

The Soldier

*“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
for my unconquerable soul.....”*

William Ernest Henley - ‘Invictus’ 1st stanza



The Campaigning Season

We are a highly specialised group of military operators conducting missions in the furthest reaches of Afghanistan. It is 2002, the environment was austere, **punishing**, and we operated for extended periods at high altitudes against an enemy desperate to re-infiltrate and reassert itself from wintering safe-havens outside Afghanistan.

This is the campaigning season, when the enemy seek to **inflict vengeance and rage** on those who sought an alternative narrative to that imposed by the rule of violence. **Guided by an extreme interpretation of a belief system, they sought to destroy anyone and anything not conforming to their narrative. We saw and felt this in the suffering of the people, the desolation of the regions and the destruction of their history.**



We had been operating at high tempo for some time, conducting long range endurance missions and I had just 24 hours previously led the preliminary entry operation and insertion of the team. The team was now deployed and conducting their tasks, while I relocated back to the command group to maintain operational oversight. Changes to the situation are common and we prepare for these. We also prepare for the worst outcomes and one was about to unfold and become *My Decisive Moment*.

*“In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.”*

William Eeist Henley - 'Invictus' 2nd stanza

My Decisive Moment

The message comes in; the team has taken a hit. We have three casualties, one in **very bad shape** with extensive lower limb injuries and the team is prepping them for evacuation. The team is a long way out and we immediately activate the recovery plan and await the arrival of the wounded. At the same time **we are evaluating the situation** and seeing how to provide support for the rest of the team who remain on task and under threat. This is getting up there with regards to how bad it can get but not beyond what we have prepared for. The helicopters land, I am there to take charge of the wounded and confirm their condition **as it's me who will be calling back and talking with their loved ones and telling them what's happened to them and what I am doing about it**.



All thoughts seem pushed aside as I see the wounded taken by stretcher from the helicopters and we move quickly with them into the surgical facility. **This is bad**, two look OK but have been rocked by the overpressure from very close, high explosive detonations and suffer numerous contusions and hearing damage. The third person is a soldier and **he is in a bad way** having taken the worst of the explosive blast. **His legs are a shocking mess**, he is heavily sedated, drifting in and out of consciousness and is not lucid or aware of where he is and what's going on. He loses consciousness again.

I focus fully on him and two of my command team focus on the other wounded, comforting them while the medical team work in front of me to stabilise the soldier. I knew he was injured badly and when I saw him I needed to see how bad; I wanted to know, I am his boss, I had gone through training with him, I knew him, and I was responsible for him. This was professional, this was personal, this was everything at once and I had the same duty of care, for the team still out there.

The surgeon talks with me; he wants my consent to perform an immediate double amputation of both legs! On seeing the extent of the injuries I felt an immediate, visceral reaction, everything was silent and I could feel a cold sickening sensation wash through me. The orbitofrontal cortex integrates our visceral emotions into the decision making process and this was going on rapidly (Lehrer,2013,p24). I feel now Plato could have been right and that my emotions could have taken me “like a fool into the world below”(Lehrer,2013,p17). I was in the midst of “perceptual narrowing” focused on the most essential facts and most basic instincts, I felt sick (Lehrer,2013,p98). However it passed and I listened intently to what the surgeon was saying. I wanted to place reason over emotion but I knew there was a battle with primitive emotion going on (Lehrer,2013,p20).



Writing this I am recalling the mass of information that seemed to traffic through my mind as I sought for some better outcome, an outcome that did not hold such appalling loss. Even though I thought I knew nothing my emotional brain did and was trying to tell me something (Lehrer,2013,p52). I calmed and started reasoning why both? My emotional brain had done my initial thinking telling me ‘no;’ there was more to consider, it had bought me time to think and do the most reasonable thing (Lehrer,2013,p99). Was I experiencing a loss frame and just trying to avoid something that felt like loss (Lehrer,2013,p77)? Was it some ‘deal or no deal’ scenario where I was pursuing a better offer no matter what (Lehrer,2013,p81)? Had my emotions “sabotaged my common sense” (Lehrer,2013,p82)? As Aristotle argued I needed to intelligently apply my emotions to “the real world” (Lehrer,2013,p107). I was at a point where it was not that I was not feeling anything but I was now regulating my emotions and my pre-frontal cortex (PFC) was in the game, I was now thinking about my own thoughts (Lehrer,2013,p106).

His injuries were severe; they needed to clean him out and salvage as much as possible including the knee joints which provides better mobility. Wait too long and this may not be achievable. My two guys with me from my command group were now at my back to my left and right waiting for what I was going to do. I worked through the information I had to make the call; perform the amputations or seek other perspectives? Sheffield (2015) lectured us on the need for pluralism where we entertain multiple perspectives and I wanted more than what I was being presented. I had restored “executive control” (Lehrer,2013,p114). My PFC was now in full conductor mode leading the orchestration in my mind (Lehrer,2013,p115). “Chance favours the prepared mind” (Lehrer,2013,p117), and my emotions bought me this chance (Lehrer,2013,p99). I was primed for opportunity and like Dodge I was searching for another way to beat this fire (Lehrer,2013,p115).

Another surgeon who had been off-roster came in; he was an orthopaedic specialist and heard the helicopters arrive. I asked for his assessment wanting to know what time I had and was there a better outcome than a double amputation? He performed an assessment, I had time to get him to another higher medical facility where he may be able to save one and possibly both legs but we had to move now! We were located at an air-field and could hear all the while the drone of engines in the back ground; a US colleague heard my decision and ran out onto the taxi-way stopping an aircraft. My guy was now on his way to the other facility with the surgeon, two of my team and the chance of a better outcome.

We soon hear that one leg was saved while the other was amputated below the knee, as despite their best efforts the surgical team could not reconnect enough blood supply to sustain the severely damaged lower part of the leg. My gut had been right and it had bought me time and we were able to reason through the options and arrive at a better outcome.



While this had all been playing out I remained acutely aware that I still had the remainder of the team out there and now I turned my full attention to them. Three days later we were all out there on site with them, reinforcing the mission and included were the two other casualties who had recovered enough to be able to continue out there with me and the team.

*“Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.”*

William Eeist Henley - 'Invictus' 3rd stanza

Making Sense of it all (V-Model and The Gold Standard-R3)

Fig. 1 represents Sheffield's V-Model (Sheffield,2005), illustrating the process steps taken numbered 1 thru 6 and using de Bono's Six Thinking Hats over the six steps (de Bono,1999).

The V shape deals on the left with steps that link with intentions and the right steps that link to outcomes (Sheffield, 2005). Steps 1 to 3 show refined and narrowed intentions while 4 to 6 compile and broaden outcomes (Sheffield,2005). The **why?** **what?** and **how?** represents; **personal/emotional commitment**, **interpersonal/moral agreement**, and **reasoned/technical excellence** respectively (Sheffield,p.88,2005). **Personal commitment** was me making the decision not to have both legs amputated and we all committing to getting the best outcome. **Interpersonal/moral agreement** was the plan to get him to the other facility and expectation from the team that he would get the best outcome possible. **Reasoned/technical excellence** was enacting the plan and creating the opportunity for a better outcome through the performances of the team, the surgeons and myself.

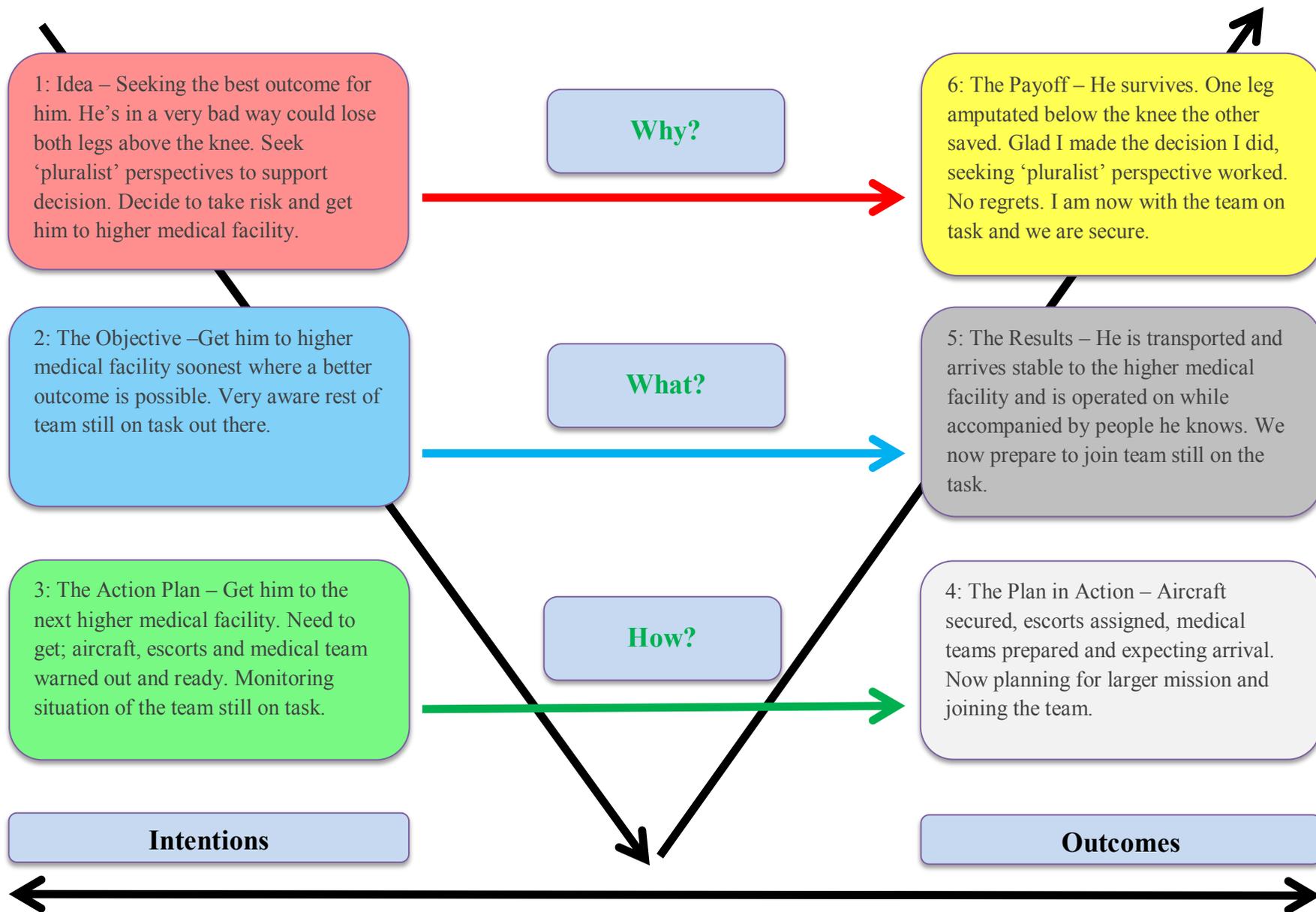


Figure 1: V-Model Decision Framework with de Bono's 6 Thinking Hat's

The Gold Standard is used here to examine the Roles, Relationships and pluralistic Rationality (R3) of the principal actors (Sheffield,2015). These are shown before, during and after the decisive moment in Figures 2 thru 4.

Roles cover the analysis of *Expert*, *Citizen Behaviours* and *Decision Maker* with these presented as the *surgeons*, the *team* and *myself* respectively. Relationship relates to the behaviour of **emotion**, **morality** and **reason**. Rationality is the degree to which behaviour meets The Gold Standard.

Personally and as a team we achieved the Gold Standard principles through (Sheffield,2015):

1. Respectful discussion between ourselves as we sought to gain **mutual understanding** as seen in the discussion with the surgeons.
2. Those who spoke, spoke freely using **reason**, **norms** and **emotion**.
3. We were free to, and did, **question each other**.
4. Power and influence through rank was set aside as we all sought genuine **discussion** with me not exercising my authority until after **discussions**.
5. **Personal commitment** was seen in the evacuation and **deliberations** on care for the casualties, **social agreement** was seen in the decision to seek a better outcome and **expectation of others that this would happen** and **technical excellence** was seen in the successful evacuation of the casualties and the highly skilled treatment of them and particularly of the soldier.

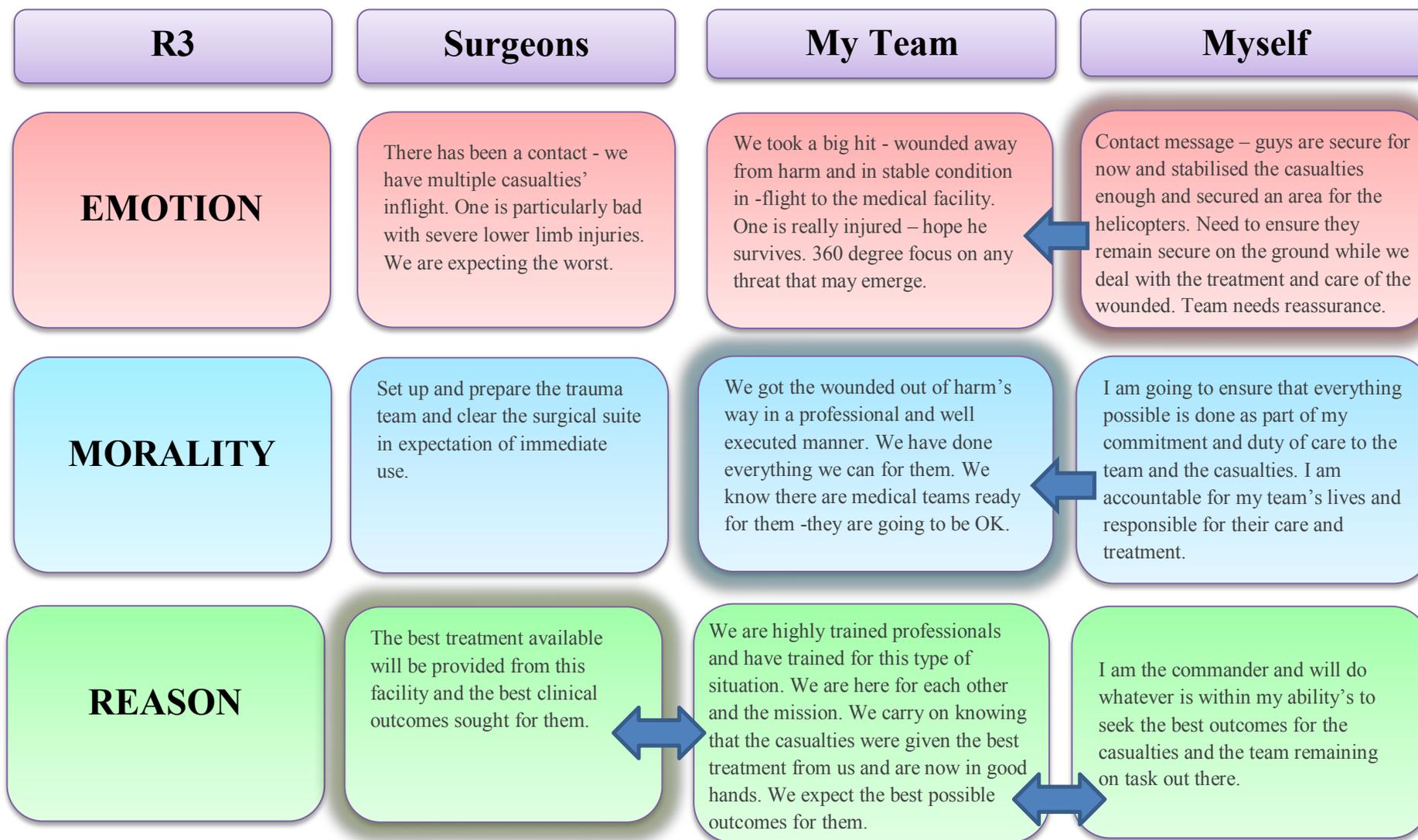


Figure 2: R3 Grid: Before the Decisive Moment

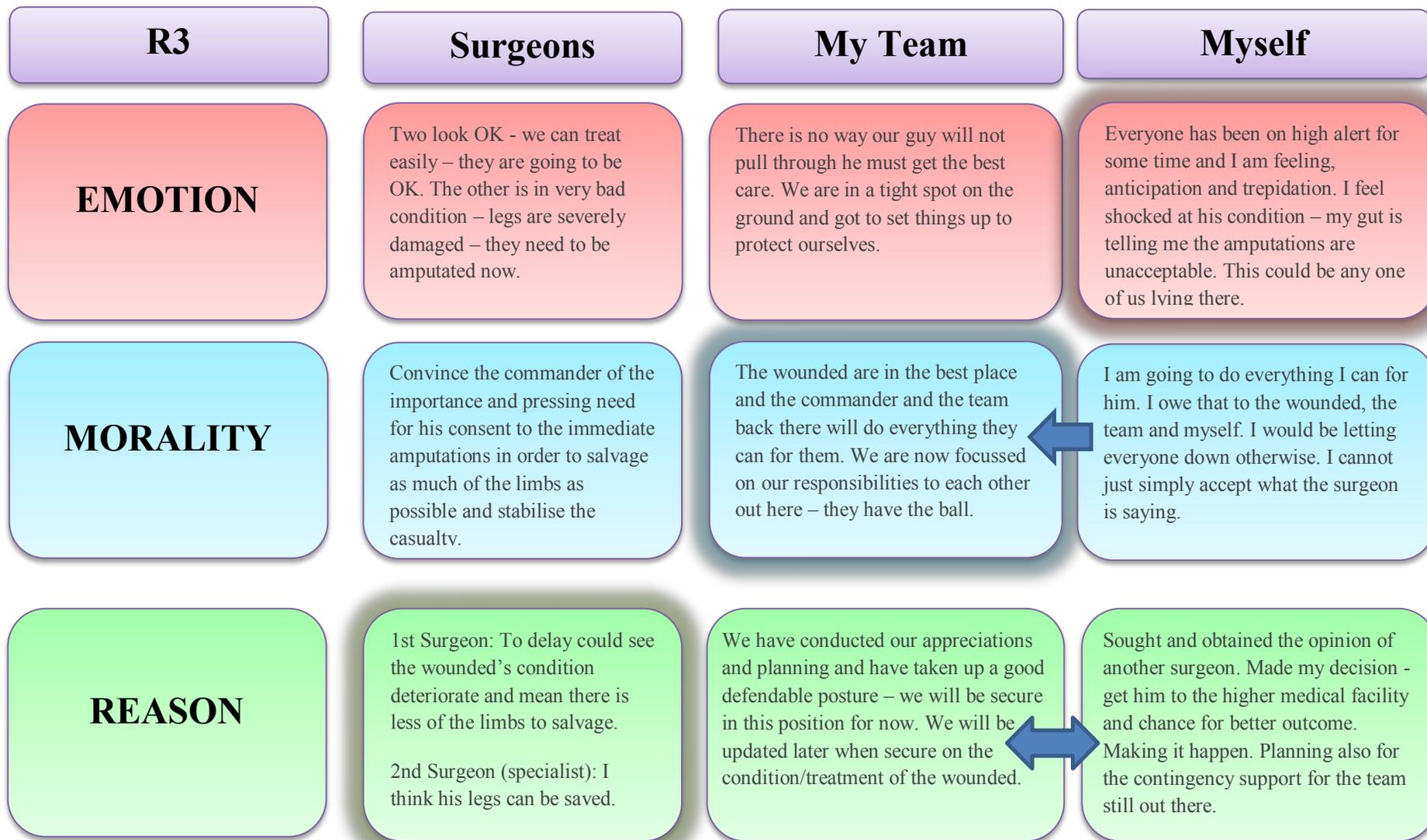


Figure 3: R3 Grid: During the Decisive Moment

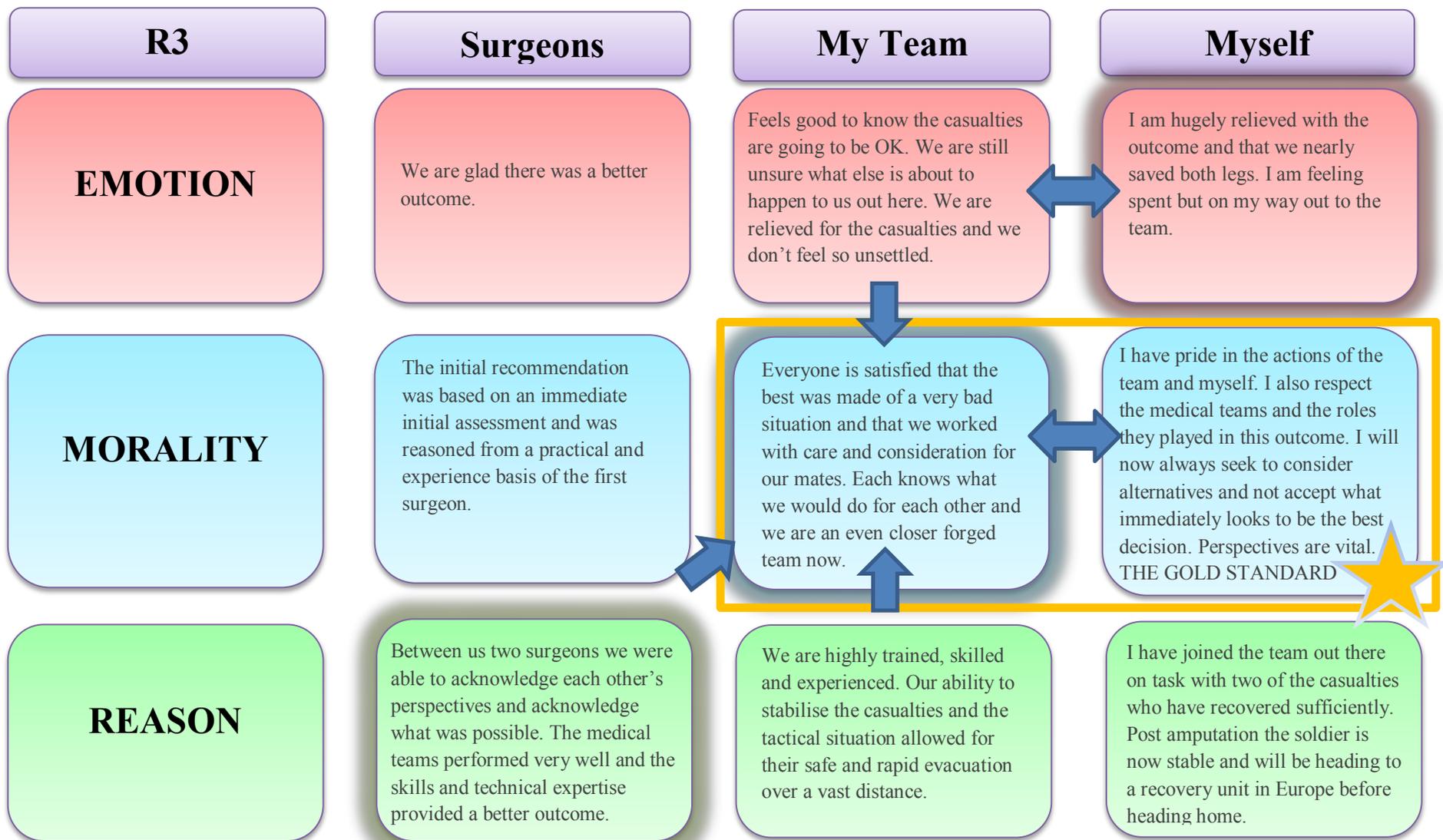


Figure 4: R3 Grid: After the Decisive Moment

*“.....It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.”*

William Ernest Henley - 'Invictus' 4th and final stanza

Takeaway points and reflection

My **emotions** initially led me before I sought to use my **PFC and direct my thoughts from the top-down** (Lehrer,2013,p114). I was now getting into a state of “deliberate calm” (Lehrer,2013,p125) with the PFC able to make use of my working memory where I could **make sense of “the information streaming in from the other cortical areas”** (Lehrer,2013,p127). I was making “creative associations” such as **knowing** from somewhere that there was an orthopaedic specialist on base and that there was an aircraft preparing for flight which we could hear in the background (Lehrer,2013,p127). The “restructuring phase” followed where relevant **information** was being mixed together in new ways (Lehrer,2013,p127). My PFC was able to pick up on new insights and realise the answer I was looking for (Lehrer,2013,p128).

With the conscious brain only able to deal with about seven pieces of information my PFC was feeling overwhelmed (Lehrer,2013,p147). Given that working memory and rationality share the same “cortical source” which is the PFC, trying to track lots of information was making me less able to exert control over my impulses and this was the perceptual narrowing I initially experienced (Lehrer,2013,p148).

I had been presented what **felt** like an ethical dilemma - stabilise him and look to manage double amputations below the knee - or seek an alternative; **my unconscious had instantly and automatically generated an emotional reaction to that proposal**, my brain had made up its mind and **I knew what was right** (Lehrer,2013,p167). Now that my **emotions** had made the **moral decision** I then started to “**activate those rational circuits” in my PFC** (Lehrer,2013,p167).

I liken the decision I was asked to make initially being similar to pushing the fat man off the bridge; it was a **personal moral dilemma** (Lehrer,2013,p171). The decision then became an **impersonal moral dilemma** as it now would rest with the second surgeon and the team at the higher medical facility as to whether the legs could be saved or not (Lehrer,2013,p171). **I felt sympathy** for the soldier and **knew how bad it was** for him and **how he would feel** about the situation he was in and I now **understand** this as “**fellow feeling**” (Lehrer,2013,p176). This **sympathy** created a drive to seek **fairness** for him and it **felt good** pursuing a better outcome (Lehrer,2013,p176). I related to him through **feeling** not **thinking** as my mirror neurons allowed me relate to him through what I was experiencing by being there with him (Lehrer,2013,p178).

Through personal examination and reflection I now think my decision making could improve by conscious application of these five key conclusions:

1. *Simple problems require reason*, as anything more than four variables can overwhelm the **rational brain** (Lehrer,2013,p233). It's **good to exercise our reason** to check our **feelings** however I did not **know** this and thought my **emotions** could be letting me down as I could not explain them.
2. *Novel problems also require reason*, as we need our working memory to tackle a real dilemma if it really is unprecedented (Lehrer,2013,p235). I need to develop awareness that this is what is actually happening as it would have helped **knowing** I was doing the right thing at the time.
3. *Embrace uncertainty* and extend my process of decision making (Lehrer,2013,p235). I will do this deliberately now as there are two things to aid me; firstly to always allow competing ideas, and secondly always remind myself the things I don't **know** (Lehrer,2013,p236). Using this quote by Colin Powell I can apply this to my thoughts; "Tell me what you know. Then tell me what you don't know, and only then can you tell me what you think. Always keep those three separated" (Lehrer,2013,p236).
4. *You know more than you know*, as we are blind to **knowing what happens outside the PFC** (Lehrer,2013,p237). It's our **emotions** that give us a clue as to what's going on giving us a "**visceral representation**" of the processes we can't see (Lehrer,2013,p237). I know now that a **bad experience** is a **good teacher** as it's **feelings and** not our **PFC** that "captures the wisdom of experience" (Lehrer,2013,p237).
5. *Think about thinking*, as matching the best thought process to the decision can be a deliberate choice I can make (Lehrer,2013,p238). Do I go with **emotion** or **reason**? It depends and I have a better understanding if I understand how I make decisions and "listen to the **intense** argument" going on in my head (Lehrer,2013,p238).

We continued on operations another four months before coming home at the end of the campaign season and over six months on operations. We would have some respite and be back within another 18 months. This decisive moment was an experience that improved us all and added to the resilience we had developed in our training – we had other moments as well.

I have come to realise at the end of this reflective experience that my decisive moment was a real test and one which I passed. It has allowed me to better appreciate the **why?** **what?** and **how?** of my decision making and the processes at work within my mind as I seek to be as William Henley's poem *Invictus* ends - "the Captain of my soul."

References

- de Bono, E. (1999). *Six Thinking Hats*. Auckland, New Zealand, Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd.
- Lehrer, J. (2013) The Decisive Moment, *How the brain makes up its mind*. Reproduced with permission by Victoria University of Wellington. MMBA508 Coursebook, Trimester 1, 2015.
- Sheffield, J. (2005) Systemic Knowledge and the V-model. *International Journal of Business Information Systems*, vol., 1-2, p. 83-101.
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