



The double paradox

Choice is good – up to a point, writes **Robin Speculand**

Which do you prefer: to be told what to do by your boss, or given a choice? Most people prefer to be given a choice, and when it comes to executing strategy, this technique can dramatically impact the outcome. One powerful idea to engage your people is the double paradox of choice.

Choice is a double paradox because people are more likely to choose the right actions if they have options. Yet when they have too many choices, they do nothing!

People are more committed to outcomes they set themselves over those chosen for them by a ratio of almost five to one, as noted by Carolyn Aiken and Scott Keller from McKinsey & Company in their paper *The Irrational Side of Change Management*.

The authors cite a famous behavioural experiment in which half the participants are randomly assigned a lottery ticket number, while the others are asked to write down any number they would like on a blank ticket. Just before drawing the winning number, the researchers offer to buy back the tickets from their holders. The result: no matter what geography or demography, researchers had to pay at least five times more to those who came up with their own number. Why? Because we are more dedicated to outcomes we set ourselves.

Choice. But not too much choice

Research has also demonstrated that an excess of choice often leads to people being less, not more, satisfied. So, if you offer too many choices, people do less – and sometimes they do nothing at all.

An experiment by Sheena S Iyengar (Columbia University) and Mark R Lepper (Stanford University) explained this in *When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing*. They wrote about an upscale grocery

store displaying 24 jams for customers to view and purchase and, on another occasion, only six different jams. From the customers who visited the 24 jam selection, only 3% purchased. From the six jam selection, 30% of the customers purchased. That's ten times more.

TV channel National Geographic reported a similar experiment for its series *Brain Games*. They selected two ice cream parlours. One only offered three flavours and the other a much wider selection. Researchers concluded that the brain prefers to choose from only three options. Why? Daylian Cain from Yale University explains that the brain uses two systems to make choices. System one is automatic and unconscious; system two is deliberate and controlled (the one used in decision making). People might assume more choices will make them happier but, in fact, more choices make them unhappier. This is because of a nagging feeling that they could have done better.

The aim is to give a few choices; three is ideal. Too many choices in execution can lead to the same levels

of choice

of lower employee-engagement and satisfaction as not having any choice.

Organizations that have achieved excellence in execution follow this advice. For example, Infocomm in Singapore terminated its contract with a single IT vendor last year in favour of allowing each business unit to choose from three different vendors rather than being forced to use one vendor.

How many strategy objectives a year?

The double paradox principle also applies for leaders selecting strategic objectives to work on every year. A strategy typically has many objectives over a few years – all deemed important. But good leaders don't aim to execute everything immediately, because lack of focus can derail your efforts. The advice is to balance and limit what's expected, and to select the urgent and the immediate for each 12-month period. So how many strategic objectives should a leadership team focus on every 12 months? Between three and five.

By focusing on between three and five, people don't feel overwhelmed

with too much to do. It sends a clear and compelling message about what needs to be done most urgently. It also sets the tone for a high-performing culture, allows allocation of resources, and develops the discipline to prioritize. As Professor Kathleen Eisenhardt of Stanford University says: "There must

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be a certain balance to the number and type of goals and objectives: too many goals and objectives are paralyzing; too few, confusing."

Iyengar, Lepper and National Geographic indicate that when organizations try to execute more than ten objectives, less gets done, and in some cases, none of the objectives are completed. People working on them

are so overwhelmed, they do a little on everything and nothing is finished.

East West Seed, the leading provider in tropical seeds, is aware of the Double Paradox of Choice. Over the next five years it has 13 strategic objectives to achieve. Bert Van Der Feltz, the chief executive, has prioritized five strategy objectives for 2017, to set focus globally across the group.

When you try and do more you end up achieving less. When you do less you achieve more and send a clear message in execution – which is a time of turbulence within an organization – about what is important, what needs to be measured, where resources should be reallocated, where employees should take the right actions, and where employees should be held accountable. Offer choices – but not too many. ●

— The material for this article has been adapted from Robin Speculand's latest book *Excellence in Execution – HOW to Implement Your Strategy*.

He is an expert in strategy implementation, and founder and chief executive of Bridges Business Consultancy