

Book review
Decisions, by Karin Brunsson and Nils Brunsson
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Heraclitus stated that change is the only constant in life. This insight contains an inherent understanding of how actors inevitably and continuously face situations that require them to choose between different alternatives. Decisions are an integral part of everyday life and we make several hundred of them every day; everything from which train to take when commuting to or from work to deciding upon dinner or whether or not to make a carbon offset for your journey to that conference next month. The fictional Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Starship Enterprise (NCC-1701-D) touches upon the complexities of making decision and how it inevitably affects our lives by stating that:

Every choice we make allows us to manipulate the future. Do I ask Adrienne or Suzanne to the spring dance? Do I take my holiday on Corsica or on Risa? A person's life, their future, hinges on each of a thousand choices. Living is making choices. (*Star Trek The Next Generation*, Season 5 episode 9, broadcast 18 Nov, 1991)

For scholars of organisation and management, the interest in how actors – individually or collectively – engage in the act of making decisions has proven to be of immense importance. Understanding how, when, and why certain decisions come about has to be understood as a central part of organisational life. In a manner of speaking, it is the first important analytical step that needs to be taken when trying to understand why a specific phenomenon came to play out the way it did.

Decisions by Karin Brunsson and Nils Brunsson is a short book, no more than 116 pages long. Despite its brevity, it provides a good basis for the exploration and understanding of contexts and situations wherein decisions work (or, perhaps even more commonly, fail to work). The book is formally structured into five chapters, with an additional research note on how the Swedish government coped with (or failed to cope with) making decisions in the aftermath of the Tsunami disaster in 2004. The research note is intended to frame the content of the book, introducing and discussing some of the key aspects and concepts presented in the book. I will come back to this research note later in my review. The eBook is priced from £22.00 from Google Play, ebooks.com and other eBook vendors, while the printed version can be ordered from the website of Edward Elgar Publishing.

In chapter one, Brunsson and Brunsson introduce decisions as a concept, as well as the process of decision making. In addition to introducing the concept, it outlines some of the core ideas subsequently addressed in the book. The four logical categories of *consequence*, *appropriateness*, *imitation*, and *experimentation* are given considerable space. Together with a critique of rationality

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(within a decision-making context), it serves as an important stepping stone into the vast field of literature that characterises the academic field.

In chapter two, Brunsson and Brunsson begin to unpack the concept of decisions. They do this from an individual perspective, arguing that “decision-making [...] consumes a great deal of a person’s life” (p. 20). They convincingly argue and contextualise situations wherein individuals (fail to) make decisions. They do this by navigating between scholarly work, biblical texts and examples from everyday life that illuminate the concept and bring clarity into the theoretical domain within which they work. Whereas chapter two focused on individuals, chapter three turns the focus toward decisions within organisations. Again, the discussion concerns how and when decisions are made, with the addition of who makes decisions in organisations. These issues are discussed and highlighted in relation to the four logical categories already introduced in chapter one. The critique of rational behaviour, or our belief that rationality truly exists and/or impacts on our manner of making decisions, continues to be the focal point of these two chapters. Although much can be said about their arguments in this respect (I do not fully agree with them about, for example, their view and understandings of management control), they accurately point out important limitations in models and ‘theories’ that currently dominate the field of organisation and management.

Chapter four turns the reader’s attention towards the *consequences of decisions*. The chapter is largely derived from Brunsson (2007) – which is also mentioned as a foot-note in the beginning of the chapter. Their discussion circles around five topics: decisions and (i) the capacity to act, (ii) management control, (iii) responsibility, (iv) output, and (v) hypocrisy. Readers not already familiar with the works of Brunsson and Brunsson (respectively), will most likely find the chapter to be an interesting introduction to the complexities and varieties in which decisions and decision makers exist.

The book is concluded by (i) a chapter on *complex decision* processes and (ii) an extension of the research note concerning the aftermaths – in decision making context – of the Tsunami disaster. Unfortunately, the chapter about complex processes comes out as underdeveloped in comparison with the other parts of the book; only five pages long for such an important area? For future editions, it would be well used effort to expand and elaborate on these processes, and connect them more clearly to ideas, arguments, and concepts already presented in book. The description of the case, on the other hand, is well written and engages the reader’s imagination as well as the will for further analysis. It is well balanced in terms of facts and descriptions, giving it a significant posture for discussing decisions in complex situations. Apart from being one of the few academic analyses I have read from an organisational perspective regarding this specific disaster, it is brilliantly constructed for students of decisions within all levels of higher education. I can highly recommend teaching staff to have a look at the case as a description and base for critical analysis that takes the public sector and the theoretical field of decisions as its departure.

Although my overall impression of *Decisions* is that it is a well written, fascinating, and relatively well composed text, there are parts that could have been more developed. My first concern is about the separation of (i) individuals and (ii) organisations. More specifically, whether it is *individuals* or

organisations that actually make or partake in decisions. Although I can appreciate the pedagogical approach of making this separation, I expected a thorough discussion about agency. I am quite convinced that Brunsson and Brunsson agree with me when I say that it is not organisations as such that have agency, but individuals. Organisations cannot do anything without its actors, why agency should be closely connected to actors and not organisations. The issue is more than a semantic one. In fact, I would argue that this failure to reflect on agency brings attention to a neglect of ethics and responsibility. If organisations have agency – and thereby can be claimed to be responsible – does that not reduce or even nullify the responsibility that individuals have in any given situation? This divestiture of responsibility can be devastating, especially – as in the case about the Tsunami disaster – when dealing with important decisions that will have deep impact on everyday life of citizens. My second concern is more of an editorial aspect. Reading the book from cover to cover, you may find that different parts of the book carry different styles. This may be of a minor issue if you only focus on specific parts, but with such a restricted size I would have liked a more consistent style throughout the different chapters. For example, chapter two is very rich in terms of exemplifications, qualifications, and embedding the ideas in individuals' life. This 'style' is absent in the other chapters. It may be a comment of minor significance, but it affected my appreciation of the text.

Having read *Decisions*, I found myself thinking about who the intended reader was. Being a scholar of public administration and management, I especially appreciated the case descriptions of the Tsunami disaster, but was a bit disappointed that it was primarily descriptive, lacking a proper in-depth analysis. However, as I have stated above, as a case description to be used for students' learning experience I found that it was adequately executed. With the tone of the book being accessible and easily followed, I can easily say that *Decisions* will be a good addition to courses in organisational theory or management. For practitioners, I expect chapters one and two the most useful ones. The quite elegantly summarisation of a complex field together with the use of examples and concretisations allow for a deeper understanding of how decisions are (not) made.

References

Brunsson, N. (2007). *The Consequences of Decision-Making*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.