

HOW TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS

William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Good decisions are often judged not so much by their outcomes as they are by the principles on which they are based. There are essentially two ways that people make decisions—intuitively and deductively. The *intuitive* approach, which is the way 99% of our decisions are made throughout the day, involves our ordinary judgments and feelings. It involves making decisions based on our feelings—deciding with our gut. This method is so effective that most of our everyday decisions are made without much thought. However, some decisions are more difficult, requiring the use of a more complex approach. The *deductive* method, which is the more complicated strategy, involves a more systematic and logical process. It is this second type of decision making model that is discussed below.

Identify the problem

When faced with a difficult decision, the first step is to identify the problem. *Operationalizing* the problem, which means defining the problem in specific behavioral terms, is often 90% of the solution. Rather than defining the problem in such a way that change can be made more difficult or even impossible, *reframing* the problem involves viewing the situation from a different—often more positive—perspective. For example, rather than viewing a challenging situation as a problem, it can be viewed as an opportunity by asking the question, “What *changes* would I like to see?” Such a question reframes the problem by restating it in terms of how or what one wants to change rather than in terms of what is wrong. In this way, operationalizing the problem helps define the solution—which is often 180-degrees opposite the problem. In other words, the goal is the flip side of the problem. To use an old adage, “The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how they are used.”

Making a decision on the basis of a goal or outcome is known as teleological justification. *Teleological* ethics (from the Greek *telos*, “end”; *logos*, “science” or “reason”) involves theories of morality that derive duty or moral obligation from what is good or desirable as an end to be achieved. A desirable goal often involves minimizing harm and maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number of people involved in the outcome. Teleology must be balanced with deontology. *Deontological* ethics (from the Greek *deon*, “duty”; *logos*, “science” or “reason”) holds that the basic standards for an action being classified as morally right or wrong are independent of consequences that are generated by the action but rather are based on the moral duty or obligation that a person has toward another person, such as the duty to be honest. Good decisions typically require both deontology and teleology, basing one’s actions on ethical duties as well as considering the consequences of one’s actions.

Identify the principles involved

After identifying the problem, the next step is to identify the values and principles on which the decision will be based. Depending on the context, guiding principles may involve the tenants of one’s religion or faith tradition, laws and legal regulations, institutional policies, best business practices, and professional ethical standards. If a single relevant standard applies in a particular situation, one’s first question should be, “Is there a reason to deviate from the standard?” (Haas & Malouf, 2005, p. 12). On the other hand, if there is no single principle that applies to the situation, one’s next step would involve identifying the relevant dimensions that make the issue problematic. The concept of universality becomes relevant at this point. *Universality* refers to the principle that distinguishes ethical action from

expedient action by being applicable to anyone operating in essentially the same situation. The *test of universality* is best illustrated by the question, “Would I recommend the same course of action to every other person essentially similar to me who is operating in essentially the same circumstance?” One universal principle that exists in at least 12 major world religions is the Golden Rule: “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” At the same time, the principle of universality must be balanced with the *principle of diversity* (Doverspike, 2000, p. 2). The universality of the Golden Rule must be balanced with the concept of *diversity*, which refers to consideration of individual differences based on age, race, gender, religion, and so forth. There is a multicultural version of the Golden Rule, which can be described as the Platinum Rule: “Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto *them*.”

Consider your options at choice points

Because there is often more than one right solution to a problem, think of solutions divergently as well as convergently. *Convergent* thinking refers to systematic thinking, including inductive and deductive reasoning, which brings together information on solving a problem by focusing on a single correct answer. There are many types of problems for which convergent thinking may be required to reach the best solution. *Divergent* thinking refers to flexible thinking that moves away in diverging directions with many possibilities that involve a variety of factors that may lead to novel or creative ideas and solutions. In divergent thinking, there is not necessarily one “right” answer to a particular problem, but instead there may be many right answers. Divergent thinking is required with the many situations in which no single moral or ethical dimension seems to outweigh the others. *Brainstorming*, which involves creative thinking and solution-generating thinking, can be helpful in revealing a variety of actions that may prove useful.

Consider doing nothing at all

When faced with a dilemma, most people are concerned with which actions to take. People typically ask, “What should I *do*?” One should also ask, “Have I considered doing *nothing*?” In considering possible courses of action, one should always consider the option of taking *no action at all*, because there are many problems for which this option may prove to be the best solution. In other words, “not doing anything” by deferring an action often achieves a desired outcome. Conversely, there are many situations that call for decisive action, but it is rarely a bad idea to consider the option of deferring an action.¹ In contrast, a sense of urgency or an impulse to do something can often lead to bigger problems. A smart person knows how to get out of a difficult situation, but a wise person knows how to avoid it in the first place. *Ethical myopia* refers to the process in which some people have difficulty seeing the long-range consequences of their actions, and they respond only to the poorly thought-out immediate aspects of a situation. One way to guard against ethical myopia is to use consequential thinking.

Consider consequential thinking

In considering the possible risks and benefits of one’s actions, it may be useful to engage in projective-retrospective thinking, which is a type of consequential thinking. *Projective-retrospective* thinking involves mentally projecting oneself into the future and then thinking back on how one’s contemplated actions would be viewed retrospectively. It may be helpful to use a *factorial matrix* (Doverspike, 2015, pp. 125–126), which is similar to a cost-benefit analysis requiring one to evaluate the short-term and long-term benefits and risks of two different courses of contemplated action (e.g., “Just do it,” “Don’t do it”). See Figure 1 for a visual illustration of the factorial matrix. There are two other ways to test consequential thinking. The external *test of publicity*, known as

the clean, well-lit room approach, involves thinking how one's contemplated actions can be explained to one's most respected friends and colleagues. The internal *test of privacy*, known as the dark parking lot approach, exemplifies the adage, "Ethics is what you do when no one is watching." This approach essentially asks the question, "How will I be able to live with myself?"

Consider overarching moral principles

An ethical dilemma (from the Greek *di*, "double"; *lēmna*, "premise" or "proposition") refers to a "double proposition" or a problem offering at least two solutions or possibilities, of which neither are practically acceptable. In classic ethical dilemmas, each choice of action can be supported by ethical principles and each choice may be associated with significant consequences. The selection of any particular course of action may compromise one of the underlying ethical standards. When encountering an ethical dilemma, in which there is a conflict between standards or principles, one useful strategy is to consider overarching moral principles. *Overarching* moral principles, which are the underlying foundation principles upon which all other standards are based, include autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity. In plain English, each principle is described below.

Autonomy refers to an individual's right of self-determination, as evidenced by the freedom of an individual to make one's own decisions and choose one's own direction.

Beneficence refers to promoting good for others, contributing to the welfare of others, and protecting the best interests of others.

Nonmaleficence refers to avoiding doing harm to others and refraining from actions that risk hurting others.

Justice refers to providing fairness to all people, regardless of age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation.

Fidelity refers to keeping one's promises, fulfilling honoring one's commitments, and being faithful to one's responsibilities of trust in relationships.

Veracity refers to being honest, truthful, and trustworthy. Trust is required to build a relationship, and honesty is required to build trust.

Consider competing self-interests

In almost any professional presentation, the first slide will state some variation on the theme of "I have no conflicts of interest to disclose."² However, every decision and relationship involves actual, potential, or perceived competing interests. Although some conflicting interests may be unforeseeable, most conflicting interests are foreseeable. An actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest occurs when one has *either* two roles with one entity *or* when one has a primary role with an entity and another role with a different entity in which there may be competing interests. An unethical conflict of interest occurs when the two roles can reasonably be expected to result in harm, exploitation, or loss of competence, objectivity, or effectiveness in one's primary, fiduciary, or professional role. At worst, unethical conflicts of interest involve a risk of harm or risk of exploitation on the part of an individual or organization (Doverspike, 2008, p. 57). Notwithstanding the traditional denial of any conflicts of interest, it is nothing new that we are sometimes blind to the bias of self-interest. Scholastic philosophers such as St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) have long observed that "People normally do not consciously choose evil, but they choose something that *appears* good inside their own framework." Competing self-interests can never be completely eliminated, but they can be managed more effectively when we are aware of them. A routine, simple "conflicts check" can help.

Consult with a respected colleague

Because *ethical myopia* can distort one's vision of unintended consequences of actions, consulting with a respected colleague can improve one's vision. Consultations can help reduce *confirmation bias*, which refers to our tendency to only see evidence that supports our own beliefs, values, or ideas (Plous, 1993, p. 233).³ Rather than consulting with a soothsayer who is always agreeable, congenial, and reassuring, it is best to consult with someone who can help identify blind spots. Often, there is nothing that helps resolve a problem better than explaining it to someone else.⁴ Two heads are better than one, and even a brief consultation is better than none. However, a consultation does not mean calling a friend who will provide reassurance for questionable or unethical actions that have already been taken. Although they are not consultations, such requests are usually related to one of the following categories (Doverspike, 2015, p. 154):

Absolution involves giving a pardon from guilt or consequences of past actions that are being confessed.

Blessing is an act of approval of present actions that are being taken.

Confession is an act of admission of past actions that have already been taken or that should have been taken.

Consolation involves giving comfort or reassurance to someone in an effort to alleviate their anxiety for actions already taken.

Imprimatur is permission for future actions that are being considered.

Guard against groupthink

If two heads are better than one, then ongoing peer consultation group may be the best plan of all. A *reactive* approach to ethical risk management involves obtaining a peer consultation in high risk situations, whereas a *proactive* approach involves maintaining ongoing consultation with a peer consultation group. At the same time, one

cautionary consideration about peer consultation groups is to be aware of the possibility of *groupthink*, which is “a phenomenon that occurs when a group of individuals reaches a consensus without critical reasoning or evaluation of the consequences or alternatives” (Kenton, 2020, para. 1). Groupthink is based on a desire to maintain harmony and to avoid creating conflict or upsetting the balance of the people in the group (Janis, 1972; Janis & Mann, 1977).⁵

Choose a course of action

Although choosing a course of action is based on *principles*, implementing a course of action is based on pragmatism. *Pragmatism* refers to the practical considerations in implementing an action or plan. Implementation of a chosen course of action involves *practicality*, which refers to the likelihood that one can actually implement the chosen course of action. A viable solution is one that can be implemented.

Evaluate the results of action

The last step involves evaluating the results of one's actions. It is often said that wisdom comes from experience, and experience often comes from bad judgment. Good decisions can sometimes lead to bad results, although bad results often lead to good outcomes. When reflecting retrospectively on their lives, many wise decision makers admit that they learned more from what they did wrong than from what they did right. Our last mistake may be one of our best teachers. *Recovery skills*, which refer to the ability to recover from one's mistakes honestly and gracefully, may be more important than not making any mistakes in the first place (Doverspike, 2008, p. 99). Relatedly, Chen et al. (2018) studied therapeutic ruptures and found that—if repaired—they often lead to better outcomes than if the rupture had never occurred. Chen et al. also found that therapists' recognition of alliance rupture in non-rupture sessions was positively associated with clients' alliance ratings

in the next session. Therapists' recognition of alliance ruptures abolished the negative effect of ruptures on clients' symptom ratings.

Figures

Figure 1
Factorial Matrix of Benefits and Risks

		Consequences	
		Benefits	Risks
Actions	Just do it	Benefits of Action	Risks of Action
	Don't do it	Benefits of Inaction	Benefits of Inaction

Adapted from Doverspike (2015, p. 126)

References

- Chen, R., Atzil-Slonim, D., Bar-Kalifa, E., Hasson-Ohayon, I., & Refaeli, E. (2018). Therapists' recognition of alliance ruptures as a moderator of change in alliance and symptoms. *Psychotherapy Research*, 28(4), 560–570.
- Doverspike, W. F. (2000, November). *Ethics checklist: Ten tests of ethicality*. http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_check_your_ethics.pdf
- Doverspike, W. F. (2008). *Risk management: Clinical, ethical, and legal guidelines for successful practice*. Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press. Pages 84–99.
- Doverspike, W. F. (2015). *Risk management: Clinical, ethical, and legal guidelines for successful practice* (2nd ed.). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Doyle, A. C. (1893). Silver Blaze. *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*. Page 336.
- Haas, L. J. & Malouf, J. L. (2005). *Keeping up the good work: A practitioner's guide to mental health ethics* (4th ed). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Janis, I. L. (1971, November). Groupthink. *Psychology Today*, 5(6), 43–46, 74–76.
- Janis, I. L. (1972). *Victims of groupthink: A psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Janis, I. L., & Mann, L. (1977). *Decision making: A psychological analysis of conflict, choice, and commitment*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Orwell, G. (1949). *Nineteen eight-four*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Plous, S. (1993). *The psychology of judgment and decision making* (McGraw-Hill Series in Social Psychology). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Whyte, W. H., Jr. (March 1952). Groupthink. *Fortune*. pp. 114–117, 142, 146.

Notes

1. A sense of urgency can sometimes occur in response to “special requests” (Doverspike, 2015, pp. 105–109). An important principle is to respond rather than react. When having to reply to requests made by an agency, client, or organization, there is one useful response that can help avoid an impulsive reaction: “If you need an answer right now, then the answer is ‘no’ because I haven’t had time to think about it” (S. Klinger, personal communication, August 27, 2022).
2. A typical professional presentation will have some form of the following statement: “I have no conflicts of interests or disclosures for this presentation, including commercial support, financial support, or any relationship that could be construed as a conflict of interest.”
3. The term *confirmation bias* was coined by the pioneering cognitive psychologist Peter Cathcart Wason (1924–2003), University College in London, who sought to explain why people consistently commit logical errors in reasoning.
4. As Sherlock Holmes observed, “Nothing clears up a case so much as explaining it to another person” (Doyle, 1893, p. 336).
5. The term *groupthink* was coined by in 1952 by William Hollingsworth “Holly” Whyte Jr. (1917–1999), an American urbanist, sociologist, and organizational analyst. Whyte acquired the idea from George Orwell’s (1949) term “doublethink” that was contained in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Doublethink* referred to the simultaneous acceptance of two contradictory beliefs. Whyte popularized the term “groupthink” in a 1952 article in *Fortune* magazine. In 1971, the American social psychologist Irving Janis introduced the term groupthink in an article in *Psychology Today* magazine. Janis (1972) used the term “groupthink” rather than Orwell’s (1949) term “doublethink.”

Correct Citation for Reference Entry

The reference entry correct citation styles for this document are illustrated below. Students should defer to the style preferences of their individual course instructors to determine whether the course instructor has preferences that are more specific than those shown below:

American Psychological Association

Doverspike, W. F. (2008). How to make good decisions.
<http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Chicago Manual of Style / Kate Turabian

Doverspike, William, "How to make good decisions," Aug. 01, 2008. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>

Note: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, blog posts are typically not included in bibliographies, but can be cited in the running text and/or notes. However, if a blog is cited frequently, you may include it in the bibliography.

Modern Language Association

Doverspike, William F. "How to make good decisions" 01 Aug 2008 [Date accessed]

Note: MLA guidelines assume that readers can track down most online sources by entering the author, title, or other identifying information in a search engine or a database. Consequently, MLA does not require a URL in citations for online sources such as websites. However, some instructors still ask for it, so check with your instructor to determine his or her preference.

Documentation

This document is cross-referenced to a portable document file (PDF) published from this Word document file: How to Make Good Decisions.doc

Server path:

http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/files/how_to_make_good_decisions.pdf

Server file name:

how_to_make_good_decisions.pdf

Website tab: Practice [Popular Articles]

Link name: How to Make Good Decisions

Website tab: Publications

Link name: Ethics and Decision Making

Website tab: Presentations

Link name: Ethics and Decision Making

Workshop Presentation Decks:

Ethical Decision Making Models.pptx

Ethical Decision Making Models – 1 Hour.pptx

Webinar Presentation Decks:

Ethical Decision Making Models.pptx

Ethical Decision Making Models – 1 Hour.pptx

Workshop Handouts:

Ethical Decision Making Models - 2020 - Handouts.pdf

Ethical Decision Making Models – 1 Hour - Handouts.pdf

Published Aug. 01, 2008 | Last updated Jan. 01, 2024

Copyright © 2008 by William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

References and some content updated 2024.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2008, February). How to make good decisions. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>