



## The Pigman Principle: Why Rational Leaders Make Irrational Decisions

By James Provis, MBA, PMP



In a perfect world, there are unlimited funds, resources, and time available to properly execute and deliver the desired results that our projects and change initiatives are intended to achieve. In this perfect world, every good idea with a valid business case is approved, appropriately prioritized, and scheduled to deliver the optimal balance of tangible return on our investments.

We do not live in a perfect world, however, and as project leaders, our projects are constantly being challenged, as we fight for the limited capital, resource availability, and the time required to effectively manage and deliver change within our organizations. Successfully navigating this landscape of ever-changing priorities, risks, and issues is where we look for guidance and key decisions from our leaders and project sponsors.

This is why, in study after study conducted by Prosci, the world leader in research and content creation in the field of change management, and published in their *Best Practices in Change Management Benchmarking Report*, the number one greatest contributor to project success is active and visible executive sponsorship. As a corollary, the top obstacle to overall success is ineffective change sponsorship from senior leaders. In order to increase the probability of success of our projects, we need access and active participation from key leaders at the right level within the organization to drive change and make the right decisions related to our project's objectives.

Gaining access to the right leaders, however, does not guarantee success. In fact, oftentimes our own project sponsors may be our biggest adversaries because some of the decisions they make may appear to be in direct conflict with the scopes, plans, and outcomes of our projects. This is because there are factors at play beyond our projects' business cases and objectives that directly influence the decisions made by our leaders. These factors are external to our projects and appear in varying degrees and combinations, depending upon the individual leader, corporate culture, and political environment within the organization. These factors: power, ignorance, greed, momentum, appearance, and necessity define the 'Pigman Principle,' and often result in irrational decisions being made by otherwise rational leaders.

In order to effectively manage our projects (and our sponsors) we need to:

- First, **understand** the six factors that can affect the decisions, or lack of decisions made by leadership;
- Second, **identify** which of these factors influence our sponsors and impact the decisions they make, both within the organization and in particular with regard to our project; and
- Third, and finally, proactively **manage** and leverage these factors to promote the visibility of our project and drive appropriate decisions.

“ The next time you make a decision, ask yourself, “Is it rational?” or is it due to the influence of one or more of the factors of the Pigman Principle? ”

So, let's look at each of these individual factors to understand how they can influence the decisions made by our project sponsors and other leaders.



## Power *because I can*

Oftentimes, decisions are made simply to establish or reinforce the power base of a given leader. These decisions may have no relation to the needs or outcomes of the project, but are simply made to define the span of influence and control of a specific individual. The needs of a project can often become collateral damage, simply by a show of force to visibly demonstrate who is in control at an organizational level. These decisions can manifest themselves as new requirements to the project, which derive no benefits, but exist simply for the sake that they are “required” by a leader with influential power. Often, when challenged on these requirements, the end answer or reply is simply “because I said so.”



**Ignorance**  
*because I don't know any better*



In today's world, there is so much information and so little time that it is almost impossible to process all of the data to make a perfect decision. Because of this, we often rationalize our lack of information (or ignorance)

based on making the best decisions we can, and supported by the information available at that point in time.

Rational ignorance can become dangerous to leadership decision making in two extremes. At one end of the spectrum, we may find those leaders who choose to make decisions based on their own perceptions and gut feelings rather than seeking out readily available facts and data. These leaders prefer to hide behind the adage that "ignorance is bliss," believing that they cannot be held accountable for what they don't know. The flip-side of the spectrum is defined by those leaders who may get stuck in "analysis paralysis"; fearful to make a decision without all of the data and facts. These leaders may commission multiple studies, or consult with every possible source, often delaying decisions as well as progress on our projects. Either extreme can result in less than informed or timely decisions, leading to less than optimal results.



**Greed**  
*because I want more*



More is better, right? Well, not always. Decisions that are focused around simply accumulating an abundance of anything of value often are blind to the impacts or consequences of this overwhelming desire for more. Decisions based

on greed can often result in compromises to the strategy, integrity, morals, and reputation of the decision maker, as well as the entire organization. There are numerous examples in which products that have been deemed unsafe

in the United States continue to be distributed in developing countries with less regulation or control. These products are manufactured and sold essentially because of the potential for financial gain, regardless of the societal impacts. While primarily focused on money, this attribute can also include accumulating and restricting access to knowledge, skilled resources, data, and any other asset that may have a finite level of availability within the organization.



**Momentum**  
*because it is already underway*



The train has already left the station—so get on or get run over. Many of our projects seem to have a life of their own. Some may have been going on for several years or be a continuation or rebirth of

previously failed efforts. Some may be the pet projects of our senior-most leaders, or the quick fix solution to a nagging problem that never seems to get resolved. Our current sponsor may not even be the original leader who supported the idea or business case in the first place.

Making a decision to stop or alter a project already underway, can often be perceived as taking responsibility for someone else's bad decision. We forget that success also includes making the decision to defer or cancel a project early enough in the life cycle to avoid additional and unnecessary losses. Unfortunately, it is oftentimes easier to allow something that is already underway to run its course, and hopefully correct itself, versus making the decision to step in front of that proverbial moving train.



**Appearance**  
*because it makes me look good*



The decisions that leaders make are lasting impressions of their contributions, standing, and support within an organization. In this regard, leaders may be influenced

to make decisions based on appearances versus project need. What a leader says and does in a public forum may not be an accurate reflection of how he or she really feels. On occasion, a leader's decisions may be altered by what he or she perceives to be the more politically correct action. Projects that are considered controversial in nature are more likely to have decisions adversely impacted by this factor than those in which everyone agrees with the business case and objectives. Less popular decisions are often made by small groups behind closed doors. The communication of these decisions is generally delegated to others to carry out, often the project manager. Over time, if left unchallenged, false perceptions can become reality and cloud future decisions. If it looks too good to be true, it probably isn't. Shifting perceptions and appearances needs to be managed because this can be the deciding factor between short-term support and long-term sustainability.

## Necessity *because I have to*

Because projects consume limited resources within an organization, certain decisions are made based on necessity. The politics of negotiation will always emerge between leaders. This is based on their own needs,



perspective, and individual level of influence in the organization. Over time, this results in a defined balance, an unspoken “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” environment. While this give-and-take approach does not define or support optimal decision making, it often is the status quo and nature of the game when it comes to leadership decisions.

Projects will often have to make allowances for less than optimal funding, resources, and time frames based on the outcomes of these “negotiations” and the level of influence of our project sponsor.

Understanding the factors of the Pigman Principle and how they can influence the decisions made by leaders is only half the battle. In order to apply this knowledge, we need to determine which of these factors (or combination of factors) are at play with our own project sponsor, and to what degree these can influence the decisions they make. The best indicator of influence would be to look at their past actions, behaviors, and decisions related to this project or other projects they have sponsored. By analyzing these decisions, in light of our new understanding of the external factors, we can hopefully get a better picture of how our sponsor decides on the actions they will take relative to the risks and issues presented by our project.

Using a scale from 1 to 10, evaluate the accuracy of the following statements with regard to your sponsor. These statements are intended to help quantify if and how your sponsor's decisions may be influenced by the factors of the Pigman Principle. The higher the score, the less accurate the statement and the greater the likelihood that external factors may influence decisions versus the merits of the project.

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Statement: My Project Sponsor...	Rating Scale: 1 (accurate/true) – 10 (inaccurate/false)
Made a personal choice to support and participate in the project.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Is passionate regarding the project and can accurately articulate the end state vision.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Is a vocal and involved champion for the changes, benefits, and improvements that the project will deliver.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Exhibits and conveys a sense of urgency to achieve the goals of the project.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Has invested significant time and resources on the project.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Asks appropriate questions to provide clarity or stimulate constructive improvements.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Makes decisions in a timely manner based on available facts and data points.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Proactively communicates decisions that are well understood by the project team and supported by the project business case.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Is able to influence the solutions to be delivered by the project.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Helps solve problems that may arise in the short term.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Accurately portrays the progress of the project versus seeking to convince everyone that the project is “complete” when there is still a lot of work to be done.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
Provides open and honest feedback and suggestions to drive future improvements.	1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

In order to manage and leverage these factors to impact and influence the decisions made by key leadership in support of our project, consider the following questions: How does this project....

- Sustain, reinforce or expand our sponsor’s span of influence and control?
- Create or provide access to critical information and data, which can be leveraged for future decision making?
- Deliver positive, tangible, and measurable returns in the short-term horizon?
- Create a ripple effect that can derive and influence continuous improvement opportunities and enable the delivery of additional benefit streams and impacts?
- Positively impact our sponsor’s image and appearance as a leader and key decision maker in the organization?
- Create leverage and influence over other initiatives?

In simple terms, how does this project benefit our sponsor beyond delivering the results as defined in the project business case? Understanding, identifying, and managing these factors can often mean the difference between the success and failure of our projects.

Understanding and applying the Pigman Principle is not a means or approach to manipulate our sponsors; rather, it is intended to help us manage our interactions and communications with our sponsors more effectively. By relating the needs of our project to our sponsor in a manner that resonates with the factors that drive their behaviors and decisions, we are in a better position to make not only our project, but our sponsors themselves more successful as well.

But keep in mind that these factors are not unique or limited to only our project sponsors and organizational leaders. We all have a “pigman” within us to contend with as we make decisions, not only on our projects but also in our everyday lives. Every decision we make can be directly impacted by these external factors to the extent we value them.

So, the next time you make a decision, ask yourself, “Is it rational?” or is it due to the influence of one or more of the factors of the Pigman Principle?

## About Ciber, Inc.

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## References

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## About the Author



James Provis, MBA, PMP

James Provis, MBA, PMP, is a senior manager with over 25 years of leadership, PMO, program management, project management, and operational experience. He has demonstrated success establishing new business functions, project management offices, service offerings, and knowledge centers. James is currently a Director – PMO Consultant in Ciber’s PM/BA Practice. In addition to being a Project Management Professional (PMP)® credential holder, James is also a certified practitioner and trainer of the Prosci Change Management Practitioner Program. Interested parties may reach James at [JProvis@ciber.com](mailto:JProvis@ciber.com).

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Ciber Inc • 6363 South Fiddler's Green Circle • Suite 1400 • Greenwood Village • Colorado 80111 USA  
Tel. (800) 242.3799 • [info@ciber.com](mailto:info@ciber.com) • [www.ciber.com](http://www.ciber.com)

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