

Sharing Conservation Decisions: Tools, Tactics, and Ideas

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ABSTRACT

Studies of decision sharing in heritage conservation show that sharing, even when attempted, usually fails to influence the decision. A far larger study of decisions made in commercial and non-commercial organizations showed that the failure to share the decision was a major cause of poor outcomes. Two common decision-making tools, the decision matrix and the decision tree, are explained. Conservation examples are discussed, including the decision matrix developed during the case study of the ICCROM Sharing Conservation Decisions (SCD) 2008 course. Tactics and ideas for effective sharing of decisions are drawn from recent texts on participatory decision-making, cognitive psychology, and experimental moral philosophy. The ability to be reflective, identified by Stanovich as a separate trait from intelligence, emerges again and again as the key piece of advice from the decision-making literature. The author concludes that, for our field, decision tools are best understood as a means to structure and document shared reflection, not to automate what are always difficult decisions.

Introduction

The literature on decision-making spreads across several disciplines, from business management to mathematics to psychology to philosophy. As documented by Antomarchi and Abend (2017) elsewhere in this volume, interest in the topic has also grown rapidly in our own field, presumably out of necessity rather than idle curiosity.

For almost four decades I have been a technical expert to museums and galleries during their decision-making about environmental control and lighting. For the Dahlem Conference of 1992, I explored far outside my technical expertise to see what the fields of perception, structuralism, and museology might teach us about “Sharing responsibility for conservation decisions” (Michalski, 1994). Over the next two decades, I developed tools for a particular form of quantitative decision-making – risk assessment – which led me to scan much of the risk and decision literature. For the SCD course in 2008, I volunteered to provide an introduction to these readings, and to guide an exercise in the application of a standard decision-making tool – the decision matrix. In 2010, I collaborated with a painting conservator to apply a second standard tool, the decision tree, to document not only the reasoning behind the final treatment, but also to document the many treatment options that had been considered but rejected (Michalski and Rossi-Doria, 2011). By the time I sat down to revise my 2008 notes for this article in 2016, excellent texts covering the same ground had been written by experts on decision-making (Kahneman, 2011; Manktelow, 2012), experts on moral decisions (Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2013) and experts on facilitation of participatory decision-making (Kaner, 2014; Renn, 2015). And just six months earlier, our own field produced an overview of the literature of decision-making, with recommendations for conservators (Henderson and Waller, 2016).

Rather than attempt yet another overview (which tend to leave the reader pessimistic about whether they can make good decisions without years of preparation), I have focused on practical advice from three sources: 1) published evidence about the rate of success in sharing decisions; 2) basic decision-making tools that are widely promoted for managers in general; and 3) recent researches into the way we humans think about these issues.