

8 Reasons Why People Make Irrational Decisions at Work



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Have you ever said to yourself, "What was that person thinking?" People do and say irrational things and it can have a negative effect on our work environment. They can cause arguments, resentment, loss of trust, or worse. At the very least, decisions based on emotion can be frustrating and confusing.

So why do people do it? Here are 8 reasons that people act irrationally - and what we can do about it.

1. All human decisions are made with emotions, at least in part. In [a study by Antonio Damasio](#), it was found that when someone has damage to the emotional processing center of the brain, they are literally unable to make decisions. They become frozen. After this discovery, Damasio studied this phenomenon more in depth, and came to the conclusion that anything that doesn't have a clear and precise outcome requires that we use our emotions in order to fill in the gaps. That means, that every decision we make, to some degree, is based on more than just being rational. Human decision making requires emotions.

Solution: Be aware of our own emotions and those of others, and if appropriate, acknowledge them. Often times, putting a supportive spotlight on the fact that we are using emotions to reach a decision can help us see how they are affecting us or others in a negative way.

2. "Illogical" behavior is only illogical to those who are watching from the outside. The human brain is not a robot. Yet, our brains are wired such that we think everything we do makes perfect, logical sense. Because of this, everyone acts logically from their own perspective. Those who are acting or saying things that seem irrational to us, are usually surprised to hear that we don't think their decisions make sense.

The decisions each of us makes are based on our understanding of the complex structure of morality and culture, combined with our past experience. We don't make decisions based on numbers and data (although we often think we do). We are taking our collective experience and feelings about those experiences, our understanding of the rules in which we are living or working, and the points of view of those around us who have authority - then making a decision based

on all of this background. We fill in all the gaps, which there are often many, with our feelings. That is why different people make different decisions in the same exact situation.

Solution: Move quickly to a position of understanding their perspective. What is it about this person's experiences and feelings that makes them think that this destructive behavior is beneficial to them? Ask this question, "Are you happy with the outcome of this decision? What would you like to see happen here?" Asking them questions instead of judging their decisions can both help smooth over the damage done by the decision as well as allow the other person to open to the possibility of self-reflection. But make sure the questions are rooted in a desire to understand, and possibly compromise if appropriate, not prove they are wrong.

3. Important information is missing. Often when someone makes a decision that doesn't make sense, it's because they lack key information. It doesn't make sense to us, because we know that information, and assume they do too. People may not have that information because they didn't know it was available, did not understand its importance, or don't have the experience or competence to know to ask for that information.

Solution: Ask if they know about the important information. If they didn't know, provide them with the information in a way that allows them to save face and repair the situation if possible. If they did already know, ask how their decision takes the information into account.

4. They had the information, but don't agree that the information is important. This is probably one of the most common reasons for disagreements that seem to stem from someone making irrational

decisions. If a colleague has information, but doesn't think it's as important as we do, they will make a very different decision than we would. For example, they know that a client wants a project done by a certain day, but they don't think it's important - maybe they don't think the client is high priority, they don't like the client, they have been late before with this client and it hasn't been a problem, or a myriad of reasons - they will not put as high of priority on it and end up making decisions that will delay the project.

If two colleagues disagree on what's important, then each other's behavior will seem irrational to the other. Each person is working with a different set of priorities. When both are expecting the other person to agree on the underlying values and goals, and they don't, it can cause conflict.

Solution: Recognize that even in cases where the information is the same, everyone has a different value assessment for each piece of information. If we know they have all the information and they make a decision that seems counter intuitive, look at core values about the various aspects of the disagreement. Back up and create agreement on the goals and what's important first.

5. They lack the skills to be able to make a different decision.

Sometimes, bad decisions are based not on limited knowledge, but limited capability. Have you heard the expression, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem is a nail?" When at work, we each have a different tool set of how to tackle the various tasks and situations that we are faced with. If someone only has one or two tools that they are able to use, using that tool is the only thing they can do.

Unfortunately, all too often, it's difficult to admit a deficiency in abilities. Rather than admit that we don't know how to do something,

we work around it as best we can, then defend our work around. This defense of our work around, can lead to even more irrational behavior in order to make sense of our previous decisions.

Solution: Education and training. If someone is making a decision that seems illogical, check to see if they need more training or education. If their values are in line with the rest of the group and they have all the information they need, it is very likely a gap in competency.

6. People don't like to be embarrassed or shamed. If none of the above seem to be the case, it's possible that the seemingly irrational decision was made in order to avoid being embarrassed or feeling shame. There are only a lucky few who do not get embarrassed or feel shame - the rest of us do our very best not to ever feel this way because it is extremely unpleasant. The human brain will justify a lot of behavior to avoid embarrassment or shame.

Solution: If you suspect that a person is embarrassed or feeling shame and is making decisions to avoid those feelings, there are two possibilities. One, they did something they don't feel good about and don't feel it's resolved, or they have deep feelings of shame that existed far beyond the scope of their work. In situation of the former, that they did something embarrassing, try to find a way to look forward to a solution that will help them make amends, and give them power to make things better for themselves. For example, if they missed a deadline, make it clear it's not OK to miss a deadline, while giving them another opportunity to meet a deadline and prove themselves again. Express that you trust them for the next time. If they missed a lot of deadlines, ask them what they think they need to do their job better and get them involved in the solution.

If they have deep feelings of shame and embarrassment, there is nothing we can do to help them fix their deep issues. That is their own

personal work they must do to recover from that. However, one important tool we can use is to keep them focused on the problem at hand. If we can bring them into the moment as much as possible, it will decrease the possibility of their pulling in emotions from outside of work.

7. They are reacting to something we can't see. Sometimes, if someone makes a decision that doesn't make sense, odds are, they have a piece of data or information we don't have, and are reacting to that. It could be something someone said to them, an experience in the past, or an assumption about the project.

Solution: "I think I'm missing something here. This doesn't make sense to me, but I think it's because you know something I don't. What are your reasons behind this decision?"

8. They cannot clearly communicate their decision making process. Have you ever had circular conversations that go nowhere?

Either they can't communicate decision making process because they don't understand it themselves, or don't want to face the real reasons that they made the decision (for example, they want to impress someone or want to switch jobs, but don't want to express it). It's also possible they know exactly what their process is, but they have a difficult time expressing it.

Solution: Ask clarifying questions and reflect back what we hear them saying. Be open to the possibility that we aren't being clear, either. If someone feels heard, and is asked questions, very often the core reason of a decision comes out one way or another.

Accepting that irrational decisions will be made because we are working with humans, not robots, is an important step to being an

effective leader and colleague. Managing these situations can be tricky, but with the right approach, we can learn better about who we are working with, mentor them, and even learn about ourselves as well.