

HOW TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS

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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. In other words, 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, one can view it 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.

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 are typically require both deontology and teleology, basing one’s actions on ethical duties and considering the consequences of one’s actions.

Identify the principles involved. After identifying the problem, the next step is to identify the 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, or 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 any person 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. 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 them do unto *them*.”

Consider your options at choice points. Because there is often more than one right solution to a problem, think of solutions by thinking 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 when dealing with the many situations in everyday life 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 usually concerned with which actions to take. People

typically ask the question, “What should I *do*?” One should also ask the question, “Have I considered doing *nothing*?” In generating possible courses of action, one should always consider the option of taking *no action at all*, because there are some problems in life for which this option may prove to be the best solution. In other words, deferring an action or “not doing anything” can sometimes achieve a desired outcome. Of course, there are many situations that call for decisive action, but it is rarely a bad idea to consider the option of taking no action at all.

Consider consequential thinking. In considering the possible risks and benefits of one’s actions, it may be helpful 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, 2008), 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”). 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 *dí*, “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.

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 final step in decision making involves evaluating the results of the actions that one has taken. 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. We learn from our mistakes, and the ability to recover from a mistake is more important than not making any mistakes at all. 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.

References

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