

# Human Decisions: The Role of the Will

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*“There is no decision without will, no will without being.”*

Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie II*, 186.

## Introduction

The purpose of this technical note is to explain why the ability to make good management decisions depends not only on the decision maker’s intellect, but above all on his will. To decide well we must think well and, above all, desire well.

The following reflections are intended to provide some fundamental concepts to help management professionals tackle their core responsibility, namely decision making, with intellectual competence and practical insight. We wish to clarify the role of the intellect and demonstrate the importance of the will in choosing and attaining business objectives.

We argue that the will plays a key role in decision making and, by extension, in all management activity. Current theoretical discourse on the importance of feelings and their influence on the intellect, often referred to as “emotional intelligence”, has led to some neglect of the anthropological foundations on which management competencies are built. Emotions and feelings are crucial; but without a strong will to drive them, they produce incomplete people with no character, managers who may be intelligent but who are also immature: people who “know what they ought to do, but do not do it.”

We argue that managers need to exercise their will daily, as well as their intellect. Actions create habits, consolidate behavior<sup>1</sup> and build character.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Pablo Cardona has addressed this subject in his book *How to Develop Leadership Competencies*, EUNSA, Pamplona, 2005. He defines competencies as observable and habitual behaviors that lead to the successful performance of a function or task.

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This technical note was prepared by Professors Guido Stein and Juan Carlos Vázquez-Dodero. February 2008.

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Last edited: 10/16/19



Repeated actions, guided by intellect and will, become habits, that is to say, more or less spontaneous behaviors. The habits specific to the management function are a vital human *tool* for making and executing decisions.

Experience shows that human actions always have a reason. Therefore, to explain actions we must identify the reasons. At the same time, everyday experience shows that there is usually more than one sufficient reason for any action. Human behavior is clearly not the result of logical reasoning alone, as there is always an element of mystery, as befits a free, creative mind. The human fabric is woven from reasons that explain a lot of things, but not everything.

We may want the consequences and effects of our decisions, but we do not have to want them. The intellect on its own is not enough; there must also be a will. This raises the question of how a person can overcome indecision when he has no decisive reasons, or how a person can choose between goods that are practically equal.

Lastly, we discuss the ethical implications of management decisions.

The theoretical underpinnings of this note are taken from the philosophy of Aristotle and the later thinking of Thomas Aquinas<sup>2</sup>.

## Prior Considerations

1. We need to distinguish between the motive and the good of a decision. The reason why a person makes a decision is his “motive”. This is distinct from what the person aims to achieve, his “goal” or “objective”, which in classical thought is called a “good”. While the good is more objective in nature, the motive has a strong subjective component, which is not always easy to identify. The good of a bankruptcy protection filing, for instance, is temporary legal protection. Yet the motive may be to cover up a bankruptcy.

The reason or motive for which a person chooses something may be an objective quality of that thing (its economic value, for instance) or a quality external to it, deriving from its relationship with the decision-making subject (its sentimental value or the status it affords, for example). A person may want to be fit because being fit is pleasant, or because it makes them attractive, or because they “owe” it to others (spouse, children, etc.).

The motive always relates to a “me” and a “now”. It combines the objective value of the good with reasons of personal convenience. It adds a personal dimension, reflecting the particular circumstances of the subject. The motives that guide a manager’s decisions show the sort of person he is, as described by the theory of motivation developed by Juan Antonio Pérez López<sup>3</sup>, which gives a solid account of why people act as they do.

The will cannot make things objectively better or worse than they are; but the intellect may invest them with personal motives that make them subjectively more desirable. From the point of view of these personal motives, the object may seem subjectively better, even if it is objectively worse. This explains how two managers with the same responsibility can prefer different, even opposite, things and act in consequence.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the work of Carlos Llano (a professor at IPADE, Mexico) to whom the authors owe an intellectual debt, is focused on the application of this philosophy to business and management.

<sup>3</sup> See “Fundamentos de la dirección de empresas”, J. A. Pérez López, Rialp, Madrid, 1993.



For example, two managers who have the same duty and desire to meet a schedule of deliveries to customers may make it their primary concern to maintain short-term industrial peace at the expense of having to explain to customers why they are experiencing delays... or the opposite. The intellect judges it better to meet the delivery schedule, which is something entirely objective. But each will decides which path to take in order to do what it deems best, based on its motives.

2. The *will* chooses *because it wants* and in so doing expresses its freedom. An object may be more expensive, for example, or less useful, and yet more desirable or better for other people from the decision maker's point of view. Does this mean that decisions based on wants are capricious? Let's consider: the options are always presented by the intellect; the motives must be rational and attractive enough to move the will<sup>4</sup>. When presented with an attractive option, the will may accept the good offered by the intellect or it may allow another motive to take precedence. How often does a manager want something that objectively is not good for him? This explains how, in the same situation, two managers may make subjectively different decisions, one improving as a result, the other deteriorating.

Ultimately, the will is the reason why man is free. Hence the saying "where there's a will, there's a way".

3. The more aware we are of the motives at play in a decision, *the freer and more responsible* and, consequently, the more human we become. A child, or a madman, cannot act with the same level of awareness as can be expected of an adult. Because they are less free, they are also less responsible, as modern law recognizes.

From these considerations we can draw some provisional conclusions, which we will explain later:

- 3.1. Decisions are rooted in the subject as a whole, including the subject's desires, feelings and natural impulses.
- 3.2. The intellect and the will support and reinforce one another. They are the pivot on which the subject's decisions hinge, as it is the subject who knows and wants.
- 3.3. The subject that decides is in no way unaffected by what it decides. The subject improves or deteriorates internally as a result of its decisions, that is, ultimately, as a result of its "wants".

To decide well we must not only think well; we must also take the will into account, as it too decides.

For a person to decide well he must *be good*, which *means* he must think well and exercise certain moral capabilities (habits or competencies) that obey the will in situations where pure reason is not enough, as commonly happens.

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<sup>4</sup> As Saint Thomas Aquinas put it, "you cannot want what you do not know".