Benevolent Subversion (BS) - a classic misapplication of DA

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What is BS?

- subversion - a cause of overthrow or destruction
- benevolent - marked by or disposed to doing good

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977
Benevolent subversion is widespread and makes sense to its practitioners

• Benevolent subverters can be found at all levels of an organization
• I’ll consider three types: executives, managers and team members
• All act with good intentions - these are not malicious people
• Benevolent subverters are driven by incentives (like everyone else). Ultimately, reducing the friction caused by benevolent subversion depends on realigning incentives, and is a systemic organizational problem.
Executive BS

• We want to institute a new policy
• We prepare a letter for the executive to sign
• The letter goes out to the troops
• The executive continues to behave exactly as she has done in the past
• What happened when another executive was “thrown to the wolves”
Managerial BS

• We have a high value, complex strategy or project decision
• We assemble a team of 20 people and put them through the process wringer
• We meet shortly after the conclusion of the meeting with the manager to plan next steps
• The manager welcomes some of the meeting insights but ignores the meeting outcomes and chooses his own preferred course
Team BS

• We have determined that some uncertainties have a material influence on a project’s value
• The team meets to discuss the probabilities or probability distributions assigned to the uncertain outcomes
• Pressure is brought to bear on “conservative” team members to assign more optimistic ranges
In all of these cases, the Decision Syllogism comes into play

Better decision processes lead to better decisions

I make good decisions

Good decisions lead to increased Shareholder value

I am here to add Shareholder value
For a change process to work, you need all of these elements:

- Tools
- Process
- People

BS’s may also be rationally responding to incentives. If you award bonuses for bringing home a project, don’t be surprised that developers will try to get them approved.

BS’s typically like tools but are nervous about being constrained by what they regard as inflexible policies.
Do you know where your problem is?

• Would your executives, managers and teams recognize decision quality?
  – “Man will occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of the time he will pick himself up and continue on” (Sir Winston Churchill)

• Does your organization explicitly measure decision quality?

• Does your organization explicitly reward decision quality?
  – “What gets measured and rewarded gets done” (Gordon Bethune, CEO Continental Airlines)