



Least commitment principle

Description

The least commitment principle is one of several strategies people use when they make plans, such as preparing for a day's outing. The principle gained currency in the 1980s in the early days of artificial intelligence research. It simply means to prioritise tasks in such a way that you keep certain decisions about resources and timings as open as you can for as long as possible.

In computational terms the principle means the sequence of tasks you want to plan for has a large number of variables with interacting and conflicting constraints. Keep as many variables open, vague and with as wide a range of values as possible. The principle assumes that the creation of a plan is a search process. At some stage in the search you are bound to strike certain constraints that decide parts of the task sequence. The less constrained tasks simply fall into line.

Planning in everyday life

The principle is meant to bear a loose correlation with what people do as a daily practice. Many constraints get fixed when you put your plans into action, by which time it's difficult or at least inefficient to backtrack and revise the details of your plan.



Here are some informal applications of the least commitment principle in everyday life.

- You tell a group of friends that you'll be at a certain cafe between six and eight pm, without demanding that they commit to joining you. This kind of informal gathering is a common enough swarming practice, abetted now by digital messaging. The process carries few risks compared with organising a dinner party in which case you probably want people to commit.
- A trusted friend asks if they can borrow your step ladder. You say "yes, just call round and pick it up any time." You don't insist on knowing when they will call, or when you will get it back. You consider that the timing of neither event is critical, and your friend will probably phone before they call round anyway. If you set a time then it's likely that other events will take over and impose adjustments to the plan.
- You start to plan out a weekend with a friend, only to recall that plans on other occasions rarely turn out as expected. So this time you both agree on a loose scenario: start with a trip to the museum some time in the morning, then lunch; if there's time a visit to the park, then the supermarket. Unpredictable factors will impinge on the day's events anyway: the weather, running into friends, running out of time. Not everything needs to be planned. During the day you also decide to buy cinema tickets, which imposes constraints that affect the other tasks, e.g. you need to get home in time to store the groceries before getting to the cinema in time.

Tasks that qualify for low levels of commitment, and to which least commitment planning might apply, are those where:

- there's little risk if they are not carried out, i.e. they are not that important
- their implementation depends on unpredictable factors
- there are alternative tasks that can replace the tasks in the plan
- the lack of commitment does not interfere with the ability of other actors to accomplish tasks that are important to them.

Being a professional

The least commitment principle also circumvents certain inefficiencies, e.g. where the time and resource costs entailed in planning your day eat into the pleasures and opportunities the day has to offer. In some cases several hours or days of planning reduce risks and lead to speedy and efficient implementation. But sometimes the costs of planning outweigh the benefits, as when you spend the whole morning planning a day's outing.

Where the planning process is a collaborative enterprise or its implementation involves other people affected by the plan, then different values are bound to come into play, requiring negotiation.

Some people like to plan in detail, and feel extremely uneasy without a clear plan for what the day holds. Others have an approach to life that is more open and revels in spontaneity. Leadership manuals advise that all talents can be brought to bear on the way a group organises its activities.

Plans and power

Planning strategies inevitably involve ethics, power and politics. Powerful operatives who insist on plans can use their insistence to cudgel subordinates. After all, there's no end to the amount of detail managers can require of the plans made by subordinates, particularly in a bureaucratic context.

The absence of a plan can be similarly weaponised. Think of the apparent lack of a plan in Donald Trump's high level meetings with world leaders: [We'll see what happens](#). That's a very poor application of the least commitment principle. The planning events around a summit between key players entail a high degree of risk, alternative outcomes are not all equally palatable, there's a high chance that the actions of other actors get frustrated and the welfare of many is put in jeopardy.

The lack of a plan is also a way of keeping rivals in a state of uncertainty, and covering over a lack of imagination and ignorance about actions and consequences. To be concerned about planning effectively is one of the signs of professional life.

What is a plan?

From a pragmatic point of view, a plan is a tool, an instrument, an object in a discussion, a sign of competence, and sometimes it's a contract and agreement between parties of a particular course of action. Sometimes a plan is a piece of useful fiction, a play of the imagination, a rehearsal and a scenario.

A plan is also an instrumental subspecies of a tendency and requirement in all of us to project a future â?? not always amenable to tabulation and articulation. It's an aspect of our positioning in time, or as Martin Heidegger would say, our temporality.

â??The concern of circumspective common sense is grounded in temporality â?? indeed in the mode of making-present which retains and awaits. Such concern, as concernfully reckoning up, **planning**, preventing, or taking precautions, always says (whether audibly or not) that something is to happen *then*, that something else is to be attended to *beforehand*, that what has failed or eluded us *on that former occasion* is something that we must *now* make up

forâ?• (458).

Also see post: [Buying time](#).

Bibliography

- Badaracco, Joseph L. 2002. *Leading Quietly: An Unorthodox Guide to Doing the Right Thing*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Choll Press
- Cohen, Paul R., and Edward A. Feigenbaum. 1982. *The Handbook of Artificial Intelligence Volume 3*. Los Altos, CA: Pitman
- Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. London: SCM Press
- Keith, Tamara. 2017. Encore: How Trump Teases, Threatens And Dodges With â??Weâ??ll See What Happensâ??. *NPR*, 26 December. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/26/573628868/encore-how-trump-teases-with-well-see-what-happens?t=1532637950542> (accessed 26 July 2018).
- Suchman, Lucille Alice. 1987. *Plans and situated actions: the problem of human-machine communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Category

1. Ethics

Tags

1. artificial intelligence
2. Heidegger
3. Planning
4. pragmatism

Date Created

July 28, 2018

Author

rcoyne99