

## The Art of Decision Making

People often say that they find it hard to make decisions. Unfortunately we all have to make decisions all the time, ranging from trivial issues like what to have for lunch, right up to life-changing decisions like where and what to study, and who to marry. Some people put off making decisions by endlessly searching for more information or getting other people to offer their recommendations. Others resort to decision-making by taking a vote, sticking a pin in a list or tossing a coin.

Below are some ideas that are designed to help those who struggle to make decisions large or small.

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**What is Decision Making?** In its simplest sense, decision-making is the act of choosing between two or more courses of action. In the wider process of **problem-solving**, decision-making involves choosing between possible solutions to a problem. Decisions can be made through either an **intuitive** or **reasoned** process, or a **combination of the two**.

**Intuition** - **Intuition is using your ‘gut feeling’ about possible courses of action.** Although people talk about it as if it was a magical ‘sense’, intuition is actually a combination of past experience and your personal values. It is worth taking your intuition into account, because it reflects your learning about life. It is, however, not always based on reality, only your perceptions, many of which may have started in childhood and may not be very mature as a result. It is therefore worth examining your gut feeling closely, especially if you have a very strong feeling against a particular course of action, to see if you can work out *why*, and whether the feeling is justified.

**Reasoning** - **Reasoning is using the facts and figures in front of you to make decisions.** Reasoning has its roots in the here-and-now, and in facts. It can, however, ignore emotional aspects to the decision, and in particular, issues from the past that may affect the way that the decision is implemented. Intuition is a perfectly acceptable means of making a decision, although it is generally more appropriate when the decision is of a simple nature or needs to be made quickly. More complicated decisions tend to require a more formal, structured approach, usually involving both intuition and reasoning. It is important to be wary of impulsive reactions to a situation.

### Applying Both Reason and Intuition

One way to do this is to apply the two aspects in turn. It’s useful to start with reason, and gather facts and figures. Once you have an obvious ‘decision’, it’s the turn of intuition. How do you feel about the ‘answer’? Does it feel right? If not, have another look, and see if you can work out why not. If you’re not emotionally committed to the decision you’ve made, you won’t implement it well or effectively.

# Effective Decision-Making

Decisions need to be capable of being implemented, whether on a personal or organisational level. You do, therefore, need to be committed to the decision personally, and be able to persuade others of its merits. An effective decision-making process, therefore, needs to ensure that you are able to do so.

**What Can Prevent Effective Decision-Making?** There are a number of problems that can prevent effective decision-making. These include:

**1. Not Enough Information** If you do not have enough information, it can feel like you are making a decision without any basis. Take some time to gather the necessary data to inform your decision, even if the timescale is very tight. If necessary, prioritise your information-gathering by identifying which information will be most important to you.

**2. Too Much Information** The opposite problem, but one that is seen surprisingly often: having so much conflicting information that it is impossible to see ‘the wood for the trees’. This is sometimes called *analysis paralysis*, and is also used as a tactic to delay organisational decision-making, with those involved demanding ever more information before they can decide. This problem can often be resolved by getting everyone together to decide what information is really important and why, and by setting a clear timescale for decision-making, including an information-gathering stage.

**3. Too Many People** - Making decisions by committee is difficult. Everyone has their own views, and their own values. And while it’s important to know what these views are, and why and how they are important, it may be essential for one person to take responsibility for making a decision. Sometimes, any decision is better than none.

**4. Vested Interests** Decision-making processes often founder under the weight of vested interests. These vested interests are often not overtly expressed, but may be a crucial blockage. Because they are not overtly expressed, it is hard to identify them clearly, and therefore address them, but it can sometimes be possible to do so by exploring them with someone outside the process, but in a similar position.

It can also help to explore the rational/intuitive aspects with all stakeholders, usually with an external facilitator to support the process.

**5. Emotional Attachments** People are often very attached to the status quo. Decisions tend to involve the prospect of change, which many people find difficult.

**6. No Emotional Attachment** Sometimes it’s difficult to make a decision because you just don’t care one way or the other. In this case, a structured decision-making process can often help by identifying some very real pros and cons of particular actions, that perhaps you hadn’t thought about before.

## **Decision Making Framework**

Below is a possible framework for making effective decisions. It is a seven-stage model, and was originally designed for use in groups and organisations. However, there is no reason why you cannot use the same method, or a simplified form, for decisions at home.

The important aspect is to go through all the stages in turn, even if only to decide that they are not relevant for the current situation.

### **1. Listing Possible Solutions/Options**

To come up with a list of all the possible solutions and/or options available it is usually appropriate to use a group (or individual) problem-solving process. This process could include brainstorming or some other 'idea-generating' process. This stage is important to the overall decision making processes as a decision will be made from a selection of fixed choices. Always remember to consider the possibility of not making a decision or doing nothing and be aware that both options are actually potential solutions in themselves.

### **2. Setting a Time Scale and Deciding Who is Responsible for the Decision**

In deciding how much time to make available for the decision-making process, it helps to consider the following:

- How much time is available to spend on this decision?
- Is there a deadline for making a decision and what are the consequences of missing this deadline?
- Is there an advantage in making a quick decision?
- How important is it to make a decision? How important is it that the decision is right?
- Will spending more time improve the quality of the decision?

Remember that sometimes a quick decision is more important than 'the right' decision, and that at other times, the reverse is true.

### **3. Information Gathering**

Before making a decision, all relevant information needs to be gathered. If there is inadequate or out-dated information then it is more likely that a wrong decision might be made. If there is a lot of irrelevant information, the decision will be difficult to make, and it will be easier to become distracted by unnecessary factors. However, the amount of time spent on information-gathering has to be weighed against how much you are willing to risk making the wrong decision.

### **4. Weighing up the Risks Involved**

One key question is how much risk should be taken in making the decision? Generally, the amount of risk an individual is willing to take depends on:

- The seriousness of the consequences of taking the wrong decision.
- The benefits of making the right decision.
- Not only how bad the worst outcome might be, but also how likely that outcome is to happen.

It is also useful to consider what the risk of the worst possible outcome occurring might be, and to decide if the risk is acceptable. The choice can be between going 'all out for success' or taking a safe decision.

## **5. Deciding on Values**

Everybody has their own unique set of values: what they believe to be important. The decisions that you make will, ultimately, be based on your values. That means that the decision that is right for you may not be right for someone else.

If the responsibility for a decision is shared, it is therefore possible that one person might not have the same values as the others. In such cases, it is important to obtain a consensus as to which values are to be given the most weight. It is important that the values on which a decision is made are understood because they will have a strong influence on the final choice.

## **6. Weighing up the Pros and Cons**

It is possible to compare different solutions and options by considering the possible advantages and disadvantages of each. One good way to do this is to use a '*balance sheet*', weighing up the pros and cons (benefits and costs) associated with that solution. Try to consider each aspect of the situation in turn, and identify both good and bad.

Having listed the pros and cons, it may be possible to immediately decide which option is best. However, it may also be useful to rate each of the pros and cons on a simple 1 to 10 scale (with 10 - most important to 1 - least important). In scoring each of the pros and cons it helps to take into account how important each item on the list is in meeting the agreed values. This balance sheet approach allows this to be taken into account, and presents it in a clear and straightforward manner.

## **7. Making the Decision**

Finally, it's time to actually make the decision!

Your information-gathering should have provided sufficient data on which to base a decision, and you now know the advantages and disadvantages of each option. It is, as the television programme *Opportunity Knocks* had it, 'Make Your Mind Up Time'.

Warning! You may get to this stage, and have a clear 'winner' but still feel uncomfortable. If that is the case, don't be afraid to revisit the process. You may not have listed all the pros and cons, or you may have placed an unsuitable weighting on one factor.

Your intuition or 'gut feeling' is a strong indicator of whether the decision is right for you and fits with your values.

If possible, it is best to allow time to reflect on a decision once it has been reached. It is preferable to sleep on it before announcing it to others. Once a decision is made public, it is very difficult to change.

## **Having Made the Decision...**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, once you have made a decision, don't waste your time thinking about 'what ifs'. If something does go wrong, and you need to revisit the decision, then do. But otherwise, accept the decision and move on.

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