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Decision-Making

Charles R. Schwenk

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The Use of Devil's Advocates in Strategic Decision-Making

Charles R. Schwenk, Assistant Professor
Department of Business Administration

ABSTRACT

There is debate about the value of using devil's advocates in strategic decision-making. In this paper, contrasting views on this question are summarized and the field and laboratory research on the devil's advocate are discussed. This research provides the basis for detailed suggestions on the effective use of devil's advocates in strategic decisions.

INTRODUCTION

* President Kennedy, fresh from a stinging defeat in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, appoints his brother Robert and Theodore Sorenson to play the role of devil's advocate and critically examine alternative American responses to the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba suggested by the president's advisory staff. The quality of decision-making improves dramatically during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the U.S. chooses an effective response to the Soviet threat.

* President Johnson, during one of the decisions to escalate the bombing in North Viet Nam in the mid-1960's asks dissenter George Ball to play the role of devil's advocate and clearly articulate his objections to the bombing before Johnson's top advisors. However, Ball's arguments and those of other dissident staff members fail to deter Johnson from the eventually disastrous course he has chosen. Johnson's confidence in this course of action is actually increased because he has "heard both sides" of the question.

Decision-makers in business and government often use informal dissenters or devil's advocates to check their assumptions in complex decisions. However, as the above examples of presidential decision-making suggest, organizational devil's advocates do not always prevent major decisional errors. Indeed, they may even help to solidify commitment to a disastrous course of action by giving the decision-makers confidence that they considered all points of view and arrived at the decision rationally and objectively. Why are devil's advocates effective in some situations and not others? Recently, researchers have

begun to explore the reasons for these differences in the impact of devil's advocacy. Based on their research, it is now possible to offer guidelines for improving the effectiveness of devil's advocates in strategic decision-making.

This paper begins with a discussion of the reasons devil's advocates may be needed. Next, three major forms of devil's advocacy are discussed. Finally, suggestions are offered for the effective use of devil's advocates in strategic decision-making.

THE NEED FOR DEVIL'S ADVOCACY

Organizational strategy formulation is a task of immense complexity. It requires interpreting ambiguous cues from the environment, assessing the organization's resources and capacities, and the generation of effective strategies for matching the organization's resources to the demands of the environment. The complexity of the task and the sheer volume of data involved can easily exceed executives' information processing capacity (Cyert and March, 1963; Simon, 1976).

However, experienced executives learn to simplify this task by making assumptions about their strategic problems. Mason and Mitroff, in Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions (1981), discuss the ways these assumptions restrict the strategies considered for dealing with the problems. Such simplifying assumptions are necessary for making the task of strategy formulation manageable. Indeed, it may be that the ability to make valid simplifying assumptions distinguishes good strategists from mediocre ones.

Problems may arise, however, when these assumptions are not challenged in strategy formulation. When very cohesive groups of executives share a large number of assumptions about the strategic problem, this may produce blind spots or biases. These biases may lead them to ignore environmental opportunities and threats as well as creative strategic alternatives. Irving Janis (1972), and Janis and Mann (1977) discuss the phenomenon of groupthink which is a pathological inability to question assumptions created by excessive consensus and pressure for conformity.

Recognizing that groupthink can aggravate biases in decision-making, Janis and Mann recommend the use of devil's advocates who attempt to counteract it. Many executives, recognizing the biases which may be produced by simplifying assumptions, make use of informal devil's advocates to challenge them. A review of the business and public administration literatures has revealed three major approaches to devil's advocacy, which will be discussed next.

Three Types of Devil's Advocacy

Three types of devil's advocacy have been discussed in the business and public administration literatures. The first is the basic devil's advocate approach in which a person within a decision-making group is appointed to critique a preferred plan or option. This person attempts to point out weaknesses in the assumptions underlying the plan, its internal inconsistencies, and problems which may lead to failure in implementation.

Devil's advocacy was first used by the Catholic Church in the 1600's as part of the process of canonization of saints. The Devil's Advocate,

or Promoter of the Faith was charged with presenting the strongest possible case against canonization to a Tribunal of the Congregation of Rites (a permanent commission of cardinals) with the pope as supreme judge. The Devil's Advocate was considered crucial in preventing Church leaders from making an error in this critically important decision (Herbert and Estes, 1977, 663-664).

Janis (1972) and Janis and Mann (1977) in recommending the use of devil's advocates by policy makers, use Robert F. Kennedy's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example of its successful use. They suggest that in situations in which there is a great deal of agreement among policy-makers and there is danger of premature concensus, the chief executive should assign one or more group members to the role of devil's advocate. This person should "be given an unambiguous assignment to present his arguments as cleverly and convincingly as he can, like a good lawyer, challenging the testimony of those advocating the majority position." Janis suggests that this person should introduce much-needed controversy by raising issues in a conventional low-key style (1972, p. 215).

Herbert and Estes (1977) discussed the use of devil's advocates as a way of formalizing dissent in the strategy formulation process. They suggested that an individual, either within or outside the organization, should be appointed to the position of devil's advocate for every major organizational decision. The devil's advocate should begin with the formal statement of a proposed course of action and the analysis underlying the proposal. He should then examine the proposal for inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and irrelevancies and prepare a critique of the proposal based on this examination. If the proposal is found to

be unsound, the devil's advocate should develop a reanalysis of the problem and alternative recommendations. A kind of confrontation session between an advocate of the original proposal and the devil's advocate is then held with key organizational decision-makers as observers. Based on this confrontation session the organizational decision-makers can then accept the proposal, modify it, or develop a completely new proposal based on a more complete understanding of the proposal's shortcomings.

Cosier (1981, p. 647) developed a model of the devil's advocate critique process which involved the identification of assumptions underlying a recommended strategy, the development of a critique of these assumptions, the production of an alternative strategy based on this critique, and the choice of a final strategy after a debate between the proponents of the recommended strategy and the critique. Cosier's model was primarily meant to apply to business decision-making.

A variant of this basic devil's advocate approach is called multiple advocacy (George, 1972). This technique involves the use of several devil's advocates drawn from the organization's internal or external critics. Each group critical of a preferred option or plan can be represented by their own devil's advocate. Alexander George, in his book Presidential Decision-Making, claims that multiple advocacy should be superior to the use of devil's advocates because it includes more advocates and more options. In the multiple advocacy system, representatives of minority opinions and unpopular views present these

to decision-makers in order to encourage them to question the assumptions underlying the prevailing or favored policy.

A key role in this process is that of the custodian of unpopular views. The custodian attempts to assure:

1) that there is no major maldistribution of resources among the proponents of various views. (Important resources include: power, influence, competence, information, analytical resources, and bargaining and persuasion skills).

2) that there is no involvement by the top-level decision-maker(s) in the debate.

3) that there is adequate time for give and take (George, 1972, p. 759).

The decision-makers who listen to these devil's advocates should play the role of a "magistrate," attempting to listen objectively to all devil's advocate critiques. Even through complete objectivity is unlikely, the use of this technique assures that managers will at least be aware of potential objections which may hinder implementation of a plan.

Mason and Mitroff (1981) have summarized research on another variant of devil's advocacy. They call this technique dialectical inquiry and in its elaborated form, Strategic Assumptions Analysis. Dialectical inquiry includes techniques for choosing individuals to form groups which will produce the most divergent solutions to strategic problems. These techniques involve first the assessment of the personality and problem-solving orientation of each person in the decision-making group. Decision-makers are then clustered into groups which are maximally

homogeneous and also maximally different from each other. The groups then develop alternatives to a recommended strategy or plan by identifying assumptions upon which it is based and upon which the group members do not agree. If groups with conflicting policy preferences already exist, as is often the case, these may be used and it is not necessary to use the procedure for forming divergent groups.

Dialectical inquiry requires the development of explicit counterplans based on different assumptions than the favored plan as the basis for a dialectical debate. However, a devil's advocate does not have to develop an explicit counterplan. If a favored strategy has been identified early in the decision-making process, the techniques for constructing divergent groups and identifying pivotal assumptions could be used as a basis for constructing a critique which merely challenges the key assumptions but offers no alternative plan.

Both simple devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry are, according to Mason (1969), distinctly superior to what he calls the expert approach which is seen as the most common approach to top management decision-making. In this approach, members of a planning department or consultants provide expert advice and recommendations regarding the plans the organization should follow. Mason suggests that the planning recommendations contain hidden assumptions which are very frequently not communicated to management, but which may reinforce management biases. This is one of the most critical drawbacks to this approach (1969, pp. B406-B407).

Table 1 provides a brief summary of the differences between the techniques.

Insert Table 1 about here

RESEARCH ON DEVIL'S ADVOCACY

Researchers have examined the effects of these types of devil's advocacy in published accounts of major decisions (Schwenk and Huff, forthcoming); they have used the dialectical inquiry variant of devil's advocacy in assisting or improving strategic decisions (Mason, 1969; Mitroff, Barabba, and Kilmann, 1977; Emshoff and Finnel, 1978; Mitroff, Emshoff, and Kilmann, 1979); and they have examined the effectiveness of alternative forms of devil's advocacy in the controlled setting of the laboratory (Cosier, 1980; Schwenk, 1982; Schwenk, forthcoming; Schwenk and Cosier, 1980; Schwenk and Thomas, 1983). Though this research has raised many questions and left many others unanswered, it does provide the basis for some tentative recommendations on the way the devil's advocate role should be played and the way devil's advocates should be used in top-level strategic decision-making.

The research generally supports the assertion that the use of a devil's advocate can improve organizational decisions in a number of ways. Specifically, it improves decision-makers' satisfaction with the process (Mason, 1969; Mason and Mitroff, 1979; Mitroff et al., 1977; Schwenk, forthcoming), it leads to the explicit identification of previously unrecognized assumptions (Mason, 1969; Mason and Mitroff, 1979; Mitroff et al., 1977), it improves decision-makers' use of ambiguous environmental cues in decision-making (Cosier, 1980; Schwenk, 1982; Schwenk and Cosier, 1980), it increases the number and quality of strategic alternatives generated (Mitroff et al., 1977; Mitroff et al.,

1979; Schwenk, forthcoming), it expands decision-makers' view of the problem and weakens the narrowing influence of expert recommendations (Mason, 1969; Schwenk, forthcoming).

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS FOR THE USE OF DEVIL'S ADVOCACY

Even if decision-makers are able to look critically at their assumptions, they may not receive the full benefit of the technique if the devil's advocate does not play the role effectively. Below are some suggestions derived from the research for using devil's advocacy effectively. Caution must be exercised in drawing normative recommendations from the research. However, with this caution in mind, some tentative rules can be advanced.

1.) The specific role of the devil's advocate should vary depending on the type of decision. Here, two basic types of decisions are considered, those in which there is a great deal of pre-existing conflict between members of the policy-making group and those where there is very little.

A.) When there is a great deal of conflict present initially in the group, and when group members are advocating different positions, the devil's advocate should be active throughout the decision-making process (Janis, 1972; Janis & Mann, 1977; de Rivera, 1968). He should attempt to articulate and clarify the differences in assumptions which underlie the differences in recommendations as did the consultants in a Mitroff et al. study involving a drug company (Mitroff et al., 1979).

The devil's advocate in this situation may also be required to play a role similar to that of George's "custodian" to ensure that each group is assisted in developing its case. A structured debate should

then occur in which each group is allowed to present its case with rebuttal from other groups and questions from those who have final responsibility for making the decision. Studies (Mitroff et al., 1977 and Mitroff et al., 1979) have shown that this is effective in clarifying assumptions. If the group must reach consensus, it may be necessary to go through an assumption negotiation stage (Mason & Mitroff, 1981, p. 52). If consensus is not required, those with final responsibility for the decision should play a role similar to George's "magistrate" in order to avoid becoming prematurely committed to one position.

B.) If the decision-making process is characterized by too little conflict and a preferred alternative has been identified with too little questioning of assumptions, the devil's advocate should play a different role (Herbert & Estes, 1977; Jervis, 1968 & 1976). Here, the devil's advocate will attempt to initiate assumption questioning and problem reformulation by identifying critical assumptions and using these as the basis for a forcefully presented critique which does not offer a clearly defined alternative. Some of the laboratory research (Cosier, 1980; Schwenk, 1982a), Schwenk and Cosier, 1980) seems to suggest that this will be more effective than the development of a specific counterplan. However, it may be, as the proponents of the field studies speculate, that with adequate training or indoctrination of decision-makers the plan-counterplan format may be even more effective than the plan-critique format. This has not yet been verified. Finally, if the devil's advocate has the time and resources to develop them, both a critique and counterplan may be more effective than either alone

(Schwenk, 1982), though Schwenk's research did not show that the combination was more effective than the critique alone.

2.) The devil's advocate should avoid strongly identifying with a particular position and becoming a strongly negative "carping critic." Mason (1969) warned against this as a potential problem with the DA. He also suggested that this sort of devil's advocate may "demoralize" decision makers and especially those who proposed the initial plan. Rather, the devil's advocate should play the role of a process consultant interested only in surfacing assumptions and improving decision-making. Schwenk and Cosier (1980) showed that a "carping critic" form of the DA treatment did not lead to better use of environmental cues than the treatment but that a more objective DA treatment did.

In this sense, the models of the debate process, the philosophical concepts which justify these models, and the detailed techniques for managing debate offered by Mitroff and his colleagues (Mason and Mitroff, 1981; Mitroff and Mason, 1981; Cosier, 1980) may be of value to devil's advocates. They may help to legitimize his role as an expert process consultant.

3.) Finally, there is some question about whether a single person should play the role of devil's advocate for a series of decisions or whether this role should rotate among group members. The research has not yet addressed this question. If a single individual plays this role over a series of decisions he should, through practice, become a more effective devil's advocate. On the other hand, rotation of the role may give the entire group a clearer understanding of the DA process and prevent the negative consequences which might result from the identification of a single individual as "the devil's advocate."

If a single individual adopts the role, he should attempt to identify another individual in the group who's views on the decision in question diverge from the rest of the group to assist him in preparing the critique. If the role shifts to a different person for each decision, the person selected to play the devil's advocate in a particular case should have the maximum divergence of assumptions from other group members. Mason and Mitroff (1981, pp. 114-119) have described techniques which could be helpful in this selection.

CONCLUSION

The use of devil's advocates does not guarantee increased participation in the strategic decision-making process and will generally not produce major shifts in policy. Further, devil's advocates may not be able to prevent major strategic errors. However, the research discussed in this paper demonstrates that their use can improve strategic decision making if certain rules are followed.

Briefly stated, the devil's advocate should play the role of process consultant and/or objective critic of a favored strategy rather than a "carping critic" identified with a particular alternative strategy. The point at which the devil's advocate intervenes and the specific role he plays should be determined by the level of conflict over a particular issue in the decision-making group.

The one major caution regarding the use of devil's advocates has to do with the attitudes of those in the decision-making group. Devil's advocates should only be used if decision-makers can honestly question their basic assumptions and have a sincere commitment to the devil's advocate process. Without such commitment, the use of devil's advocates may be useless or even harmful.

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Table 1

Variants on Devil's Advocacy

<u>Technique</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Further Information</u>
Devil's Advocacy	Usually single individual plays Devil's Advocate. Broad mandate to critique favored plan.	Irving Janis & Leon Mann <u>Decision-Making</u>
Multiple Advocacy	Several Devil's Advocates representing different interest groups. Use of Custodian and Magistrate.	Alexander George <u>Presidential Decision-Making</u>
Dialectical Inquiry	Explicit attempt to identify assumptions underlying favored plan. Development of counter assumptions as basis for counterplan.	Richard Mason and Ian Mitroff <u>Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions</u>

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