

# DECISION MAKING EFFECTIVENESS

## EXERCISES

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### FOR WHEN YOU FEEL PARALYZED ABOUT A DECISION

#### **Exercise 1: Don't make a good decision**

I'm always a little skeptical of someone who claims that as a child they knew their life purpose or had identified their vocational destiny. I'm sure it feels that way in hindsight, but does that really ever happen? Instead, the more common experience is the agonizing question that most of us ask in our early 20's. "What should I be when I grow up?" If you are like me, at 55, I am still kind of asking that question... and maybe that's a better way to make life decisions. My bias is that our success in life is rarely attributable to a *great* decision we made in the past. The notion of a VUCA environment backs me up on this. Many of the very great decisions are decisions that were initially made and then tweaked over and over again as events unfurled.

There is a wonderful phrase I learned as an Infantry Officer: O.B.E., which stands for the phrase "Overcome By Events." It is a fabulous admission that the best laid plans go awry as life happens to us. To further fuel my cynicism about the decision-making, I like to remind myself that our evaluation of whether a *chosen* course of action was good or not good is always made *after* the fact. The actual decision, any decision, is neither good nor bad until hindsight makes it so. When we guess right, it was a great decision. When we guess wrong or our initial calculations have been OBE, then we were foolish. Instead I like to adopt a different approach.

First, based on the facts at hand, use the best decision making approach you can to make a decision. Second, make that decision a good one by a lot of hard work and tenacity. Try this yourself. Pick a particularly agonizing or important decision you have been dreading to make. Set a date and a fact accumulation threshold at which you will make a decision. Make the decision. Then spend the rest of your mental and emotional effort making your decision work. And remember, the nice things about the vast majority of our life's decisions is that you can always make another one if the first one doesn't work out.

### FOR WHEN YOU ARE READY TO KNOCK OUT THE SELF DOUBT

#### **Exercise 2: Let go the Ego.**

We like to think that we are rational beings making decisions based on cold hard facts. That notion is not reality. First, there is the problem of "which version of the facts" do we use. Second, as students of our own human nature, we must admit, that if we were true rational actors, then how did we make the more egregious dumb mistakes of our past? Without much convincing, we know that our purist logic is always self-centered.

To illustrate this, think back to a time when you had a crush. You wanted to walk right up and talk to this mysterious winsome creature but you didn't – at least not at first. You held back. You watched, you waited, maybe you pined. A friend came along, noticed your self-imposed predicament and said something like this: "Oh come on." "Go say 'hi,' it's no big deal." And you? You shrugged your shoulders and looked at your feet. It happens to all of us. When faced with risk – especially social risk – we freeze. What ifs echo in our thoughts. What if they don't like me, what if they think I'm ugly. And while you are having this interior dialogue with your fragile ego, your friend, is encouraging you. "You would be perfect together. What do you have to lose?" Your ego whispers; "...A lot.",

In board rooms at the highest levels of industry and government there are grown men and women with a teenager's fragile ego. They want to do the right thing. They may even know what the right thing to do is. But... ego echoes fill the canyon of doubt. What if, this doesn't work? What if it fails and I'm blamed for it? What if the investor's pull out? All the spreadsheet well-wishing and projection chart encouragement suddenly fails to motivate when it's our ego on the line. So, take it out of the equation.

### **Try it.**

Think of a huge decision you need to make – one that will dramatically impact your career. Instead of you making the decision – imagine it is someone else. Imagine this other person with your dilemma is the shy teen. Imagine you are the confident friend. "What have you got to lose?" Nothing and precisely because you have no skin in the game, the big decision is not pitted against your ego and its fears. You are free in this imaginary moment to consider the situation without weighing the risk to yourself. In this frame of mind. You can confidently advise yourself. What do you say to your friend? What wisdom do you share? How significant does failure or shame or embarrassment look in this new pair of shoes? Now, tell them what to do.

## FOR WHEN YOU AREN'T QUESTIONING YOUR DECISION-MAKING METHODS

### **Exercise 3: Use your Brain**

There are many decision-making approaches, just as there are many problem-solving methods. Most Decision frameworks share three things in common:

- First – Some method to bring more information to bear. DeBono's Power of Perception tool set, Voice of the Customer, Data Analytics and a SWOT analysis are perennial favorites.
- Second – Some method of evaluating options. Rating and ranking are popular.
- Third – Some method of choosing between options. Sometimes intuitive, such as Consensus and Voting and sometimes more mathematical, such as Cost to Benefit ratios.

But, in contrast to this trifecta of functions, there is one universally used and wildly popular decision-making process which doesn't do any of this. It doesn't look for more information, it doesn't weigh options and it never prevaricates between options. Most C-Suites use this method but few ever discuss it. In fact, it is the best kept secret of all of the various Decision making formulas. This framework, more than any other, constitutes over 90% of all decisions

we make – both big ones, like whether to merge companies, and small ones, like whether to drive or Uber home after the company social.

This ubiquitous and omnipresent framework is called Implicit Bias. “Implicit” because it is built in, unconscious, and automatic. “Bias” because it has already decided. As David Rock says in his SEEDS of Bias video series; “If you have a brain, you are biased.” And here in lies the rub. Every decision-making framework is competing with implicit bias. All formal decision-making has to come to grips with the power of bias. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that all decision-making formulas are attempts to explicitly design a decision rather than default to our implicit hunches. One way to leverage this built in framework is to use it as a set of guard rails. The bias system defaults to whatever is: similar, expedient, within our own experience, close at hand in time or space and safe.

Knowing these unconscious preferences, we can use them as straw man arguments and deliberately deconstruct them.

**Try it.**

Next time you are sure about a decision, stop. Pick one of the 5 SEEDS of biases and argue against it. If you are convinced that this is “similar” to another decision you made, list all the ways it is very different. If you are absolutely sure your decision is “safe” break it down until you see the danger it presents.