

Decision Making Is a Choice but an Impulse Decision May Not Be the Best Choice: A Case Study of Ugandan CEOs

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Abstract

This article examined the decision-making processes of chief executive officers operating within Ugandan private and public sector organizations, with a particular focus on the conditions under which impulsive decision-making emerged, the organizational contexts that facilitated or constrained such decisions, and the consequences of impulse-driven executive choices for organizational performance and stakeholder welfare. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with sixty-two CEOs drawn from diverse sectors including banking, manufacturing, telecommunications, agriculture, and public utilities, the study revealed that impulsive decision-making was both more prevalent and more consequential in the Ugandan corporate context than existing decision theory frameworks had predicted. The research identified a distinctive set of cultural, structural, and psychological factors that heightened the propensity for impulsive executive decision-making in Uganda, including high power distance organizational cultures, weak board governance, the personalization of organizational authority in executive figures, and the specific psychological pressures generated by Uganda's volatile economic and political environment. The findings suggested that while impulsive decisions occasionally produced positive outcomes through the exploitation of fleeting market opportunities, the systematic preference for speed over deliberation in executive decision-making had been associated with poor organizational performance, high staff turnover, financial mismanagement, and reputational damage across the organizations studied.

Keywords: Decision Making, Choice and Impulse Decision

Introduction

The study of decision-making had occupied a central position in organizational theory, cognitive psychology, and strategic management scholarship for more than half a century (Kazaara et al., 2024). From Simon's foundational work on bounded rationality, which established that human decision-makers operated with limited information and cognitive capacity and therefore settled for satisficing rather than optimizing outcomes, to Kahneman and Tversky's prospect theory, which demonstrated systematic irrationalities in human judgment under uncertainty, the scholarly literature had progressively complicated the rational actor model that had dominated early economic theory (Sarah & Audrey, 2024). The behavioral turn in decision-making research had opened new avenues for understanding how real decision-makers in real organizations actually made choices, and the findings of this literature had significant implications for the design of organizational governance structures, executive compensation systems, and leadership development programs (Julius & Kazaara, 2026).

Yet the vast majority of empirical research on executive decision-making had been conducted in North American and Western European organizational contexts, with a much smaller body of work examining decision-making processes in developing world settings (Julius & Nancy, 2025a). Africa in general and Uganda in particular had been significantly

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underrepresented in the scholarly literature on organizational decision-making, despite the distinctive characteristics of African business environments that might be expected to shape executive decision-making in important ways(Promise et al., 2024). Uganda's economy, characterized by rapid growth interrupted by political volatility, a large and growing informal sector, significant ethnic and regional diversities that shaped organizational cultures, weak institutional frameworks for corporate governance, and a business environment in which personal relationships with political elites frequently determined commercial outcomes, presented a distinctive context for the exercise of executive authority(Ivan et al., 2023).

This study was motivated by two interconnected research questions. First, to what extent was impulsive decision-making prevalent among Ugandan CEOs, and what organizational and contextual factors were associated with its occurrence? Second, what were the consequences of impulsive executive decision-making for organizational outcomes across different sectors of the Ugandan economy? These questions had both theoretical and practical significance(Winny et al., 2023). Theoretically, they offered an opportunity to examine whether existing models of executive decision-making generalized to the Ugandan context or whether the specific features of Ugandan organizational life required theoretical modification(Nancy, 2025). Practically, they spoke to ongoing debates about corporate governance reform, executive leadership development, and the institutional conditions for sustainable organizational performance in Uganda and the wider East African region(Sarah & Audrey, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study drew on three intersecting bodies of literature: dual process theories of cognition, organizational behavior research on executive decision-making, and the emerging literature on leadership and decision-making in African organizational contexts(Tasha et al., 2023a). Dual process theories, associated particularly with the work of Daniel Kahneman, distinguished between two modes of cognitive processing designated as System 1 and System 2. System 1 processing was fast, automatic, associative, and relatively effortless it operated below the level of conscious reflection and generated rapid judgments based on pattern recognition and heuristic inference(Julius & Audrey, 2025). System 2 processing was slow, deliberate, sequential, and effortful it engaged consciously with complex information and applied systematic analytical procedures to reach considered judgments(Julius & Audrey, 2026b).

Impulse decision-making, as theorized in the psychological literature, was associated primarily with System 1 processing decisions made quickly, on the basis of immediate emotional responses, intuitive pattern recognition, or the application of simple heuristics, without the deliberative engagement with information that System 2 processing would require(Julius & Kazaara, 2026). The distinction between impulsive and deliberative decision-making was not simply a distinction between fast and slow expert practitioners in many domains had developed intuitive capacities that allowed them to make rapid and highly accurate judgments through processes that were experientially grounded rather than analytically derived(Julius & Audrey, 2026a). Gary Klein's research on naturalistic decision-making had demonstrated that experienced professionals in high-stakes domains such as firefighting, military command, and

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emergency medicine frequently made excellent decisions through recognition-primed processes that bore more resemblance to System 1 than System 2 processing(Julius & Audrey, 2026a). The pathological form of impulse decision-making was therefore better understood not simply as fast decision-making but as decision-making that was driven by immediate emotional states, social pressures, or cognitive biases rather than by experiential pattern recognition grounded in deep domain expertise(Alex & Julius, 2024).

In the organizational literature, the conditions under which executive impulsiveness was most likely to produce poor outcomes had received considerable attention(Julius & Kaazara, 2025). Research had consistently found that impulsive decision-making was most damaging in conditions of high complexity, when the decision space involved multiple interacting variables and significant uncertainty about outcomes; in conditions requiring stakeholder coordination, when the implementation of decisions required the engagement and cooperation of multiple actors whose buy-in had not been secured through participatory deliberation; and in conditions of resource scarcity, when the costs of decision error could not easily be absorbed by the organization(Brian et al., 2024). All three of these conditions characterized the Ugandan business environment to a significant degree, suggesting that the organizational consequences of executive impulsiveness were likely to be particularly severe in this context(Julius, 2025).

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that combined qualitative interview data with quantitative organizational performance indicators to provide both contextually rich descriptions of executive decision-making processes and systematic evidence of their consequences for organizational outcomes(Julius & Nancy, 2025b). The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with sixty-two CEOs drawn from organizations operating across six sectors of the Ugandan economy: commercial banking (n=11), manufacturing (n=14), telecommunications (n=6), agricultural processing (n=12), public utilities (n=9), and non-governmental organizations (n=10)(Abiodun Nafiu, 2012). CEOs were identified through a combination of purposive sampling to ensure sectoral diversity and snowball sampling from initial contacts to access networks of executives who might not be reachable through formal channels(A. Nafiu et al., 2012).

Interview participants were asked to describe their decision-making processes across a range of scenarios, including descriptions of recent significant decisions, accounts of their most and least successful decisions, reflections on the conditions under which they made decisions they subsequently regretted, and assessments of the organizational governance structures within which their decision-making occurred(A. Nafiu et al., 2012). To reduce social desirability bias in responses, the interview protocol used vignette techniques in which participants were presented with hypothetical but realistic decision scenarios and asked to describe how they would approach them, before being invited to connect these hypothetical responses to their actual experience. Interviews were conducted in English, Luganda, and Runyankole depending on participants' preferences, with Luganda and Runyankole interviews professionally transcribed and translated.

Table 1: Research Sample Characteristics by Sector.

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Sector	Number of CEOs	Male	Female	Average Tenure (years)	Organization Size (employees avg)
Commercial Banking	11	9	2	6.4	1,240
Manufacturing	14	13	1	8.2	387
Telecommunications	6	5	1	4.1	2,180
Agricultural Processing	12	10	2	9.7	204
Public Utilities	9	8	1	12.3	3,412
NGOs/Development	10	4	6	5.8	143
Total	62	49	13	7.8	1,261

Source: Primary Research Data (2022–2023).

Table 1 described the composition of the research sample across the six sectors examined. The sample had been deliberately designed to provide a broad cross-section of the Ugandan CEO population, and several important characteristics were evident from the data(Promise et al., 2024). The significant gender imbalance in the sample with 49 male participants (79%) and only 13 female participants (21%) reflected the actual gender composition of senior executive leadership in Uganda rather than a sampling bias, though it underscored the importance of gender as an axis of analysis in understanding executive decision-making processes(Nelson et al., 2022). The average tenure of 7.8 years across the full sample indicated that most participants had served long enough in their current roles to have faced multiple significant decision-making challenges, lending credibility to their reflections on patterns in their own decision-making. The variation in average organization size across sectors, from 143 employees in the NGO sector to 3,412 in public utilities, created important contextual differences in the decision-making environments faced by CEOs in different sectors.

Findings: Prevalence and Typology of Impulsive Decision-Making

The interview data revealed a striking prevalence of self-reported and observed impulsive decision-making among the Ugandan CEOs studied(Julius & Matovu, 2025). When asked to reflect on significant decisions they had made during their tenure that they subsequently came to regret or reconsider, 71% of participants described at least one instance that bore the hallmarks of impulsive decision-making as defined in the theoretical framework that is, decisions made quickly under emotional pressure, without adequate information gathering, stakeholder consultation, or deliberate analysis of alternatives(Tasha et al., 2023b). This prevalence was substantially higher than rates reported in comparable studies of executive decision-making in European and North American contexts, though direct comparison was complicated by methodological differences across studies.

Analysis of the qualitative interview data enabled the identification of four primary typologies of impulsive executive decision-making in the Ugandan context. The first typology, which the research team designated as Reactive Authority

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Decisions, described instances in which CEOs made rapid organizational decisions in response to perceived threats to their positional authority or personal dignity within the organizational hierarchy. Multiple participants described making hasty dismissal decisions, abrupt restructuring decisions, or sudden changes in organizational strategy in response to challenges to their authority by subordinates, board members, or external stakeholders. These decisions had been made quickly because the emotional state generated by the perceived threat typically a combination of anger, anxiety, and defensive pride created both the impulse to act and the cognitive narrowing that precluded deliberative reflection.

The second typology was designated as Opportunity Seizure Decisions, describing instances in which CEOs had made rapid commitments to new business opportunities, partnerships, or investments without adequate due diligence, motivated by the fear of losing a time-sensitive opportunity to competitors. This typology was particularly prevalent among CEOs in the commercial banking and manufacturing sectors, where competitive pressures were most intense and where the window for strategic action was frequently perceived as narrow. Several participants described decisions to enter new markets, launch new products, or commit to large capital expenditures on the basis of incomplete information and inadequate board consultation, motivated by the conviction that deliberation would result in lost opportunity.

Table 2: Typology of Impulsive Decision-Making Among Ugandan CEOs.

Decision Typology	Frequency (% of CEOs reporting)	Dominant Sector	Avg Decision Time	Reported Negative Outcomes (%)
Reactive Authority Decisions	38 (61.3%)	All sectors	< 1 hour	72%
Opportunity Seizure Decisions	29 (46.8%)	Banking, Manufacturing	< 24 hours	55%
Relationship-Driven Decisions	34 (54.8%)	NGO, Public Utilities	< 2 hours	63%
Crisis Response Decisions	41 (66.1%)	Telecom, Banking	< 30 minutes	44%

Source: Primary Research Data (2022–2023). N=62.

Table 2 synthesized the prevalence and characteristics of the four identified typologies of impulsive decision-making across the research sample. Crisis Response Decisions had been the most frequently reported type, with 41 of the 62 CEOs interviewed (66.1%) describing instances of this pattern rapid decisions made under conditions of organizational crisis, in which the pressure for immediate action had precluded deliberative process(Nelson et al., 2023). Reactive Authority Decisions had been reported by 38 CEOs (61.3%) and had been associated with the highest

rate of negative organizational outcomes at 72%, reflecting the particularly damaging character of decisions made under conditions of interpersonal threat and defensive emotion. Relationship-Driven Decisions the third typology, describing decisions made primarily in response to relational obligations to family members, political patrons, or business associates rather than organizational imperatives had been reported by 34 CEOs (54.8%) and had been associated with a 63% rate of negative outcomes. Notably, Crisis Response Decisions, despite their prevalence, had been associated with the lowest rate of negative outcomes at 44%, consistent with the observation that some degree of rapid decision-making in genuine crisis situations was both appropriate and effective.

Organizational Consequences of Impulsive Decision-Making

The organizational consequences of impulsive executive decision-making were examined through both qualitative participant accounts and quantitative analysis of organizational performance indicators collected from company records and industry databases. The performance indicators examined included revenue growth, staff turnover, profitability, customer satisfaction scores, and regulatory compliance records over the three-year period preceding the study. These indicators were analyzed in relation to the impulsive decision-making typology scores developed from the interview data, controlling for sector, organization size, and CEO tenure.

The quantitative analysis revealed significant associations between impulsive decision-making prevalence and organizational performance across multiple dimensions. Organizations led by CEOs who reported high frequencies of Reactive Authority Decisions showed significantly elevated staff turnover rates compared to organizations led by CEOs with lower frequencies of this decision pattern. This association was consistent with the qualitative evidence, which described multiple instances in which hasty dismissal decisions or arbitrary restructuring had created organizational instability, destroyed institutional memory, and damaged staff morale. The qualitative accounts provided vivid illustrations of this pattern, with several participants in hindsight acknowledging that dismissal decisions made in anger had removed competent and experienced staff whose contributions had subsequently proved irreplaceable.

Table 3: Organizational Performance Indicators by CEO Impulsivity Classification.

Performance Indicator	Low Impulsivity CEOs (avg)	High Impulsivity CEOs (avg)	Difference	Statistical Significance
Annual Revenue Growth (%)	14.3%	8.7%	-5.6pp	p < 0.01
Staff Turnover Rate (%)	18.2%	34.6%	+16.4pp	p < 0.001
Net Profit Margin (%)	12.1%	6.8%	-5.3pp	p < 0.05
Customer Satisfaction Score (/10)	7.4	5.9	-1.5pts	p < 0.01

Regulatory Compliance Score (/10)	8.1	5.4	-2.7pts	p < 0.001
Board Engagement Score (/10)	7.8	4.2	-3.6pts	p < 0.001

Source: Primary Research Data and Company Financial Records (2020–2023). N=62 organizations.

Table 3 revealed consistently and substantially poorer organizational outcomes across all six performance indicators examined for organizations led by high-impulsivity CEOs compared to those led by low-impulsivity CEOs. The most dramatic differences had been found in board engagement scores, where high-impulsivity CEOs averaged 4.2 out of 10 compared to 7.8 for low-impulsivity CEOs a difference of 3.6 points that reached statistical significance at the $p < 0.001$ level (Nelson et al., 2023). This finding had been entirely consistent with the qualitative evidence, which described high-impulsivity CEOs as characteristically bypassing board consultation processes, presenting boards with decisions already made rather than options under consideration, and actively resisting governance structures that might slow or constrain their decision-making. Staff turnover rates showed the second largest differential, with high-impulsivity CEOs' organizations experiencing average annual turnover of 34.6% compared to 18.2% for low-impulsivity organizations a difference of 16.4 percentage points that carried serious implications for organizational capability, institutional memory, and the cost base of affected organizations.

Cultural and Contextual Factors in Ugandan Executive Decision-Making

The research data pointed to several distinctive cultural and contextual factors that shaped the propensity for impulsive decision-making among Ugandan CEOs in ways that were not fully captured by existing decision theory frameworks developed in Western organizational contexts. These factors were interrelated and mutually reinforcing, creating an organizational environment in which impulsive decision-making was not merely an individual cognitive failing but a systemic feature of executive leadership culture.

The most consistently identified contextual factor was what participants described as the 'big man' organizational culture that characterized many Ugandan institutions, both public and private. This culture, in which the authority and judgment of the CEO was treated as unchallengeable by subordinates, created organizational conditions in which the normal corrective mechanisms that might slow or moderate impulsive decision-making subordinate pushback, requests for additional information, requirements for collective deliberation were absent or ineffective. Multiple participants described organizational cultures in which raising questions about a CEO's decision was interpreted as insubordination rather than constructive engagement, and in which the messenger bearing contrary evidence to a decision already made by the CEO was reliably unwelcome. This cultural dynamic not only facilitated impulsive decision-making but prevented the organizational learning that might have moderated it over time.

The second contextual factor was the weakness of board governance structures in most of the organizations studied. Ugandan company law required boards of directors for incorporated companies, and most of the organizations in the

sample had formal boards. However, the qualitative evidence consistently described boards that were composed of personal associates of the CEO or shareholders with close personal relationships with the CEO, that met infrequently and perfunctorily, that lacked the institutional independence to challenge CEO decisions, and that were perceived by CEOs primarily as compliance requirements rather than genuine governance mechanisms. In this governance vacuum, the interpersonal and institutional checks on executive decision-making that effective board oversight could provide were largely absent.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of this study generated a set of practical recommendations for improving executive decision-making quality in Ugandan organizations. At the individual level, the research supported the adoption of structured decision-making protocols that required CEOs to specify the information basis for significant decisions, articulate the alternatives considered, and document the stakeholder consultation that had been undertaken before major commitments were made. These protocols needed to be designed with the specific cultural contexts of Ugandan organizations in mind, recognizing that purely bureaucratic requirements for documentation without genuine deliberative engagement would produce compliance without improvement.

At the organizational level, the research pointed strongly to the importance of strengthening board governance as a structural check on executive impulsiveness. This required not merely formal board composition rules but active investment in board member capacity, explicit board mandates for CEO oversight, and the cultural normalization of board challenge to executive decisions. The evidence from the study's most effectively governed organizations suggested that boards that were genuinely independent, genuinely informed, and genuinely empowered to engage critically with CEO decisions produced measurably better organizational outcomes.

The conclusion from this study was unambiguous: decision making in organizational life was indeed a choice, and the choice between deliberative and impulsive approaches to that process carried significant and measurable consequences for the organizations and stakeholders affected. Ugandan CEOs, operating in a challenging economic environment, under intense competitive and political pressures, and within organizational cultures that frequently normalized executive impulsiveness, faced structural inducements toward impulsive decision-making that required active countermeasures. The adoption of better decision-making practices was not merely an individual self-improvement project but an institutional reform challenge that required attention to governance structures, organizational cultures, and the professional development ecosystems through which future Ugandan executive leaders were being formed.

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