



## When Deciding Gets Hard

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

**The Scene.** In the midst of a major organizational directive to reduce company-wide headcount, a coaching client vacillates on the best way to make the decisions involved in establishing three-year targets. “Should I set the number myself? Should I work together

with my leadership team members to do it? Or should I direct them to wrestle through the tradeoffs involved and reach agreement as a team before bringing their decision to me?”

He looks over at me. “What do you think I should I do?”

**The Ubiquity.** I often bear witness to leadership clients struggling to make major decisions. One privileged aspect of being a coach and consultant to others as they make decisions is that you often walk alongside them during their key inflection points. My experience during this kind of moment is that many leaders fall into a double loop of confusion and self-flagellation when feeling unclear about how to make a key decision. The first loop of internal dialogue contains the confusion over how to make the right decision; the second loop holds the confusion (with a chaser of self-criticism) about why they are even in this quandary.

If that second loop had a voice, it would angrily mutter things like: "I got to this level because I have a track record of good decisions. So why aren't I better at this?!"

**The Ego's Lament.** These leaders aren't alone in their frustration, despite their egos' lament. Decision-making dilemmas comprise one of the most frequent reasons people seek help, professionally and personally. Multi-day workshops are dedicated to the topic of effective decision making.

We all admire a decisive leader. In feedback interviews of various clients' key stakeholders, they often raise decision making as a key element of leadership efficacy. At the other end of the spectrum,

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indecisive leaders are castigated by their followers, the media and political pundits alike. The *Harvard Business Review* declared that an indecisive boss is one of ["three particularly ineffective kinds of leaders."](#)

Closer to home, decision-making angst is also a common lunch topic with friends. Searching together for the "right" answer about love relationships, kids, family dynamics, work lives and even spiritual meaning is the glue through which many a friendship has been cemented.

Ultimately, our personal and professional lives are indelibly shaped by the decisions we make - as is organizational success. Indeed, as the authors of the article ["The Decision Driven Organization"](#) assert, "A company's value is no more (and no less) than the sum of the decisions it makes and executes. Its assets, capabilities, and structure are useless unless executives and managers throughout the organization make the essential decisions and get those decisions right more often than not."

Consequently, the sense of frustration and stress that comes with being stuck in a decision-making dilemma, whether professional or personal, can be significant. As one client recently said to me, her face a canvas of desperation, "I can't seem to find my internal compass on this decision. I feel completely lost."

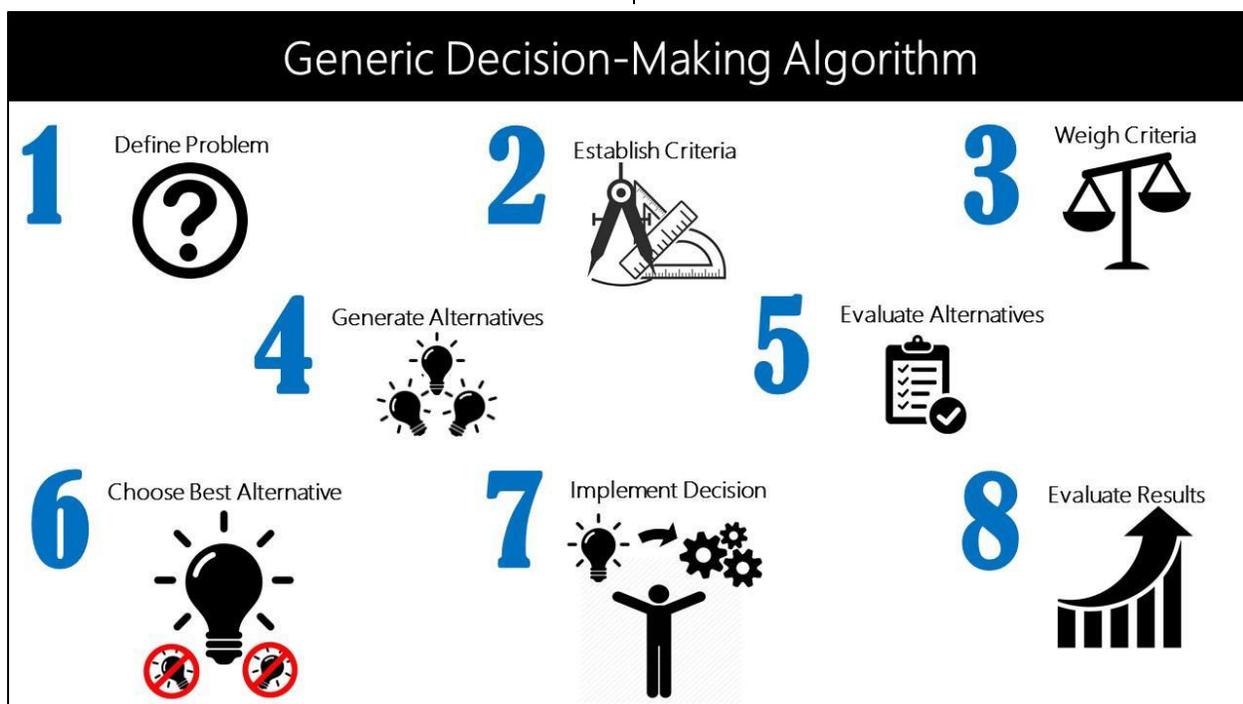
So how can we better navigate through times when the decision isn't coming easily?

**Decision-Making Basics.** Myriad decision-making models exist out in the decision-making literature. With some variation, most models depict the following steps to decision making:

- Define the problem
- Establish decision making criteria (e.g. what would good look like?)

- Weigh the decision-making criteria (which are most/least important)
- Generate alternatives
- Evaluate alternatives against the criteria
- Choose the best alternative
- Implement the decision
- Evaluate the decision

In addition, important considerations around roles and decision-making authority exist, aided by well-known models like [RAPID](#) and [RACI](#). These models, and others like them (every consultant has his/her favorite decision making model), can be helpful guides from a process standpoint. My observation after twenty-plus years of leadership consulting and a substantially greater number of years living my own life is that the more "struggle worthy" moments of individual decision making aren't usually due to a lack of rational process, however.



Rather, we get stuck because we're not engaged in an exclusively rational decision process.

**Parts of Self.** If a decision has significance to us, we are rarely operating solely from our intellect or "rational selves." As far back as Plato, those who make it their business to explore why we do what we do have distinguished between various aspects of self that exert their influence in decision making situations. Freud famously proposed that we have a superego, ego and id, each of which plays a unique role in determining behavior. More recently, the field of leadership development has taken notice of research suggesting that our decision making emanates from the interplay among the components of a tri-partite system: simply put, our [head brain, heart brain, and gut brain](#). Each component relies upon a complex neural system that contains its own intelligence. One author depicts the [primary functions of each brain](#) in the following way:

- *Head Brain Functions:* cognitive perception, thinking and meaning making
- *Heart Brain Functions:* emoting, values, and relational affect
- *Gut Brain Functions:* core identity (self/not self), self-preservation and mobilization

If this model feels brand new to you, consider how often you have said, "my gut

instinct on this one is..." or "my heart just wasn't in it..." in sorting through a matter of significance. Viewed through this lens, all three types of intelligence affect our decision making. Indeed, an emerging field of leadership development known as mBIT

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(multiple brain integration techniques) purports to assist leaders in building strategies to integrate all three systems to achieve superior decision making.

**Enter the Elephant.** One of my favorite (and most practical) models in this space comes from Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and expert in ethical leadership. In his book [The Happiness Hypothesis](#), he offers the evocative metaphor of the elephant and the rider to explain the dualistic forces that

influence most decisions (quick side note: Chip and Dan Heath built extensively on Haidt's metaphor, with great success, in their book *Switch*). In brief, Haidt proposes that we view our emotional selves as an elephant, upon which is perched a rider, our rational selves. Both elements of self ideally work in concert with each other to create effective action.

The reality is often less than ideal, however. Given deep-seated cultural values and social conditioning that favor rationality (not to mention years and years of formal schooling), most of us pour energy into our rider, using the "reins" of intellect and objective analysis to lead our elephant in the direction our rider has decided is correct. If our emotional self, the elephant, is not in alignment with the rider, our rider attempts to overpower its brute force by ignoring it or offering rational explanations to appease it.

These tactics can work for a while but if we make a habit of suppressing misaligned emotional needs, the rider eventually grows weary from the effort expended to hold those needs at bay. The elephant bucks the

rider and havoc may be the result, leading to behaviors that may seem shockingly out of character.

Alternatively, if we tend to lead excessively from our emotional selves, letting the elephant guide us, we may find that our decisions and actions create unintended consequences or suffer from inconsistency, driven by the emotions of the moment. One need look no further than the recent presidential race for examples of this kind of behavior.

**Netting it Out.** So, what are we to do? First, self-awareness is key...or should I say, "multiple-selves awareness is key"? In using this model, we must become comfortable with the concept of having multiple aspects of self with which to work. Indeed, in working with coaching clients, I liken this *parts-of-self* way of processing to their experiences with making decisions in a team setting. Our parts of self (head/heart/gut or emotional self/rational self, you choose!) form a team of a different sort – all internal. Thus, similar to working a decision within a team, it's important to check in with each team member to gather

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input for optimal decision making. Particularly on the more important decisions.

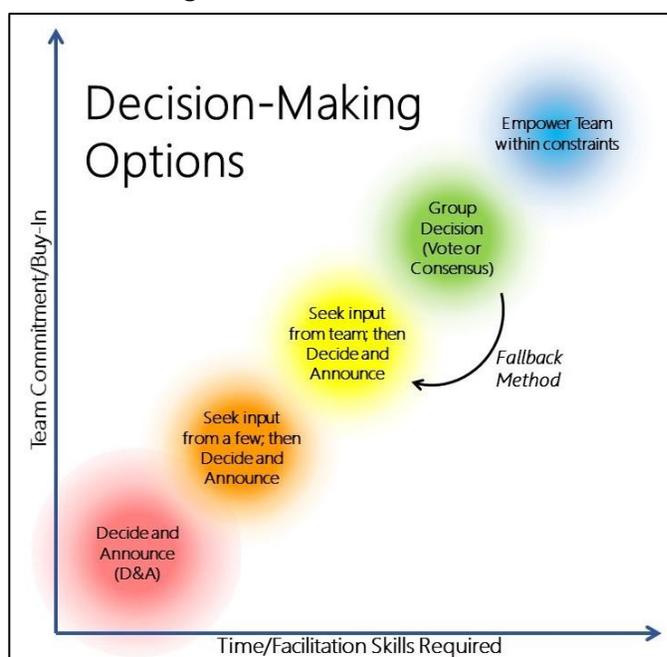
How to execute that checking-in process? You might begin by assigning one chair in your office to each part of self and then move from chair to chair, giving voice to the viewpoint of that part of self on the matter at hand (helpful hint here: unless you want a crowd to gather, shut the door first). Or, if playacting isn't your thing, draw several columns on a whiteboard or sheet of paper. Assign one column to each aspect of self as you write out the pros and cons of a decision. Then sit back from the parts-of-self processing you've just done and see what you've got to work with. At that point, you are back in what I (and some others in this space) call your "executive self." Your executive self is the leader of that internal team, the master processor who observes all the parts, without whom you couldn't work through a process like this.

## Involve Living, Breathing Others.

Which brings us to the next decision making tip – the value of gathering input. Your various parts-of-self aren't the only "others" who can provide assistance to decision making; so, too, can the walking parts-of-selves containers that you call your friends, co-workers and employees. Many decisions will be improved through the collection of

input from, or even sharing the decision-making rights with, relevant others. Particularly if those others either hold valuable information and/or have a stake in the outcome.

As one of those card-carrying, model-toting consultants I referred to earlier in this article, I call upon a favorite decision-making model around how to involve others that has proven useful to a number of coaching clients. It looks like this:



(Note: I believe this model was originally developed at Toyota as a part of its quality programs but I have been unable to find a clear trail of attribution. I learned it from some wonderful OD colleagues earlier in my career.)

Every position on this model is a viable approach to making a good decision. The most straightforward approach is to make a

decision entirely on your own (fondly referred to as a "D&A"). On the high end, you can also give the entire decision away to others, as long as any pre-conditions ("constraints") are made clear as you do so (e.g. "Team, I'm going to let you determine the sales targets for this product line. The only constraint you have to work within is that the full set of targets must, at a minimum, result in an average growth of 5%.").

The magic lies in choosing which decision-making approach to use and when.

**The Magic.** In deciding which approach to choose (e.g. "should I just decide on the new organizational structure and announce it or should I work with the leadership team to build it?" or "should I just break up with this woman or should I talk about it with her?"), you might first consider:

- how valuable the information is that the others may hold;
- whether their support is important to the success of the decision and
- the tradeoff between involving others and the time required to reach the decision.

Additionally, I believe you also should reflect on your values as a leader, parent, partner and/or friend as another consideration in choosing the approach you want to adopt. How do you want to be experienced by the others as you make

decisions over time? In other words, what would you say is the ideal distribution of all the decisions you have to make across those 5 points on the model? Would you like to be experienced by others as primarily a consensus-builder, with periodic forays into D&As? Or would you prefer to operate as a person who keeps to his/her own counsel most of the time?

Once you've set that vision for yourself, it can be useful to periodically perform an audit of how much time you spend in each position on the model. Are you engaging in too much D&A or giving too many decisions away? Or are you living up to your vision? Is your vision delivering the results that you want (or need) to deliver? You may need to make some adjustments.

**The Next Right Move.** Sometimes, decision making your way out of a tough corner is not about painstakingly working through your parts-of-self considerations or putting effort into engaging others in your decision making. Sometimes, the best decision-making process is to simply identify the next right move to make.

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Have you ever been confronted with a life or leadership decision so big, so complex and/or in such an uncharted part of the terrain that you feel lost, despite your best and most valiant efforts to wrestle it to the ground? Then rest your weary head (heart and gut) in the comfortable lap of Oprah Winfrey, whose [advice to a Stanford Business School class](#) had almost two million hits at my last check. Her guidance for navigating through times of feeling lost is to get quiet, then ask (and answer) “what’s the next right move?” After making that move, you just keep asking that same question and finding the next right move, repeatedly.

This approach is similar to a more rigorously researched method from the [HeartMath Institute](#) called the Freeze-Frame Technique.

Research into the use of Freeze-Frame and its effects on physiological markers of stress, self-reports of internal state, and a range of performance indicators demonstrates that:

*As a result of using Freeze-Frame, perception can shift markedly: individuals find they can think more clearly and often transform an inefficient, emotionally draining response into a proactive, creative one. With practice, this tool can be used effectively in less than one minute.* (extracted from [Science of the Heart](#), a free publication from the Institute of Heartmath)

The steps are as follows:

- 1.** Take a time out from the stressful situation or thought (e.g. working hard at making the decision)
- 2.** Engage in heart-focused breathing (shift your attention to your heart area and visualize drawing breath in through your heart and out through your solar plexus for some number of breaths)
- 3.** Activate a positive heart feeling (e.g. think of someone or something you appreciate or love, reflect on something you are grateful for)
- 4.** Ask yourself what an efficient, effective decision or action would be in the situation
- 5.** Quietly sense any change in perception or ideas that come forward (the shift may be subtle, requiring you to be patient and stay tuned in)

The bottom line here: once again, sometimes a vexing problem is not solved by relying on what we would traditionally call a “rational” decision making process.

**Take Time to Defrag.** I used to work with a very insightful coaching client who talked about periodically needing to defrag her life. It might not surprise some of you to know

that she is a senior IT leader (note: I have her permission to include her story in this blog). Not being particularly conversant in IT lingo, I asked her for a working definition of “defragging.” She described it as process of gathering up all the disparate fragments of information, data and experience that she collects during a busy time and making sense of them. To do so, she schedules some open time in her calendar and uses it to step back from the action. She reflects on significant issues and relevant information she has collected since the last defragging. Then she sits and waits for new patterns or insights to emerge.

By the end of the defragging process, she has potentially reorganized how she is viewing or approaching an issue. Her decision making improves, as does her sense of clarity and confidence.

As I wrote this blog, I quickly ran a definition search of “defrag” through google. Turns out defragging is not just a process to reduce fragmentation of the way data is stored on a computer’s hard drive. My [favorite related definition](#) came from the Urban Dictionary: “Antonym of [frag](#). i.e., to bring someone back to life.” You see, it turns out fragging is also a slang term for shooting an enemy in a single person shooter computer game. So defragging is a process of bringing back to life.

## Defragging is a process of bringing back to life.

I love this additional level of meaning to my client’s metaphor.

How much might all of us be “brought back to life” in a difficult decision-making situation by stepping away from the hustle and bustle of a busy day, or our concentrated efforts to make a big decision, or all the conversations we might be having with other people about it, to breathe deeply, sit quietly, and wait for the patterns or insights to emerge?

**Back to the Beginning.** Back to the scene that opened this article. What did that leader decide to do?

After we spent some time walking through the various trade-offs involved in whether to make a D&A, a consensus-based decision, or leverage the decision with constraints, we ended the session. At our next session, I asked him what had happened. He answered by sharing a version of the following: “Well, I thought about making the decision myself and almost did that. That would have been quick and easy. But then I was out doing some yard work this weekend when suddenly I had this feeling that I should direct the team to work on it together and bring their decision to me.”

He went on: "I've been building this team for some time now and I felt there was value in telling them to lock themselves in a room and figure it out together. I got some push back on it, particularly from the folks who are used to a more traditional hierarchy of decision making at the top, but my gut instinct told me to stay the course. So they did it. And came out a better team for it, I think. They will really stand behind that number now."

Excitedly, I described the head/heart/gut model to him, cueing on his reference to all three decision-making centers in the way he told his story. I mentioned that, coincidentally, I was writing an article on the very same topic. He sat musing for a minute or two. "Does this mean I will be featured in your next article?"

Why yes. Yes, it does. And my elephant and rider are aligned on that decision.



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