

Eradicating “Safe Decision Syndrome” *in Today’s Digital Workplace*

Jack’s been with you for almost two years. You’ve put him in charge of a couple of projects because of his technology skills and sense of organization. He’s got a good work ethic, relates well with others, and seemed to be a rising star when you selected him. But he can’t seem to make a decision without asking you or someone else. Sure, he can grasp the scope of the project; It is making the day-to-day judgments that seems to bedevil him. Yesterday he texted you to say that his team wanted to change their weekly meeting time. Was that okay? “Of course,” you said. But every time he approaches you about an issue he should resolve himself, it takes your focus away from something else. Added up, this turns into hours a week.

Today’s emerging generation of college graduates is the best formally educated cohort of Americans to enter the workforce to date. Yet countless employers complain that many of them have no “common sense.” So how can that be? A lot of it has to do with what I call *safe decision syndrome* (SDS) or the fear of taking calculated risks. It’s one thing, for instance, to know the principles of negotiating. It’s another to put your authority and reputation on the line and come up with the best solution when a vendor is demanding a requirement your firm considers unreasonable.

Of course, there is more to this phenomenon than just young people with a fear of making mistakes. *Safe decision syndrome* is permeating all aspects of the workplace. As the number of daily decisions increases and the amount of information explodes, more and more people of all ages

are feeling overwhelmed. Instinctively, they become hesitant to make decisions of consequence for fear of committing a career-impacting error. That’s a topic we’ll address as we proceed through this paper.

The Impact of SDS

So what’s the impact of *safe decision syndrome*? Because of its scope, this phenomenon affects all aspects of your firm’s operations. It begins with the quality of decisions. In 1956, economist Herbert Simon introduced the term **satisficing** or *not choosing the best option but the one that’s good enough*. Imagine being too busy or overwhelmed to do the research involved in choosing the best vendor for a project. You’d love to, but there’s too much on your plate and a decision just has to be made. You don’t like doing it, but you select the one that seems to fit the bill and you live with the consequences. That’s satisficing.



Satisficing is a phenomenon that affects us all. Today’s information explosion, the demand for immediate outcomes and the fear of making mistakes has certainly intensified its practice. Is it any wonder that a number of your people, regardless of age, may

retreat from making the decisions you consider normal for the course of everyday business? The outgrowth of this is a desire to ask permission rather than take a calculated risk. Over time, this practice becomes sand in the gears of any organization's productivity, customer service, morale, corporate reputation and, of course, the bottom line.

Understanding the Origins of SDS

So what are the origins of *safe decision syndrome*? They can be attributed to a number of sources. Each of these may seem innocuous individually. In combination, they create a powerful force that dissuades people from taking action. If *safe decision syndrome* permeates the culture of your organization, productivity can grind to a halt. Here are the contributing factors:

Information overload – Technology has always been a mixed blessing and digital technology is no different. As much as it provides more efficiency and access, it also generates so much data that most people find themselves buried in minutiae. Not only does this make it more difficult to locate the information you really need, studies indicate it produces mental and physical fatigue.

Over-choicing – Do we really need 65 choices of white when choosing paint? In an attempt to provide for our every convenience and desire, the marketplace has taken to offering consumers so many options that it's easy to feel tired just sorting through them. Perhaps we do need a wider range of options when purchasing a car. But do we really need 100 different choices for the daily cup of coffee? Individually, these decisions don't amount to much. Taken together, with all the other daily decisions, our minds can feel endlessly burdened.

Manipulated choicing – Increasingly, we are all being forced to make choices without being able to alter or even influence the options. This ranges from the limited alternatives when purchasing an item on-line to the restrictions placed within business software on seemingly common sense tasks.

(When was the last time, Microsoft Excel or Office would not let you complete a simple job in the way you desired?) Typically, these forced choices serve the organization or institution that created them. Granted, many of these systems are necessary for the operation of software and bureaucratic processes. Increasingly, however, this strategy is being used to manipulate consumers and constituents. How many times have you felt you were being forced to settle because of this phenomenon? Did you want to call someone, send a text or email, or even shout at the computer? The advances in artificial intelligence, such as "auto-correct," have exacerbated this.

Most of the time, the user is offered little if any opportunity for contacting the organization involved. While this practice standardizes systems for the firm or institution, it can irritate the very people it desires to serve. The resulting alienation discourages support from customers, volunteers, contributors, members or taxpayers depending on the relationship. Sometimes called behavioral economics, these practices have been used in positive ways to reduce smoking, improve diets and increase retirement savings. But used in selfish or destructive ways, they can leave users feeling like a portion of their freedom has been restricted. The more we become accepting



of these effects, the more we self-limit our desires and creativity for fear of getting frustrated by these obstacles.

Menu-driven thinking – I define *menu-driven thinking* as an overdependence on digital cues to make routine decisions. In other words, the person's action is response-driven as opposed to self-initiated. This type of thinking may be okay for the plethora of daily choices we make like using the ATM or purchasing a sandwich. We cross the line however, when we begin to feel discomfort if not presented with a set of options for decisions that require discernment and judgment. The craving for options in inappropriate situations is *menu-driven thinking*.

This malady leads to impaired judgment and undercuts the confidence required to make decisions and follow through on responsibilities. Those who have grown overly dependent of technology-based cues limit their own creativity and contributions to organizational function. In other words, they would rather be manipulated by menus than initiate original ideas. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly pervasive with the proliferation of mobile devices.

Lack of individual motivation – Much has been made about the supposed lack motivation among young people. Aside from whether this is true, studies have indicated that the emerging generations are more detached in their view of the employer-employee relationship. In other words, many see each job as a contract rather than a career or calling. At the other end of the spectrum, you may employ people who are close to retirement. Those in this situation may be emotionally winding-down or perhaps feeling somewhat detached as they consider their next season of life.

Fear of making a career-ending mistake – In conjunction with the above is the concern that making an error would end a career prematurely. With the frequently announced layoffs, downsizings and other corporate shifts, workforce veterans no longer feel as secure as they did at the beginning of their careers. While this apprehension may reside in the back of most minds, it can become

especially prominent in those close to retirement.

A corporate environment where mistakes are not acceptable – Finally, it is important to take a hard look within your organization for signs that mistakes are not tolerated. No corporate leader likes to think that this is the case, but it is the employees' perceptions that count. A poorly handled



firing, an abrupt shift in supervision or an awkward end to a project can leave the impression that those who don't perform consistently may find themselves losing influence or without a job.

There are also three more global influences requiring a mention:

Fear of embarrassment – Over time, society has become more acutely attuned to both the success and failure of its members. Celebrities, politicians, sports stars, business leaders and entrepreneurs are lionized one month and vilified the next. Off-hand comments and photos posted on-line go viral and destroy reputations. It's enough to make anyone a little paranoid. This glass-bowl phenomenon infects the minds of everyone to varying degrees. Is it any wonder then, that some people within your organization will be apprehensive about speaking up, supporting an effort or making decisions that run the risk of failure or embarrassment?

Helicopter parenting – The past twenty years has seen a dramatic rise in over-protective parents. The reasons for this have been attributed to several sources including concerns for safety, desires to help their kids excel, media and entertainment influences, and the natural sense of competitiveness that

parents may feel. (My kid's an honor student. Your kid's a loser.) Regardless, the dependence, some might say helplessness, this has fostered contributes to employers' concerns that some young people lack experience in thinking independently and dealing with the consequences of their actions.

The shift from reason to rules – The recent past has witnessed a significant increase in the number of regulations promulgated by policymakers and, in turn, by corporations. It is no secret that this has had a chilling effect on corporate risk-taking. Individually, these policies may appear to make sense, but unintended consequences have proliferated. Taken collectively, this shift from reason to rules has created among many an apprehension about making even some of the simplest decisions for fear of running afoul of the law. As these rules have implemented internally, employees have predictably become more hesitant to take risks they might have in the past.

Detecting SDS within Your Firm

So how do you detect SDS within your work environment? Answer the following five questions:

#1. Have you been making more “common sense” decisions than you have historically? In other words, are your people coming to you with decisions they should be making themselves? What's your present way of dealing with this?

#2. Do your people seem to be requesting increasingly specific instructions? Does it seem that they are hesitant to act without being told exactly what to do? Does it appear they're trying to cover themselves in case the decision does not work out as planned?

#3. Are your people finding it difficult to take the next step independently? Are they relying on your guidance rather than reporting back about what they did and how it worked out? Do you find yourself pushing and

prodding others to take a position on what needs to be done?

#4. Are you getting more push-back from veteran contributors about making normal decisions? Do historically resourceful employees appear more hesitant about making decisions they would have embraced in the past?

#5. Are you sensing a shift in your corporate culture toward more risk avoidance? Do you sense it in meetings? Do you hear it in everyday conversations? Are routine decisions devolving into endless analysis?

Now, before continuing, take a few moments to consider how you can manage the effects of *safe decision syndrome* within your firm? Then compare your ideas with the strategies identified below. Even better, pass this paper around to your managers and discuss the ramifications at an upcoming staff meeting.

Eradicating SDS

Let's be honest. You will never completely rid your firm of this scourge. There will always be people and situations requiring your intervention, even though it appears the person responsible should have made the decision. That aside, here are some strategies for reducing this phenomenon within your work environment:

Provide context – Do all your people really understand how the firm operates and makes money? If not, why not? Consider how long it took for you to become a confident decision maker at the beginning of your career. Did your confidence and quality of your decisions grow with your knowledge of the larger context? Will the people reporting to you develop a better grasp of the decisions to be made if they understand the economics of the projects with which they are involved? Will those on the “front line” be more confident in their work if they understand the nuances of the firm's business model? The

more employees grasp the “big picture,” the more informed and accurate their decisions will be. Don’t sell your people short. They may comprehend a lot more than you think. What steps can you take to share more of the context with your team?



Do a better job of framing decisions – The hardest part of making any decision is being clear on the desired outcome. Too often, someone else’s agenda or another distraction can impair our thinking. In my book, *Figure It Out: Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World*, I argue that the most important question you can ask when framing a decision is, “What does success look like?” This question applies whether you’re resolving a personnel dispute or working your way through a change in project specifications. It is paramount that those making decisions on your behalf make a habit of getting past impulse, distraction and impatience to define the question to be decided. As you know, the development of this discipline takes time and determination. Discussing case studies in meetings and during coaching will illuminate how others approach decisions and will help you determine whether they are confident in pursuing the real issue.

Commit to using think-alouds – Lifted from the ranks of educators, this strategy suggests that the manager asks the employee who has a question to think the problem through out loud in front of him or her. This accomplishes three things: 1) The manager has an opportunity to better understand how the employee approaches problem solving;

2) If the employee pursues the wrong approach, the manager can see that early on and provide some coaching; 3) As the employee comes to a solution independently, there will be a resulting sense of satisfaction and confidence. Do this enough and you’ll have a self-reliant decision maker on your hands.

Frame mistakes as an understandable part of work – You make think, “Of course mistakes are okay. They’re a part of life.” But is that what your people perceive? As I mentioned before, poorly handled personnel decisions, awkward ends to projects and the like may send a message of, “You’re doing a great job. Just don’t screw up.” When these inevitable situations arise, open and frank communication is critical. In these days of the digital grapevine, difficult situations can sour within hours. Include potential reactions to these tough decisions in your considerations before acting and be prepared to respond should the rumor mill begin to turn. You want a team of confident and invested decision makers who will not fear for their jobs when things go wrong.

Celebrate small successes – Much has been made of the “trophy kid” generation entering today’s workplace. Whether this is overblown seems to depend on the individual manager’s experience. Regardless, surveys of the Millennial generation indicate that they desire more frequent feedback than previous generations. While you maybe thinking, “They should be thankful they have a job,” indulge them a little and everyone else as well. When someone handles a personnel decision well, takes care of a minor crisis, or resolves a conflict on her own, take a minute to praise the decision maker. Your reward will be a more confident self-initiating professional down the road.

Make a practice of providing closure – When a significant decision has been made and the outcome has become apparent, encourage the decision maker to take time to process what happened. In *Figure It Out*, I call this cogitating. Those in the military and law

enforcement create “after-action reports.” While your process may not be as formal, it should be just as essential. Suggest that the decision maker answer four questions: 1) What worked? What didn't work? What should I have anticipated? What have I learned? Make this practice a part of normal procedure and you'll see a difference in the way your team approaches decisions. When it's okay to take time to reflect on the quality and outcome of one's decisions, it is only natural to want to make this a habit.

And two bonus strategies:

Better selection – Having consulted with hundreds of employers over the past 25 years, I am convinced more than ever that everything associated with employee success hinges on selection. It is ironic that most firms still spend weeks researching a \$10,000 equipment purchase, only to spend just a few hours hiring the person to who will run the machine. Even if paying that person \$15 per hour, you are making a \$40,000 annual investment. In the computer world, “garbage-in-garbage-out” refers to careless programming. The same might be said of those who fail to take care in hiring the best decision makers they can find. Just as with the framing of decisions mentioned above, the question to ask before commencing any selection is, “What does success look like?”

Better training – While a lot of focus is placed on the development of skills in new hires, little is placed on the development of decision making. Sadly, most firms leave this to trial-and-error. With today's pressure on profits and the increased frequency of turnover among young contributors, waiting for employees to learn as they go can drain the earnings out of your company in no time. The recipe is simple: 1) Screen for decision making skills and confidence when hiring; 2) Focus on the development of decision making. (They can pick up the content knowledge as needed.) 3) Match each person with a mentor who will compel them to learn both the skills and confidence to make good choices when the heat's on.

The Next Step

As much as *safe decision syndrome* did not appear suddenly, neither will it vanish. But every day you leave it unchecked, its insidious effect will drain your firm's resources. What steps can you take in the next few weeks to foster a culture of making healthy decisions? Perhaps it's implementing think-alouds when dealing with those asking too many questions. Maybe it's cogitating on the outcome of decisions. It could be doing a better job of framing decisions. Whatever paths you take, you'll be on your way to ridding your company of this profit-stealing scourge. Good luck!

Bob Wendover teaches managers how to get their people to make better decisions. He is the award-winning author of *Figure It Out! Making Smart Decisions in a Dumbed-Down World*. For more information, go to www.bobwendover.com or call 1-800-227-5510.