



## CHAPTER 3.3:

# Courage and Character in Executive Decision Making

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### Introduction: Making hard choices

What makes for an effective senior executive in government? There is no shortage of hypotheses in that regard, with policymakers, practitioners, and academics proffering a whole host of theories, but most of them focus on largely observable leadership behaviors and competencies that purport to describe a good (or at least competent) public sector executive. We decided to take a different approach, setting out to examine *how* government executives go about making difficult decisions—typically defined in the research literature as those that are technically and informationally complex, fraught with uncertainty, and ultimately involving hard tradeoffs among conflicting values or interests—to see if outstanding executives did so differently. However, in the course of our examination, we discovered something that surprised us: the importance of courage and character in decision making, two exceedingly intangible but no less critical qualities of an effective government executive.

Making difficult decisions in government can be challenging under almost any circumstances. Cognitive limitations preclude decision makers from fully considering all relevant information, and cognitive biases can also interfere with their information gathering and analysis. The executive can compensate for such individual limits by seeking out advisors and other sources of input. However, the literature on groupthink also highlights the limitations of group-informed decision making. Out of these two areas of decision research has emerged an approach that Irving Janis calls “vigilant problem solving,” a process in which the decision maker solicits input from advisors who are deliberately selected for their diverse knowledge and opinions<sup>75</sup> and in which the leader actively seeks out dissenting views, critically examines the costs and risks of the preferred (and other) choices, and demonstrates a willingness to revise his or her initial predispositions in response to the deliberations.

<sup>75</sup> Janis, I. L. (1989). *Crucial decisions: Leadership in policymaking and crisis management*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

## Vigilant decision making

Vigilant problem solving is widely seen as the most effective process for making complex, difficult decisions. To examine whether that approach was more prevalent among outstanding government executives (compared to a randomly selected sample of their peers), we interviewed 20 heads of sub-cabinet-level organizations in the Federal government. All of those executives served during the Obama administration, with 10 nominated by “good-government” experts as ones who had done an outstanding job and 10 chosen at random from a listing of all Federal sub-cabinet and equivalent positions. We asked each the same set of questions about how they made important decisions, with the objective of determining whether and to what extent executives in the two categories used a “vigilant” process when making difficult decisions.

When we asked both sets of executives about their most difficult decisions, most of them (including 9 of 10 of the outstanding ones) did not identify those that were technically complex. Rather, the vast majority described their most difficult decisions as ones that were unpopular or that involved significant personal, political, or organizational risk. In other words, their most difficult decisions required courage and character to make, in part because the executives who made them had to not only decide the right thing to do but also muster the will to do it. This became the central focus of our research, as we sought to examine the distinctions between decisions involving courage and those involving complexity.

The literature on effective decision making notes that to make a rational, value-maximizing decision, one would need to list all alternative strategies; determine all of the consequences of those alternatives; comparatively evaluate the costs, benefits, and risks of those consequences; and select the alternative that is most consistent with the organization’s priorities. However, as critics have noted, it is impossible to realize this ideal because of cognitive limitations and biases.

As noted, Janis offers an alternative: a vigilant decision-making model designed to overcome both individual cognitive limitations and the well-known pathology of groupthink.<sup>76</sup> This model posits that a decision maker can make more effective decisions by seeking information and input from a group of advisors carefully selected for their diversity of experience, knowledge, and points of view and by actively soliciting these advisors’ dissenting views, considering new information, challenging initial assumptions, and critically examining costs and risks of preferred and alternative choices. Vigilant decision making is specifically designed to avoid too much agreement and too quick a rush to judgment by a group. Its prescription is “more is better”—more information, more discussion, and more opportunities for debate and dissent.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

This model has found significant support among researchers, and it has instinctive appeal to practitioners. Thus, the research question we originally sought to examine was whether senior U.S. Federal executives (in this case, at the sub-cabinet level) generally employed a vigilant decision-making process when faced with hard choices. We also wanted to examine whether outstanding executives were more likely to rely on that approach than their peers—hypothesizing this as one reason they were more successful. However, some of the findings from our interviews led us to examine decision making when the choices were not complex but rather when they required courage to make.

### **Complexity, courage, and character**

For our study, we interviewed 10 outstanding Federal sub-cabinet executives and a comparison group of 10 randomly chosen peers of comparable rank and responsibility. To identify those outstanding executives, we used a “reputational approach,” soliciting nominations from experts on the Federal government, including the 677 peer-elected Fellows of the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy), as well as the Partnership for Public Service’s 74 Strategic Advisors to Government Executives (SAGE), a peer-elected group of former senior Federal officials in IT, acquisition, financial management, and human capital management.<sup>77</sup> We also solicited nominations from a group of 16 current and former senior government officials and experts from OMB, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), professional staff of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, former members of Congress, and a senior journalist from a media outlet that specializes in covering government management.

Those executives who received multiple nominations from these experts were identified as “outstanding.” And for our comparison group, we randomly selected incumbents of rank-equivalent positions listed the most recent *Plum Book*, which is published every 4 years by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.<sup>78</sup> We conducted interviews of all 20 executives during the last year of the first term of the Obama administration, as well as the first year of the second Obama term. Each respondent was interviewed in person, generally for 2 to 4 hours; interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 2,000 pages of transcript. Interviews followed a standard format, consisting primarily of open-ended questions. Among other things, we asked about each respondent’s approach to decision making, including their typical sources of information and advice, their techniques for encouraging discussion and dissent, and examples of

<sup>77</sup> Wolfinger, R. E. (1960). Reputation and reality in the study of “community power.” *American Sociological Review*, 25(5), 636–644.

<sup>78</sup> United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions (*Plum Book*). (2008). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office.

situations in which they had changed their original predisposition to the decision.

The last question in the decision-making part of our interview protocol was, “Please think about the single most difficult major decision you have made on this job. What was the decision? Why was it difficult? How did you go about making the decision?” This line of inquiry was intended to elicit more detailed information about our original research focus on vigilant decision making. In keeping with the literature regarding what makes decisions difficult, we expected the respondents to describe those that were cognitively complex. However, as noted above, that did not turn out to be the case.

When we asked respondents why their most difficult decision was so difficult, only 1 of the 10 outstanding executives (and 5 of the 10 in the comparison group) cited complexity as the reason for the difficulty of their decision. The others said it was because the decision was unpopular; was emotionally wrenching; or went against the counsel of their advisors, hierarchical superiors, or powerful external organizations...in other words, because the decision required courage to make. The most difficult decisions included standing up to pressure from organizations like OMB and GAO or the executive’s own organizational superiors. Other decisions concerned such things as canceling major IT systems over the strong objections of organizational stakeholders, terminating individual longtime career managers, and downsizing or significantly restructuring the executive’s organization and staff. All of these decisions had a common theme: They were all widely unpopular, likely to encounter stiff resistance, and emotionally wrenching for the executive involved.

All of those executives—outstanding and comparison group alike—used strikingly similar words when describing their courageous decisions. For example, one stated that “ultimately, I had to make a decision that we weren’t going to yield on the requirement, that doing the right thing long term was more important to the long-term viability of the program.” Another told us, “I finally concluded [the program] could not be made to work...and I was not willing to implement a public program I believe is flawed.” A third stated, “Well, there were certainly a lot of people that thought we should continue [the program] but, in the end, I mean, it was my call because the leader of that organization was looking to me to make that recommendation, right?”

The executives who made these decisions knew the right thing to do (of course, given that many of these decisions were unpopular, others would almost certainly disagree with them). However, they also knew that doing the right thing would be exceedingly difficult. The conflict they faced was between taking the easy way out—and thus avoiding adverse personal consequences—and acting courageously despite such consequences. In all the cases we examined, the executive made the decision they regarded as right, those adverse consequences notwithstanding.

## A contingency approach to courage and complexity

As we noted above, our initial research sought to examine the extent to which senior executives used a vigilant decision-making process. And for those decisions we classified as technically complex, we found that to be true—both outstanding and comparison executives consulted multiple advisors, gathered additional information from a variety of sources, encouraged dissent, and deliberately avoided rushing to judgment. But little of that vigilance was present when they discussed decisions that we classified as courageous. Only three of the nine outstanding executives who made courageous decisions reported that they gathered significant new information to help them do so. For the rest, information gathering was minimal. Thus, instead of consulting a wide variety of advisors to get diverse opinions, our courageous executives tended to employ a more solitary decision-making process. Indeed, six of the nine outstanding executives essentially made the decision by themselves, choosing not to involve others after their initial information-gathering efforts.

As the literature suggests, Janis' vigilant decision-making model was specifically developed for decisions that are technically complex. However, as noted, those respondents who made courageous decisions did not employ this model. Rather, their courageous decisions were more likely to involve reflection and introspection, with consultation, if any, limited to a small group of trusted advisors. Thus, we posit that while vigilant decision making makes sense when faced with complexity (including complex decisions involving difficult ethical dilemmas), it is less relevant when decisions require courage. In the spirit of Tom Petty's song, those decisions require someone who "won't back down" from doing the right thing. And doing so requires character and courage.

What underlies courageous decisions? The literature in this area is sparse, especially compared to the research on decisions involving complexity. Some authors suggest that certain people have a strong sense of their own "moral identity" that may ultimately cause them to do the right thing.<sup>79</sup> Others posit that the decision maker must have a "self-efficacy" or self-confidence that makes them feel their decisions can make a difference.<sup>80</sup> But even for a self-confident executive, making a courageous decision is hard. The easy way out is to avoid an unpopular decision, and "courage in organizations is likely to be unpopular."<sup>81</sup> All of the decisions we classified as courageous shared this common denominator.

<sup>79</sup> Aquino, K., & Reed, A. (2002). The self-importance of moral identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(6), 1423–1440.

<sup>80</sup> For example, Hannah, S. T., & Avolio, B. J. (2010). Ready or not: How do we accelerate the developmental readiness of leaders? *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31(8), 1181–1187.

<sup>81</sup> Worline, M. C., & Quinn, R. W. (2003). Courageous principled action. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 138–157). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

A central implication of our research is that the literature on complex decisions and the literature on decisions involving courage may provide different prescriptions for the executive faced with a difficult decision. And the extensive information gathering, diverse sources of advice and input, and discussion and debate inherent in vigilant decision making may actually serve to undermine a decision maker's intention to act courageously. Thus, while one can imagine a situation in which support from a large, diverse group of advisors might steel the executive's resolve, we believe the opposite is far more likely to be true—that is, large groups might actually tend to undermine courageous individual behavior by absolving members from accepting personal responsibility for the group's consensus. In the colorful words of Margaret Thatcher, more vigilance may induce an executive to "go wobbly."

Thus, when an executive is contemplating a decision that requires courage, self-reflection—looking inside oneself—may be more effective than relying on a group of advisors. Indeed, if deciding courageously is hard, it would seem the last thing the executive needs in such a situation is a large number of advisors debating the wisdom of the executive's decision. Support from a small group of trusted individuals whose ethical identity the executive respects may be more helpful.

In any event, our research suggests the need for a contingency model—one that advocates a different decision-making process, depending on whether the decision itself involves complexity or courage. For decisions that are technically complex, the vigilant process recommended by the literature remains optimal. But courageous decisions may require a different approach, one in which introspection—perhaps shared with a small group of trusted, supportive confidants, perhaps based on intuition—replaces more information gathering, debate, and dissent. Hence the two contingent approaches to decision making. And of course, while we have characterized these contingencies as the opposite ends of a theoretical courage-complexity continuum, we acknowledge that real-world choices are never so clear, and that a decision that first appears to be a matter of solving for complexity can easily morph into one that requires courage.

To borrow a term from organizational design theory, we believe that successful executives must be able to be *ambidextrous* in the way they approach decision making. On one hand, the executive should be able to use a vigilant approach for the run of technically complex decisions; on the other hand, he or she should also be prepared to turn inward and reflective when it becomes apparent that he or she is faced with a decision that demands courage and character.<sup>82</sup> Hence ambidexterity: the ability to use either decision-making model, depending on the circumstances. Interestingly, our findings also suggest that the same model may be applied to the executive's most trusted advisors as well—they too should learn to discern when their leader's

<sup>82</sup> O'Reilly, C. A., & Tushman, M. L. (2008). Ambidexterity as a dynamic capability: Resolving the innovator's dilemma. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 28, 185–206.



decision demands discussion, debate, and dissent and when their moral support is the order of the day. However, it is clear that we need more research on whether, and how, successful—that is, ambidextrous—executives are able to switch styles.

### **Implications for the executive decision maker**

The literature on decision making generally focuses on complex decisions that entail extensive information gathering and detailed cost-benefit analyses, but we believe insufficient attention has been paid to decisions involving courage, especially those made by senior government executives in the day-to-day course of their public duties. And by bringing together two important bodies of practice and research—vigilant decision making on one hand and the relatively sparse literature on organizational courage on the other—we believe we have made a contribution to decision-making theory by proffering a differentiated, contingent model for making decisions that range from complexity to courage.

Admittedly, our model is based on what can be characterized as exploratory research and theory building. We urge our colleagues, both academics and practitioners, to build upon it—and to pay as much attention to public sector executive decisions that involve courage as our profession has to those involving complexity—so government officials who are faced with difficult choices can more effectively make them. While most executives may not be called upon to make courageous, won't back down decisions very often, they are likely to face such defining moments at some time in their career; when they do, the decisions they make will likely have significant organizational, professional, and personal consequences. In other words, what they decide will matter, most especially to the individuals and agencies involved. We hope our research will help better prepare public executives to act accordingly when that time comes.