



R H E M · W H I T E P A P E R

More information, worse decisions.

On information overload at the decisive moment — and
what leadership teams can do about it.



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The problem is not a lack of information

Almost every organisation preparing for crisis invests in information: dashboards, situation reports, operational feeds, group chats, external sources. The assumption is simple — the more we know, the better we decide.

In practice the opposite happens. At the moment it counts there is rarely too little information. There is too much, too fast, across too many channels, with too little interpretation. The team spends its scarce attention processing messages instead of making a decision.

The moment of the crisis is almost never the moment of the mistake. The mistake was made earlier — in a decision structure that was never rehearsed.

What pressure does to judgement

Under acute pressure people process information differently. Working memory narrows, attention tunnels, and the brain falls back on patterns that worked before. That is functional: it enables fast action. It becomes dangerous the moment incoming information exceeds that narrowed capacity.

Cognitive load. Every extra channel costs attention that does not go into the judgement.

Confirmation pull. Under pressure teams seek information that confirms the first picture.

Deferral. More information feels like diligence, but often functions as postponing the decision.

Loss of shared understanding. Each member reads different messages and builds a different picture — exactly the moment where the image-forming stage of the Dutch crisis-doctrine model BOB (image-forming → judgement-forming → decision-making) should converge on one shared picture, instead of splitting into four versions of the truth.

Four patterns we see again and again

1. The picture is reported, not interpreted

Situation reports list facts without meaning. The team receives data, not a picture — and has to interpret it at the exact moment there is no room to do so.

2. Everyone is in every channel

Without role-bound information flows everyone reads everything. It feels alert, but it produces four versions of the truth at one table.

3. Mandate is implicit

When it is not explicit who may decide what, the team waits for consensus. Extra information then becomes a way to defer the decision.

4. There is no cut-off moment

Without an agreed moment to decide on what is available, information keeps arriving and the decision keeps not being made.

None of these patterns are a failure of people. They are predictable outcomes of an image-forming stage that was never designed to work under pressure.

What does work

The answer is not to collect less information, but to make information subordinate to the decision. Four measures make the most difference in practice:

1. Start with the decision, not the data. Name in advance which decisions this team must take in this scenario. Then determine what information is genuinely required — and what is not.

2. One picture, one source. Give a single role — often the information manager in a crisis structure — ownership of the shared picture. Interpretation belongs with the picture; raw messages stay off the table.

3. Make mandate and cut-off explicit. Who decides what, and at which moment do we decide with the information we have? Fix this before the crisis, not inside it.

4. Exercise on decisions, not procedures. Evaluate not whether the format was followed, but whether the decision was timely and defensible — and whether the team shared one picture.

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Five questions for your own organisation

- Do we know which decisions our crisis team must take in the first two hours?
- Is one role accountable for the shared picture, including interpretation?
- Is it explicit who may decide what without consulting?
- Do we have an agreed moment at which we decide with the information available?
- Do we evaluate exercises on decision quality or on process compliance?

If two or more of these questions have no clear answer, you do not have an information problem — you have a decision-making problem. That is good news: it is solvable, and it can be rehearsed.

FROM THE FIELD

We do not see these patterns from behind a desk. Fifteen years across police, fire & rescue, the medical column and crisis management taught us that the line between strategic, tactical and operational is not a chart — it is the question: what does this team need to know right now to decide, and what can wait? RHEM designs decision structures that draw that line in advance, so a team under pressure no longer has to.



Build the crossing before you need it.

BETTER DECISIONS · STRONGER TEAMS · BETTER OUTCOMES

ABOUT RHEM

RHEM advises executives, crisis teams and operational leaders on performance under pressure: decision-making, team resilience and human performance. Founded by Melvin Riem after fifteen years across police, fire & rescue, the medical column and crisis management. RHEM moves deliberately between the strategic, tactical and operational level — and designs from all three at once.

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