

Overcoming cultural indecision: is operational discretion the key?

The three-year inquiry into the 2017 Manchester Arena attack concluded in June. It assessed the response of the emergency services and other authorities to 21 monitored recommendations.

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Among these recommendations was for Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service (GMFRS) to 'ensure that its commanders are adequately trained in operational discretion.' This was due to the indecision on the night that delayed mobilising firefighters to the scene as they strictly adhered to procedures. The inquiry revealed that firefighters were willing to take risks but were constrained by a culture of fear and rigid protocols.

What is organisational culture?

An organisation's culture is socially constructed, based on the beliefs, values, and attitudes of employees. If an employee believes that they will not be supported in their decision-making, then this can lead to risk-averse attitudes that promote self-protective cultures, as described at Manchester.

Although the recognition of a maladaptive culture is good, achieving cultural change is not easy. Top-down managerial instructions, such as the greater use of operational discretion, will have very little impact if employees perceive these instructions to be disingenuous or disconnected from the realities of their role. Employees must buy-in to changes to embrace them within the social fabric of their organisation.

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What causes cultural indecision?

The indecision that was witnessed at Manchester was not unique. This is because decision-making during emergencies is incredibly complex. Commanders are faced with unpredictable and dynamic emergencies, where they must make critical choices under stress. These environments create wicked problems – situations that are novel and unique, and where there are no obvious right or wrong solutions. Wicked problems create a high risk for indecision as humans are motivated to avoid these choices. When decision makers fear negative consequences for making choices in these contexts, then this can foster an organisational culture of indecision.

What is unique about emergencies is that decision makers are rarely motivated to avoid making choices, unlike in everyday situations where we have the luxury of postponing complex decisions without significant consequences. Imagine that you are thinking about moving house: gathering information, assessing

motivations, and weighing pros and cons is common, and delaying the decision can be a reasonable choice with minimal negative consequences.

Yet choice deferral is not possible during emergencies. The core purpose of the emergency services is to 'save life and reduce harm'. Responders have an organisational responsibility to act. If a commander is indecisive, then the consequences of inaction can be greater than the consequences of a sub-optimal choice.

My research has looked at what causes commander indecision. Why does indecision arise despite the motivation to act? In a series of interviews with commanders, we found that indecision occurred not because commanders wanted to avoid their choice, but because they were engaged in intense, albeit redundant, deliberation about how to act. This is known as decision inertia – when decision-makers want to act but are unable to break their deliberative cycle.

We found that decision inertia was driven by negative thinking about outcomes – both for action ('what if I make a choice and it goes wrong?') and inaction ('what if the incident escalates out of control?'). Negative thinking was linked to concern about short-term consequences, such as causing harm to the public or emergency responders, and long-term worries linked to organisational reputation, team welfare, and personal accountability. This fear of negative consequences is what underpins a culture of indecision.

Can operational discretion help to reduce cultural indecision?

A greater focus on operational discretion is a positive step. Operational discretion enables commanders to use their professional judgement during unconventional emergencies, bypassing rigid procedures that may hinder resolution. The risk of deviating from standard operating procedures is justified if it will save lives, reduce escalation, or prevent endangering others.

While operational discretion has the potential to reduce indecision, it's crucial to avoid swinging to the other extreme. Commanders should not be pressured into using it when waiting for more information is necessary. Additionally, there is a risk that although operational discretion is promoted in theory, decision-makers may lack organisational support and face negative consequences if their choices result in unfavourable outcomes.

My research highlights that indecision can be reduced by shifting mindsets away from seeking the perfect choice to making a 'good enough' choice. Delays occur when people excessively deliberate about how to make choices that fit within idealised procedures. By encouraging 'good enough' choices, decision-makers can act promptly without fixating on perfection. Training on operational discretion must embrace this mindset shift – empowering responders to experiment in 'good enough' thinking, deviating from gold standard procedures.



Dr Nikki Power.

What's next for ops discretion?

During the conclusion to the Manchester inquiry Dave Russel, Chief Fire Officer for GMFRS, expressed his commitment to lead an organisation 'that is driven by a desire to make a difference than the fear of making a mistake.' He personally emphasised this by writing to all staff at GMFRS upon assuming his role as Chief Fire Officer, assuring them of his full support in using operational discretion for justified reasons. This is a significant step, as research has shown that high fear of accountability leads responders to prioritise self-preservation over saving lives, due to concerns about negative repercussions. Having the support of a strong leader within the organisation is crucial in empowering members to use operational discretion and think more flexibly.

GMFRS has taken direct steps to develop a supportive organisational culture that empowers commanders to exercise operational discretion. To reinforce this, it is essential that commanders undergo regular decision training to expose them to wicked problems. This will help them to familiarise themselves and gain confidence in when to use operational discretion and how to justify its use.

Importantly, training must be delivered in a non-judgemental environment where decision makers have the psychological safety to think flexibly without fear of criticism from colleagues. Engaging multiple decision makers in respectful debates about different approaches enhances dynamic thinking and encourages diverse perspectives, bolstering confidence and skills in using operational discretion.

Preventing indecision is crucial to avoid future incidents like Manchester. Operational discretion could be the key to achieving this goal, providing that it is properly embraced within the culture of the emergency services.

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