Using design-thinking to address escalating commitment risks in decision-making
Tim Cooke - Radford University - December 2021

Why do we try to force square pegs into round holes?

Humans make plans for all sorts of endeavors throughout their lives, but what happens when there is reason to believe the plan will not work? Plan-continuation bias (PCB) is the cognitive desire to maintain a plan, even as information rolls in indicating the plan is in trouble. Escalation of commitment (EoC) is the realized manifestation of continuing with a plan. PCB therefore takes place before a decision, and EoC is the result of that decision and subsequent action.

1. A plan is in place - Fit a peg into a hole
2. Adverse information arrives - Peg will not fit, the hole is round and the peg is square.
3. PCB is the voice in a person’s head telling them to stick with the original plan - The peg needs to fit into that hole...
4. EoC is the act of sticking with the plan - Hammer that peg in if necessary!

Imagine you are going out for supplies ahead of a dangerous storm and you find the storm arrived early--do you still go out? Imagine your testy boss wants you to proceed with a project plan you know will never work--do you tell them and risk getting chewed out or just do as your told and suffer the struggle toward inevitable defeat?

It turns out that numerous psychological, sociological, and contextual factors all play into the ultimate decision on whether to escalate commitment, or to de-escalate and change the plan. So, why do we try to force square pegs into round holes? It’s complicated...

This study was conducted across six phases. Three phases were completed by the student researcher alone and three phases involved engaging with 10 managers of various experience.

Each phase built on the efforts of the last and different design-thinking methods were used to tease out new information each time.

Much of the challenge does not necessarily revolve around the question of “why do we stick with plans that are not working?” but instead is rooted in “what does it take to change a person’s mind?”

The purpose of this study was to apply design-thinking methods to better understand decision-making that can lead to plan-continuation bias and escalating commitment in a management setting.

Student Researcher (alone)

This study was conducted across six phases. Three phases were completed by the student researcher alone and three phases involved engaging with 10 managers of various experience.

1. Initial DT exploration
2. Workshop 1
3. Analysis of Phase 1&2
4. Workshop 2
5. Prototype
6. Follow up

Phase 1 - Initial DT exploration

Phase 2 - Workshop 1

Phase 3 - Analysis of Phase 1&2

Phase 4 - Workshop 2

Phase 5 - Prototype

Phase 6 - Follow up

Student Researcher with Subjects

Problem Tree Analysis
Stakeholder mapping
Interview
Affinity Clustering
Creative Matrix
Visualize the Vote
Quick Reference Guide
Critique

Method of looking at causes and effects
Method of understanding stakeholder relationships
Subjects interviewed each other who possible
Method of organizing seemingly disparate ideas and thoughts
Method of brainstorming based on prompts
Method of receiving constructive feedback
• Time pressure and scarcity
• Communication
• Compulsion and Addiction
• Identity
• A dysfunctional relationship is far more likely to miss warning signs and will fail to cooperate
• Sometimes you have to make a choice now and backtrack later
• I’ll change my mind if the reasons are good
• We need reliable data
• How will we convince others?
• Trust, collaborate, and keep an open mind
• We need reliable data
• How will we convince others?
• Trust, collaborate, and keep an open mind
• What is the problem and what do we do now?
• How do we communicate and control next steps?
• What’s on your RADAR?
• What is the problem and what do we do now?
• How do we communicate and control next steps?
• How do we acquire info?
• How is the info presented?
• How do we process info?
• How do we view past choices?
• Possible tactics and strategies
• Good length
• Examples are helpful
• Illustrations would be helpful
• This would likely be helpful to a new manager

Method of receiving constructive feedback

Method of looking at causes and effects
Method of understanding stakeholder relationships
Method of brainstorming based on prompts
Method of receiving constructive feedback

The purpose of this study was to apply design-thinking methods to better understand decision-making that can lead to plan-continuation bias and escalating commitment in a management setting.