

Critical Decisions

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Many areas, such as law and medicine, are largely about making right decisions in the face of incomplete information, but so is making a choice at the local supermarket. With many decisions, we feel we have to get them ‘right’, even if we are not sure what ‘right’ really means. Practically every decision is based on assumptions, but often we also assume basic parameters, such as our basic values and what is important to us, without questioning them, which can lead to decisions that make us worse off. This is why it is important for a good decision to reflect on one’s values and what is truly important to oneself.

No decision

One ‘solution’ to decision making dilemmas is not to decide, but this is also a decision. Sometimes, making a decision does not influence the outcome, and it seems one should not spend a lot of resources on making a decision. However, often making a decision can help psychologically if it helps one to become clearer about what is important to oneself. Besides clarity, it can also help future decision making by doing much of the work now and adapting the decision later on.

The ‘right’ decision

The next question is what constitutes a ‘right’ decision. In law, even if there is clear and unambiguous information on the facts, there may still be uncertainty about the law. In this case

one often needs to ‘dig deeper’ and try to find the fundamental legal concepts that may help to answer the question at hand. In most of life this is true as well. If the everyday habits, such as where to have lunch, no longer work, it is important to look at something more fundamental. This is where reflecting on one’s values and basic interests helps. If you go against your basic values for an extended period of time you will not be happy.

The process

Whenever we are faced with a new situation we have to apply our decision rules and the basic values. So, there are at least two tools we need to make good decisions. A process that tells us which information we need and when we have enough of it, and some basic decision making criteria, our basic values. The process is how we learn to make decisions, how we select the information and how we put it together and process it to help us make the decision. It can change over time as we learn tools we believe to be better and discard old ones we believe to be inferior.

Information

Information reduces decision making anxiety. This could be information from other people or from books, journals and the internet. An informed decision is always a better decision. This is the information we process consciously. However, there is also the unconscious processing of information, which we may partially make conscious, but usually do not. To make every bit of information that reaches us conscious is uneconomical, because we can process much more information in parallel if we leave this to unconscious processes, which generate a feeling, either a positive or a negative one, the ‘gut instinct’.

However, information alone is in many everyday decisions not enough, because it merely says what the future could be if you decide one way or another. It still leaves a choice which type of future you prefer. Resolving this choice involves some ‘fuzzy logic’ by making sense of enormous amounts of information that reach us every second. We employ this heuristic logic, which is more like a partly learned and partly hard-wired set of rules of thumb, because

otherwise we would get overwhelmed by the information that awaits to be processed. Even if information is filtered out, this decision still needs to be made quickly.

Values

Our values, a set of relatively firmly held beliefs about how people and the world works, should tell us which version of the future is going to make us happier. But there are less stable yet important factors that influence how we see the world and the decisions we make. Our emotional states have an influence on the probabilities we attach to outcomes and which version of the future seems more attractive in the moment. If one feels depressed, negative outcomes seem more likely and one may not believe that one deserves a bright future. Given the same information, a depressed person may opt for the course that leads to the mediocre future. On the other hand, a manic state may lead one to select a course of action that could lead to a very positive but also highly unlikely future. Focusing on one's core values and those things that truly make one happy delivers better and more stable results in the long-run.

Gut instinct

Using one's 'gut instinct' as information is important, because it is the summary of much of the information that is processed subconsciously, much more than could ever be processed by the narrow focus our consciousness can use. What makes it difficult is that we often have difficulties trusting it. And it can be wrong because one's information processing also depends on past experiences and the information it has been provide with over a lifetime. If we have witnessed interpersonal conflicts, such as between parents or other people important to us, we may be more cautious in interpersonal situations than they warrant. To eliminate this bias, it is important to distinguish where information belongs to, the current situation or experiences from the past. The more you become an expert on the sources of the information inside yourself and around you, the better you will be in making decisions that make you happy and successful.

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