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

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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.

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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"

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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

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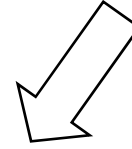
Team BS

- 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

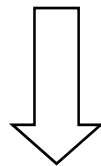# In all of these cases, the Decision Syllogism comes into play

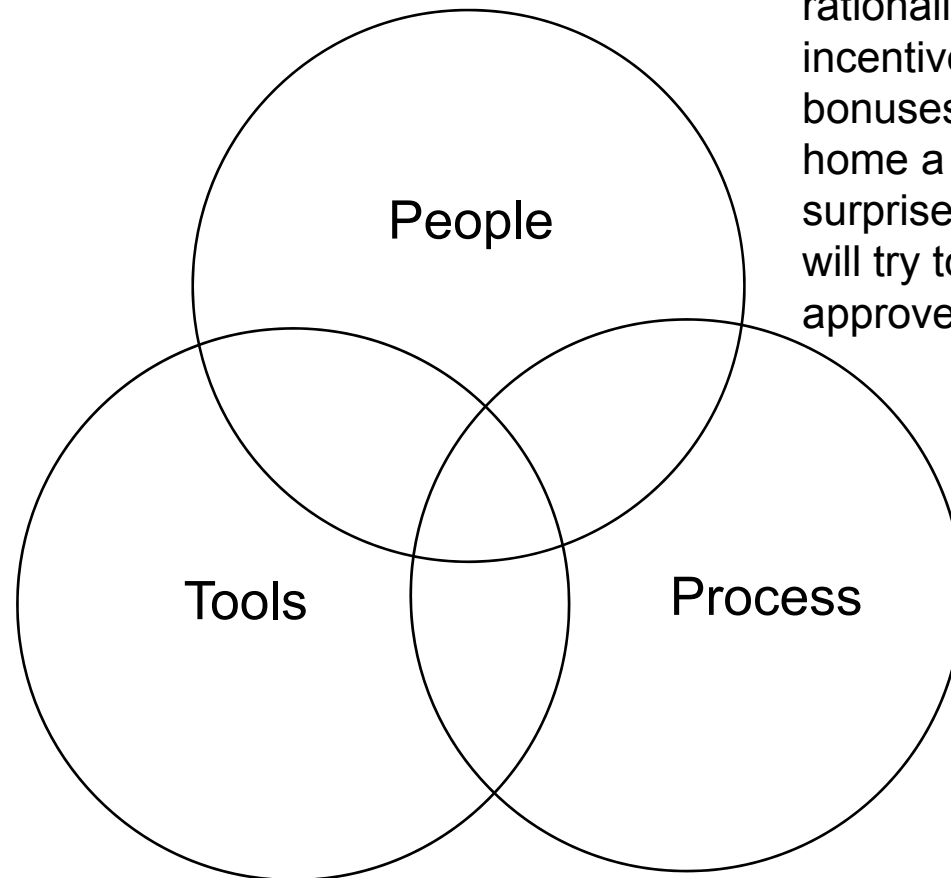Better decision processes lead to better decisions
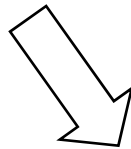
I make good decisions

Good decisions lead to increased Shareholder value

I am here to add Shareholder value

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Developing a common options language

For a change process to work, you need all of these elements

People

Tools

Process

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

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Developing a common options language

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)

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