

STRATEGY & DECISIONS

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# JUDGMENT

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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.

# Contents

|                                                |             |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Preface.....</b>                            | <b>xiii</b> |
| <b>Foreword.....</b>                           | <b>xxi</b>  |
| <b>The Experiment .....</b>                    | <b>xxv</b>  |
| <b>Three Crucible Moments.....</b>             | <b>1</b>    |
| The Height of the Cold War .....               | 3           |
| The Precipice of Global Economic Collapse..... | 21          |
| The Global War on Terror .....                 | 65          |
| <b>Deeper Codes. Common Patterns. ....</b>     | <b>97</b>   |
| Decision Arcs .....                            | 99          |
| Energies within the Arc .....                  | 103         |
| Living Organisms .....                         | 105         |
| Trigger Points.....                            | 106         |
| The Force of Water.....                        | 115         |
| Misalignment .....                             | 118         |
| Decision Archetypes .....                      | 123         |
| Lineage.....                                   | 129         |
| Enterprise Architecture .....                  | 136         |
| Alignment .....                                | 140         |
| Archetype Diversity .....                      | 146         |
| Long Arcs.....                                 | 151         |
| Evolution.....                                 | 157         |
| Short Arcs .....                               | 160         |
| Revealing Decision Outcomes .....              | 163         |

|                                       |            |
|---------------------------------------|------------|
| The Mark .....                        | 170        |
| Common Errors .....                   | 172        |
| Ego over Mission .....                | 173        |
| Intransigent Narratives .....         | 175        |
| Advocacy before Facts .....           | 180        |
| Fallacy of Success .....              | 185        |
| Common Wisdom .....                   | 189        |
| Fallacy of Ideology .....             | 194        |
| The Silent Stewards of Judgment ..... | 196        |
| Indicators.....                       | 198        |
| Agitation.....                        | 200        |
| Objective Position .....              | 204        |
| Leverage.....                         | 206        |
| Time .....                            | 208        |
| Transparency.....                     | 210        |
| Shifting Rules .....                  | 211        |
| Fear .....                            | 213        |
| Overcoming Irrationality .....        | 215        |
| The Seven Indicators .....            | 217        |
| Relentless Self-Flagellation.....     | 218        |
| Shape of the Table .....              | 221        |
| Ritual Sacrifice .....                | 226        |
| The Quiet.....                        | 231        |
| <b>Judgment Mind Map .....</b>        | <b>234</b> |
| <b>Bibliography .....</b>             | <b>235</b> |
| <b>Notes .....</b>                    | <b>241</b> |

## **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 Vitan, 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

**J**udgment: *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.

## Advocacy before Facts

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**I**n the wake of the disastrous 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, President John F. Kennedy determined that the methods and processes for making US national security decisions was deeply flawed. The intelligence he was provided lacked integrity. The facts were not the facts. They were interpretations colored by the biases of the individuals and myriad institutions that knit together to create the national security apparatus. As a result, Kennedy's decision-making suffered. He survived the crisis but emerged battered and bruised.

To remedy the failings, Kennedy created the White House Situation Room. Its mandate was simple. Its sole purpose was to render the most accurate set of facts about the bubbling hot spots around the world that could rapidly implicate the United States and force the president into a position where a critical decision must be made quickly. Stated another way, the mandate of the White House Situation Room was to mitigate the influence of self-serving bureaucratic fiefdoms, power politics, and the flaws of personal assumptions and biases of those who touched the process on its path toward a presidential decision.

The logic of a mandate to gather the facts, and only the facts, is simple to understand. To implement it, however, is immensely challenging.

As hot spots around the world gurgle and seethe, increasing in intensity, then receding or even vanishing, potentially reappearing elsewhere with even more intensity or subtlety, the apparent facts are often cryptic, conflicting, and confusing. They are colored by those who gather them, those who transmit them, and those who interpret them.

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## **67** Gather the facts before interpretation or action.

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In the run-up to any momentous decision, whether it be a national security incident, navigating the waters of a choppy subprime credit market, or imagining what lies somewhere beyond the steel hull of a windowless submarine reliant only on the interpretations of acoustic hums and murmurs heard by a sonarman, establishing the facts with accuracy and reliability is of paramount importance and immense challenge.

Misinterpretations, false readings, intentional manipulation, decoys, deception, and incompetence can lead to catastrophic outcomes, whether possibly triggering a nuclear war in the Caribbean (as during the Bay of Pigs) or the Sea of Japan (as when hunting the *Akula*), sending the global economy into a death spiral or sparking a conflagration after terrorist-driven attacks in Europe.

Any of these distinct situations reflects the common paradox of no participant in the game ever possessing a full or accurate picture of the game; instead, each acts like the blind men in the fable who describe an elephant, compounded by a child's game of telephone.<sup>292</sup> By the time the message reaches its end point, it bears little relationship to the message at the start. Each actor in the chain hears those pieces of the story that stand out to them and that they believe are

most important, inevitably sloughing off pieces or distorting remainders.

It can get worse. Short timelines and unstable triggers in the minefield of an emerging fact pattern viewed by different blind men watching the tension adds intensity and sensitivity to the one's perception of the situation. Their different worldviews, values, belief systems, and experiences only amplify the confusion. The smallest shift can dramatically reset the

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**68** The deeper dynamics within an unfolding decision arc will be confusing to teams facing challenges. There will be an increase in friction, emotion, and bad behaviors, which will affect their ability to effectively respond to or capitalize on new opportunities created.

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course of history, the legacy of leaders, and the lives of millions. The elephant is no longer an elephant. The Paris terrorists are impossible to define. The subprime credit market is no longer what it once was. The Soviet Navy recedes back into the stealthy dark.

Returning to one of the core codes of decision-making in crucible moments, the White House Situation Room's mandate is simply to establish the "what" of a situation, not the "why" or "What comes next?"

The White House Situation Room is charged with pulling a picture from the dark fog somewhere out there and drawing it in closer and closer until it becomes more in focus, the shades of gray shifting into lines of black and white, and only then allowing color to resolve into the image.

This function is also its limit. The White House Situation Room does not try to explain what the facts mean. Instead, analysis and interpretation of the facts is the mandate deeded separately to the NSC. The NSC then works in consultation with the State Department, the CIA, the NSA, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and myriad additional agencies to give meaning to the fact patterns, color them, determine alternative courses of action, set probabilities for each, and make recommendations to the president as to the preferred path forward. The president retains ultimate responsibility for making the decision to act or to hold, to increase the intensity or moderate it, to zig or to zag.

The decision arc is never perfect, but it is highly curated; it is the president's judgment that ultimately determines the course of action.

Kennedy set a precedent in 1961 for how national security decisions are made. It is a precedent that has been inherited by each successive president since then. Some have accepted its wisdom readily; others have let the lines between fact-gathering and interpretation blur once again, only to pay the price.<sup>293</sup>

The lineage adapts and improves over time. The heirs to the lineage learn from mistakes. They study the after-action

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**69** To increase probabilities of success, continuously iterate upon the processes and methods for understanding the unfolding decision arc, as well as how judgment will be exercised by the players at key inflection points.

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reports of each crisis to achieve new learnings, integrating them into the operational policies for how to handle the next crisis lurking in the dark.

On a Friday afternoon more than four decades after Kennedy established this precedent, Obama set to work to gather and validate the facts emerging from Paris. A day later, he and the NSC evaluated the fact pattern, provided their interpretations of the causes and implications of the terrorist attacks, and set probabilities for what would or should come next.

Decisions were made. Judgment was exercised.

The French were aided. Raids in France quickly ensued. Bombs were dropped in Syria. The tail stemming from the arc of the attacks was shortened.



## **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.