

WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER FOUR

Too Far In to Stop

Once a course is begun, the decision to continue is inherited rather than taken, and the remedy is written at the start.

Ammanuel Santa Anna

Santa Anna, A. (2026). Too Far In to Stop. In Who Decides (ch. 4). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989227
Luminous Library Licence 1.0 · business.hautelumiere.life/library/who-decides

THE LICENCE

Too Far In to Stop

Once a course is begun, the decision to continue is inherited rather than taken, and the remedy is written at the start.

Who Decides · Chapter Four. The Haute Lumière edition, 2026. © 2026 Ammanuel Santa Anna.

Released under the Luminous Library Licence 1.0 (hautelumiere.life/library-licence): free to read, share, quote, translate and teach, non-commercially, for ever. The Author keeps every other right, including every commercial right.

Published by Luminous Prosperity Inc. for Haute Lumière. Author ORCID 0009-0008-3244-0306.

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.23989227 · this record's page: business.hautelumiere.life/library/who-decides/04-too-far-in-to-stop/

Please cite as: Santa Anna, A. (2026). Too Far In to Stop. In Who Decides (ch. 4). Luminous Prosperity Inc. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989227

Chapter Four of Who Decides. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/who-decides (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989215).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Once a course is begun, the decision to continue is inherited rather than taken, and the remedy is written at the start. It is nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, and the programme director of a housing association is at her kitchen table with the steering paper for Tuesday. The overhead light is on, and the rest of the house is dark. The programme is a new system for scheduling repairs across eleven thousand homes, two years in, on its fifth forecast. The template the programme office uses has a box on its first page headed Recommendation , and in every paper since the first, the word in it has been Continue . She has typed it again. The cursor is blinking after it. She proposed the system. She stood in front of the board two years ago with a slide of a repairs visit booked in one call instead of three, and she believed it, and in part she still does. The supplier has missed two releases. The tenants' panel has stopped asking when it will arrive.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Far In to Stop

Once a course is begun, the decision to continue is inherited rather than taken, and the remedy is written at the start.



Too Far In to Stop

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER FOUR

Nine o'clock on a Sunday, the steering paper

It is nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, and the programme director of a housing association is at her kitchen table with the steering paper for Tuesday. The overhead light is on, and the rest of the house is dark. The programme is a new system for scheduling repairs across eleven thousand homes, two years in, on its fifth forecast. The template the programme office uses has a box on its first page headed *Recommendation*, and in every paper since the first, the word in it has been *Continue*. She has typed it again. The cursor is blinking after it.

She proposed the system. She stood in front of the board two years ago with a slide of a repairs visit booked in one call instead of three, and she believed it, and in part she still does. The supplier has missed two releases. The tenants' panel has stopped asking when it will arrive. The operatives in the depots have built their own spreadsheet to work round the parts that do arrive, which is the most reliable thing the programme has produced. Her chest is tight in a way that is not about the deadline. She is a composite, drawn from the way these evenings are described in the research below and in the house's own practice, and no organisation is meant.

What she cannot quite see from the kitchen table is that nobody has ever decided to continue. The programme was decided once, two years ago, by the board. Since then the steering group has received a paper every quarter, and every paper has said *Continue*, and every meeting has noted it. The decision to stop has never been on any agenda, because nobody is responsible for putting it there.

The house's Luminous 100, its reading of the frameworks every consultancy sells, describes the purpose of the stage-gate process, the oldest formal answer to this problem, in a single plain sentence: it "Prevents the common failure of carrying weak projects too long because of sunk cost attachment."[17] The housing association has no gate. It has a box with a word already typed in it.

This chapter makes one claim. Once a firm has committed to a course, the decision to continue is usually not taken at all. It is inherited, quarter by quarter, by a review that has no stopping signal agreed in advance and is chaired by the people whose names are on the start. Escalation is less a failure of nerve than a decision nobody has been given, and it is answered by writing the conditions for stopping before they are needed.

Knee-deep

In 1976 the organisational psychologist Barry Staw published a study with a title that has become shorthand for the whole subject: *Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy*.[18] He gave business-school students the role of a corporate financial officer allocating research money between two divisions of a company, and then told them how their first choice had turned out. Those who had made a choice that failed, and who felt personally responsible for it, put more money into the same division the second time, not less. The study's text was not reopened for this book, and its design is given as the escalation literature has long described it. It is a laboratory study with students, and its authors and successors have been careful about how far it travels.

Five years later Staw set out the general problem in a review, and its abstract is still the best short statement of the mechanism: "Because it is often possible for persons who have suffered a setback to recoup their losses through an even greater commitment of resources to the same course of action, a cycle of escalating commitment can be produced."[19] A setback creates the hope of recovery, and the hope of recovery justifies the next commitment, and each commitment raises the cost of admitting the first was wrong.

In 1985 Hal Arkes and Catherine Blumer gave the mechanism its everyday name in a paper called *The Psychology of Sunk Cost*.[20] Their best-known demonstration, as it is usually reported, was a field experiment with a university theatre's season tickets: people who had been sold tickets at the full price went to more plays in the first part of the season than people who had been given a discount, as though the money already spent obliged them to attend. The paper's text was not reopened for this book, and the experiment is given in outline. What it shows, in a small and humane setting, is that a cost already paid and unrecoverable still pulls on what people do next, even when they know it should not.

None of this says that persistence is foolish. Many projects that are rescued after a setback should have been rescued. What the research shows is that the decision to continue is made under a particular distortion, one that pushes in one direction, and that the people most subject to it are the ones who made the first decision.

Read the steering paper through Staw's abstract and its fifth forecast has a familiar shape. Each forecast since the first has followed a setback, a missed release or a supplier change, and each has proposed a recovery: one more release, a new module, a further quarter. Each recovery, considered alone, is plausible. What the paper never shows is the series. A reader who saw only the fifth forecast would judge it on its merits. A reader who saw all five side by side would see a cycle, and would ask the question none of the forecasts contains: if the next recovery fails as the last four did, what then? The template has no place for that question, because it was designed to report progress, and a programme reports progress until it stops.



A fair in Vancouver

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER FOUR

A fair in Vancouver

Laboratory findings invite the question of whether real organisations behave the same way, and in 1986 Jerry Ross and Barry Staw answered it with a case.[21] They studied the decision of the government of British Columbia to hold a world's fair, Expo 86, in Vancouver. Their abstract gives the arc in one sentence: "Despite rapidly increasing deficit projections (from a $6-million projected loss in 1978 to over a $300-million projected loss in 1985), the provincial government remained steadfast in its plans to hold Expo."

Their account of why is the part of the paper that matters to the housing association. The case, the abstract says, "not only illustrates the frequently studied processes of self-justification and biased information processing but also highlights the potential importance of institutional explanations of escalation." And it proposes that "escalation starts with project and psychological forces but can evolve over time into a more structurally determined phenomenon." The fair began as a project its sponsors believed in. By the end it was a commitment held in place by contracts, reputations, public statements and the simple fact that every institution around it had organised itself on the assumption that it would go ahead. Ross and Staw later studied a nuclear power plant on Long Island, Shoreham, that was abandoned only after many years, as a case of how organisations do eventually exit.[22]

A meta-analysis published in 2012 by Dustin Sleesman and colleagues gathered more than three decades of this research and compared the many explanations offered for escalation, from self-justification to the framing of losses to the social and structural pressures Ross and Staw described.[23] Its abstract notes that "little effort has been made to systematically investigate these various accounts," which is what the authors set out to do. The broad lesson of the literature is that escalation has several causes at once, which is why no single remedy, such as telling people to ignore sunk costs, reliably works.

That lesson matters for anyone tempted to treat escalation as a personal weakness. The programme director is not a person who cannot let go. She is a person inside a structure that has made letting go the only act that nobody is assigned to perform. The supplier is contracted to deliver, the programme office to report, the steering group to receive the report and the board to be told. Each does its job. A stop is nobody's job, and so, as Ross and Staw found in Vancouver, the project continues not because anyone decided it should but because every institution around it is organised on the assumption that it will.

The repairs programme is somewhere between the two ends of Ross and Staw's arc. It began with a director's belief. It is now held up by a supplier contract, a board paper, a tenants' charter that promised the new system, and a programme office whose posts exist because the programme does. Each of those is reasonable. Together they make a structure in which *Continue* is the only word the template has room for.

The name on the start

Staw's students escalated most when they felt personally responsible for the first decision, and the housing association has arranged its review so that the person most responsible writes the paper.

This is not a criticism of the programme director. It is a description of the template. She is the person who knows the programme best, so she writes its paper. She is also the person whose judgement two years ago is on trial in every paper she writes, and she knows it, and her chest knows it. The steering group, which includes the director of operations who seconded the original proposal, reads the paper in the same light. Nobody in the room has a role in which recommending a stop would be an ordinary piece of work.

Santa Anna's canon, writing about organisations that cannot move on from what they have lost, describes the mechanism in terms that are usually reserved for grief, and they fit: "Decisions that would require revisiting past losses are unconsciously avoided." To stop the programme would be to lose two years, a supplier relationship and a public promise, and to lose also the version of herself that stood in front of the board. The canon notes elsewhere how organisations disguise such losses even from themselves: "They are framed as changes, decisions, strategic pivots, transitions — language that implies forward movement rather than the experience of something being taken away."

The Cairn, another of the house's books, reads [what happens when a goal is made to carry something it cannot hold](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and a programme that carries its sponsor's standing is a goal of exactly that kind. The canon's book on governance records the pattern at the scale of a whole organisation, a healthcare network whose strategic initiatives had each followed the same arc: "enthusiastic announcement, initial momentum, gradual erosion, and quiet abandonment." Quiet abandonment is the other way escalation ends. The project is not stopped. It is starved, and nobody has to say the word.

The director of operations, who seconded the proposal, carries a version of the same weight, and so does the board, which approved it in public and told the tenants' panel. Each of them would find it easier to stop the programme if someone else proposed it, and each assumes, reasonably, that the person best placed to propose it is the programme director. She assumes the same of them. It is the unowned decision of Chapter 1, arriving at the end of a commitment rather than the beginning.

The Luminous 100 offers a different word for stopping, and it is worth taking seriously because it changes what a stop means to the people in the room. In its reading of the stage-gate, "the "kill" decision is reframed from failure to composting". A stopped project is not nothing. It is the knowledge, the spreadsheet in the depots, the data cleaned for the migration and the people freed for other work, returned to the organisation as material for what comes next.

A stopping signal written at the start

The research on escalation is more useful on prevention than on cure, and its best advice is about what to write down before anyone has anything to defend.

In 1993 Daniel Kahneman and Dan Lovallo described the pattern by which managers make timid choices and bold forecasts, and the remedy they argued for, taking an outside view of how projects like this one usually go rather than an inside view of how this one is planned, has become standard advice.[24] Their text was not reopened for this book, and the argument is summarised. The practical version is a single question asked at the start: of programmes like ours, in organisations like ours, how many arrived on time, and what happened to the ones that did not?

A second instrument works on the same principle from the other direction. In 1989 Deborah Mitchell, Edward Russo and Nancy Pennington studied what they called prospective hindsight, which their abstract describes as "generating an explanation for a future event as if it had already happened."[25] Explanations for events treated as certain, they found, were longer and contained more episodic reasons. The psychologist Gary Klein later built a practice on the idea, the premortem, in which a team imagines that its project has failed and writes down why, before it starts. *The Cairn* also shows how [an obstacle written down in advance arrives as an appointment rather than a verdict](https://hautelumiere.life/editions/rsd-rsd-and-self-confidence/page/), and a stopping signal is an obstacle written down for the whole organisation.

Asked at the housing association two years ago, the outside-view question would have been uncomfortable and useful. Large systems programmes in organisations of its size have a long public record of running late and over cost, and the board could have read some of that record in an afternoon, in the reports that public bodies are required to publish about their own programmes. Nobody would have concluded that the repairs system should not be built. They might have concluded that a programme which was expected to run late needed, from its first day, a clear statement of how late was too late.

Santa Anna's book on decision-making describes the same discipline as a property of the decision itself rather than of the people making it: "Building review and adaptation into the decision architecture — what we call learning loops — transforms decisions from static pronouncements into living, evolving commitments." Among the questions it asks of every loop is one the housing association's template has never contained: "What voices were right that were initially dismissed?"



The review with a door in it

HAUTE LUMIÈRE · WHO DECIDES · CHAPTER FOUR

The review with a door in it

What changes the Sunday evening is a different template, and a different person reading it.

Picture the same housing association a year later, starting its next large commitment, a programme to fit new heating systems across its older homes. Before the board approves it, the sponsor writes a single page that will be read at every review. It says what the programme expects to see, and by when: the number of homes fitted by the end of the first year, the cost per home, the tenants' satisfaction measured the way the association already measures it. It says what would make the programme pause and be reviewed from the

beginning: two missed milestones in a row, or a cost per home above an agreed line, or the tenants' panel withdrawing its support. It names the person who will read each review and recommend whether to continue, and that person is the director of finance, who did not propose the programme and whose standing does not rise or fall with it. And it states that a recommendation to pause or stop is an ordinary outcome of a review, to be thanked and acted on, not a failure to be explained.

The Luminous 100's description of the stage-gate gives the rule its older form: "Each gate has explicit criteria — projects that don't meet criteria are killed, freeing resources for stronger ones." The page does the same work in an organisation that has no gates. Its value is not that it predicts the future accurately; nobody's first page does. Its value is that it was written by people who had nothing yet to defend, at the one moment when the conditions for stopping could be stated without anyone hearing them as a verdict on themselves.

For the repairs programme, which began without such a page, the programme director does something harder. She rewrites the steering paper on the Monday. Its first page now has two columns: on the left, what the board was told two years ago that the programme would have achieved by now; on the right, what it has achieved. The recommendation box says: *Pause new development for one quarter. Ask the director of finance to lead an independent review, including the depots' spreadsheet, and bring a recommendation to the board.* She sends it before she can change her mind, and then, because she is honest, she sends a second email to the director of operations, saying that she knows this is not what either of them hoped to write.

The order of what she did matters. She put the original promise beside the present result, which made the gap a matter of record rather than of her opinion. She asked for a reader who had not started the programme. She named the depots' spreadsheet, which made the operatives' work count before the review began. And she proposed a pause rather than a stop, which made the decision reversible and so made it possible to take.

The steering group, when it meets on Tuesday, does something it has not done before. It reads the two columns in silence before anyone speaks, and then the chair asks the director of operations to speak first, because his name is on the original proposal and the room needs to hear that he will not defend it for its own sake. He says that the right-hand column is what he would have expected to see a year ago, and that he agrees with the pause. The meeting takes forty minutes. Nobody is asked to explain anything.

There are predictable ways this goes wrong, and Chapter 7 carries them with the review page and its run sheet. The stopping signal is quietly moved when it is reached. The independent reader is chosen by the sponsor. The person who recommends the stop is moved to other work, and nobody recommends one again. A firm that wants to know what its late stops cost will find that the answer lies in records it already keeps (Chapter 5), and that the counting has to be agreed before the next commitment starts.

The first two places a firm's decisions wait, the decision nobody owns (Chapter 1) and the approval queue, are about decisions not yet made. This one is about a decision made so firmly that nobody can unmake it, and it needs the same remedy at the other end: an owner, a date and a question that has a place to be asked.

Writing the page before the start

The chapter followed one programme to its stop and one to its first review. The book can go further, into the finer points of writing the page that makes a stop possible.

Begin with the moment. The page is written before the commitment is approved, by the person proposing it, and approved with it. Written later, it is written by someone who already has something to defend. If the organisation has commitments already running without such a page, which most do, the page is written now, for each, by someone who did not start it, and the commitment is read against it from the next review.

The second finer point is what the page contains, and it is short. What the commitment is expected to show, by when, in measures the organisation already keeps. What would make it pause and be reviewed from the beginning: a small number of signals, each stated as something anyone could see in a record, never as a judgement. Who will read each review and recommend, and that person is not the sponsor and does not report to the sponsor. When the reviews will be held. And one sentence saying that a recommendation to pause or stop is an ordinary outcome of a review.

The third is the level of the signals, and here the book is deliberately silent on figures. A signal set too tight will stop good work at its first difficulty; a signal set too loose will never be reached. The people who carry the commitment's risk set them, from the organisation's own experience of commitments like this one. The outside view of Kahneman and Lovallo is the best help: before setting a signal, ask how commitments of this kind have usually gone, here and elsewhere, and set the signal where a commitment would be going clearly worse than the usual.

The fourth is the review itself. It begins with the two columns, what was expected by now and what has happened, read in silence before anyone speaks. The reader speaks first and recommends. The sponsor speaks next, and the question put to her is not *why is it behind?* but *what do you know now that you did not know at the start?* Then the steering group decides: continue, change course, pause for review, or stop. A pause is often the right first decision, because it is reversible, and a reversible decision is easier to take than a final one.

The fifth is what a stop releases. The canon's word for it, composting, is practical. When a commitment stops, write down what it leaves: the people freed and where they will go, the money not yet spent, the knowledge gained, the parts that work and can be kept, like the depots' spreadsheet. A stop that releases

nothing visible will be remembered as a loss. A stop whose released resources are named, and put to use within a month, will be remembered as a decision.

The sixth is the person who recommends the stop. Her standing is the test of the whole practice. If she is thanked in public and her next assignment is a good one, the organisation has learned that recommending a stop is part of the work. If she is quietly moved aside, it has learned the opposite, and no page will ever be read honestly again.

And the decision that most changes the result is the first time a signal is reached. Someone will propose that the signal was set too tightly, and that it should be moved. Sometimes that is right. But it is decided by the reader, not the sponsor, with the reason written down, and the commitment is reviewed from the beginning either way. A signal moved quietly when it is reached was never a signal. Chapter 6 places the pages for running commitments in the second month of a ninety-day plan, and Chapter 7 gives the commitment page and the two-column review as a page each.

Nine o'clock on a Sunday, a year later

It is nine o'clock on a Sunday evening, and the programme director is at the kitchen table with a different paper. The repairs programme was paused in the spring and closed in the summer, on the director of finance's recommendation. The depots' spreadsheet was kept, and rebuilt properly, and it now books most repairs in one call.

The paper on the table is for the heating programme's first review. Its first page is the page written before it began, with the expected figures on the left and the actual ones on the right. Two lines are behind. None has reached its signal.

In the box headed *Recommendation*, the cursor is blinking on an empty line.

References

1. Santa Anna, A. *The Luminous 100*, "Stage-Gate Process (Robert Cooper)"; *Conscious Governance Models*, "Institutional Grief" and "The Healthcare Network That Faced Its Shadow"; *Organizational Soul Work*, on organisational grief; *Inclusive Decision-Making Protocols*, "Phase 4: Implementation". Luminous Prosperity Inc.; The Luminous Developmental Canon.
2. Staw, B. M. (1976). Knee-deep in the big muddy: A study of escalating commitment to a chosen course of action. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16(1), 27–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(76)90005-2 (The design is given as the escalation literature describes it; the text was not reopened.)
3. Staw, B. M. (1981). The escalation of commitment to a course of action. *Academy of Management Review*, 6(4), 577–587. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1981.4285694 (Quoted from the abstract, read through its OpenAlex record.)
4. Arkes, H. R., & Blumer, C. (1985). The psychology of sunk cost. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 35(1), 124–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(85)90049-4 (The season-ticket experiment is given in outline as it is usually reported; the text was not reopened.)
5. Ross, J., & Staw, B. M. (1986). Expo 86: An escalation prototype. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 31(2), 274–297. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392791 (Quoted from the abstract, read through its OpenAlex record.)
6. Ross, J., & Staw, B. M. (1993). Organizational escalation and exit: Lessons from the Shoreham nuclear power plant. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36(4), 701–732. https://doi.org/10.5465/256756 (Named only; the text was not reopened.)
7. Sleesman, D. J., Conlon, D. E., McNamara, G., & Miles, J. E. (2012). Cleaning up the big muddy: A meta-analytic review of the determinants of escalation of commitment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(3), 541–562. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0696 (Quoted from the abstract, read through its OpenAlex record.)
8. Kahneman, D., & Lovallo, D. (1993). Timid choices and bold forecasts: A cognitive perspective on risk taking. *Management Science*, 39(1), 17–31. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.39.1.17 (Summarised; the text was not reopened.)
9. Mitchell, D. J., Russo, J. E., & Pennington, N. (1989). Back to the future: Temporal perspective in the explanation of events. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 2(1), 25–38. https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.3960020103 (Quoted from the abstract, read through its OpenAlex record. Klein's premortem is described from his practice, in Klein, G. (2007), "Performing a project premortem", *Harvard Business Review*, 85(9), not reopened.)

Too Far In to Stop

Ammanuel Santa Anna · Luminous Prosperity Inc. · Haute Lumière

Set in Cormorant Garamond and Manrope.

Read the Business Library at business.hautelumiere.life/library.

Luminous Library Licence 1.0 · hautelumiere.life/library-licence

REQUEST A CONVERSATION

business.hautelumiere.life/book/?kind=gainshare

The Business Library

business.hautelumiere.life/library/

The packages

hautelumiere.life/pricing/