

LUNCHTIME TALK

“I WON’T BACK DOWN”?: COMPLEXITY AND COURAGE IN U.S. GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE DECISION-MAKING

There is a large literature on how leaders and their advisors can best make difficult decisions, generally seen as ones informationally or technically complex, or requiring value tradeoffs. Much of this literature centers on the dangers of “groupthink,” where a group rushes to judgment too quickly, without hearing dissent and consideration of alternatives. The remedy is seen as “vigilant decision-making,” where the leader encourages wide consideration of alternatives and is open to dissenting viewpoints. We senior executives in the U.S. federal government, asking questions about how they made their most difficult decisions. We were initially focused on whether they employed a vigilant approach or not. However, we found that most executives identified their most difficult decision as one that was not complex, but rather required courage: the hard thing was not deciding what the right thing to do was, but to do it. We also found that they made decisions requiring courage in ways very different from those recommended by the vigilant decision-making paradigm. We thus develop a contingency model of effective executive decision-making that requires leaders to be “ambidextrous” and use different techniques to make complex decisions and ones requiring courage.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Prof Steven Kelman

Weatherhead Professor of Public Management, John F. Kennedy School, Harvard University

A summa cum laude graduate of Harvard College, with a Ph.D. in government from Harvard University, he is the author of many books and articles on the policymaking process and on improving the management of government organizations. His latest book, *Unleashing Change: A Study of Organizational Change in Government*, was published in 2005 by the Brookings Institution Press. His other books include a study on how to improve the government computer procurement process, entitled *Procurement and Public Management: The Fear of Discretion and the Quality of Government Performance* (AEI Press, 1990), and *Making Public Policy: A Hopeful View of American Government* (Basic Books, 1987). In 1996 he was elected a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration. In 2001, he received the Herbert Roback Memorial Award, the highest achievement award of the National Contract Management Association. In 2003 he was elected as a Director of The Procurement Roundtable. In 2010 the American Political Science Association awarded him the Gaus Prize, which honors a lifetime of achievement in public administration scholarship. He currently serves as editor of the *International Public Management Journal*, and he writes a regular column for *Federal Computer Week* and a blog, *The Lectern*, at FCW.com.

From 1993 through 1997, Dr. Kelman served as Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy in the Office of Management and Budget. During his tenure as Administrator, he played a lead role in the Administration's reinventing government effort. He led Administration efforts in support of the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 and the Federal Acquisition Reform Act of 1995.

CHAIR

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Seminar Room 3-5, Level 3, Manasseh Meyer Building, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
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Admission is free. Please register at lkyschoolevents@nus.edu.sg

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