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DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT. PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

The world is dealing with a health crisis unparalleled in this era that underscores a negative side of globalization. People have to face economic and psychological changes. The paper is intended to draw attention upon the importance of building emotional resilience to handle the actual crisis and its development. Thus, it analyses what the emotional reactions of people are when making decisions in such difficult contexts as this pandemic crisis. Specifically, each of the seven steps of the decision-making process are described along with the subsequent emotional reactions of the people (both as individuals and as part of an organization or team) involved in the process. The conclusion of the paper is that all reports that have been issued by governments of all countries rather urges to further decisions that should be made in three areas: economic support, Covid-19 testing and the lockdown. Therefore, the decision-making process seems to be rather a work in progress within this pandemic context. At the emotional level, every step is experienced differently. There is still a common emotion that seems to appear at all stages of the process and that is anxiety. Up to some point, anxiety is functional and useful. It is human and adaptive for a while. But beyond certain reasonable limits, however, it becomes exhausting and devastating.

Keywords: pandemic; decision-making process; emotion; crisis;

1. INTRODUCTION

We all have gone through a difficult time in this context of economic and psychological changes. The world is dealing with a health crisis unparalleled in this era that underscores a negative side of globalization.

What I shall focus on in today's paper are the emotional reactions of people when they have to make decisions in such difficult contexts as this pandemic crisis.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the last four decades the topic of emotions and decision-making has gained relevance among psychologists. However, nowadays, the connections between the two is even more relevant for the light it brings to the scientific research and pragmatic approach on how people react in times of crisis.



As we all know decision-making is regarded by the scientific literature as encompassing 7 steps and being the cognitive process resulting in the selection of a belief or a course of action among several possible alternative options. Decision-making involves therefore identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values, preferences and beliefs of the decision-maker. (Edwards, W., R.F. Miles, Jr., D. von Winterfeldt, 2007). The seven steps of the Decision-Making Process are: Identify the decision/Gather relevant info/Identify the alternatives/Weigh the evidence/Choose among the alternatives. /Take action. /Review your decision. (Goodwin, P. and G. Wright, 2004)

Unfortunately, for each step the decision-maker whether it's a company or an individual living in this uncertain world faces a specific crisis. Moreover, the word CRISIS seems to define the vast majority of the challenges we encounter today and the dominant negative emotions seem to be more and more anxiety / fear, anger / revolt and sadness / despair. (Madalina Petrescu, 2020)

3. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The present paper is intended to try and identify the emotions that accompanied each step in the process of making decisions during pandemic.

4.THE STEPS OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND THE EMOTIONS THAT ACCOMPANY THEM

4 1. Identify the problem

To make a decision, you must first identify the problem you need to solve or the question you need to answer.(Skinner, D.C. 1999). Clearly, the problem the world has to deal with nowadays is the right answer to the Covid-19 virus; so the problem is not the virus in itself, but the answer to its appearance and the effects it brings in the human organism. Many of the world leaders identified the problem as being the virus in itself not the right vaccine; therefore, they focused for a long period of isolating the virus instead of finding ways to live with it.

And here comes the chain of negative emotions and worldwide panic when it was clear for everybody that the problem even if identified cannot be made measurable and timely so that we know for certain that we eventually met the goal at the end of the process. As a consequence, the emotions that we experienced at this phase appeared to be from the spectrum of the negative ones (frustration, guilt, shame, etc.), but depending on the coping (the way they are managed) one or all of the above prevails.

4.2. Gather relevant information

Once we have identified our decision, it's time to gather the information relevant to that choice. *Our brain is not an impartial supervisor, but a hyper vigilant guardian, who prefers to take a stand against any disturbing stimulus, rather than risking being taken by surprise.* (So we kept our brain open to all kinds of information for a while; we let our mind receive all types of information, out of despair; everything that came from China was taken for granted; subsequently China was seen as a possible source not only of information but also of a solution as it was one step ahead of every other country; at some point we could not distinguish between fake news and reliable, trustworthy one. Everything that came on the market connected to the evolution of the virus was welcomed by our minds.

The dominant emotions of this step was frustration, accompanied at times by fear and anger, revolt. Anxious people became even more anguished and had a very poor response to the ambiguity of the situation. The people or the companies that used to be in control of the situations were immediately affected. Anger followed, because many people were placed in unfair positions by losing their jobs. The coping mechanism that the people found at this stage was switching the center of gravity on the outside, on others or in context, to overcome certain internal obstacles or overwhelming emotions (anxiety).

4.3. Identify the alternatives

With all types of information coming from both the scientific community and the political one, the leaders of each country had to come up with alternatives. Shall we close the borders? Shall we cancel flights? Shall we declare emergency alerts? How shall we handle panic within the population? How do we avoid chaos? These were probably the questions on every state president's mind and lips. They all tried to listen to their counsellors and identify possible solutions to the problem caused by the invasion of COVID-19. Social media played a huge role in countering the options. The action strategy involved confronting multiple scenarios, mobilizing resources, but in excess, increasing thus the risk of escalating

conflicts and deteriorating interpersonal relationships (aggression). The dominant global emotion of this stage was SADNESS. This emotion was fuelled by negative judgmental thoughts, related to devaluation, failure, mistake, personal flaws or bad decisions. People started to blame the government, blame other countries, point fingers to one another.

But no one told us not to beware; no one told us that we can be easily bogged down by too much information—facts and statistics that seem applicable to our pandemic situation might only complicate the process.

4.4. Weigh the evidence- was the moment of the great powers of the world to come in front and for the less important ones to stand aside and obey. Countries and organizations have identified multiple alternatives, weigh the evidence for or against alternatives suggested by world health organizations and scientific communities. People and companies flicked through the pages of history and found out what others did in the past to succeed in overcoming the obstacles and dealing with the crisis. Shall we put the safety of the individual first or shall the safety and the future of the company prevail? This was the question on every CEO's mind. They identified potential pitfalls for each of their alternatives, and weighed those against the possible rewards.

It is probably interesting to discuss what the impact on leaders, all types of leaders at the emotional level, was.

Well, leaders are also human beings, so nothing that characterizes the human being in general bypassed them. They differentiated themselves from the other members of the team by the extra responsibility, both towards their own activity and towards that of the team. The great leaders functioned continuously as a role model for others. Usually, team members do what the leader does, not what the leader preaches. So If there is no coherence and consistency between the leader's statements and actions, people withdraw their trust and begin to protect themselves. So true leaders knew they had to hurry to accomplish step 5.

4.5. Choose among alternatives.

A decision had to be made to prevent chaos at organizational level. As for the individual level, each of us followed and processed his own thoughts and feelings. In an ideal approach, the decision needed to be adopted have been identified and clarified by now.

In the pandemic context we have experienced recently, things were far from following the ideal steps. On the contrary, some of them were mixed and trespassed or skipped. Why? Because at some point pain and despair prevailed.

In an ideal world at this step we are ready to choose. But in the pandemic context, all leaders were far from being ready to choose. So what we all we had to do both nationally and individually was to...explore. Leaders themselves had to admit that they are humans and they should be allowed to explore and feel; but most of them took risks, did not look for perfect solutions, did not look for guarantees. The more honest they became the more validation and appreciation they got from other members of the team. The latter came as a natural climax of authenticity and connection with team members. So, at some point *connection* was the key word. Physical distancing was imposed but social connection kept people united.

Of course, in the context of a crisis, like the one we are going through now, it was even more difficult to maintain a balance between achieving organizational goals, focusing on performance and enhancing and strengthening interpersonal relationships.

People had to be fired and thousands of others lost their jobs especially those which involved social interactions. In spite of the isolation, we became more tolerant to each other at the interpersonal level of communication. We seemed to understand that if we give ourselves permission to make mistakes, we will make fewer mistakes, with a high probability. On the other hand, we also realized that If we saw reality in terms of problems, or even more appropriate, in terms of challenges, we will look for solutions, and emotions will be able to be controlled and will not overwhelm our resolute approach. (Kahneman, D., P. Slovic, and A.Tversky. 1982).

But some people chose to see reality in terms of dangers against which they built defences, feeling overwhelmed and burdened by taking on too many responsibilities. Whatever the category each of us belonged to, we all had to move on to step 6.

4. 6. Take action

Each person, each country and each institution developed a plan to make their decision tangible and achievable. Most countries chose isolation, quarantine and wearing masks. If in the past we watched people wearing mask with caution and avoided them, now there was the time to avoid and blame people who weren't wearing masks. We passed by each other and started to be furious at those who wearing obeying the law.

At all times, people needed guidance and laws. Whether it's the bible or a mere internal rule, we need guidance and order in our lives. Otherwise, chaos prevails.

So from my point of view watching how the mind worked at performing this step was the most challenging experience. What happened in our minds when each of us had to choose to take action? Well, each of us acted upon how he or she interpreted the reality. As we all know, reality is what is prevalently displayed by our mind. Everything, I would say, is an interpretation of our mind of the life events, through our own cognitive filters.

If something is meant to be threatening, dangerous by one's own mental cues, it will become a mental priority and take over the field of consciousness. As a rule, our attention is focused faster and harder to detach from things interpreted as dangerous, problematic. At this point, anxiety triggered by these negative connotations becomes the fuel that sustains worries, which are endless and often **uncontrollable** chains of catastrophic thoughts. (Petrescu M., 2020)

Therefore, the dominant emotion of this phase was ANXIETY. Up to some point, anxiety is functional and useful. It is human and adaptive for a while. But beyond certain reasonable limits, however, it becomes exhausting and devastating.

4. 5. Reviewing the decision

So, then, the next question is: *What is the key? What is the solution?* How can we determine to achieve and maintain an appropriate level of anxiety that keeps us functional and in action? Well, as I always advise my clients, moderation is the key. Anything in excess damages the emotional, mental, physical balance and affects the various functional plans. Concerns, which are the central element of anxiety, have both benefits and costs. Moderate, adaptive worries motivate us to solve problems and increase our performance. Therefore, for a while, anxiety and performance may go together, until they reach an optimal point, beyond which, as anxiety increases, there is a drastic decrease in performance, due to disorganization and demobilization installed accordingly.

The goal is not a worry-free life, but the transformation of dysfunctional worries into adaptive worries. So I think this is what we should all do in times of crisis: adapt by appealing to surviving skills and subsequently create new ones. For the actual pandemic context, the only certainty we have is the lack of predictability.

4.6. Finding tools for better decision-making

In general, in crisis situations, people do not embark on new activities, do not seek to explore new recently acquired strategies. Still there is this new constant struggle of the pharmaceutical companies to deliver a vaccine at any cost.

But for the time being, I, as an individual, would rather go to a slight regression; I would not rush to adopt new patterns of behaviour or actions; I am not for generating new results at any costs. I'd rather feel safe and accept that for the time being we can't change things. Let's not forget that this virus is the result of scientific research. It was produced and released in a scientific lab. So, if I were to express my personal point of view I would say that before any progress is made in one direction or another, stabilization is crucial. This does not mean stiffening, but adjustment on the way, adaptation. Darwin said that "survival does not belong to the most intelligent or powerful, but to the most adapted."

So let's feel stable and secure before we proceed to accepting any change.

The way I see the problem for the actual inhabitants of this planet is that one part of the planet knows how to experience and interpret and direct emotional discomfort whereas a significant part of the inhabitants are horrified by experiencing emotional pain and avoid the slightest sign of pain ignoring, after all the fact that it may have a buffer role (shock absorber, protector) that is, it may help us get used to and accept less desirable results.

The last steps of the decision-making process are: Reviewing the decision and finding tools for better decision-making.

Step 7- Reviewing the decision - implies an honest look back at the decisions made the governments. Their initial response to the Covid-19 crisis was hampered by the absence of a long-term strategy, lack of clarity about who was responsible and its poor use of evidence. As for solving the problem, we are still far away from it. Moreover, all reports that have been issued by countries' governments rather urges to further decisions that should be made in three areas: economic support, Covid-19 testing and the lockdown.

As leaders, it is important to be authentic, to accept our limits, to honestly acknowledge our emotions, normalizing those of others in this way, but focusing on the task and not on how we feel about it; this is the attitude which will support our progress and performance. As leaders, it would be preferable to rely more on intuition, on the inspiration given by the expertise gained in their career. As for the individual level, I would honestly advise each person to work on their cognitive distortions and limiting beliefs that take control of their minds and dominate their deliberative process. If the context allows, it would be preferable that when you feel that your emotions overwhelm you, to postpone the adoption of a decision, in order to calm your emotional state.

When we feel intense emotions, things are experienced and perceived hyperbolically, therefore regaining calm and a state of security is preferable before finalizing a choice. If something in the external context maintains the state of discomfort, choose to focus on the body, and especially on the breath, this being the best anchor for bringing our mind to the present. If, on the other hand, emotions come with an overwhelming procession of bodily sensations, focus your attention on the outside, coming out of your body and mind.

5. CONCLUSIONS

1. Emotions are not good or bad. They are generally useful, and without emotions we would be deprived of important marks and actions of our lives. We would not know when we are going well with our relationships or are at peace with the choices we make.

2. The emotional discomfort that we may experience at any step of the decision-making process is rather an indicator that the situation is important and it is preferable to prepare an adaptive and prompt response. If we can still consciously choose, through paying attention and being present within the immediate reality, it would help us take responsibility for what we understand and subsequently do something useful with that understanding.

3. It is important to know that our emotions are not the direct consequences of the realities and life events we go through, but are the result of the meanings we experience.

4. As leaders, accept your emotions as a fuel for any action (e-motion = energy in motion) but contain them, without being overwhelmed by them. Emotions are energy that is consumed as we accept them, not the precursors of imminent catastrophic scenarios.

5. As for the individuals, breathing and mindfulness techniques are recommended whenever one feels overwhelmed by strong emotions. If we want to offer a response not a reaction to an event, we need to make a step back: thus, we take control of emotional reactions and it is not the emotions which control us.

In conclusion, the solutions are ours. If we allow ourselves to make mistakes, maybe we will make fewer mistakes. If we allow ourselves to explore and feel, tackling the problem may come as a more familiarized step and even an easier and more successful one, at least to our view. Whether we work on our self-confidence or on our health, it is important to always remember that all these are choices that we make.

And what is life if not a huge bunch of choices?

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