

Decision Making and Rationality in Organizations
Video Guide for *Frontline: The Triumph of Evil*. (1999). PBS.

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Following is a video guide that I use with the PBS video *Frontline-Triumph of Evil*. This video focuses on the genocide in Rwanda. I use this when I cover the chapter on decision making and rationality.

In-class use:

Instead of just playing the video, I play a small section, stop the tape, and then go through the questions relevant up to that point (for example, after the program intro, I go through questions 1-3 and ask students to write down what they think the rational thing to do is).

I also stop at important scenes (for example, the meeting of the UN Security Council where they vote to pull out UN troops), discuss what happened in concrete terms, and then analyze the scenes in terms of decision making and rationality.

At the end of the discussion, I ask them to reflect on their answer on question #3 and discuss whether the U.N. and the U.S. acted rationally. It's been quite a heated debate!

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Definitions:

Rationality. Ordering the world based on reason; using observable facts and logical reasoning to reach objective conclusions; usually connotes the ideas of being reasonable, sensible, sane, and systematic; in modern organizational life, epitomized by bureaucracy

Decisional Premise. A value that guides decisions. For example, “safety first.”

Questions:

1. What organizations are represented in this video?

2. What is the central problem with which the organizations have to deal?

3. In your opinion, what is the rational thing to do?

4. What specific instances of communication *interfered* with rationality?

5. What specific instances of communication *fostered* rationality?

6. Was there information underload or information overload? Why?

7. Was the quality of information adequate?

8. March and Simon argue that communication shapes our definition of the situation, our assumptions, and our decision premises. How were these things shaped by communication in this instance?

Definition of the situation -

Assumptions -

Decision premises -

9. Simon says that organizations and humans cannot be perfectly rational and instead of finding the optimal solution, the goal of decision-making should be to satisfice. Do you think that the U.S. and the U.N. accomplished the goal of satisficing? Why or why not?

10. Do you feel that the U.S. and the U.N. were rational in their decision making?