EDITORIAL

Building commitment

The management of change and the psychology of decision-making behaviour have long been the subject of systematic research in the social sciences. However, it is only comparatively recently that operational researchers have become aware of just how much of this research is pertinent to their concerns. Last year's IFORS Conference in Cambridge on "Operational Research and the Social Sciences" was a valuable contribution to increasing this awareness. Many of the papers published in the proceedings (Jackson, Keys and Cropper, 1989) should be compulsory reading for practitioners and students of OR.

A further interesting example of writings in the management literature of relevance to OR practitioners is an article by Charles Schwenk (1986) on encouraging commitment to a course of action. It is widely acknowledged by practitioners that management commitment to proposed changes plays an important, if not crucial, role in successful OR interventions. Thus, the OR implementation literature talks of the desirability of high-level management commitment, of building commitment by keeping the client involved and informed of progress, and the need to plan carefully for the implementation of recommendations. In short, there is a need consciously to manage the change process, and it follows that an understanding of how commitment develops may be particularly useful for practitioners.

Schwenk's article raises some interesting possibilities for encouraging commitment to a proposed course of action by exploiting the way in which people process information in decision-making. Limitations in our ability to process information give rise to biases and simplifying "rules-of-thumb" which people commonly use to reduce the amount of information they have to consider in decision-making. Schwenk argues that these biases can be exploited to present courses of action in a more favourable light and to encourage commitment.

One bias which many people exhibit is the tendency to give too much weight to vivid, easily-recalled anecdotal information and too little weight to "pallid" statistical information. For example, Schwenk cites one study in which students, given a vivid story of one employee's positive experience with a company policy, expressed more belief in the policy and commitment to it than those given statistics supporting the truthfulness of the policy. Schwenk also cites John DeLorean's attempt to increase the salience of information about himself to potential investors, to encourage a kind of "representativeness rule-of-thumb" which reduced investors' motivation to seek out and use other types of data. Investors

apparently attached undue weight to DeLorean's personal characteristics in assessing the likely success of his automobile company. It seemed to investors that DeLorean exhibited all the stereotype characteristics of a successful entrepreneur. This tendency in information processing suggests the possibility of providing clients, and others concerned with the implementation of changes, not only with pallid statistical information, but also with vivid anecdotal information. OR practitioners may be able to use vivid anecdotal information to increase commitment and draw attention away from equivocal statistical information. The implied opportunities for presenting the effects of interventions in a favourable light are obvious!

As well as influencing the choices themselves, anecdotal information may also influence the level of confidence decision-makers have in their choices. Studies suggest that, while not significantly improving the accuracy of decisions, large volumes of anecdotal information related to a particular choice may increase decision-makers' confidence in their choice by increasing the number of reasons for confidence available in memory.

Another bias referred to by Schwenk is the so-called "illusion of control", by which people overestimate their ability to influence a situation. This can affect assessment of chances of success in a venture because it can lead to overconfidence in one's ability to produce positive outcomes. OR practitioners interested in increasing commitment may encourage a similar process by selectively providing information which emphasises the controllable elements and plays down the uncontrollable elements in an intervention situation.

Seeking to build commitment by exploiting biases in an individual's information processing might be regarded as somewhat unethical. However, if OR practitioners genuinely believe in the soundness of their recommendations, then it may be appropriate to use information to put the most favourable light on a proposed course of action. Once a course of action is decided upon, the commitment of management ought to help to ensure success. In this vein, Nils Brunsson (1980) has argued that the need to create commitment and motivation, to make the best out of projects that are elected, is an important function of project evaluation. He calls this the "supportive function" and distinguishes it from the "selective function", which is concerned with selecting the best projects. The selective function is best carried out using what Brunsson calls a "rationalistic" approach. This approach involves estimating the effect

that acceptance of a project proposal will have on overall goals, such as profitability and growth. On the other hand, the supportive function is better carried out using a different, more impressionistic approach. In this approach evaluators consider a few conspicuous features of the project proposal, and on the basis of these a view of the project is formed which is perceived as either "good" or "bad". Instead of trying to find out all the positive and negative characteristics of the project, information search is directed to finding evidence or arguments supporting the first impression. The result is a very unbalanced picture of only positive or only negative characteristics of the project.

Brunsson's study was concerned with the way in which project proposals were evaluated in two contrasting companies. The less successful and less innovative company used the rationalistic approach, emphasising the selective function of evaluation, but the more successful, innovative company used the impressionistic approach emphasising the supportive function. An important difference between the companies was that the more successful company had formulated a detailed strategy, and project failures were accepted to some extent. In the less successful company strategy was too abstract and vague to serve as a guideline for evaluators, and failures were strongly avoided.

Seeking to build commitment to a course of action is one thing, but often managers need to be persuaded of the need for change in the first place. Frequently, commitment to existing, less satisfactory, courses of action is strong and needs to be addressed. Sometimes managers may even be motivated to use information to increase commitment to an unsound course of action, for example in the hope of turning a situation around and justifying past decisions. In such cases an appreciation of the possibilities outlined here may help others to recognise this manipulation and to avoid overcommitment to a course of action which is likely to fail.

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For the interested reader

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