Closing the Deal: Influencing a Decision in Two Cultures

by John H. Wilson

Complexity in the selling process increases when decision teams include individuals or groups who come from different nations or cultures. Therefore, understanding decision-making models can guide tactical decisions more successfully and allow you to better influence decision makers across cultures. To illustrate this, let's consider a salesperson named Jerry.

Jerry is proposing a solution to evaluators in two different countries, Brazil and Germany. . As part of Jerry's selling process, he will seek to understand how the culture of each separate decision team shapes their decision-making model. Based on research about decision-making practices in both cultures, Jerry will assess which of the following decision-making models are more likely for each of the teams: (a) rational, (b) emotional, (c) political/coalitional, or (d) garbage can. Identifying the decision-making model that is likely for each of the decision teams based on their cultural perspective, can potentially help Jerry modulate his sales process to best suit the priorities of each team. The story begins as Jerry travels to a final meeting with a prospective client's entire project evaluation team, including factions from both Brazil and Germany.

Reflections from 30,000 Feet

Jerry turned on the overhead reading lamp and activated his laptop as the plane leveled off for the transcontinental flight. He began to reflect on the 18-month sales process with two separate project teams from two different continents comprised of employees from Zimmer Labs, Ag, a German manufacturer. The first group was a German logistics team seeking a solution for tracking mobile delivery operations worldwide in order to streamline inventory movements. The second was a Brazilian Information Technology (IT) team tasked with evaluating the impact of proposed solutions on the existing software systems architecture. Jerry is an account manager at Apex Logistix Software,

and is responsible for influencing these stakeholders toward a decision to engage his firm for the project.

Decision-Making Models

One of the greatest challenges for Jerry and his internal team of associates, so far, has been to understand the divergent decision process employed by the different Zimmer teams even though both worked for the same company. To prepare for this challenge, Jerry spent a considerable amount of time studying the ways decision models differ by culture. While scores of decision-making models exist (Beach & Connolly, 2005, Harrison, 1993; Nutt, 1976), the following four models represent a range of options for Jerry to consider:

1. The *rational* or *classical* model presumes that all group members have a common goal and have all of the information needed to reach the optimal conclusion by identifying the problem, assessing all possible alternatives and choosing the best option (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Harrison, 1993).

2. The *emotional* model encompasses a range of feelings that influence the decision-making process such as mood, regret/disappointment, views about sunk costs, a sense of endowment/entitlement, reluctance to alter the status quo, overconfidence and risk aversion, to name a few (Beach & Connolly, 2005).

3. The *political/coalitional* model is behavioral with emphasis on negotiation, cooperation, or conciliation in order to serve, appease or satisfy the largest population of stakeholders through consensus (Harrison, 1993).

4. The *garbage can* model is often described as organized anarchy or answers seeking questions, because it operates under the assumption that choice opportunities, problems and potential solutions confronting an organization are ambiguous and chaotic, though generally work out for the best (Beach & Connolly, 2005; Olsen, 1972).

As a regular practice, Jerry always assessed the likely decision-making model of each prospect he worked with. While his focus, historically, has been on U.S.-based firms, Apex was expanding internationally, and he found himself more frequently engaged with multi-cultural decision teams like these two from Zimmer. As a result, he needed to synthesize his understanding of decision-making models with decision-making characteristics common in Brazilian and German cultures. For Jerry to influence these two disparate groups such that they both choose his firm, he had to account for the individual decision-making model(s) common to each national culture.

Brazilian Culture and Decision Making

Jerry recalled the first of a series of both formal and informal meetings with his contacts from Zimmer's Brazilian IT team in Sao Paulo. Based on advice he found in *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands* by Morrison and Conaway (2006), he arrived a few minutes prior to the scheduled 9:00 a.m. meeting. However, proceedings did not begin until nearly 10:00 a.m. "Bom dia," he had greeted his contacts from Zimmer's IT team as they arrived in the conference room. This first meeting, and the meal that followed, involved only limited discussion about the business problem or possible solutions. Based on advice from local advisors, Jerry arranged subsequent visits including key experts and executives from Apex to meet with the team in an effort to demonstrate their abilities and commitment to a successful project.

Rational vs. Emotional

Through research and interactions with the Brazilian evaluators, Jerry assessed which decision model seemed most likely in order to prioritize his efforts to support their evaluation. Jerry's research uncovered a study of decision making priorities among Brazilian IT professionals by Ferreir and Laurindo (2009), who found strategic issues, contracts compliance and costs over-shadowed risks, new management forms and benchmarking. Based on this, Jerry inferred that a purely rational model is unlikely even though some rational elements exist. There is evidence to support that an emotional model prevails over the rational.

In support of this, Jerry discovered a case study described by Gomes, Nunes, Xavier and Valle (2008), which described how a group of Brazilian decision makers engaged experts with relevant experience to identify valid options and then make recommendations about an "ideal point of view" (p. 402). However, they did not merely accept their findings if other factors were perceived as more relevant. Instead, there was evidence that policy, cost and lifestyle preference factors weighed most heavily. These findings suggested to Jerry that decision makers from Brazil subscribed to an emotional rather than rational decision-making model since they sought a balanced and effective solution that satisfied emotional priorities, not necessarily endeavoring to find a singular, perfect choice.

Political/Coalitional vs. Garbage Can

Another aspect of decision making that Jerry explored in regard to the Brazilian evaluation team is whether there was a tendency toward political coalitions or a more chaotic approach characteristic of

the garbage can model. Jerry discovered that the political landscape in Brazil is typically fragmented and unpredictable because individuals often have to navigate complex social structures and rigid bureaucracy to accomplish their purposes. Therefore, while there are fewer loyalties to a particular group, there is a focus on individual problems and issues absent of any strong group affiliation or coordination (Blume, 1968). As a result, Jerry concluded that the garbage can model was more relevant than the political/coalitional model.

Once Jerry's interactions with the group confirmed his assumptions, Jerry focused his selling efforts on illustrating how existing Apex clients have experienced better quality of life once the solution is in place, and the likelihood that they could achieve their stated business requirements at a reasonable cost. Further, since the group seemed to lack strong political alliances except where the individual interests of team members aligned, he also invested considerably in building relationships with each individual in the group, emphasizing how they could personally recognize value from the solution.

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German Culture and Decision Making

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Jerry's experience working with the German operations team was very different than that of the Brazilian IT team. Jerry met only twice with the project appraisers in Germany during the course of their investigation into Apex' offerings. The first meeting began promptly at "half-ten," which Jerry had fortunately discovered ahead of time was actually 9:30. As a sign of respect, he confidently greeted the group, "Gutenmorgen, ist mein Name Jerry," as he exchanged business cards that had been made especially for the occasion to include additional information such as reference to his master's degree, the year Apex Logistix was founded and the number of employees working for the firm.

Rational vs. Emotional

Jerry performed similar research regarding decision practices that are common in German cultures to gain insight into this team's decision-making model. He learned from Carr and Tomkins (1996), that decision makers in Germany place a premium on thorough and controlled decision processes (i.e. employing precise calculations for discounted cash flows), which is more consistent with the rational model as opposed to the emotional model. Further, this study suggested that German firms prioritize longer-term strategies, portentous of a common belief in an optimal solution revealed through rigorous normative analysis. In contrast, the emotional model does not fit well with the evidence that German decision makers place greater importance on long-term strategic goals,

methodical analysis and controlled processes. The emotional model suggests that decisions are influenced more by mood, concerns about regret or sunk cost, unjustified attachments to the status quo, or simple hubris (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Since these are less prevalent among German decision makers than the rational attributes outlined above, Jerry looked for ways to supply rational evidence that the Apex solution fits in with Zimmer's long-term strategies, and that the solution has a proven track record of success.

Political/Coalitional and Garbage Can.

Given Germany's national emphasis on political accountability (Wrede, 2006), Jerry learned that consensus is highly valued in German culture and is exemplified by the popular phrase "'ordnung muss sein' (There must be order!)."

While this would seem to support a political decision-making model based on bargaining and negotiating, Harrison (1993) posited that the political and rational models are at odds, and there is much evidence to suggest that coercion from upper levels in an organizational hierarchy drives such consensus more so than democratic agreement (Carr & Tomkins, 1998). Likewise, the garbage can model seems to have little connection with the German approach to decision making given the pressure on individuals to reach consensus rather than pursue individual objectives or preferences characteristic of this model.

Given this evidence, Jerry concluded that the decision makers on the German team were more likely to follow a rational model. As a result, he focused on selling activities that catered to this model. For instance, in alignment with a rational model, Jerry produced hundreds of pages of documents and other materials during the course of several months, all translated into German, with sufficient detail to demonstrate and validate all claims about Apex functionality and capabilities. The purpose of providing such comprehensive information was to demonstrate that the Apex solution is the paramount solution for the business problem.

Conclusion

The effort that Jerry took to understand the decision-making model in these two different cultures allowed him to make intelligent choices about how to focus his energy and company resources during the sales process to this point. Since the Brazilian IT team was more inclined toward the emotional model, Jerry summarized information in a way that showed how the solution would improve quality of life and facilitate better relationships within the organization. Further, he invested a greater degree of time cultivating personal relationships with each team member in an effort to

influence their individual recommendations since there was evidence of the garbage can model rather than the political/coalitional model. Conversely, the German team was more likely to subscribe to a rational model of decision making rather than emotional. This required more comprehensive data and documentation, and proof that there was no better alternative to the Apex solution. In terms of the social aspect of the decision process, Jerry channeled resources and time into building relationships and influencing a few key leaders of the team who had a clear mandate from higher levels in the organization.

The final step was a meeting the next day in Frankfurt as Jerry and both Zimmer teams met face-to-face for a consolidated presentation with all of the stakeholders. Jerry turned off the overhead light as his laptop powered down. He was confident in the work of his team thus far to influence both the Brazilian and German contingents of the Zimmer decision team to engage Apex for the pending project.

It was time to close the deal.

About the Author

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