

“See? I Told you So!”

The Deaf Effect in Project Management and What Can Be Done About it

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About Mike Cuellar



- | Assistant Professor @ Georgia Southern University
- | 25 years practice experience in IT project management
 - Team leader, project and program manager
 - Over 20 years and 20000 hours of project management
- | Taught Project Management and Outsourcing

What is the Deaf Effect?



| Perhaps you remember this:

Perhaps You Haven't Heard What Happened the Night Before



Deaf Effect Definition



- | What you have just seen is an instance of the “Deaf Effect Response to Bad News Reporting”
- | **When a project manager doesn’t hear, ignores or overrules a report of bad news to continue a failing course of action**
- | Joe Kilminster overruled the report of bad news to recommend the launch
- | I’m sure if I polled the group, we would have many instances of the the Deaf Effect that we could talk about
- | It is one cause of “run-away” projects and project failures

Conditions That Predispose the Deaf Effect

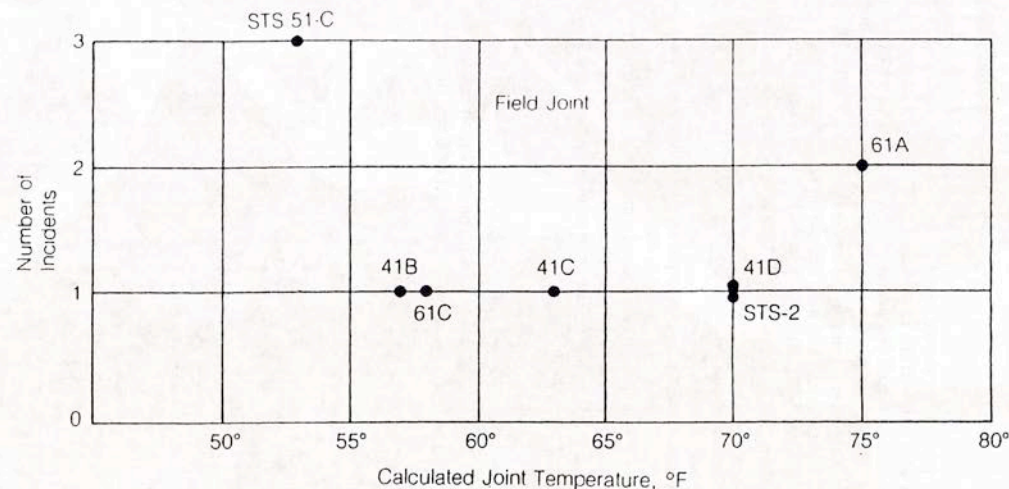


- | Extreme time pressure to make the decision
 - Night before the launch
- | External pressure to perform
 - Extreme pressure from NASA
 - Business worries about the contract
 - Implicit pressure from his manager
- | A decision maker who cannot evaluate the evidence on his own
 - Kilminster did not have the experience with the technology
- | A bad news reporter who does not clearly express the reality of the problem
 - Boisjoly and Thompson did not clearly present the issue

The Data Used to Present

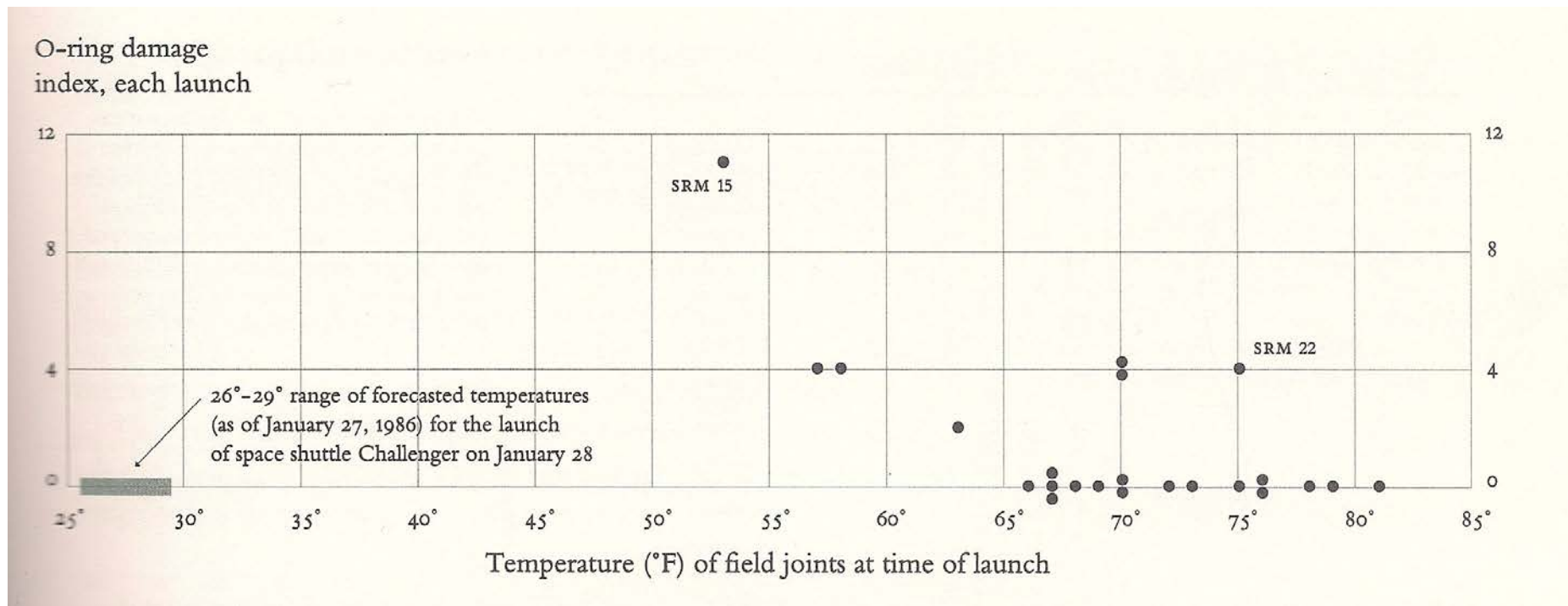
- | This chart was drawn later by the presidential commission to illustrate the data used

Exhibit 13 Plot of Flights with O-Ring Incidents versus Joint Temperature



Note: Incident is defined as O-ring erosion, (gas) blow-by, or excessive heating.

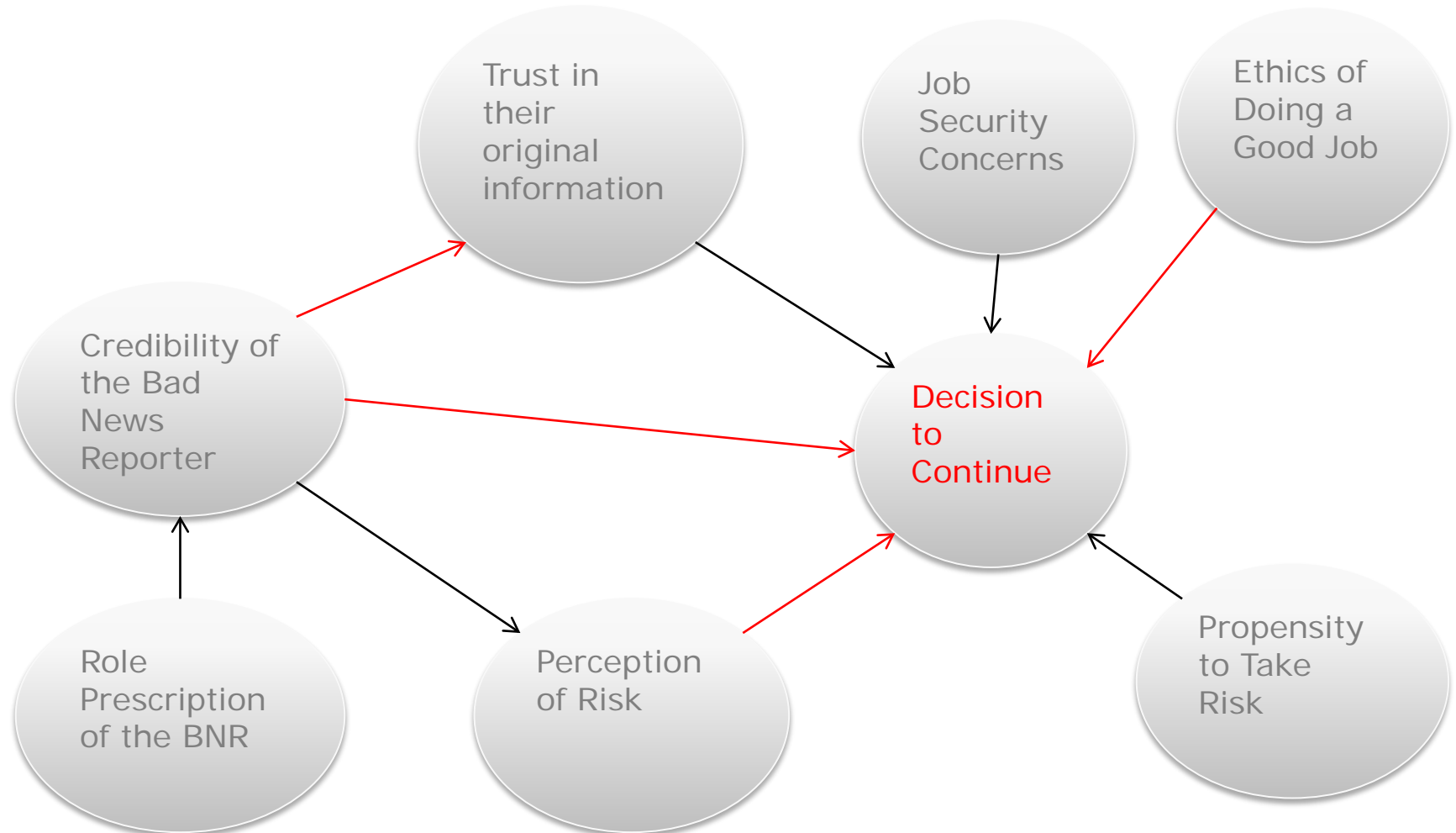
With all the Data Available



(From Tufte, Visual Explanations, 1997)

- | Several Laboratory Experiments
 - Put subjects in the same type of situation as the Challenger
 - Had them make a decision to implement a system despite reports of bad news
 - Conducted the experiments in US, Germany, and China
- | A Case study of a failed information systems project
 - State Government Student Information System

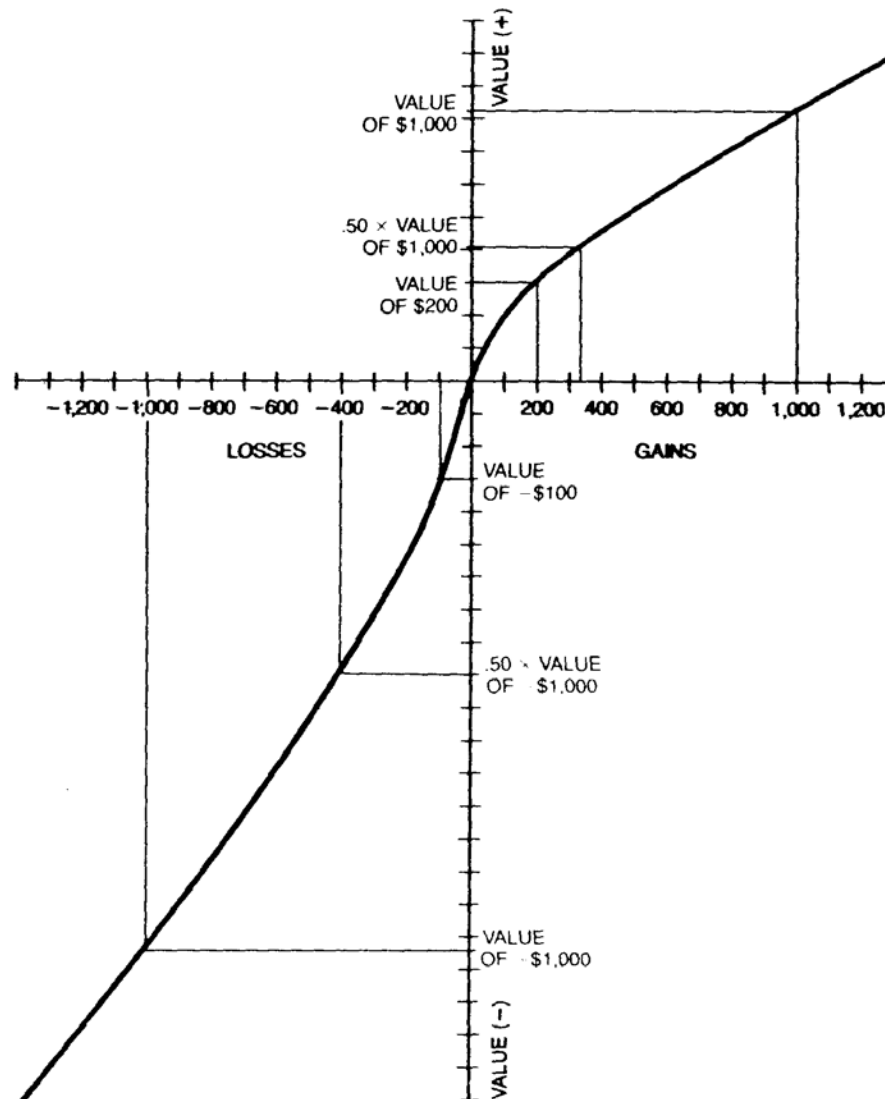
Deaf Effect Model



- | Key component of the network
- | Composed of “Expertise” and “Trustworthiness”
(Pornpitakpan, 2004)
- | Expertise – Do they have the knowledge, skills and ability to know what they are talking about?
- | Trustworthiness – Will they tell me the real situation?
- | NASA’s relentless probing cast doubt on the data used to make the recommendations

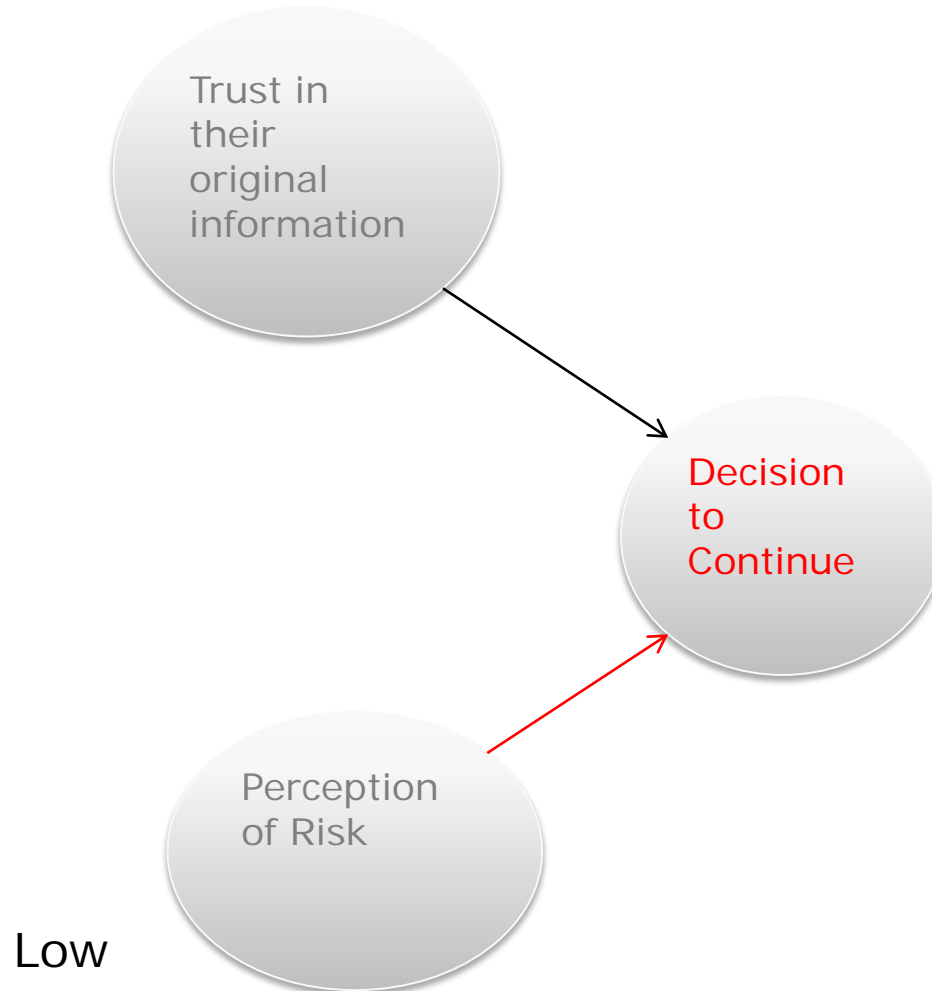
How the Decision Gets Made

Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1982)

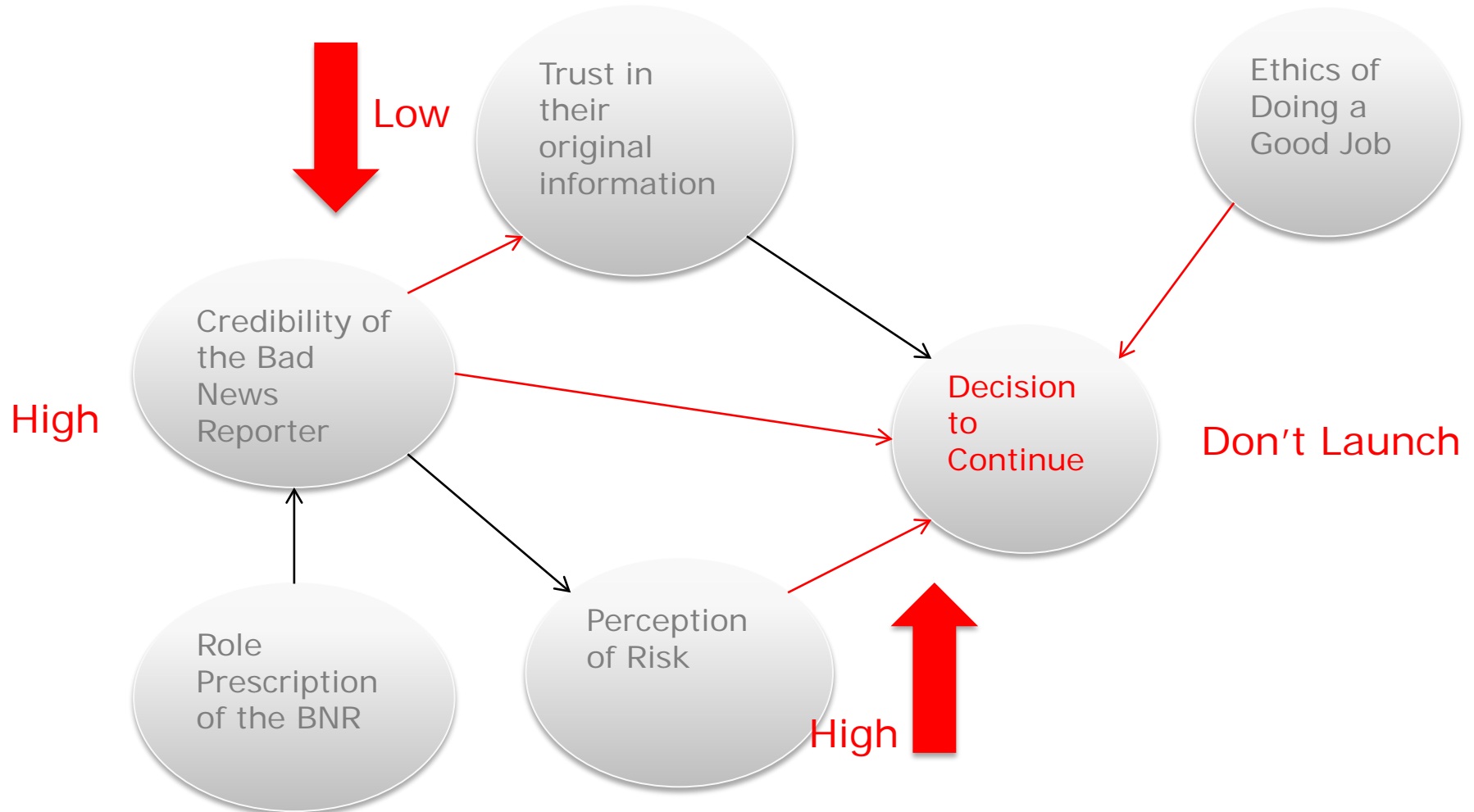


- | Framing of the problem affects the decision
- | Choice between gains
 - Risk Averse
- | Choice between losses
 - Risk Accepting
- | Here they were willing to accept risk to eliminate the loss

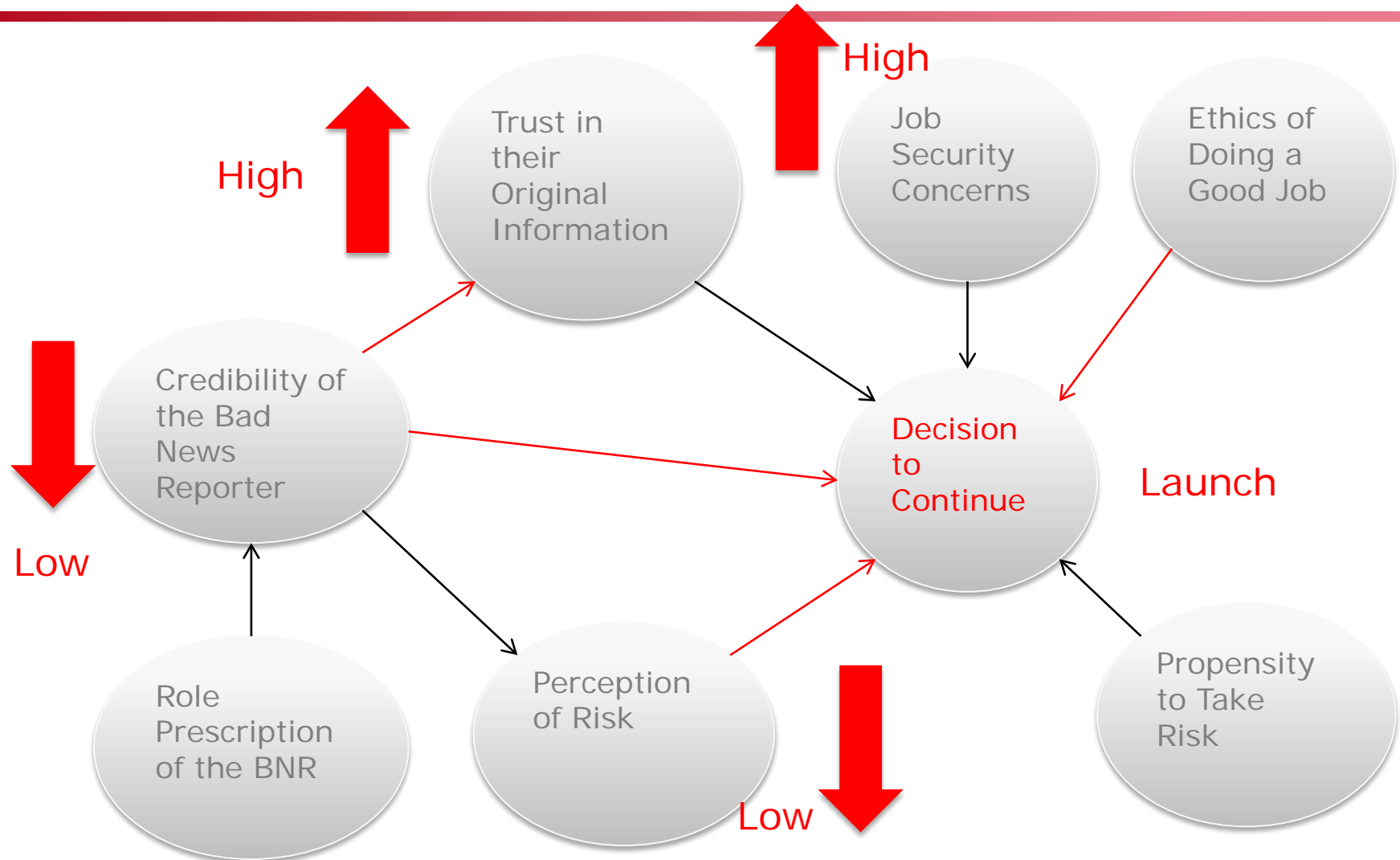
Before the Report of Bad News



After Boisjoly's Report



After NASA and Mason



So What Do We Do?



- I Eliminate the Predisposing Conditions
 - Remove the time pressure
 - Culture of “We always have time to make the right decision”
 - Properly regulate the pressure to perform
 - Resist the urge to “beat down” objections
 - Don’t recreate a “high performance” organization
 - Ensure that decision-makers are able to independently evaluate information
 - Improve communication capabilities of Bad News Reporters

What Can We Do?



I Eliminate the causes

- Increase the credibility of the Bad News Reporter
 - Ensure that it is part of everyone's job to "blow the whistle"
 - Position auditors properly in the organization
- Decrease the propensity to take risk
 - Develop Project Managers that are tough enough to resist external pressure
- Remove job security concerns to the extent possible
 - Establish a culture of "Command Decision"
 - Military concept in which we don't second guess field commanders
 - Project Managers don't get shot for saying "no"

What Can We Do?



I Eliminate the Causes

- Inject ethical concerns into the decision making process
 - Don't allow decision-making to become strictly financial or strictly pragmatic
 - Reward "Doing the right thing"

Thank you!
Questions?

