

**ARTICLE FOR “WESTERN COUNCILLOR”
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IRRATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

In their best selling book entitled *Sway* published earlier this year, authors Ori and Rom Brafman write about how apparently logical thinking in decision-making processes can be subverted or “swayed” by unseen behavioural forces.

The authors discuss topics like *loss aversion*, which is essentially how human beings have a natural tendency to avoid short-term losses after making a commitment to a certain course of conduct.

One example used is that of the late Lyndon B Johnson, who was the President of the USA who conducted the Vietnam War. He sought to avert the certain political defeat that would have followed an early withdrawal from Vietnam, hoping that his commitment of substantial levels of money and lives might have a faint possibility of ultimate success – a situation analogous to that of a rich gambler on a losing streak.

In referring to other examples and research, the authors show that such behaviour is not restricted to high office or “high rollers” with addictive tendencies.

Another behavioural force mentioned is that of the “chameleon” effect. Apparently, people are inclined to behave in a way that fits in with the opinions of expectations of those around them.

In a study involving telephone contact between strangers, female subjects were telephoned by males who had been shown two categories of photographs of women – beautiful and plain – and told that the woman in the photograph was the woman they were speaking to.

The study found that the women subtly altered their behaviour to conform to the expectations of the callers.

A further behavioural impulse identified was that of *value attribution*. One example given by the authors was that of a field study conducted by the Washington Post in which world-class violinist Joshua Bell, wearing ordinary clothes including a baseball cap and jeans played anonymously for about 40 minutes in a subway station during the rush hour one January morning in 2007 in Washington DC.

Even though he played his \$4.5 million Stradivarius masterfully, no-one stopped to listen. Because of his clothing and the venue, the commuters did not hear an outstanding performance justifying a sell-out concert, they merely heard a street busker.

Similarly, the authors contrast the rejection of one of the most momentous discoveries in anthropology of the 19th century – the fossil of *homo erectus* - by the Dutch scientist Eugene Du Bois for many years, mainly because he was of

unknown standing at the time, with the quick acceptance of a claim by Charles Dawson, a member of the British establishment who falsely claimed to have found a fossil of *Pitdown Man* a few years later. A striking example of value attribution.

The book also touches on research into the concept of fairness and how convicted criminals' views on the fairness of the legal system were influenced largely by the outcome of their cases: someone who received a light sentence tended to think that their trial was fairer than someone who received a heavy sentence. However, regardless of the level of punishment received, respondents placed nearly as much weight on the process as they did on the outcome.

The correlation between the convicts' views and the amount of time spent with their lawyer also suggested to the authors that the more communication there was with a person in any kind of process, the more likely they were to consider it to be fair. Is this the reason why our governments are inclined to follow some kind of public consultation process in development projects?

Finally, the authors also noted that the *dissenter* has a very important place in decision-making processes. It is the dissenter or the "blocker" whose true contribution is in forcing the majority to refine their positions and raise the quality of their analysis – ultimately to the benefit of all concerned. Will we think differently about the lone dissenting councillor from now on?

With such an array of behavioural influences, it would be worthwhile councils reflecting frequently on the hidden behavioural forces behind the decision-making of their councillors and officers.

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