How (Not) to Implement an Unpopular Decision:

A Case-Study of the Swedish Armed Forces

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Several factors have an effect on the perceived outcomes of leadership styles and decision-making. Even a cursory literature search[1] suggests that one of the more important factors is the perceived fairness of the decision-making process. Several studies show that procedural fairness is positively related to the perception of decisions, a pattern named the *fair process effect*.[2] People tend to react more positively when treated with higher levels of procedural justice.[3] It is disputed whether it is *distributive justice* (outcome) or *procedural justice* (method) that primarily affects the individual's experience of the decision. Several researchers emphasize the interaction between distributive and procedural justice.[4]

The basic principles behind *fair process* are engagement, explanation and clarity of expectations.[5] Engagement means that individuals should preferably be involved in the decision-making. Explanation requires the thinking and argument behind a decision to be clarified. Expectation clarity means that there should be no doubt as to what expectations are placed on every employee. Fair process should, however, not be confused with either decision by consensus or workplace democracy.[6]

There are a number of conditions that affect the relationship between fairness and the perception of a decision. The degree of fairness in the process has a stronger effect on the experience of the decision when the actual favourability of the outcome is low.[7] Another condition arises if the individual feels evaluated. Individuals who receive an unfavourable outcome in evaluative contexts assess the decision as less positive following a fair procedure, as opposed to an unfair process. One reason may be that an unfair decision process enables individuals to attribute their own unfavourable outcomes to external factors. This is named *Reversed Fair Process Effect*.[8]

In addition to distributive and procedural fairness, there are other factors that affect individuals' willingness to accept the leader's decisions, such as *participation* and the *ability to voice opinions*. People are more willing to accept decisions after they have had an opportunity to be heard.[9]

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[1] *Cf.* the references assembled for this study, on pp.12*sq*. Worthy of note is that none bore on military contexts.

[2] See for instance : Folger, 1977.

[3] For example : Greenberg & Folher, 1983 ; Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke & Dronkert, 1999.

[4] For instance : Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996.

[5] Chan Kim & Mauborgne, 2003.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] For instance : Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996

[8] Van den Bos *et al*., 1999 ; Brockner *et al*., 2007.

[9] Brockner *et al*., 1998 ; Van den Bos *et al*., 1999.

Expectations as regards the decision-making process play a role in the individual's experience of the decision. People who expect a non-participatory process can react more negatively to a participatory process than to a non-participatory process.[10] The effect of participation is reduced when individuals consider themselves less knowledgeable in the area of decision to provide a meaningful contribution.[11]

Knowledge is otherwise important for the perceived outcome. Individuals who perceive themselves as well-informed in the area of decision-making rely more on their assessment of how the outcome may affect them. Those who, on the contrary, see themselves as less well-informed rely more on their overall impression of the decision-making process.[12] In contexts where the outcome for others is known, social comparison is used in assessing the fairness of their own outcomes. When the outcome for others is unknown, individuals, instead, use information about the procedure for assessing the fairness.[13]

The experience of knowledge influences the effect of *participation* even at the policy level. Individuals who perceive themselves as knowledgeable in the field are more willing to accept decisions following a procedure in which affected groups were involved. The relationship between participation and decision acceptance is, contrary to this, absent in cases where the individual lacks knowledge in the decision area.[14]

Trust in the decision-maker also affects the perception of the decision.[15] People, who know that the decision-maker is reliable, perceive the decision-making process as fairer, compared with people who know that the decision-maker is unreliable.[16] There is a positive correlation between perception of procedural fairness and willingness to accept decisions in cases where information about the decision-maker's reliability is missing, a relationship that does not exist when the individual knows that the decision-maker is reliable or unreliable.[17]

Studies within this field range from survey studies on employees in various work organizations to experimental studies on undergraduate students. This has implications for the kind of dependent variable that is used.[18] Studies of the former kind often have *organizational commitment* as their main concern, but occasionally also *decision acceptance* or general *job satisfaction.* Those of the latter variety often result, on a more general level, in greater attention paid to *procedural* and *distributive (outcome) fairness/justice*.

Most outcome variables are as a result subjective. It is how the decision is *perceived* that is measured, rather than if it is successful from an objective standpoint. A good decision is, however, not always the same as a good result. Evaluation of a decision

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[10] Van den Bos, Vermunt & Wilke, 1996 ; van der Bos *et al*., 1999.
[11] Brockner *et al*., 1998.
[12] K. See, 2009.
[13] Van den Bos, Lind, Vermunt & Wilke, 1997.
[14] Terwel, Harinck, Ellemers & Daamen, 2010.
[15] See for instance : van den Bos, Wilke & Lind, 1998 ; Terwel *et al*., 2010.
[16] Terwel *et al*., 2010.
[17] Van den Bos *et al*., 1998.
[18] Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996.

is often made when the outcome is known, which implies that the evaluator has access to facts that may have been unknown at the time of the decision. Evaluation of a decision should, for that reason, preferably be assessed on the basis of the decision's input values rather than of the outcome.[19]

To summarize, many studies show a relation between knowledge, fairness, participation, trust and how the outcome of the decision is experienced. The relation with fairness is weaker when the individual is well-informed, feels evaluated or receives a high objective outcome. The relation with participation is stronger if participation is expected and if the individual is well-informed.

While commitment and job satisfaction are important, most high-level decisions normally have other purposes. They may, for instance, be designed to increase productivity or reduce costs in business firms, or better fulfil political demands on the organization in the public sector. Occasionally, there may be conflict between promoting job satisfaction and commitment on the one hand, and concerns for cost-effectiveness and productivity on the other. Leaders sometimes have to make unpopular decisions that will result in objective impairments for some groups. These kinds of situations are the most demanding from a leadership perspective and the problem with how decisions are perceived is especially relevant in these cases.

While securing favourable perceptions andacceptance of a hard decision may be a challenge in a number of settings, it may be even more so in military contexts. The latter are associated with an authoritarian culture whose ultimate justification is that the combat situation demands leadership styles which contradict ideals such as concern for decision acceptance, participation and people's ability to voice opinions. In the face of danger, there is simply no time for such luxuries as it may be a matter of life and death that there be no questioning of orders. Yet, peacetime decisions may need another leadership approach where decision acceptance may be more relevant.

The first purpose of the present study is to evaluate the armed forces' ability to implement an unfavourable decision while maintaining commitment and job satisfaction. The second purpose is to identify what factors will promote acceptance of a decision with an unfavourable outcome for most employees. Derived from the literature, the main hypothesis is that fairness, participation, knowledge and trust will promote decision acceptance. There is an additional hypothesis that higher hierarchal position will promote understanding of the decision. The rationale is that you get more information at higher levels and that you have better connections with the top level.

Method

Procedure

The idea behind the present approach was to select a specific decision case that would serve as a basis for a questionnaire study. The criteria were that the decision (a)

[19] Baron & Hershey, 1988.

affected a large amount of individuals, (b) was of a certain magnitude, and (c) can be assumed to have triggered emotions and thoughts on the part of those affected as to whether the decision reached its objective.

The organizational context chosen for the study was the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF), mainly because of that organization's hierarchical character and large size. The specific decision-making process that was selected bore on the 2010 choice to make service on international military missions mandatory for all SAF personnel, which means that the possibility to be exempted from such a mission is restricted. This decision case was chosen as relevant for the study in a dialogue with senior military officers at the Swedish Defence University.

The top leadership of four Army regiments were contacted and asked to distribute a questionnaire to a sample of their employees. Each regiment received 120 questionnaires and a local military officer was asked to handle the distribution to prospective respondents. The criterion for being included in the study was to have been affected by the decision process described above. The questionnaire was returned by 229 respondents, which gives a response rate of 48%.

Participants

The respondent population was made up of Swedish mid-career military officers and civilian employees. The gender distribution was 90% male and 10% female. The sample consisted of 78% officers, 11% specialist officers and 11% civilians. Among them, 14% were of a rank lower than lieutenant, 28% were lieutenants, 28% captains, 18% majors and 4% lieutenant-colonels or above, while the rest (8%) did not specify rank. In the sample, 38% were 35 years of age or younger, 27% were between 36 and 46, 20% were in the 46-55 age bracket, and 14 % were above 55. In terms of years in the SAF, 71% had more than 10 years' seniority, 22% had served between 5 and 10 years, and 7% less than 5.

Measures

The questionnaire was *ad hoc* and intended to measure the variables that, in the literature review, were shown to be of importance. The reasons for using an *ad hoc* instrument was that there is a lack of validated measures in Swedish and that such an instrument increased the possibility to adapt the items to the specific context and population concerned. Four principal variables were included (see Table 1 below, p.7).

The first was *knowledge*. This variable was measured through 16 items about how the respondents perceived the decision's input values. The items were grouped into three scales that concerned (1) whether the decision was perceived to have had clear objectives, (2) the subject's perceived knowledge of the decision, (3) the perceived complexity of the decision, and (4) the perceived timing of the decision.

The second variable – or group of variables – was *fair process and participation.* This variable was measured through 18 items about how the respondents perceived the

decision process. The items were grouped into three scales that concerned (1) the balancing of the arguments, (2) the degree of fairness within the organization, and (3) the employees' participation in the process.

The third variable was *trust*. This variable was measured through 8 items about how the respondents perceived the organization and the decision-makers. The items were grouped into two scales that concerned (1) the respondents' trust in the decision makers, and (2) their trust in the organization and its climate.

The forth variable was *outcome.* This was measured through 26 items. The items were grouped into four scales that concerned how the respondents perceived (1) how the decision influenced them, (2) their trust in the decision-makers after the decision, (3) the decision outcome, and (4) the emotional outcome of the process (effects on commitment and job satisfaction).

The response to each item was made on a rating scale with six options ranging from "disagree" to "fully agree". The rating scale had no middle option. The participants also had the opportunity to respond "not relevant" or "don't know". Altogether, there were eight response options.

Demographic questions included gender, age, employment category (military or civilian), rank and length of service in the Army. The questionnaire had room for free comments.

Statistical Analysis

The SPSS (v.23) statistics software programme was used. Indexes were constructed through factor analysis (principal axis factoring, with direct oblimin rotation). Reliability of the indexes was measured through Cronbach's alpha. The relationship between outcome and explanatory variables was studied by the use of Pearson bivariate correlations (two-tailed) and linear regression analysis. Subgroup differences were calculated by means of independent-sample T-test and one-way ANOVA.

Results

Index Construction

All items with more than 20% "don't know" responses were excluded from this part of the analysis. Altogether 35 items were disqualified due to this criterion, including all scales concerning the perception of the decision process. In addition, most items from the "complexity of the decision", "trust after the decision", and "perception of the decision outcome" scales were excluded, as well as some single items from other scales.

The general criterion that was chosen was that the factor loading should be > .40 for an item to be included in a factor. In reliability testing, an item was excluded if it caused the alpha value of the index to increase. Indexes were merged if (a) it would

otherwise result in indexes with less than three items, (b) it implied increased alpha value, and (c) the theoretical interpretability of the indexes was not negatively affected.

The Decision's Input Values

Firstly, the items of the four scales intended to measure the perception of the decision's input values were factor-analyzed. One of these scales ("Complexity of the decision") was left out due to too many "don't know" responses. The factor analysis of the eleven items in the remaining three scales resulted in four factors. Three of these had three items and one had two items.

Reliability analysis showed that all four factors reached satisfactory levels in that regard ($\alpha > .70$). Reliability would, however, increase in two of the factors if items were deleted. This implied three indexes with only two items. The reliability of these three factors, if merged, was tested, which resulted in satisfactory measures that would not increase if any item was deleted. This led to the definition of two indexes: *knowledge* and *timing*.

Perception of the Organization and Decision-Makers

Secondly, the items on the scales that were intended to measure the perception of the organization and the decision-makers were factor-analyzed. The factor analysis of these eight items resulted in one factor. Reliability analysis showed that the factor reached a satisfactory reliability ($\alpha > .70$), that would not increase if any item was deleted. One further index was thus defined: *trust*.

Perception of the Outcome

Thirdly, the items on the scales that were intended to measure the perception of the outcome were likewise factor-analyzed. The factor analysis of these twelve items resulted in three factors.

One item failed to load > .40 in any of the factors and was excluded from further analysis. In factor 2, only two items loaded > .40. These two, however, also loaded > .40 in factor 3. Factor 2 was consequently dropped. This resulted in one factor with seven items and one with five items.

Reliability analysis showed that both factors reached a satisfactory level ($\alpha > .70$). Reliability would, however, increase in factor 3 if items were deleted until there were only two items left. The reliability of these two factors if merged was tested. If two items were deleted a satisfactory reliability ($\alpha > .70$) was reached that would not increase if any item was deleted. As a result, one final index was defined: *outcome*.

Table 1 (see next page) summarizes these various points as to scales, number of items and indexes:

Table 1: Scales included in the Questionnaire ; Number of Items ; Indexes they were turned into

Questionnaire Scale	Items	Index
Perception of the Decision's Input Values		
The decision had clear objectives	4	Knowledge
Respondents' knowledge of the decision	4	Knowledge
Complexity of the decision	5	> 20 % "don't know"
Timing of the decision	3	Timing
Perception of the decision process		
The balancing of the arguments	5	> 20 % "don't know"
Fairness within the organization	7	> 20 % "don't know"
Employee participation	6	> 20 % "don't know"
Perception of the Organization and Decision-Makers		
General trust in the decision makers	4	Trust
Trust in the organization and its climate	4	Trust
Perception of the Outcome		
How the decision influenced the employees	3	Outcome
Trust in the decision-makers after the decision	7	> 20 % "don't know"
Perception of the decision's outcome	9	> 20 % "don't know"
Perception of the emotional outcome of the process	7	Outcome

Note. There were some exceptions on item level from this general pattern.

This process resulted in four indexes:

Independent Variables

(1) *Knowledge*: the respondent had knowledge and understanding of the background and aims with the decision (8 items; α = .784) ;

(2) *Timing* : the organization was prepared and ready for the decision (3 items ; α = .817) ;

(3) *Trust* : the respondent trusts the decision-makers and the organization has an open climate (8 items; α = .878).

Dependent Variable

Outcome: the decision had positive effects on the respondent's commitment and job satisfaction (10 items; α = .915).

Table 2: Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Decision Outcome, Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Predictor variables	*B*	Partial correlation	Bivariate correlation with Outcome	*M* *	*SD*
Knowledge	.14	.18	.50***	3.93	0.98
Timing	.33***	.54	.66***	3.01	1.45
Trust	.44***	.54	.64***	3.16	1.06
R^2	.64				
Adjusted R^2	.62				
R^2 change	.64***				

Note. For outcome variable *M* = 2.88 and *SD* = 1.08.

* Scores could range from 1 (disagree) to 6 (fully agree).

*** $p \leq .001$.

Correlations and Regression Analysis

As can be seen in Table 2, knowledge, timing and trust all correlate with outcome, but timing and trust show a slightly stronger relationship. There are also significant correlations between the independent variables, even if these are lower than their correlations with the outcome variable. The correlation is .46 between *knowledge* and *timing*, .39 between *knowledge* and *trust*, and .36 between *timing* and *trust* ($p < .001$ on all correlations).

Subgroup Differences

The hypothesis that a higher hierarchal level would implicate higher decision acceptance was tested in two ways. The first was to test whether different military ranks produced different outcomes. Military rank was recoded into four categories: second lieutenant or lower ($N = 32$), lieutenant ($N= 64$), captain ($N = 65$), and major, lieutenant-colonel or higher ($N = 49$). There were, however, no significant differences between these four groups on either outcome or the independent variables.

The second method was to test if unit level had any significant impact. The sample was divided into section/platoon ($N = 78$), company ($N = 45$) and battalion-brigade level ($N = 63$). There was a significant difference on timing ($F = 3.20$; $p = .04$) but not on outcome. The lowest organizational level perceived the timing of the decision in more favourable terms than the others.

Further subgroup differences concerned age and seniority. Those aged 35 or less ($N = 86$) had a significantly higher mean than those above 35 ($N = 142$) on the timing variable (3.62 vs. 2.68 ; $p < .001$). The younger group had, in addition, a significantly higher mean than the older group on the outcome variable (3.21 vs. 2.74 ; $p = .027$). The group with more than 10 years of service ($N = 162$) had a significantly lower mean than the rest ($N = 66$) on timing (2.80 vs. 3.62; $p = .001$) as well as on outcome (2.75 vs. 3.30 ; $p = .019$). Altogether, the older ones with more years of service are more negative both towards the timing and towards the outcome. The relatively younger ones with fewer years of service were less affected by the decision, due to the fact that they were aware of it when they chose their military career.

No other significant subgroup differences were found: the range of responses was generally narrow on most other demographic variables.

The General Quality of the Decision Process

There are no validated cut-off values to determine whether an outcome is to be considered acceptable, normal or ideal. Still, there are several indications that the present outcome was mainly dissatisfaction. Among the four indexes, outcome had the lowest mean. Item analysis shows that the three items (of those included in the factors) with the lowest means were…

- The decision has increased job engagement ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 1.25$)

- The decision has increased job satisfaction (*M* = 2.22 ; *SD* = 1.16)
- The decision was received with joy (*M* = 2.16 ; *SD* = 1.17)

The respondent's knowledge was mixed. On more general items about knowledge (e.g. "I understand the reasons for the decision"), most respondents had a relatively high level of agreement. However, the respondents generally had less knowledge about how arguments and different considerations were balanced against each other, the cost-benefit balance of the decision or as to whether all the relevant facts had been taken into account. For example, the following items had more than 50% "don't know" responses :

- The decision was based on a reasonable balance between the various arguments (61% "don't know")
- The decision-maker made an analysis of possible alternatives (68 % "don't know")
- The decision-maker chose the most cost-effective alternative (54 % "don't know")

Additional Comments from the Open-Ended Question

Additional comments were given by 75 respondents (33%). This qualitative data was considered a valuable complement to the otherwise quantitative study and, for that reason, included in the analysis. The comments were categorized by the first author.

Table 3 : Results of the Qualitative Categorization of Additional Comments

Category	Subcategory	N	Content
Positive comments		5	Different positive views on the decision
Critical comments		49	
	Implementation	19	Criticism of implementation, especially that the decision's announcement came during summer vacation
	The decision	8	General criticism of the decision itself
	Trust	5	General lack of trust in SAF and/or the political level
	Unnecessary decision	10	The decision was pointless for supplying our international missions with personnel, since this was never a problem
	Hidden purpose	7	Speculations that the real reason for the decision was to downsize the workforce or at least that this is a main outcome
Not affected		5	These respondents were mainly employed in SAF after the decision and not primarily affected
Methodological comments		16	These were mainly critical of the questionnaire or found some questions difficult, among other things due to that some time has passed since the decision

There is a fairly obvious pattern of criticism in the comments towards both the decision and its implementation. The representativeness of the group that added comments was tested. The group with comments had a significantly lower mean on trust than those without comments (2.90 vs. 3.28; $p \leq .021$). No significant differences were found on other indexes.

Discussion

As expected, knowledge, timing and trust all significantly contributed to the outcome, although the correlation with timing and trust is slightly higher. There was, in addition, a generation effect in the sense that those above age 35 and with more years of service were more negative both to the timing and to the outcome. This group was also more affected by the decision. Generally, the study indicates a lot of dissatisfaction with the decision and its implications, but also a lack of knowledge about the decision process.

Hierarchal position was not shown to have any effect on outcome. Those in higher positions are, however, also older and have more years in service. They were accordingly more negatively affected by the decision. The hypothesized relation between a higher hierarchical position and decision acceptance could accordingly have been counteracted by the relation between a higher hierarchical position and the decision's consequences.

The objective outcome of the decision process in focus was unfavourable for most individuals. It implied that they could be forced to serve far from home. The literature on the subject suggests that a low favourability of the outcome may increase the importance of fairness in the decision-making process. It is clear that this specific decision process had some suboptimal attributes. Most importantly, the perception of a fair process was lacking. Even if the decision was fair in the sense that it affected everyone equally, it is obvious that the respondents seemed, to a large extent, not to know what considerations had been taken into account. The participation items indicate, in addition, that respondents felt they had little say in the decision, but they also generated a high rate of "don't know" responses. The decision-makers all too obviously did not spend much time explaining why the decision had to be made. It could be hypothesized that this is related, at least in part, to the military organization's traditionally hierarchical culture. You should follow orders – not question them. Still, according to previous research, satisfaction with the decision would likely be improved by a fairer process and a higher degree of participation. This would have been especially relevant for the senior members of the SAF, who were primarily affected by the decision.

There is currently no reference range to decide if the decision process under study is better or worse than other processes in other organizations. It could, however, be more relevant to compare the outcome with an ideal case. If a decision has a favourable impact on employees, the ideal case would be that everyone should be satisfied with it and its implementation process. For a decision that has unfavourable consequences, like the present one, it may be a more reasonable ambition that job satisfaction be maintained, even if not increased. One must, accordingly, differentiate between what is *ideal* and what is *acceptable*, which could be related to the distinction made long ago by Herbert Simon between looking for the optimal decision and being content with one that *satisfices*.[20] We currently have no such norms or cut-off values, but it could be argued that such are needed to be able to better evaluate decision-making processes in the future.

[20] Simon, 1956.

While the present study may add some knowledge on the perception of decisions and decision-making processes, its main limitation resides in the lack of comparable data from other contexts and other decision processes. The fact that this is a case study also implies that the possibilities for generalizations of the results are restricted. However, it may be of value in developing future questionnaires in this substantive field of research. An established instrument may be helpful in collecting more data, but also as a tool for different organizations to evaluate their decision-making processes.

One problem that arose during the study was an unexpected high incidence of "don't know" responses. This problem could be addressed in two principal ways. One is to further stress that it is the *perceived,* rather than *actual,* knowledge of the decision process that should be reported. Another is to construct separate scales that measure this aspect.

Generally, there is need for more research on what affects decision acceptance, including the impact of hierarchal position. Future research should also preferably address a theoretical development of leadership styles. Experience of (good and poor) outcomes of strategic leadership is traditionally referred to the leader's individual characteristics and leader style.[21] An aspect that traditionally has been separated from the leadership models is how the *content* of leadership – the decision-making process itself – affects the perception of leadership quality. This impact is likely to increase in proportion to the complexity of decisions and as a function of the organizational level considered.[22]

To sum up, these authors have not found, in their literature search, any studies on decision acceptance in hierarchical systems, in military environments, or in relation to hierarchical level. This study might be one of very few addressing this topic. While it has identified a need for further research, it also indicates that leadership development programmes within the Armed Forces should preferably focus on the factors that promote decision acceptance.

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[21] Northouse, 2007 ; Kaiser, Hogan & Craig, 2008.

[22] See for instance : Ohlsson, Wallenius & Larsson, 2014.

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