

Decision Quality

The Fundamentals of Making Good Decisions



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Our Decisions Shape Our Lives

Decisions: Inspiration from Poets, Philosophers, and Others

*You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any
direction you choose.
You're on your own.
And you know what you know.
And YOU are the one who'll
decide where to go....*

–Dr. Seuss

*"Life is a matter of choices,
and every choice you make
makes you."*

–John C. Maxwell

*Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I—I took the one less
traveled by, And that has made
all the difference.*

–Robert Frost

*A quality decision is one that
makes sense and feels right!*

--DEF

Choosing “Decision” and “scissors” have the same root. By making a decision, we choose to cut off one alternative future to pursue another. Our decisions shape our lives. The purpose of making good—quality—decisions is to get more of what we truly want out of life. This booklet provides a foundation for understanding and teaching quality decision-making. Many decisions are easy and can be made quickly, whereas others are both important and difficult. The ideas and methods presented here apply to any decision, simple or complex. They are drawn from an extensive body of theory and practice from multiple disciplines including decision theory, psychology, group dynamics, mathematics, economics, and probability.

Head and Heart Guide Quality Decisions In making decisions, we need to rely on both the head and the heart. Quality decisions make sense and feel right. Yet we must be aware that we all tend to solve problems from our comfort zone and tend to emphasize either our head or heart. Further, we have different personal styles in how we approach decision-making—for example, methodological versus intuitive. Also impeding our decision-making capability are our biases, which affect how we filter and interpret information and prompt us to bolster our beliefs by seeking information that confirms our way of thinking. Understanding our preferences and biases helps us leverage our natural strengths and anticipate where we might want to work harder or seek help.

A Process to Reconcile Head and Heart This booklet explains the importance of declaring a conscious choice in making a decision, of using the six elements of decision quality (DQ) to structure decision-making, and of iterating through a proven decision-making process to reach a quality decision. In addition, we present tips for knowing ourselves better so we can counteract our biases.



Declaring a Decision

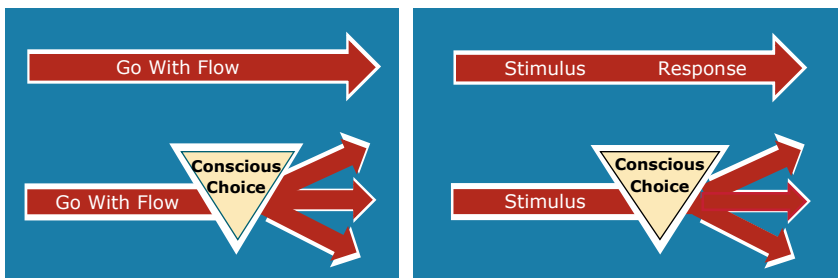
Stop to Consider: Claiming Decision Power

Ceding Power to Others

We can't make a decision unless we recognize and seize the opportunity to do so. "Declaring" a decision is consciously creating the space for a choice—driving a wedge between stimulus and response.

Consider the case of Bernard, a 16-year-old youth in juvenile hall. When asked how he got there, he replied, "So, I'm driving along and this guy pulls up next to me and looks at me funny. So, I pull over, he pulls over, and I beat him down. I drive off, he calls the cops, the cops arrest me, and now I'm here." Asked what he thought about the decisions in his situation, Bernard paused and then replied, "Well, the guy decided to look at me funny. He decided to call the cops. The cops decided to arrest me. So, I don't like decisions—they put me here!"

Who has the power in Bernard's life?



Creating the Space for Choice

An obstacle limiting success in life is not fully recognizing the freedom we have. Like Bernard, we may find it easy to blame things on fate and fail to take control of our life. Yet decision power is ours to claim.

Most of the time, we don't reflect much on our lives but just "go with the flow." It's only when something has broken down, or when we face a life-changing decision, that we consider making a conscious choice: How to deal with being arrested ... What to do about a bad grade ... Where to go to college ... Whether to join a gang ... How to pursue a job opportunity ...

In such cases, we must recognize that we do have a choice, that it's worthwhile to reflect on that choice with head and heart. We must declare our decision.

HOW TO DECLARE A DECISION

Recognize

- You can shape your life by being alert for decision opportunities.
- You have a choice: Is this a decision worthy of reflection?
- "Going with the flow" is making a decision, too. If things you value are at stake, take control.

Ask Your Head

- Is this the right time and place to make this decision?
- How different will my decision be if I follow the crowd?

Ask Your Heart

- What am I worried about? What am I afraid of? Where do I feel out of control?
- Will I still be accepted by my social group (family, peers, classmates) if I question where the herd is heading, or will I be viewed as a leader?

TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Set goals and identify decisions to achieve them.
- Role-play: Compare "going with the flow" with declaring a decision
- Picture yourself in 2 years. How could you change this picture?
- Look back. What decisions should you have declared?

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Lack of decision fitness—lack of the capacity to make a good decision (e.g., angry, drunk, broken hearted)
- Fatalism—no matter what we think or do, the future will turn out the way it will
- Reacting to situations without thinking
- Avoiding conscious choice because of fear of failure, criticism, ambiguity, lack of resources, loss of face
- Reacting unconsciously out of guilt, hate, shame, revenge, or love
- Letting others decide for us

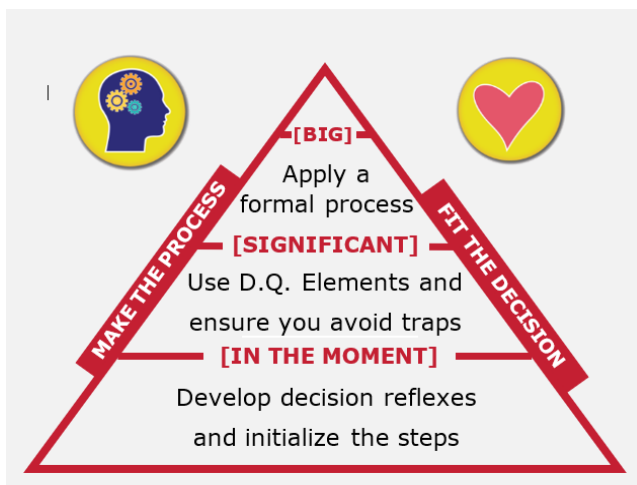


Distinguishing Types of Decisions

Understand the Decision Problem Before Plunging In

Three Types of Decisions

Because decisions come in many forms and sizes, it is helpful to categorize them into three types: (1) big, life- shaping decisions, (2) significant decisions to consider seriously; and (3) in-the-moment decisions that seem inconsequential or require an immediate response.



1. Big Life-Shaping Decisions. For youth, big decisions might be what career to pursue, whether to take a year off before college, or how to change study habits.

2. Significant Decisions Significant decisions might be selecting a summer internship, deciding among extracurricular activities, or considering whether to continue or end a relationship.

3. In-the-Moment Decisions In-the-moment decisions range from benign—what to order at a restaurant—to the possibly life-changing—whether to be a passenger in a car with a friend who has been drinking.

Process That Accommodates All Three Types

When we declare a decision to be big (life-shaping), we need to take the time and effort to iterate through the decision process. This approach is also effective for significant decisions and may be accomplished with fewer iterations. In-the-moment decisions are different because we don't or can't take the time to consider them carefully. When driving a car or playing a sport, we must rely on automatic responses and make judgments instantly. The decision amounts to a reflex or a habit that can be well honed—a product of good decision habits. Yet small, in- the-moment decisions may, over time, prove to have a greater influence on our lives than significant ones. Thus, it is important to develop good decision habits so that we become decision fit.

HOW TO DISTINGUISH TYPES OF DECISIONS

Ask yourself

- What kind of decision is this?
- How great is the commitment and what is at stake?
- Can it be easily reversed or not?
- How much time do I have to make it?
- Should I escalate the decision to a higher level?

TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Size up what kind of decisions you face.
- When in doubt, ask others.
- Use the version of the decision-making approach that fits the decision type.
- Practice good decision behavior until becomes a habit. Not taking the time to stop and think

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Shooting from the hip when facing life-shaping or significant decisions
- Escalating every decision into a life-shaping decision
- Getting bogged down on insignificant decisions
- Considering all in-the-moment decisions as unimportant—they may be the decision habits that shape your life

Defining Decision Quality

Whether a Decision Is Good or Bad Depends on
How We Make It, Not on the Outcome

The Distinction Between a Good Decision and a Good Outcome

The distinction between a good decision and a good outcome is very important. When we face uncertainty, we can make a good decision and yet get a bad outcome. For example, we can choose to apply for a job we really want but not get it. This does not mean we shouldn't have gone after it. If another appealing job opportunity came again, we would apply again. Similarly, we can make a bad decision and have a good outcome. Suppose we didn't buy car insurance for a year, but we didn't get ticketed and didn't get in an accident. We were fortunate: we made a poor decision and got away with it.

Good decisions do not guarantee good outcomes, but—on average—consistently better decisions lead to consistently better outcomes.

DEFINING DECISION QUALITY

- Distinguish between good decisions and good outcomes.
- Remember that quality decisions make sense and feel right.
- Use the DQ chain.
- Make each link in the DQ chain as strong as it can be, not necessarily perfect.

TOOL TO USE: THE DQ CHAIN

For each link, ask:

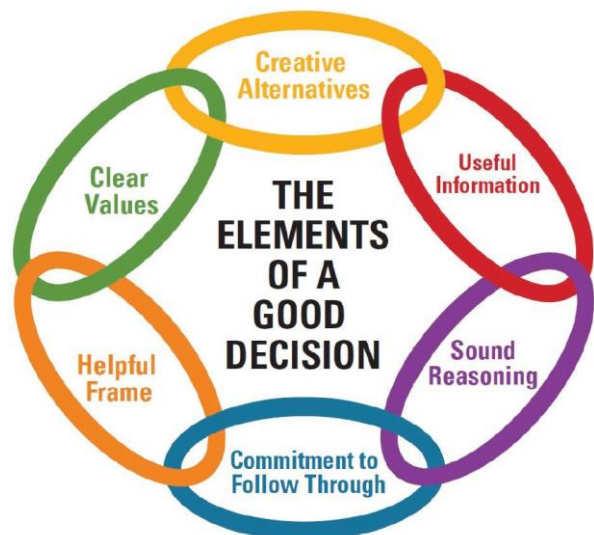
- What makes sense?
- Which link is the weakest?
- What feels right?
- How does it affect me?
- How does it affect others I care about?
- To separate alternatives, information, and values ask
 - What can I do?
 - What should I know but cannot change?
 - What do I want?

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Omitting one of the quality decision links
- Focusing on the decision links that are most comfortable
- Thinking of 100% as perfection
- Confusing alternatives and information

The Six Elements of Decision Quality

Once we have declared a decision, to be sure that we reach a quality decision, we need to get six elements right. We represent these elements as links in a chain because a decision is only as strong as the weakest link. If each element is strong, the decision is of high quality. If an element is seriously weak, the decision is no better than this element. Each link should be considered from both head and heart perspectives because the decision should make sense and feel right. Every one of the six elements is necessary to reach a quality decision: helpful frame, creative alternatives, useful information, sound reasoning, commitment to follow through, and clear values. Thus, we can use the chain as a checklist in gauging the quality of a decision as we make it. The next six pages explain what to consider in addressing each DQ element.

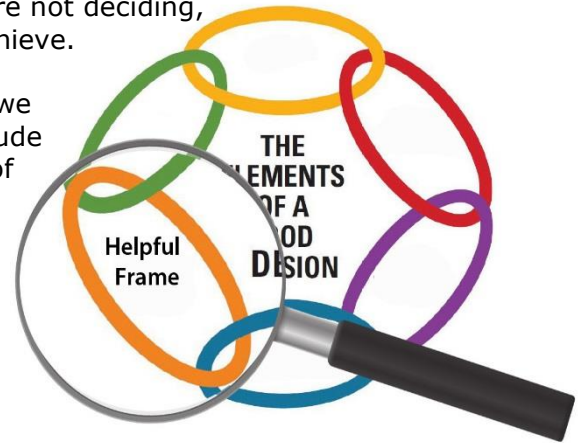


Helpful Frame: Zoom in on the Decision

Framing is clarifying the decision we're tackling. To properly frame a decision, we need to define what it is that we are deciding, what we are not deciding, what we should take as given, and what goals we wish to achieve.

A decision frame has three components: (1) Purpose—what we hope to accomplish by this decision; (2) Scope—what to include and exclude in the decision; and (3) Perspective—our point of view about this decision, consideration of other ways to approach it, how others might approach it.

Framing is like taking a picture with a zoom camera. What we include inside the picture is the scope. From where we take the picture to get the right lighting and angle is our perspective. And what kind of picture we want—for example, an action shot or portrait—is the purpose.



DEFINING DECISION QUALITY

To begin

- State the problem (what it is, what it is not, what the issues are).
- Determine whether this is part of a bigger decision that should be addressed now.
- Determine whether you may be covering too much ground.

Ask your head

- Why is the problem difficult to solve? What factors are involved?
- What are you taking as given?

Ask your heart

- Whose choice is it? Is the decision yours alone?
- Who needs to be involved to reach a decision that makes sense and feels right?
- What would keep you from acting if you saw the answer clearly?
- How would someone else you trust and admire frame this situation?

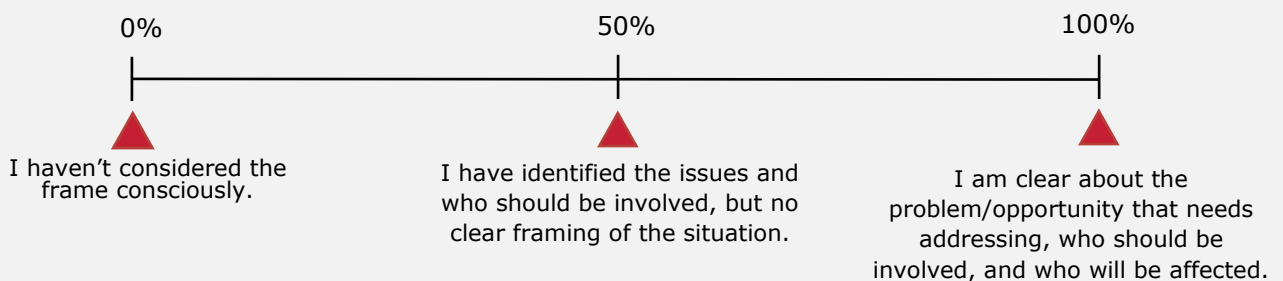
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Statement of vision, purpose, short- and long-term goals
- List of things taken as given
- List of head and heart issues
- Brainstorming
- Consult with others for important and/or life-shaping decisions
- Expanding and contracting the frame—try multiple frames before settling on one that's best

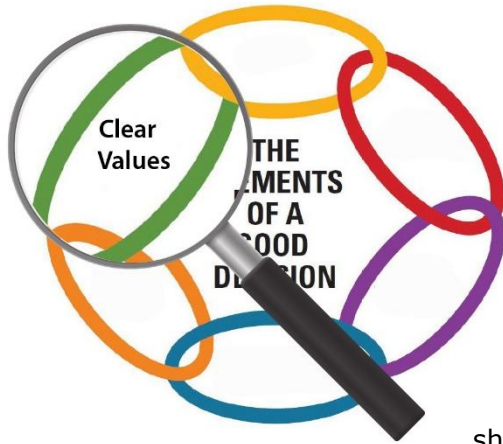
TRAPS TO AVOID

- Plunging in to make a decision without thinking about the frame
- Being limited by fears, peer pressure, etc.
- Framing the problem too narrowly to bring it into your comfort zone or too broadly to make it difficult to address
- Making wrong assumptions—taking things as given that aren't so

Where Am I Now?



Clear Values: What We Really Care About



Values are what we care about—wants, needs, likes, and dislikes. They cause us to prefer the consequences of one alternative decision over another.

Frequently, we find decisions difficult to make because none of the alternative actions can satisfy all our values. Such decisions involve trade-offs to define which value is more important in the instance. For example, in choosing a job, we might trade off salary with how much we like the position and how it contributes to the community. Or, in buying a used car, we might trade off saving money with paying for a warranty.

Too often, people make poor decisions by overemphasizing the short term (e.g., buy it now because it's cheap) and underemphasizing the long-term (e.g., too much credit card debt). Further, we may forget to consider a value that is really important, such as how our decision will affect those we care about. Another point to consider is that sometimes we don't really know what we truly want. Our values may be in transition. In that case, efforts to clarifying our values are crucial to making quality decisions.

HOW TO CLARIFY VALUES

Ask yourself

- What do I really want out of this decision?
- How much of one value am I willing to give up to get more of another value?
- How do my overall goals apply in this situation?

Ask your head

- Can I explain why the potential futures associated with each alternative are attractive or not?
- Can I explain how much of something I would give up to get more of something else?

Ask your heart

- Have I considered the potential impacts of my decisions on all those I care about?
- Are the values I am expressing consistent with my conscience?

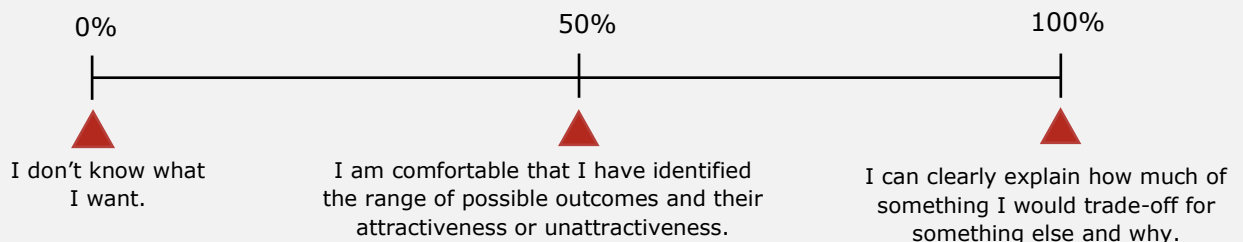
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- List of what I care about
- List of possible outcomes for each alternative
- List of what I want and dislike about each possible outcome
- Explanation of how much of the "wants" I would be willing to give up in order to reduce the "dislikes"

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Thinking in the short term
- Thinking only of yourself
- Being attached to sunk costs
- Overreacting to risks
- Ignoring risks

Where Am I Now?



Creative Alternatives: There's Usually a Better Way

An alternative is one of the possible courses of action available. Without alternatives, we have no decision. Good alternatives are (1) under our control, (2) significantly different, (3) potentially attractive, and (4) doable.

The quality of a decision is limited by the alternatives we consider—we can't choose an alternative we haven't thought of! Many people assume they have few or no alternatives. Yet there usually are many more alternatives than appear at first glance. Sometimes, we don't like the alternatives that are immediately apparent. In both cases, we need to talk to and brainstorm with friends whose experience and judgment we respect, or we need to make wish lists—anything to get our creativity stimulated so we can envision alternative ways to address our decision.



HOW TO GENERATE CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES

Ask yourself

- What are my alternative courses of action?
- Are any potentially good alternatives not on the list?
- What alternatives might others consider that I have missed?
- Who might help me create better alternatives?

Ask your head

- Are my alternatives logical (e.g., including not deciding now and revisiting the decision later)?

Ask your heart

- Do my alternatives consider others I care about?
- Do my alternatives seem to be a complete set?
- What other alternatives might I consider?
- What might someone I trust and admire do?

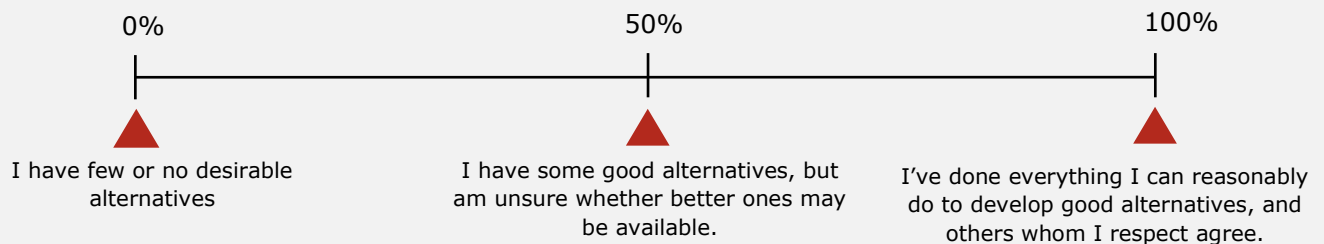
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Brainstorming
- Conversations with others
- Wish lists
- Creativity methods

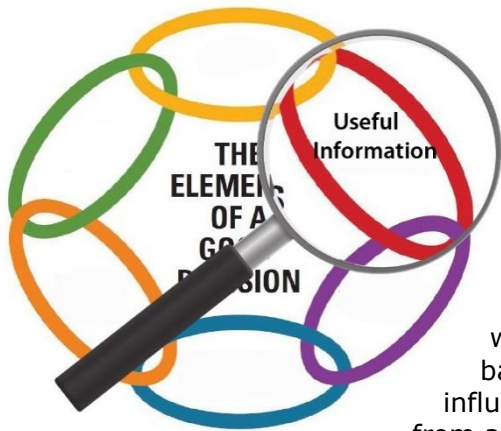
TRAPS TO AVOID

- Assuming no alternatives exist
- Getting bogged down—too many alternatives, too many minor variations
- Considering alternatives that are not doable
- Accepting unnecessary limits to alternatives
- Forgetting the “do nothing” alternative

Where Am I Now?



Useful Information: Possible Outcomes and Their Probabilities



Useful information is anything we know, would like to know, or should know that might influence our decision-making but that's not under our control. This includes factual information from the past and judgments about current or future situations that help us anticipate the consequences of acting on our alternatives. In choosing a car to buy, for example, we would want to know the recent sales price of other similar cars (factual information), whether the car has unknown problems (uncertain current situation), and what the resale value would be in 2 years (uncertain future situation). The information we base our decisions on should be useful in the sense that it could influence our choice of alternatives. Useful information should come from a credible and unbiased source, be timely, and acknowledge uncertainty. Information about uncertainty, such as the value of the car in 2 years, should recognize the upside and downside risks and their associated probabilities. Too many decisions are made based on wrong or incomplete information. Consciously considering information needs and gathering useful information before we act is essential to good decision-making.

HOW TO OBTAIN USEFUL INFORMATION

Ask yourself

- What do I wish I knew to make a better decision?
- How might I get it?
- Do I believe the information? Is the source biased?

Ask your head

- What are the potential outcomes of each course of action?
- How likely is each of the outcomes?
- Is it worth getting more information before deciding?

Ask your heart

- Who knows about this topic? Who could help me find out?
- What stops me from getting the information that I wish I had?

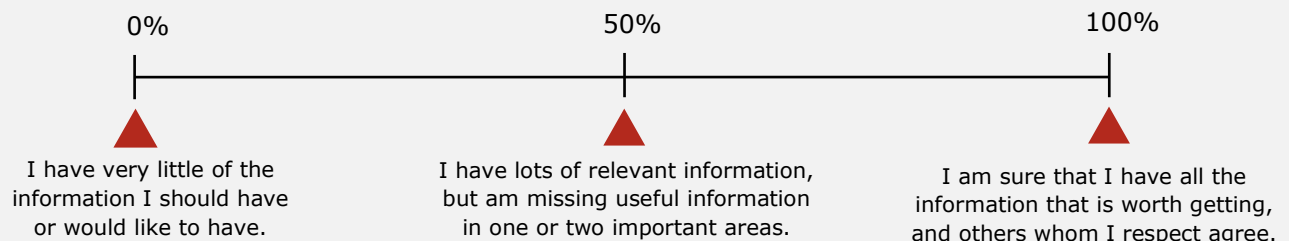
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Digging for information from good sources—e.g., libraries, newspapers, magazines, internet
- Finding out from people who know
- Networking to find good sources

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Laziness or reluctance to find out
- *"The things I know that ain't so"*
—Yogi Berra
- Wishful thinking
- Assuming the future will be just like the past
- Avoiding uncertainty
- Ignoring things that I don't understand
- Getting swamped with too much information

Where Am I Now?



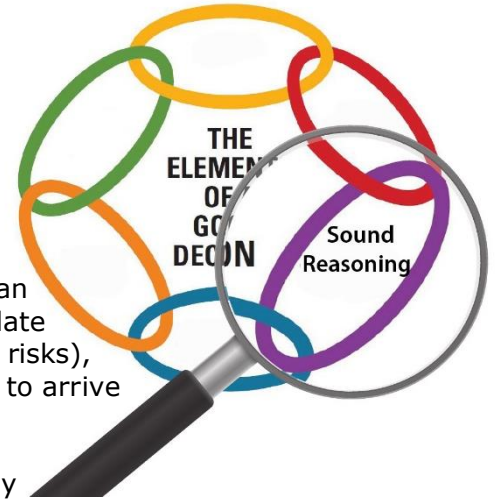
Sound Reasoning: Does It Make Sense?

Can I Explain the Rationale?

Reasoning is the process of combining alternatives, information, and values to arrive at a decision. It completes the sentence, "I am choosing this alternative because..."

Choosing an alternative for an important decision just because it feels right is not enough. Sound reasoning requires an explanation or rationale. For example, we can say we are choosing an alternative because it involves less risk and is better for people we care about than the other alternatives available. To back up this choice, we can articulate the alternatives considered, information taken into account (including risks), values and trade-offs considered, and method for combining all these to arrive at the chosen alternative.

Poor reasoning leads to poor decisions. For example, people frequently assume the upside is more likely and ignore the downside, e.g., "I'll never get into an accident. Therefore, I'll save money by not buying car insurance."



HOW TO ENSURE SOUND REASONING

Ask yourself

- What is my approach to comparing and selecting my best alternatives?
- Is my analysis and selection among the alternatives consistent with my information and values?
- How could I explain this choice to others?
- Should I drop any alternatives for ethical reasons?

Ask your head

- Why is this the best alternative?
- What would it take to switch to another alternative?
- Have I used probabilities to describe uncertainty?

Ask your heart

- Do people I trust, respect, and/or care about agree with my logic/rationale?
- Does the answer feel right? If not, why not?

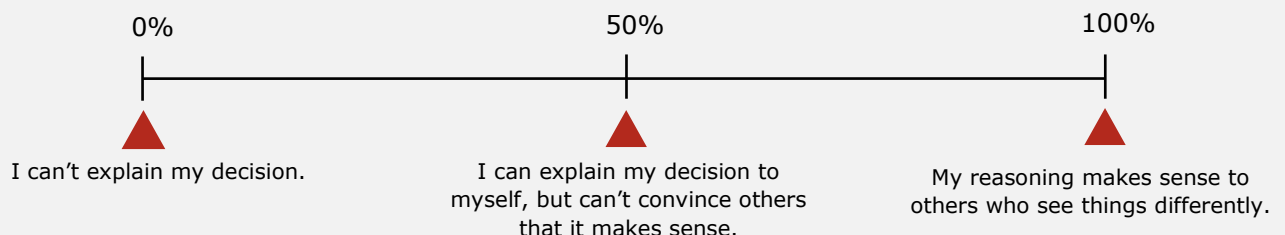
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- List of pros and cons for each alternative
- Decision and probability trees
- Influence diagrams
- Computer/spreadsheet models, simulation

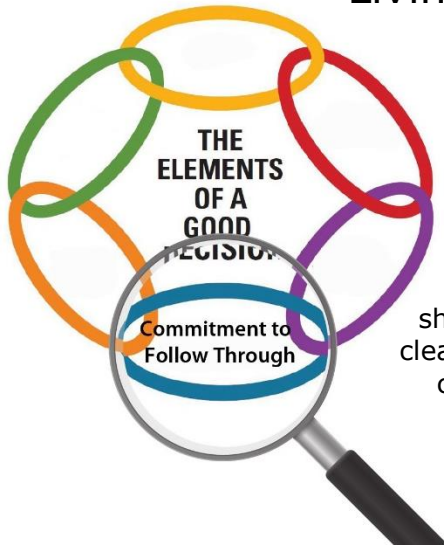
TRAPS TO AVOID

- Ignoring possibilities, "It won't happen to me"
- Assuming there's no uncertainty in potential outcomes
- Misinterpretation of factual information
- Ignoring information, alternatives, or values
- Relying on irrelevant information (e.g., sunk cost, regrets)
- Wishful thinking, "Because I want it, it will happen"
- Doing what I know how to do and ignoring something difficult but important
- Making logical errors
- Paralysis by analysis

Where Am I Now?



Commitment to Follow Through: Living Decisions Makes Them Real



Commitment to follow through means we are set to execute our decision and can do so purposefully. If we are only half-hearted about our commitment, our follow-through is usually less intense and may not achieve the best results.

Committing to follow-through is like pulling an internal switch—after the switch is on, we do whatever it takes to make our decision real. When we shift from considering a decision to being in the state of commitment, we are clear and can proceed without reservation, conscious of potential consequences.

Successful follow-through requires resources such as time, effort, money, or help from others. It also requires being prepared to overcome obstacles.

HOW TO COMMIT TO FOLLOW THROUGH

Ask yourself

- Am I ready to act?
- Will I do this?
- Do I have the necessary means to follow through?

Ask your head

- What could stop me from following through?
- Am I prepared for the consequences and for doing what it takes to carry through on the decision?

Ask your heart

- What fears do I have that prevent me from making my decision real?
- Have I accepted the potential consequences that go along with acting/choosing?
- Am I ready for the internal shift from considering the decision to the state of making it happen?
- Will others support or hinder me in executing

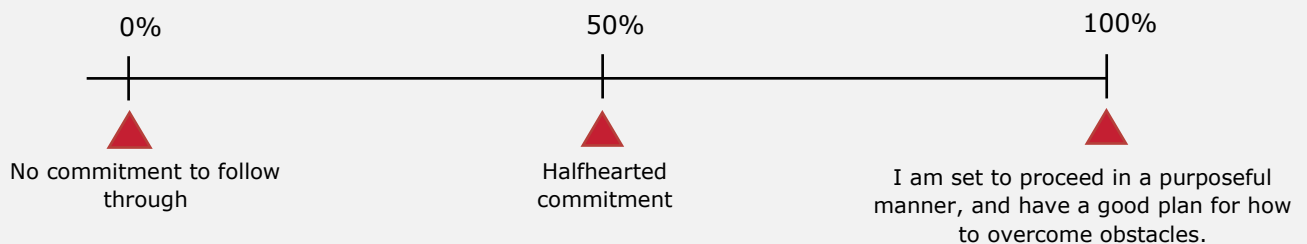
TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

- Quality decision process to create the right conditions for follow through
- Alignment with others whose help I need to achieve commitment
- Action or implementation plan
- Progress measurement (e.g., milestones)

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Making a “mental commitment,” but separately deciding not to really put forth the necessary effort to follow through
- Not dealing with obstacles that get in the way
- Procrastination
- Halfhearted commitment

Where Am I Now?



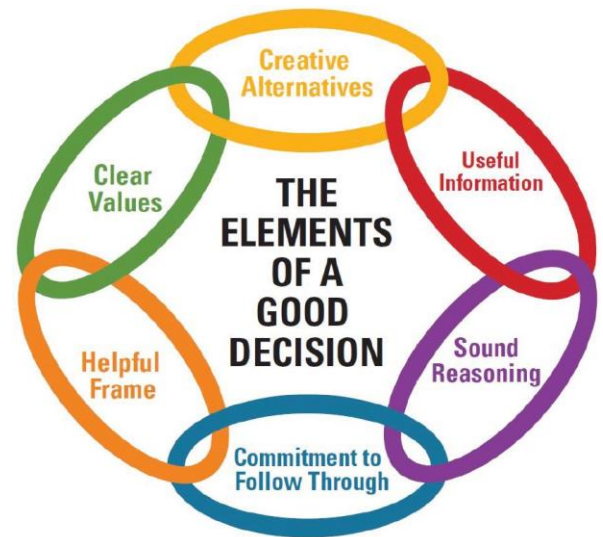
The Decision Quality (DQ) Checklist

How Good Is This Decision if I Were to Make It Now?

We can rate the quality of each of the six links of the DQ chain on a scale of 0 to 100%. One hundred percent is not perfection; it's the point where additional improvement isn't worth the effort or the cost of delay.

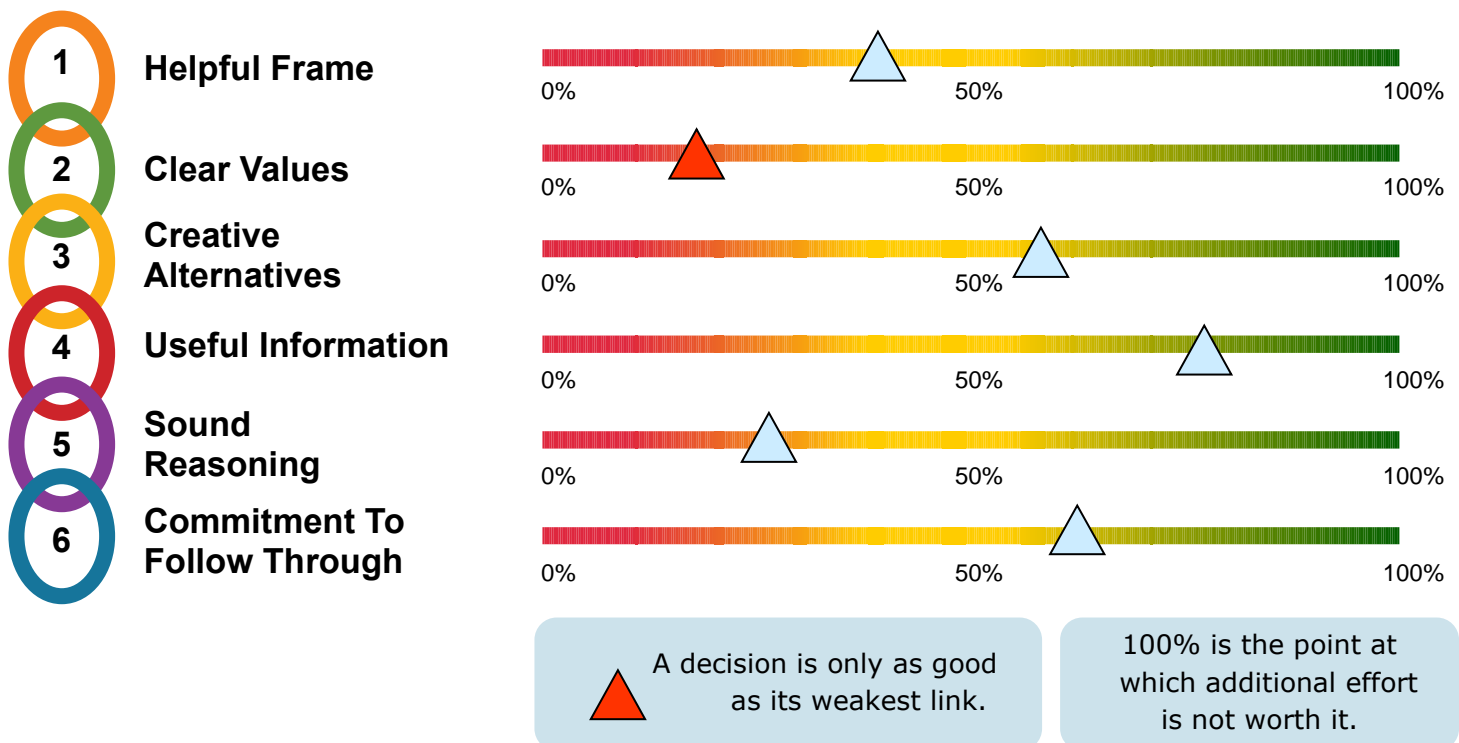
Because the weakest link determines the overall quality of the decision, going through the process of addressing the current state of each DQ element will help to identify where additional effort will be likely to improve the decision.

This checklist is useful for rating the state of our decisions. It helps us answer the following questions: Am I ready to make a good choice? If I made the decision now, how good would it be? What needs to be improved to make my decision a quality decision? It also keeps us from getting bogged down by not going beyond 100%.



Sample Decision Rating

As you proceed through the decision-making process, rate the quality of each DQ element as you address it. In this example, Clear Values needs the most work because it's the weakest link. Your goal is to bring the quality of each link up to 100% to get to a decision that makes sense and feels right.



The What and How of Quality Decisions

Our Purpose Is to Make a Quality Decision,
and a Good Process Helps Us Meet This Purpose

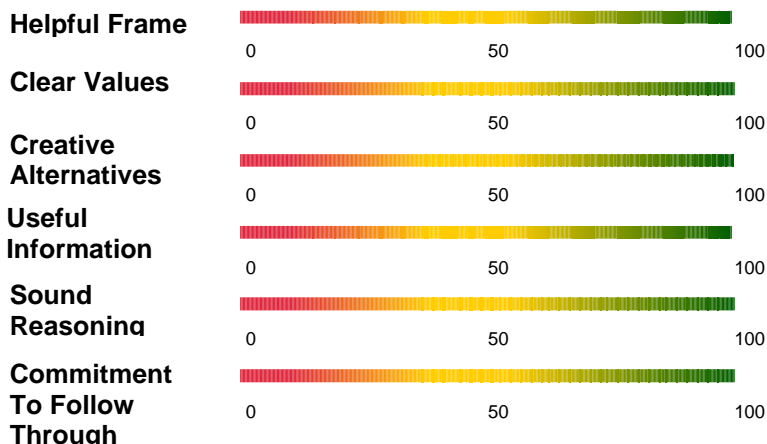
A good decision is like a good meal. We judge the quality mostly by the end product, but the ingredients and preparation have much to do with the quality of the meal.

We can judge the quality of a decision by the strength of the six DQ elements. The image of a chain with six links reminds us that the decision is no better than its weakest link. Using the chain as a checklist helps us see quickly which links need attention.

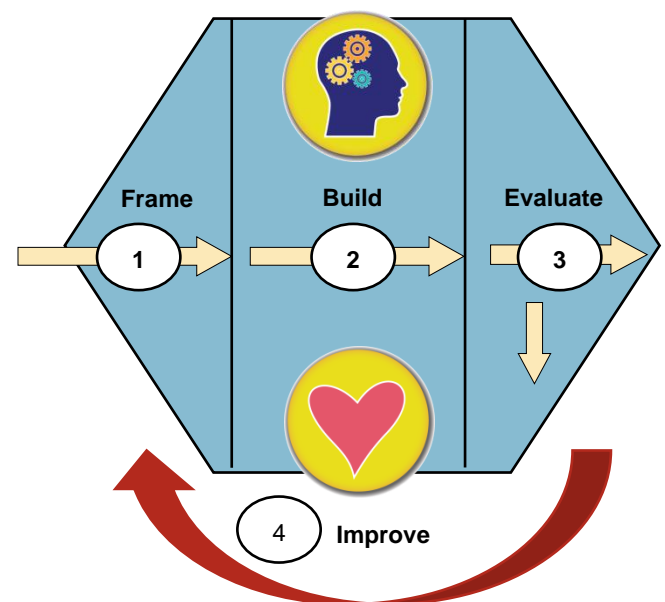
Having developed the “What” of a good decision by understanding the chain and its elements, we now turn to the process—the “How.”

The steps and effort we use to reach a decision make a difference in the quality of the decision. The purpose of our process is to reach 100% on the check list to be able to make a quality decision and arrive at that point without wasting a lot of effort and time.

In the following pages, we discuss the basic steps to reaching a quality decision: frame, build, evaluate, and improve.



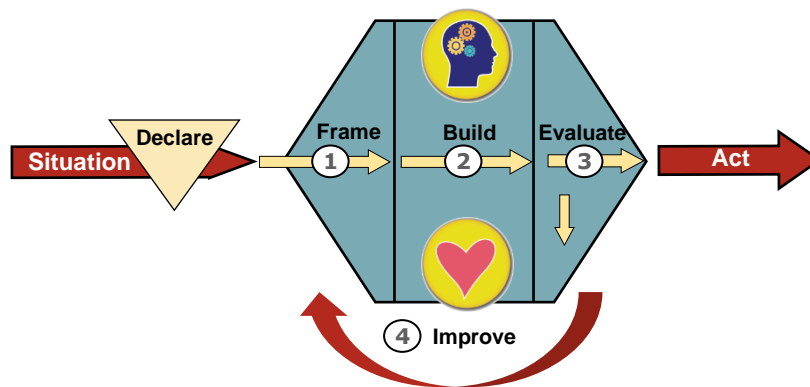
WHAT? Get to 100% in each of the six elements in a good decision. Don't forget 100% is not perfection -- it is the point at which additional effort is not worth it.



HOW? Getting to a good decision requires four steps.

Process for Making Quality Decisions

I Really Want to Get This Right



The way we go about making a decision may shape our ultimate choice, and our preferences and biases influence our decisions. However, a good decision process will help us to face whatever it is that is most important in reaching the best choice, even if it takes effort or feels uncomfortable.

With a good process, we can address the components of a decision in a sensible order and make a decision in a timely manner. Further, such a process helps us achieve the appropriate balance between considerations of head and heart, between searching for facts and creating possibilities, and between deciding too quickly and taking too long to decide.

To determine the best order for building the six elements of DQ, generally, start with frame because, if the frame is not right, the rest of the steps may be useless. The order of building information, values, and alternatives is not important. These elements interact—e.g., the information we need depends on the alternatives we consider. We arrive at DQ by cycling through the decision process until there's no more value to be gained in any part.

The sidebar presents a basic four-step process that is appropriate for most decisions made by individuals. At the end of the booklet, we also describe a process that has been shown to be very effective in generating alignment around a quality decision in a large or diverse group.

HOW TO COMMIT TO FOLLOW THROUGH

After declaring a decision, go through four steps.

1. **Frame:** Make sure to solve the right problem. Determine the purpose, scope, and perspective for the decision.
2. **Build:** Engage in working on the problem and improve the DQ links. Develop alternatives, get better information, and get clearer about what you really want.
3. **Evaluate:** Compare and evaluate the alternatives based on information and values—which is best for me and for those I care about? Before reaching closure, test the quality of your decision. Rate the decision on each element. Does the choice make sense and feel right?
4. **Improve:** Identify and fill gaps to bring the quality of your decision to 100%. Then proceed to committed action.

Balance the process between heart and mind.

- Consider the head and heart in each step.
- Get the facts and create possibilities.
- Don't skip the initial steps or get too bogged down.

TOOLS AND GOOD PRACTICE

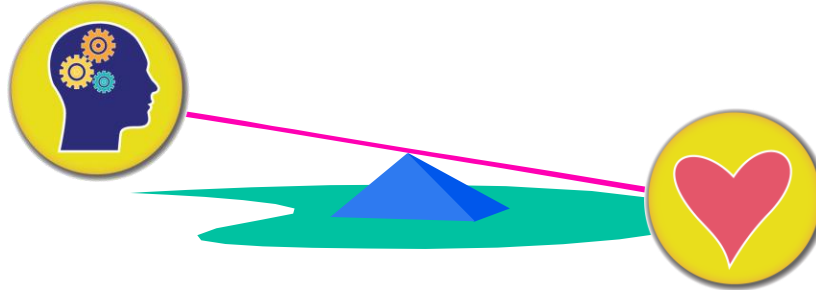
- The four-step process
- The DQ checklist
- The Decision Rating
- Know my personality type and which process parts I would emphasize or miss
- A coach

TRAPS TO AVOID

- Doing only what comes naturally—following our preferences or biases
- Viewing the problem from the perspective of only the heart or the head
- Doing it alone (without a coach, we are tempted to skip steps)

Balancing Head and Heart

Don't Use Just Head or Just Heart—Use Both



Decisions require both the head and the heart. Good choices result from a process of reasoning and caring. Good choices make sense and feel right.

We define and use “head” and “heart” in the decision context very broadly.

Using your head means searching for facts, making judgments about the likelihood of future events, understanding how one thing relates to another, and then reasoning your way through the whole situation to reach a sound conclusion. If you do all that, a decision makes sense.

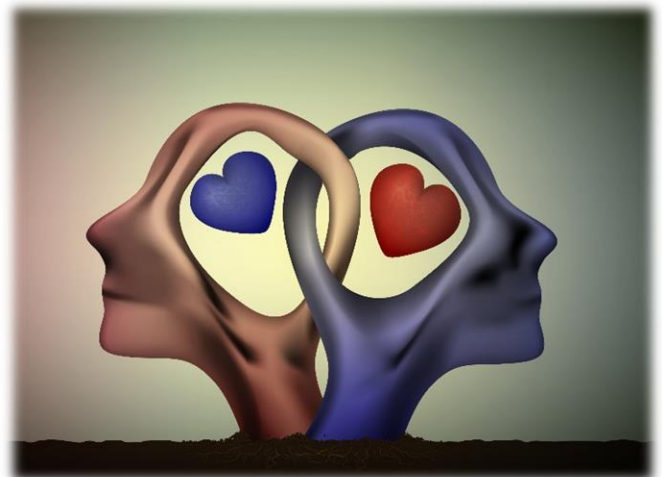
Using your heart means taking into account what you really care about, which often includes the effect on other people and retaining their respect and trust. It means listening to your emotions and intuition. If you have taken your heart into account in the appropriate way, a decision feels right.

Extensive research has shown that people tend to lead either from their head or their heart. Unless we make a conscious choice to achieve the appropriate balance, we tend to do what comes naturally and solve the problem from within our comfort zone.

Specific decisions require an appropriate balance of heart and head. If we think about it, the needed balance is usually clear.

By explicitly considering the true need for the right head-heart balance, we can reach out to others to help us and adjust our approach to do what is most important to reach a quality decision rather than pulling the problem into our comfort zone.

It is important to incorporate the right mix of head and heart when we declare a decision and even more so as we work on the DQ links. In the end, a quality decision balances head and heart.



Know Yourself

Know Your Preferences, Strengths, and Weaknesses

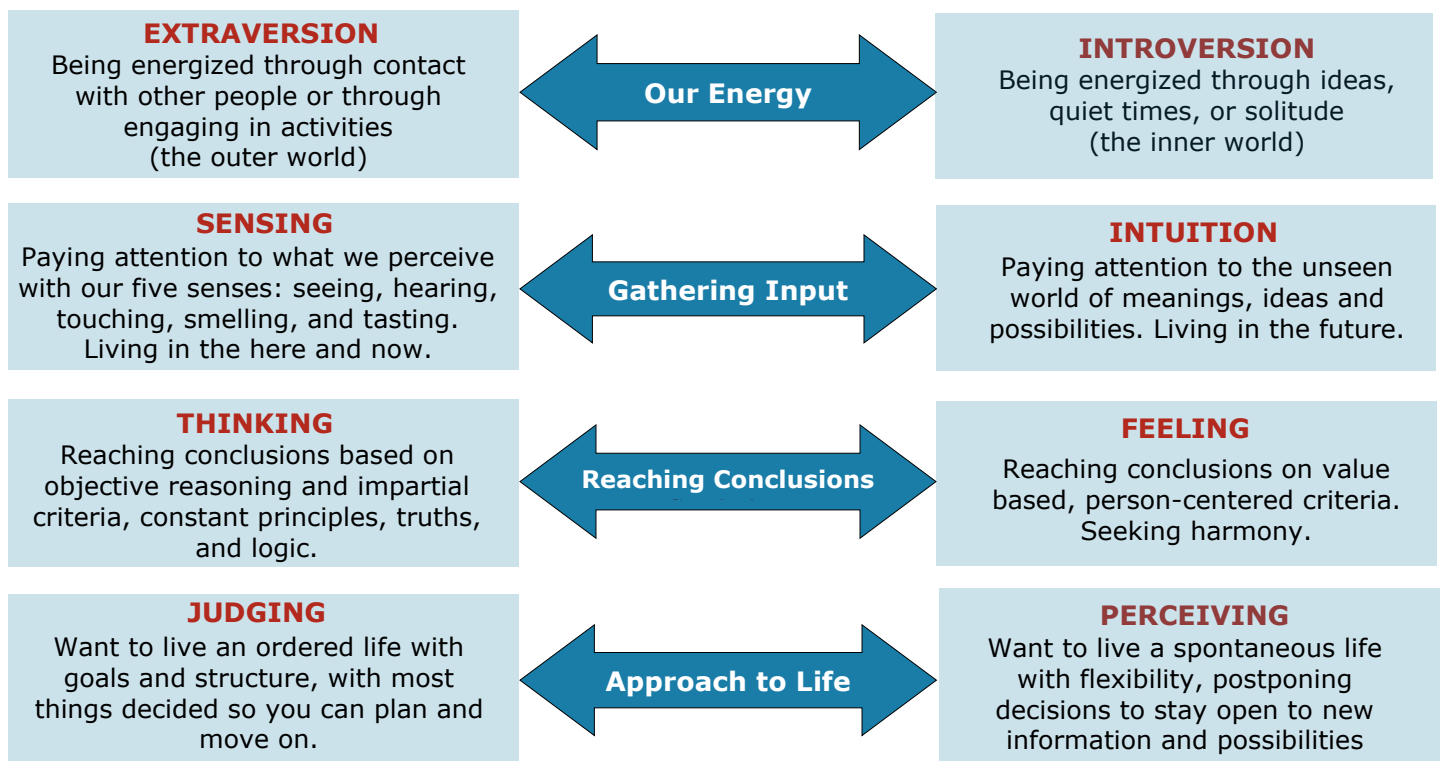
Being unique and doing what comes naturally to us rather than others, we solve problems with our personal habits—whether the specific problem fits our habits or not. We call that the “comfort zone” bias. We drag decisions into our comfort zone instead of considering the real needs of the decision situation. By knowing ourselves better, we can counteract that bias.

A popular approach to understanding personality differences and preferences is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®). MBTI® differentiates individual preferences along four dimensions that are relevant to our decision-making habits and styles. MBTI® is based on the observation that we all have a preference for one side or the other on each of the dimensions, just as most of us are either right-handed or left-handed. However, to make good decisions, we have to use both sides.

Understanding our own preferences helps us to leverage our natural strengths as well as anticipate where we might want to work harder or seek help.

For example, in seeking out information, those with a Sensing preference would generally seek out specific, factual information and would be skeptical of “pie-in-the-sky” possibilities that are uncertain. While this may or may not be right for the decision being addressed, the point is, unless we know ourselves, we can fall into such patterns whether they are appropriate or not. There is no best personal style or profile. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, depending on the task to be accomplished and the situation we are in.

The MBTI® describes personalities along four dimensions of preference.



Adapted from Using The MBTI® Tool in Organizations (3rd ed.) © Consulting Psychologists Press. MBTI® is a trademark of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Trust



Avoid Traps and Biases

Face It: We Are a Bunch of Quirks and Emotions

Biased Interpretations

We all have biases that affect how we filter and interpret information. Furthermore, we often bolster our beliefs by seeking additional information that confirms our way of thinking. The net effect of these biases is that we frame a particular issue without fully appreciating other possible perspectives and may be overconfident about our view.

Filtering	What we actually pay attention to is very much determined by what we expect to see. Psychologists call this selective perception. If something doesn't fit, we often distort reality to fit our viewpoint rather than challenge our assumptions.	Another important motivational bias is suppression, or the refusal to see reality for what it is. The extreme example is of an ostrich burying its head in the sand on seeing danger and hoping the threat will thereby disappear.
Distortion	Even if we let the new information penetrate our minds objectively, we are still susceptible to various biases of interpretation. Rationalization is interpreting evidence in a way that sustains a desired belief. We fall victim to this, for example, when trying to blame our own mistake on someone else or on external circumstances. Wishful thinking is a related motivational process in which we see the world in a pleasing or self-serving way.	Another common interpretation bias is egocentrism, the tendency to overemphasize our own role in the events we seek to explain. Some of this distortion makes us feel better, such as wishful thinking or being optimistic, and may enhance our mental health. But these distortions may also interfere in reaching the right decision and, as such, need to be kept in check at the moment of choice.
Bolstering	Not only do we filter the information we take in and then subject it to slanted interpretations, we may further bolster our case by searching for additional evidence to confirm our view. For example, we may disproportionately talk to people who agree with us or selectively seek new evidence that confirms our perspective—called confirmation bias—rather than pursuing a more balanced search strategy that includes disconfirming evidence.	Another important motivational bias is suppression, or the refusal to see reality for what it is. The extreme example is of an ostrich burying its head in the sand on seeing danger and hoping the threat will thereby disappear.

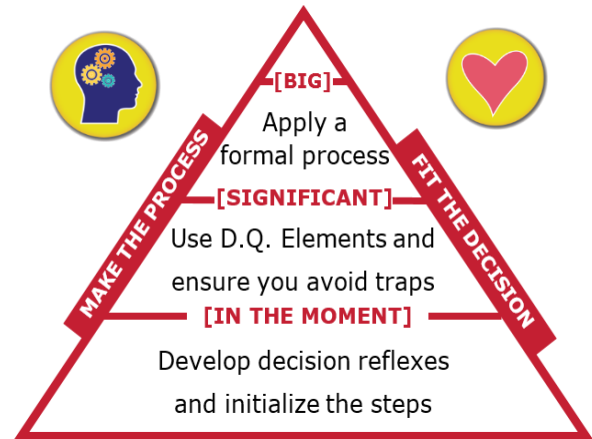
An important step toward **avoiding the many decision traps** that lurk in our cognitive and motivational biases is to recognize them and use tools to counter them when needed. It also helps to write out what you are thinking, the facts you observe, and how you are observing them. Then find someone with a different perspective, who can provide a different reading of what you consider the facts to be.



Become Decision Fit

Build Good Decision Habits

By applying the principles and process described here, we can reach DQ in a systematic manner. Although the approach is sound for all decisions, it is not practical for the many in-the-moment decisions where time is short. Some of these in-the-moment decisions can be life shaping—e.g., our response in emergencies or our choice to become a passenger with a driver that has been drinking alcohol. Also, the sum total of many small decisions, when taken together, may have a very big impact on our life.



How can we develop decision fitness, so that our decision reflexes will be on when needed?

Policies and Habits	Think ahead and decide what you would do in certain circumstances. You can develop a policy (a decision rule) that over time becomes an ingrained habit. For example, adopting the policy of not getting in a car when the driver has been drinking will help counter peer pressure.	In the moment, we may not have the time or the good judgment to consider the potential consequences of joining an unfit driver. Reaching clarity and a disciplined commitment ahead of time is a powerful way to develop good reflexes and enhance decision fitness.
Practice and Simulation	Gain experience through practice. For example, sports require many in-the-moment decision skills, and only those who practice diligently will acquire them. Another form of practice is simulation, like a pilot spending hours in a flight simulator to be ready for an engine failure.	Using decision games or role-plays—in which the participants encounter experiential learning opportunities—can help develop our decision skills to the point of their becoming automatic.
The Six Elements	Gain a deep understanding of and skill for making quality decisions so as to rapidly go through the six elements of DQ in the moment. This skill could have saved many lives in the Rhode Island nightclub fire, in which 100 people perished.	Four exits were available, and 90% of the occupants rushed to the familiar front exit. Just as a good baseball swing takes no more time than a bad one, we can learn how to make quality decisions the first time quickly.
Know When You Are Unfit	Sometimes, we are simply unfit to make decisions. We may be in a bad emotional state—angry, in shock, tired, or euphoric—or we may be under the influence of drugs.	We need to have enough presence of mind NOT to make decisions then and ask for help or postpone a decision. We can also be helpful to others when we recognize that they are unfit to make a decision.

Keep Learning

Keep Sharpening Those Decision Skills

Making a Quality Decision Involves Learning	<p>The decision process we recommend builds learning into making each specific decision: go through the decision—once quickly—not to decide, but to identify what you may be</p>	<p>missing in the six links. Then, before you really decide, use that learning to improve the weakest elements in the decision.</p>
Learning From Outcomes	<p>We all remember times when we made poor choices and didn't follow quality decision-making principles. Reflecting on the outcomes of our decisions is a powerful way to continue to improve our decision skills. There is truth in the statement, "There is no decision failure except the failure to learn."</p> <p>Because decisions are about the future and the future is uncertain, learning from outcomes takes special effort. The connection between our actions and outcomes is often obscured because of uncertainty, delayed feedback, and actions we take after a decision to improve the outcome. We can make a quality decision and have a bad outcome. We can make a bad decision and have a good outcome. We have to be careful not to draw the wrong conclusions.</p>	<p>We keep asking, in retrospect, did I miss something that I want to take into account in future decisions? Did I take a risk maybe I shouldn't have? If I were in a similar situation again, would I like to proceed differently?</p> <p>Learning from outcomes requires a disciplined analysis of what happened and why. Of course, we don't need to learn only from our own mistakes or successes. We can observe others, or we can practice in safe environments. Sports coaches have learned to: (1) make careful observations (how often is your first serve off in tennis); (2) introduce just one change at time (change your stance slightly); (3) observe your play in slow motion (via video); and (4) develop a mental model of how to do things better.</p>
Becoming a Better Learner Is a Continuing Challenge	<p>Biases lead to developing greater confidence or stronger convictions than we should rightly hold. Look around, and we see ample evidence of strong views—often built on sparse evidence—in politics, in parenting, in cliques. Looking carefully and with an open mind, we find such prejudices in ourselves. We are further prone to vigorously defend our views, especially in debating situations. Such defensive posturing makes it even harder to change our mind when the evidence suggests that we should.</p> <p>If we really wish to learn and grow, we have to make a special effort to overcome our natural tendencies and remain open to learning. We call that being in a learning frame, and it is a mindset we can practice. We can check in on ourselves and ask, "Am I in a learning frame or defending my position?"</p>	<p>We can develop the habit of asking open questions to understand others' perspectives—"Why would you conclude this?" or "What is your rationale for that?" or "Do you have evidence for that?"—rather than defending our position. We can make learning a decision objective. When deciding where to go for dinner, we might rank options based on price, food quality, ambiance, or travel distance. But we could also add another attribute, "learning something new," which may change our ranking from the same old places to choices that we would not have considered. So, ask for every decision—either routine or big—is there a learning opportunity here? And, if the answer is yes, consider including it as part of your evaluation criteria as well as your options.</p>

Decision Roles

How We Work Together Makes a Difference

Frequently, we reach a decision with input from peers or knowledgeable people. For many decisions to have positive outcomes, we may need to gain approval or achieve consensus with others. For example, a high school youth may be considering whether to spend a year as an exchange student. This decision requires the involvement of many—in particular, parents—for their agreement and support.

Decision roles change as we grow up. A good parent makes most of the important decisions for a 3-year-old. A young adult of 20 should make most of his or her own decisions.

So, somewhere in between, the roles have to transition. The transitioning of decision roles is one of the most difficult adult-youth interactions.

Parents and youth can significantly improve these interactions by clearly defining their roles in making specific decisions. The same holds true for interactions between youth and other people of authority—like teachers. Any of the roles outlined on this page may be appropriate, depending on the decision at hand.

DICTATORIAL & PERMISSIVE ROLES

Two extreme roles are the **dictatorial** and the **permissive**. In the dictatorial mode, the parent declares, “You must do what I say.” In the permissive mode, the parent says, “You may do *whatever you want*.” If you have seen the movies *Dead Poet Society* or *Thirteen*, you know that the extremes do not work well and neither role teaches anything about how to make a decision.

PARTICIPATIVE ROLES

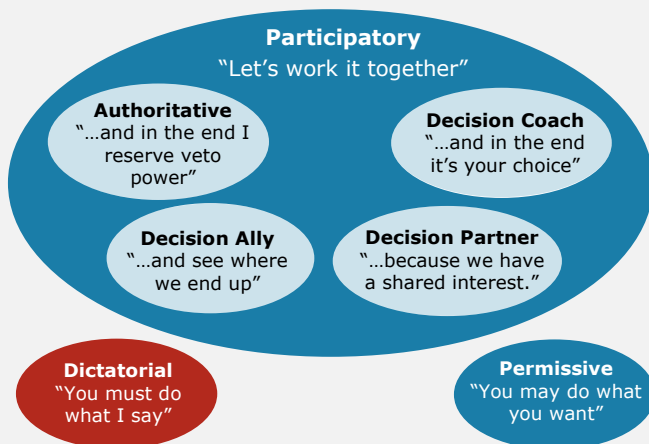
A more involved and participative decision process creates a better relationship and brings learning opportunities about the decision at hand **and about how to make a decision**. We distinguish at least three **participative** roles:

Authoritative: The parent (or other adult) engages in a joint decision-making process with the youth but reserves final veto power.

Partner: The parent engages in a joint decision-making process with the youth, with the intention of reaching a consensus.

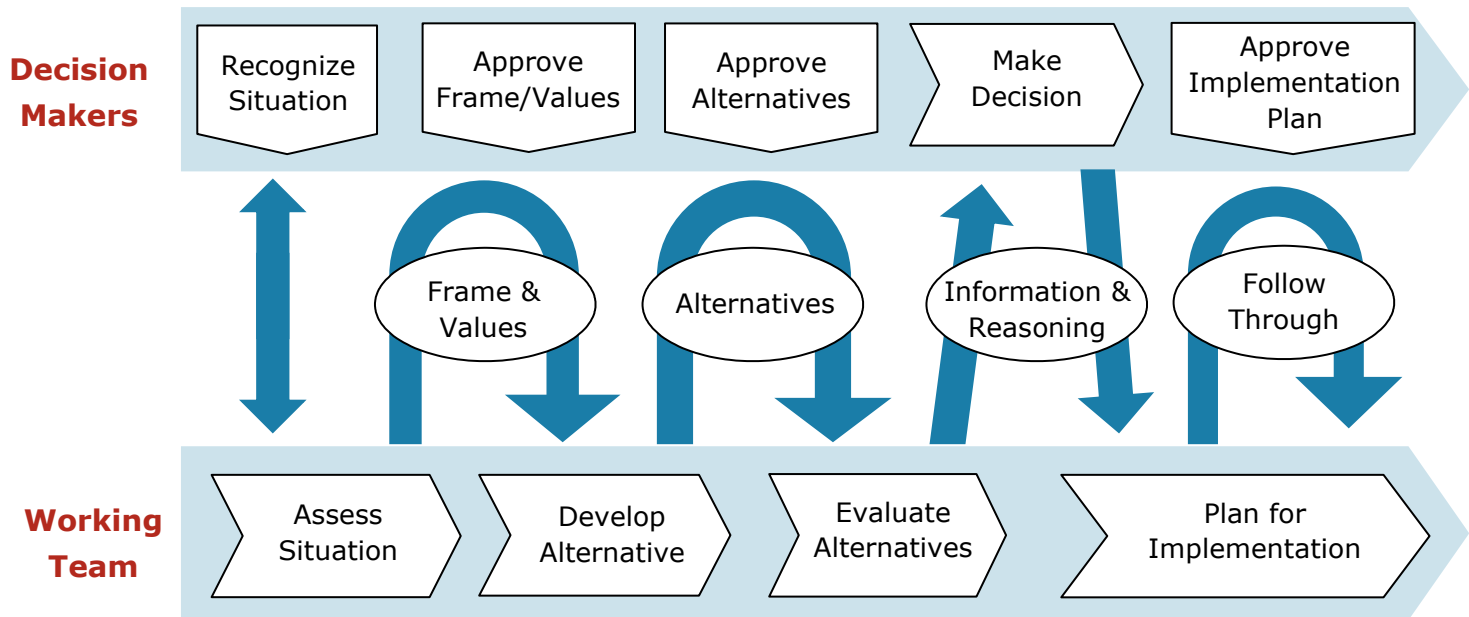
Coach: The parent helps the youth make a quality choice. In the end, it is the youth’s decision to make. Once a decision is declared, the parent/adult and youth can decide jointly (or negotiate) the appropriate roles. Different roles are needed for different decisions and at different times.

Consciously define appropriate decision roles to empower youth and improve their decision skills.



Decision Process for Groups

How We Work Together Makes a Difference



The actual situation dictates the appropriate number of interactions.

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Effective decision-making flows from a clearly defined process that involves the right people in the right ways to reach a quality decision. The figure above illustrates a process that moves decision-makers toward a quality decision through a dialog with a decision team on specific staged deliverables. This process is applied to gain decision alignment among groups and can be effective for parents and youth or student leadership and school administration.

Participants in decision-making may be serving in three distinct roles: decision-maker, decision staff, or content expert/implementer.

DECISION-MAKERS: These individuals or decision-making bodies are responsible for making the decision and allocating the resources needed to pursue the chosen course. By definition, they have the responsibility for overall decision quality.

WORKING TEAM: These individuals enable decision-makers to make well-informed choices more efficiently. They assist in framing the situation, gathering information, generating alternatives, and analyzing the value of potential outcomes. They facilitate the process by achieving commitment to action from the decision-makers and by providing clear direction to those designated to implement the decision.

CONTENT EXPERTS AND IMPLEMENTERS: Content—or domain—experts provide valuable facts and judgments about the consequences of different alternatives. Involving implementers early in the process helps avoid barriers that arise when people must implement decisions made by others. Implementers' involvement and contributions usually translate to improved execution.

About the Decision Education Foundation

Better Decisions — Better Lives

Good decision-making is an essential life skill, but most people acquire it only through a process of trial and error—if at all. We equip people with powerful decision-making skills to help them better shape their futures in an uncertain world. In particular, our curriculum provides youth with the decision skills to take control of their fates and proactively map out their lives' paths. This curriculum is based on a proven approach to making quality decisions.

By educating people in decision-making and arming them with effective methods, we will enable them to tackle their decisions in a more enlightened and empowered manner. We pay special attention to youth at greatest risk from bad decision-making.

Today's youth are tomorrow's leaders. Clearer thinking about decision-making will yield profound benefits for us all.

The Decision Education Foundation is a not-for-profit organization. For more details, see www.decisioneducation.org.

About the Authors



Dr. Keelin serves on the Board and Executive Committee of the Decision Education Foundation. He is a founder and Managing Partner of Keelin Reeds Partners, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping emerging, innovative companies achieve their potential.

He is also a former director of the Strategic Decisions Group (SDG). Tom frequently teaches decision skills to high school youth, parents, teachers, and corporate executive settings.



Dr. Schoemaker is a former member of the Decision Education Foundation's Board of Directors. He is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Decision Strategies International, a consulting and training company specializing in strategic planning, executive development, and multimedia software.

He is also the Research Director of the Mack Center for Technological Innovation at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, where he teaches strategy and decision-making. He is the author of many books, including *Decision Traps*, *Winning Decisions*, and *Profiting from Uncertainty and Peripheral Vision*.



Dr. Spetzler served formerly as Executive Director of the Decision Education Foundation. He is one of the founders of Strategic Decisions Group and currently serves as the chairman of SDG. His professional career has been dedicated to improving the strategic decisions of major corporations.

He is an innovator in the field of decision-making and frequently leads executive seminars. He is dedicated to making the benefits of better decision education accessible to everyone.

