepared meetings • Meetings have lots of participants • Issues don't get resolved without 'decision maker' • Produce lots of internal information/communication • Large marketing/PR expenditures	• Many rules, protocols and contracts • Lots of internal control and inspection • Many formal staff functions producing directives • Reliance on complex legal contracts • Use of individual bonuses and other (financial) incentives • Long work weeks are the norm	• Quick to litigate • Culture perpetuates societal biases • Internal conflicts don't always get resolved • Internal competition for resources • Unclear who is responsible • Unpredictable company politics • High employee turnover • High sick leave • Frequent reorganisations	• No or unclear vision and mission • Sees profit as organisational purpose • Focus on short-term performance and developments • Little interest in (long-term relationships with) clients • Win-lose mentality • No clear strategy • Limits flow of information, both in- and externally

Figure 4: Overview of organisational characteristics correlated with utilising a lot (Perceiving) or little (Non-perceiving) expertise in pursuing its organisational goals.

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