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Ideas for Leaders #563

Bad Framing Leads to Bad Decisions and Bad (Even Fatal) Actions



Key Concept

Decision makers must frame or ‘make sense’ of events and situations, and then make their decisions accordingly. A groundbreaking analysis of an innocent civilian’s tragic shooting by anti-terrorist police reveals how groups of individuals commit, through the interaction of communication, emotions and material cues, to a single, common frame — in this case an erroneous frame. It is a cautionary tale for leaders and other decision makers, exposing how errors or assumptions can cascade into a complete misunderstanding of situations.

Idea Summary

To make decisions, leaders must understand, to use the vernacular, ‘what is happening’. They must make sense of the events and situations that impact their areas of responsibility; this sense-making not only involves the past and present, but also the future: what is likely to happen.

In July of 2005, an innocent man commuting to work was killed by police in a tube (subway) station in London. The shooting happened one day after four terrorists had attempted to set off bombs on tube trains, and two weeks after terrorists had successfully set off bombs in the London tube, killing 52 commuters.

A detailed analysis of all the events leading to the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes (available through the material offered as evidence in the subsequent inquest) reveals the process by which **communication** (the language used), **emotions** and **material cues** (such as the surroundings in which events took place and the actions of the suspect) combined to create a frame for the situation at hand.

Here are some examples:

- **Communication.** De Menezes was never firmly identified as the suspected terrorist police were hunting. However, surveillance officers said de Menezes had a “good possible likeness” to the

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- ▶ [Aalto University School of Business](#)
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Source

- ▶ [Journal of Management Studies](#)

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terrorist. On being pushed, one of the surveillance team said, “For what it’s worth, I think it’s him.”

- **Emotions.** The agents and the leadership team became increasingly more anxious that de Menezes was on a suicide mission, noting that he was “nervous and twitchy,” which, as the information moved up the chain of command, became “very, very jumpy.”
- **Material cues.** During the surveillance, Menezes got off the bus he was riding, walked away, then returned to the bus stop and took the next bus. This was interpreted by the surveillance team, and communicated to the control centre, as an anti-surveillance move. In truth, de Menezes got off the bus to take the tube but the tube station was closed for security reasons; he then took the next bus to the next station.

From this detailed analysis, the researchers developed a process model that explains how a group of people can commit to a common frame that is created and reinforced over the course of events. The first step is *communicative grounding*. Language sets the initial frame, and the repetition of the language among those involved continue to reinforce the frame. The second step is *emotional contagion*. Emotions originally aroused spread to all members of the group. Finally, there is *material anchoring*. Perceived material cues are used to ‘anchor’ the conceptualization created through language and emotions.

Thus, the firearms team were told by the control team that they were pursuing a terrorist (communicative grounding); assigned to perform an armed intervention the team’s emotions ran high as they desperately rushed the crowded tube station trying to get to the terrorist (emotional contagion); when they see the suspect they note that his jacket is “bulky,” indicating that he was carrying a bomb (material cue — in fact, it was an ordinary denim jacket, unzipped).

Business Application

The tragic killing of Jean Charles de Menezes occurred because a group of highly trained professionals became so committed to a specific frame — that de Menezes was a terrorist on a mission — that they could not consider an alternate frame, which happened to be the truth: that de Menezes was a commuter on his way to work. Business decisions are also based on a certain framing of events and situations. This tragedy is a cautionary tale for leaders in how they frame situations for others — or how others may be framing situations for them.

Leaders must pay close attention to the words and expressions they use; they must also be aware of emotions, and how those emotions may be defining their own reactions or influencing the actions of others in the organization. As the study shows, once language choices and emotions have established a certain frame, perceived material cues will only reinforce that frame — even if the frame is erroneous. The outcome may not be as tragic as the shooting of de Menezes. Nevertheless, an organization that has completely mischaracterized situations its business environment is destined for significant operational and strategic

failures.



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References

The Contraction of Meaning: The Combined Effects of Communication, Emotions, and Materiality on Sensemaking in the Stockwell Shooting. Joep P. Cornelissen, Saku Mantere & Eero Vaara. *Journal of Management Studies* (July 2014).

Further Reading and Relevant Resources

[Joep P. Cornelissen's profile at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University](#)

[Saku Mantere's profile at Hanken School of Economics](#)

[Eero Vaara's profile at EMLyon Business School](#)

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