

STRATEGY & DECISIONS

JUDGMENT

THE ART
of
MOMENTOUS
DECISION-MAKING

Lessons for Leaders Drawn from
Three Crucible Moments in History

CHRIS MAILANDER

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*To my father (1937–2022),
who spent a lifetime
deciphering the subtle clues
separating the ordinary from the extraordinary.*

Who Should Read This Book

Judgment: The Art of Momentous Decision-Making
is for strategists, planners, and leaders in
the corporate boardroom, on the battlefield,
or in government.

It is for those preparing their own judgment
for when it will matter the most.

Purpose of This Book

Judgment explores real leaders
making tough decisions
under difficult circumstances.

You will see what the leaders
saw in those moments.

You will feel what they felt.

You will share their struggles
and their fears.

You, too, will face tough decisions.
They will be made under difficult circumstances.

The purpose of *Judgment* is
to build upon their experiences.

It is to prepare you
for your own crucible moments.

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Praise for *Judgment*

“Mailander deconstructs the subtle, yet powerful decision-making variables that profoundly impact a leader’s success, defining how to navigate the arduous path to critical decisions, and the strategies for communicating these decisions to a company’s most important stakeholders. The strategies set forth in *Judgment* create significant advantages for those companies seeking to compete at the highest level.”

—Mike Doyle, President & Global CEO, Ketchum

“*Judgment* is this moment’s essential read for every business and thought leader who aims to seize fast-moving opportunities, make smarter decisions under pressure, and give themselves a competitive advantage. With a profound understanding of human behavior, Chris’ thought-provoking analysis cuts through the noise to shine a light on the decision dynamics that are at play in every high-stakes moment. I wholeheartedly recommend *Judgment* to anyone seeking to enhance their decision-making skills and gain a sense of clarity in today’s hyper-disrupted world. Whether you are an entrepreneur or at the helm of a large organization, this book serves as the blueprint to unlocking not only your potential — but also that of your team, your organization, and your mission.”

—Angelique Rewers, Founder and CEO, BoldHaus

“In this extraordinary resource for global leaders developing the strategies to tackle our greatest challenges, Mailander provides the tools and methods for curating the long arc of decision-making necessary to take on our most significant societal, economic, and climate-related challenges. *Judgment* is critical reading for global thinkers and change agents.”

—Andrew Jones, Executive Director, Climate Interactive

“*Judgment* is equal parts a thrilling, suspense-filled tale of high stakes decision-making, and a sophisticated deconstruction of who won, who lost, and the lessons learned in those crucible moments.”

—**Robbie Bach, Former President and
Chief Xbox Officer, Microsoft**

“Classic Chris – his penchant for captivating storytelling is at its height in *Judgment: The Art of Momentous Decision-Making*. Aspiring and established leaders, across all walks of life, will profit from the combination of Mailander’s worldly professional experience and perspective.”

—**Jonathan Smith, Managing Director,
Fairmount Partners**

“In *Judgment*, you learn how to make exceptional decisions under high pressure. This is essential reading for CEOs.”

—**Scott Bauer, Partner, PwC**

“In *Judgment: The Art of Momentous Decision-Making*, Chris Mailander disentangles the myriad forces, inflection points, and decisions that shape the trajectory of events that lead to crucible moments. Drawing from three pivotal events—each described in vivid detail—Mailander explores how the decisions the principal actors made along the arc leading to those moments helped determine whether the players could forge successful outcomes when the stakes were at their highest. *Judgment* provides valuable insights into how to anticipate, prepare for, and make sound decisions during critical moments we will all face in our careers and lives.”

—**Nathan Viton, Chief Legal Officer, Public Storage**

“Judgment is for rising CEOs building phenomenal companies. It is for those asking how they can do more, how they can do better, and how to get it right in their critical moments. *Judgment* is for those CEOs that seek out those exceptional moments when they will be called upon to be extraordinary.”

—Chris Whitney, CEO, Whitney Logistics &
Miles Ahead Brands

“Judgment: The Art of Momentous Decision-Making is an indispensable guide for those seeking to enhance their leadership capabilities, refine their decision-making acumen and embrace the extraordinary.”

—Jonathan Bowman, Certified EOS Implementer®

“Chris Mailander ushers readers into the very rooms where decisions are being made, revealing the tensions and triumphs that underpin decisive moments in history. His vivid storytelling lets us experience these moments in real-time, while not skimping on the analysis, granting unique insight into the complexities of leadership during what he terms ‘crucible moments’. This is more than a CEO field guide; it’s a journey into the nexus of action and consequence in high-stakes environments. A truly immersive and enlightening read.”

—Eliot Puplett, CEO & Co Founder of The Medici Project

“Judgment provides modern strategies for growing, competing, and winning, all of which are rooted in how we make the critical decisions in business and life.”

—Nick Friedman, Co-Founder, College Hunks Hauling Junk

“Mailander leverages decades of world experience to deliver a seminal work on strategy and decision-making, while simultaneously taking readers on a phenomenal journey. The lessons of *Judgment* apply without regard to nationality, geography, or culture. Instead, they are anchored in the hidden yet universal codes upon which exceptional decision-making operates.”

—**Mohammad S. Qaryouti, Group CFO,
Emirates Post Group**

“*Judgment* lays out a thought-provoking framework for critical decision-making.”

—**Carlos Soler Duffo, CEO, TOUS**

“A signal of the strength of a leader is judgment, and the ability to utilize good judgment in both small battles and long wars. Mailander offers a collection of decision-making lessons from three significant world events that leaders can use when faced with their next judgment call.”

—**Scott Curtin, EY**

“As a handbook for monumental decision-making, *Judgment* provides a new framework for understanding the forces which affect our decision-making in crucible moments.”

—**Ana Trias Arraut, Chief Brands Officer
Carolina Herrera, Dries Van Noten & Nina Ricci**

“*Judgment* is required reading for those CEOs seeking to create phenomenal value for their shareholders and employees.”

—**Ted Hull, CEO, Bako Diagnostics**

“The lessons in *Judgment* transcend leadership, regardless of company size, geography, or industry. It plucks out the deeper codes of judgment that are essential to great decision-making.”

—**Derrick Raymond, Strategy & Corporate
Development Leader**

“*Judgment* is for anyone making decisions that have a global impact.”

—**Ann M. Steingraeber, Senior Lawyer, Cargill**

“*Judgment: The Art of Momentous Decision-Making* is a captivating exploration of the art and science behind effective decision-making. Chris Mailander skillfully presents a wide range of strategies that empower leaders to make sound and impactful decisions while steering clear of avoidable mistakes. *Judgment* is perfect for aspiring leaders, seasoned executives, and anyone seeking to enhance their decision-making capabilities.”

—**Michael Morales, Chief Executive Officer, RF-SMART**

“*Judgment* sets forth the strategies enabling a high-potential company to achieve its most audacious goals.”

—**Joseph McMillin, Founder and Former CEO,
Atlas Organics**

“*Judgment* is filled with secrets that can help you during your most challenging and impactful moments.”

—**Chris Larsen, Founder, Next Level Income**

The Experiment

Judgment: *The Art of Momentous Decision-Making* is based upon an experiment. In this work, we will examine three case studies. They are:

Nuclear Brinkmanship in the Cold War, 1986

In the waters somewhere off the coast of Vladivostok, Russia, we study the command of the USS *Guardfish*, one of the US Navy's top weapons in the hunt for Soviet secrets. It is 1986, and the Soviet Union and the United States are locked in an escalating battle defined by political and military brinkmanship. Each of their respective gambits runs the risk of triggering nuclear annihilation. The moment-by-moment decisions made by the captain of the USS *Guardfish* and its crew deep below the darkened seas tell us much about preparing for crucible moments.

The Precipice of Global Economic Collapse, 2008

In 2008, the global economy teeters on the precipice of cataclysmic disaster. The core of the global financial system is melting down. Leading financial institutions are falling. One institution, however, is too big to let fail. If it implodes, it

will take the entirety of the financial system and possibly the whole economy with it. Over the course of several days, the fate of the global financial system is determined by several dozen men in tense negotiations in quiet conference rooms across several blocks of Wall Street. The quickly shifting balance of power among them, affecting their leverage over one another and their susceptibility to events outside of their control, informs our own responses to those events we can and cannot control.

Crescendo in the Global War on Terror, 2015

Just before the world's leaders convene in Paris, seeking to attain the most significant multilateral commitments ever on global climate change, terrorists launch coordinated attacks across the city. Over the course of four hours, as friends and lovers dine in tiny bistros and fans cheer on their national soccer team taking on the world champion German opponent, France witnesses the greatest atrocity on its soil since World War II. We study the decisions made moment by moment in France, as well as from inside the White House Situation Room, the epicenter from which the United States' own national security apparatus stands up to defend against its newest threat. The events reveal lessons in responding to quickly changing conditions and formulating rational responses to fear-inducing circumstances.

Commonalities

In some ways, these case studies are similar:

- Each is historically significant;
- In each, the stakes are extremely high; and

- The pressure on the decision makers is immense. The level of uncertainty about the future that will unfold as a consequence of their decisions or indecision is at its greatest. The arc of history will change with the decisions they make or fail to make.

In each instance, I have talked with individuals at or near the center of the storm, reacting to or causing it, playing roles instrumental to shaping the decisions required in the very present moment. Again, there are commonalities in their experiences:

- The decisions required the height of their intellectual capabilities;
- They invoked the emotional body; and
- Their decisions and the resulting acts affected them in ways both consciously known and subconsciously perceived, and most likely affected their loved ones, their teams, and potentially the lives of millions of others wholly unaware of the catastrophic possibilities ahead.

As such, given the gravity of the moment, the individual's very being is affected. Their altered being affects their judgment. The crucible moment hangs on their judgment, for better or for worse. Consequently, the risk is high.

Differentiation

Each of these case studies is also unique.

- Each is wholly unrelated to the other and implicates dramatically different situational contexts;
- They involve different sets of actors with different backgrounds, experiences, and training; and

- They occur at unrelated times spanning three decades.

It is from this perspective of differentiation that allows us to identify and test the deeper codes and common patterns that exhibit themselves in critical moments.

Observations

This experiment reveals several overarching observations:

There are strong correlations between these deeper codes and common patterns for leadership in crucible moments.

Understanding these codes and patterns can inform our own analyses and actions.

We can build upon these strategies, lessons, and techniques.

They should be integrated into our own exercise of judgment.

In doing so, we will lead from insight and strength.

Our judgment will become exceptional in our own crucible moments.

***We will better ourselves.
We will better others.***

How to Read This Book

This book is structured in a way that will feel vaguely familiar to those who have had the dubious pleasure of attending law school, yet it is designed to be highly accessible to leaders of all backgrounds.

The first part sets forth three distinct fact patterns. These fact patterns provide characters and context. They establish what is happening above the waterline in the various crucible moments, but also tease at the tensions and drama at play subtly or not so subtly below. We become sensitized to the situational context facing leaders in their moment of challenge, as well as the dynamics of whatever game of strategy and chance is being played.

The second part digs into the characteristics, proclivities, and patterns of leadership in crucible moments, using the three fact patterns to illustrate the opportunities and pitfalls that emerge in crucible moments of decision-making.

The third part of this book is an overlay. There are ninety callouts that describe the deeper codes, common patterns, strategies, tools, and methods for your use in both preparing for and exercising judgment in your crucible moments. Each of these callouts is numbered and correlate to a comprehensive mind map that readers can download for use in developing their own playbooks.

DEEPER CODES.
COMMON PATTERNS.

The Quiet

Robinson, the parliamentarian and my early mentor, listened each day to the cacophony emanating from the never-ending theater that is politics and policy-making in Washington, DC. He listened for the sounds that were bold and blaring. He listened for the single perfect note that would sometimes pierce through. He felt the noise rise in intensity, and then fall or at times even go quiet, emitting seemingly no sound at all.

His daily habit was to pore through the news, make calls to insiders, and have meetings with the team and clients. Then he would sit, staring through the large panes of glass framing his office into the ether of nothingness above the busy intersection of Connecticut Avenue and M Street Northwest. I imagined he saw every chord in the cacophony emerging from the city as a decision arc uniquely unfolding. Each imagined arc would wave higher or lower, predictably or chaotically, with intensity or subtlety, finding its way.

What Robinson was doing was surveying the competing arcs to predict which would result in action versus frustration or stagnation. He was seeking to sort the signal from the noise.

He would then contemplate the strategies for influencing the arc of his chosen few to move either higher or lower. Competitors sought to bend each arc to their favor and, in doing so, were required to exercise their own best judgment.

Errors of judgment could cripple an arc, flare it, increase its dysfunction, or kill it. Errors often fueled the noise. The media reveled in any failure and ineptitude among the elected and privileged. Interest groups real or manufactured fanned the flames to benefit their own aims, and political opponents sensed an opportunity to nick or kill.

I came to learn something else in this time, something ironic—moments in which judgment is brilliantly exercised are often very quiet. There is little fanfare. Judgment is exercised discreetly. It is behind closed doors and nondisclosure agreements. It serves little interest to others who instead want drama, stasis, and friction.

This is an injustice, of course. We should celebrate exceptional decision-making. The reality is that our society and its institutions, including business, politics, and the media, favor story lines of anger, frustration, inequity, and injustice. Stories of decision-making success are often uneventful. They do not sell news. They do not send voters to the polls. Their lessons are often forgotten in the ensuing quiet.

The story of Benmosche and his team righting AIG in the wake of its bailout, repaying all monies owed to US taxpayers plus interest, was heralded by few on Wall Street, Main Street, or the halls of Congress. It was a momentous achievement. It was, however, a mere blip in the public narrative. Those who had sought to further use the arc of the financial crisis for their own future gains saw little value in celebrating judgment well exercised.

The story of those few hours in which the USS *Guardfish* pursued the Akula from only several meters away, hidden in her shadow, was a closeted secret. The story was inaccessible to but a privileged few who understand how judgment was well exercised in a crucible moment of Cold War history.

The inside story of the decisions made by Hollande and

the French national security forces over several hours of a highly orchestrated terrorist attack is little known beyond the few directly affected by it. The story of their exceptional judgment exercised in a crucible moment was quickly subsumed into the cacophony of the long-running Global War on Terror.

The reality is that evidence of decision arcs managed well often have less visibility and permanence in our consciousness than those managed poorly. They slip into the quiet.

Yet we should know these lessons. We should strive to sort the signal from the noise. We should listen for the single pure note that is hidden within the blare of discordant notes emerging from the cacophony. We should hunt to resolve errors, inequities, and injustices until we achieve the quiet.

For those who do come to exercise judgment well, who carefully curate its execution, and who render a decision that improves the arc of the decision, expect few accolades. You will, however, be welcomed into an elite *fraternité*—the silent stewards of judgment.



Chris Mailander

Chris Mailander counsels corporate and national government clients through the arduous decision path faced in the pursuit of extraordinary outcomes. His client roster has included MasterCard, Bank of Montreal, the Federal Home Loan Bank System, Unisys, Visa, KPMG Consulting, BearingPoint, the President of Nigeria, the Government of Iraq, and a host of mid-market leaders and Silicon Valley innovators seeking to transform industries. He has negotiated tenders and commercial transactions in more than forty countries across North America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, including in conflict and post-conflict economies. He was previously an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law School and an adjunct fellow at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina.