

Do we stay or do we go? – Making decisions in the field

Continued: An article by NRTG's Sean Mitchell

Calm yourself: We often hear the mantra 'don't panic'. Well, guess what, that emotion is one of the first we will get when in a novel and potentially threatening situation. Telling someone to not panic is instructing them to turn off their fight or flight response. It is not possible. Better advice: Manage the anxiety. This may be by taking deep breaths, going for a five-minute walk to clear your head, telling yourself you are not going to make the decision for five minutes, so you remove the pressure of immediacy, etc. Use your own personal anxiety management techniques, but, importantly, recognize there will be anxiety in an important decision. Face it and manage it.

Weigh the options: In the coolest frame of mind that you can muster after managing or reducing your anxiousness, think about your options and consequences. Write them down in your notebook. Ask your crew what options they see. Try to develop as many as you can. You want to avoid being trapped into a dichotomy of a choice of only two outcomes. Problems are nuanced. There are usually more than two answers, and, even if not, each of those two will be nuanced and have subtleties that will result in better outcomes. The more potential solutions you can identify, the better the probable outcome.

Understand the project objectives: It is important that you know not only how to technically do the work you do, but also the why you are doing the work. It is only when we understand the purpose of the data collection or survey, we are conducting that we can make intelligent decisions. Consider, a road washout prevents you from accessing the site you had planned to get to that day for a wildlife survey. You are two hours drive away from the office. If you do not have a higher-level understanding of the project requirements and study design, then there is not a lot that you can do to salvage the day. But if you do have that bigger picture understanding (and have planned ahead) you might be able to simply shift the area you survey that day. You and your crew can go and assess another site, then merely switch the days on the schedule in which you visit each site. Or perhaps you can go and assist another crew and double up their efficiency. But to make these decisions requires understanding the project.

One person takes responsibility for decision: The reason field crews are structured with a lead is so that a single person is accountable for decisions. This is a weighty responsibility, but necessary. So, in field decision-making the crew lead is responsible for the ultimate choice and the consequences of those choices. That person should, certainly, consult with the crew for their thoughts and opinions, but the final decision is not a democracy. It falls on the crew lead. Therefore, this individual must be ready to accept consequences of the decision. As lead, it means that you should stand by your decision – it was yours.

Recognize sometimes you will make a decision not resulting in the desired outcome: When we look at decision-making, we need to always keep in mind that people make the best decision they can in any circumstance based upon the knowledge and resources they have at that time. Later evaluation of a decision is always easy, and biased, because we have more knowledge (e.g., success or failure of the decision) which we did not have when we were having to decide. You will make the best decision you can, **at that time**. Will it always be the correct one? Likely not. Will it always be the best with your knowledge and resources in the moment. Yes.

Document your decision-making process in your notes: A good manager will not second-guess your field decision. But their boss might. Or the client who is paying the bills. To protect yourself and company reputation, document your decision-making. To do this, describe the problem in detail (with photographs or video as appropriate); options you have considered; and your rationale for why you are selecting the option you are. You want to show those that may judge your decision that you considered alternatives and chose something that was a reasonable choice given the knowledge you had at the time.

Once the decision is made, do not second guess yourself: As with the advice of ‘don’t panic’, this mantra of ‘do not second guess yourself’ entirely ignores psychology and how our brain works. Of course, you will second guess yourself. Accept that you will do that and have a process in place to circumvent that. One way to manage these doubts that arise is to commit to your plan until new information comes in that may allow you to modify it. SCUBA divers have a mantra of guidance that I encourage all to follow “*Plan your dive; then dive your plan*”. The entire purpose of a plan is to give you direction. Go in that direction. Stick to it unless (until?) new information comes in that suggests the plan will not work. Then make a new plan (if required) as the knowledge you have **at the time**

has changed. Returning to the aborted wildlife surveys above, perhaps your plan is to go to the site of the next closest working crew to see if you can assist them. Good plan until you find their site is also inaccessible due to fallen trees across road. Now is the time to revise your plan, doing it in response to new information not due to internal fears and second guessing.

To make sound and informed decisions in the field may get easier with practice, but the challenge of those decisions may also increase with more experience and time in the field. As a field practitioner you will meet your own challenges, learn your own lessons, but we hope the general outline laid out here will help guide you when facing your own choices away from your supervisor's advice or the suggestions of others.

This article was created for the Natural Resources Training Group blog by instructor and author Sean Mitchell.