

Mikhael Lalwani | The Cost of Waiting

Practical Insights on Business, Risk, Growth And Resilience

When Inaction Becomes a Business Decision

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Executive Summary

In fast-paced, high-pressure environments, executive teams may view waiting as prudent. They delay gathering additional reports, await clearer market signals, or wait for full consensus. However, in a competitive market, inaction is not neutral. It consumes resources and increases risk.

Delaying decisions to avoid risk alters your risk profile, drains capital, reduces strategic leverage, and limits future options. When an organization stops progressing, it accumulates hidden inaction debt. Eventually, the market will demand repayment, often at unfavorable terms.

Inaction vs. Decision

In an uncertain business environment, pausing until full clarity emerges is an illusion. Making a calculated decision with partial information preserves options, retains strategic initiative, and creates a continuous feedback loop. Taking a deliberate move—even with incomplete or evolving data—lets an organization secure early positioning, test market boundaries, and adapt dynamically as real-time variables unfold on the ground.

Conversely, treating delay as a safe holding pattern merely compounds risk rather than mitigating it.

Deliberate delay, masquerading as thoroughness, creates an accumulating "inaction debt"—a high-interest liability in which operational flexibility erodes, bargaining leverage diminishes, and market forces gradually dictate terms. In volatile environments, inaction is never neutral; when leadership declines to choose, uncertainty decides for them. Thoughtful decisions preserve options and help your organization maintain a competitive edge. Delaying, or inaction debt, increases risk and leads to less favorable outcomes over time.

Core Principles for Strategic Decision

- Collect only the information necessary for the decision at hand. If a decision is reversible, act promptly and be prepared to adjust. Reserve extensive research for significant, one-way decisions that require substantial resources.

- Assign each decision to a single individual, even if all information is not available. Because information is rarely complete, empower someone to gather the available data and proceed rather than waiting for full consensus.

- Assess the cost of waiting. Treat delays with the same seriousness as major expenditures. Compare the monthly cost of inaction with the potential cost of taking an initial, imperfect step.

A Situation Where Delay Made a Problem Materially Worse: Lessons from the Field

As a Risk Management advisor, I observed an enterprise client identify a critical supply chain and compliance bottleneck across their transport operations. Rather than immediately restructuring vendor contracts and implementing digital shielding, the management ordered a series of secondary impact studies over six months.

By the time the final report was tabled, regulatory enforcement had tightened, operational delays had tripled, and the cost to implement the operational overhaul was four times higher than the original estimate. Patience had served as variable-rate debt.

In crisis response and martial operations, complete information is a luxury that does not exist. As a Group CEO, when evaluating strategic expansions or structural realignments, I rely on a structured assessment: *What is the cost of being wrong versus the cost of doing nothing?*

If the cost of being wrong is manageable or reversible, but the cost of waiting is irreversible structural decay, I execute immediately on 60–70% data.

Executive Case Study: Strategic Fleet Compliance & Operational Readiness

The following example demonstrates how inaction debt increased business risk during a recent supply chain and regulatory project within the FMCG sector:

Context & Operational Risk

A major manufacturer in Java had to comply with new Over-Dimension Over-Loading (ODOL) rules and transport protocols. Audits revealed a 12-month plan to renegotiate freight contracts, implement digital fleet checks, and update agreements with logistics vendors.

The Decision Gap

The executive team postponed the strategy for three quarters, awaiting the final regional regulations and approvals from legal, supply chain, and procurement departments.

Executive Outcomes & Value Captured Upon Intervention

- **Higher Spot-Market Costs:** By delaying contract changes until enforcement commenced the client encountered a shortage of compliant transport. This caused spot-market freight rates to rise **300%** above original estimates.

- **Loss of Leverage:** Early action would have enabled the client to secure long-term agreements with compliant fleet providers. By waiting, they forfeited bargaining power to external carriers.

- **Fixing the Process:** The company later set clear decision deadlines and appointed a single individual to oversee regulatory risk. This restored supply chain stability and reduced ongoing costs.

Executive Insight: Overcoming Analysis Paralysis

Most significant business mistakes do not stem from poor execution. They typically arise when leaders become paralyzed by over-analysis, mistaking it for caution. This mindset leads teams to believe that inaction is safer than action, despite its inherent risks. To move forward without sacrificing good governance, boardrooms need to set clear operational rules. Make strategic decisions when you are about 70% confident in your data and have a defined deadline. Waiting for near-certainty delays progress and typically adds minimal value, especially in a dynamic market.

The Cost of Hesitation: Lessons from The Mat

In combat sports, standing still on the mat without launching an attack or securing control isn't neutral rest; it is a choice to absorb your opponent's momentum, surrender spatial dominance, and let their strategy dictate the match. Hesitating to execute a sweep or escape gives your opponent time to secure a deeper grip or lock in a submission, drastically reducing your defensive options and forcing you into an exhausting, high-risk recovery. Just as a fighter who hesitates on the mat burns energy while accumulating damage, a business that delays necessary action incurs an invisible "inaction debt," systematically burning capital, eroding leverage, and handing competitive authority to faster rivals. Adaptive Leaders must treat operational friction like a live combat sport.

Stop treating waiting as a safe harbor. Recognize that every moment spent standing still on or off the mat, lets critical supply chain and compliance bottlenecks, market conditions, and competitors tighten their grip. Act, reframe, and recalibrate in real time.

Strategic Takeaways

When Adaptive Leaders encounter significant uncertainty, making a calculated decision helps preserve flexibility, maintain market leadership, and generate ongoing operational feedback. Acting deliberately, even with incomplete data, allows an organization to secure early positioning, set the agenda, and adjust quickly as conditions change.

In contrast, delaying decisions in the name of risk mitigation creates growing "inaction debt." Waiting does not keep conditions unchanged; instead, it lets hidden risks grow, weakens leverage, and gradually shifts strategic control to competitors and market forces.

About the Author



Mikhael M. Lalwani is a business leader and practitioner in business risk, crisis management and strategic resilience, with more than two decades of experience spanning security, operations, corporate risk, crisis response, entrepreneurship and investment.

As Founder & Group CEO of CORIM Group, he leads a multi-sector business ecosystem and works with corporate leaders on complex, high-stakes situations where decisions must often be made before the picture is complete.

His perspective is grounded in real-world operating environments. His career has moved from security and high-risk operations into corporate risk advisory, crisis management, strategic business leadership and investment—giving him a practical view of how risk develops, how organisations respond under pressure, and how leaders can build the visibility, readiness and decision discipline required to act under uncertainty.

His thought-leadership focus is the business of uncertainty: risk before crisis, decision-making under pressure, organisational resilience, human risk, leadership, and the relationship between risk and opportunity.

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