DBRIEF -MAY 2023

When Speed Kills

Boeing's 737 MAX and the Catastrophic Cost of Pressured Decision-Making

Vol. F.1P

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When Speed Kills - A Case of Poor Decision Quality

In 2011, after American Airlines announced plans to buy Airbus jets, Boeing faced a crucial decision. They could spend years creating a new aircraft or quickly update the old 737 to keep up. In just forty-eight hours, Boeing's leaders chose speed. That rushed choice started a chain of assumptions that eventually cost 346 lives and tens of billions of dollars.

The 737 MAX tragedy isn't about villains or incompetence. It shows how competition can hurt decision quality, how time pressure shortens careful thinking, and how company systems can push good people toward bad choices. These are patterns we all face in our own decisions, usually with less dramatic but still important results.

The Anatomy of a Decision Failure

The MCAS flight control software was the main failure point in both crashes. Engineers built it to use just one sensor, even though using two would have been safer. Internal memos show they knew the risks. Almost forty percent of Boeing's FAA representatives felt pressured to approve designs they worried about. Warning systems that could have helped pilots spot sensor failures were sold as extras instead of being standard safety features.

After Lion Air Flight 610 crashed in October 2018, Boeing faced another key decision. Their own analysis suggested grounding the fleet, but the planes kept flying. Five months later, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashed, killing all 157 people on board. In total, 346 lives were lost. The financial cost was over $20 billion, along with lasting damage to Boeing's reputation.

This case stands out because Boeing had great resources, technical skill, and deep experience. The company had built safe planes for over a hundred years. The 737 MAX engineers were some of the smartest. Still, the decision-making system they worked in kept favoring speed over safety, cutting costs over managing risks, and reacting to competition instead of careful planning.

The Decision Quality Lessons

Boeing's tragedy highlights several parts of decision quality found in the BRIEF© framework. First, **Frame**: Boeing saw the decision as 'how do we respond to Airbus quickly?' instead of 'how do we build the safest, most competitive plane?' This narrow focus left out safety. Second, **Risk**: known risks were downplayed. The single-sensor design, optional warning systems, and pressure on regulators were all recognized risks but not given enough

weight. Third, **Assumptions**: Boeing believed pilots would handle MCAS problems, even though the system was confusing and training was lacking.

Most importantly, Boeing's culture discouraged the dissent that could have stopped disaster. When engineers spoke up, company pressures silenced them. FAA representatives who had doubts felt unable to act. The hierarchy filtered out important safety information instead of raising it. This is what happens when decision quality isn't built into an organization—when systems meant to support good judgment end up working against it.

The Personal Parallel

Here's the hard truth: the same patterns that led to Boeing's 737 MAX disaster show up in our own lives. How often do we stick with a pressured decision—about a job, relationship, or investment—and ignore information that challenges it? How often do we rush decisions because of time pressure, when waiting would help? How often do we see risks but explain them away because facing them would mean making tough changes?

Decision quality isn't just a theory. It's what separates outcomes that match our goals from those that don't. Boeing's engineers wanted to build a safe plane, but the systems they worked in led to the opposite. The first step is to understand our own decision habits and the patterns that shape how we see problems, judge risks, and handle pressure. This helps make sure our decisions support our real goals instead of working against them.

Good intentions & knowledge aren't enough—Boeing's people had them. What's needed are better decision systems, more awareness of how people make decisions, and company cultures that support good judgment. The cost of poor decision quality, in lives, money, and lost trust, is too high to risk.

MESSAGE:

At the heart of every transformative outcome lies a quality decision—yet most individuals and organizations still lack a systematic understanding of how they decide. This is the gap we are committed to closing. Our mission is to elevate decision quality

from an assumed competency to a developed discipline—one that can be measured, understood, and continuously improved. Through the BRIEF© framework and our Decision Quality Platform, we are building the tools and insights to help leaders decode their decision-making DNA and cultivate the judgment required for an era defined by complexity and AI-augmented possibility. When people make better decisions, they build better organizations and more meaningful lives—and we are honored to partner with you on that journey.

"Decision quality is a disciplined, scholarly practice that directly shapes enterprise outcomes and long-term value creation. It is strongly correlated to strategic delivery, risk stewardship, and value preservation."

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