Ongoing Discussion "Thought Piece"

Decision Governance – Thought, Meta Cognition, and Emotional Sabotage

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SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

Decision making spans the spectrum from a conscious, deliberative thought to subconscious habitual, programmed response. Decisions are the root of our actions/inactions, and although not directly covered in workshops on the topics of problem solving and causal analysis, they are without question, the essence of these processes.
An overview of the way we as humans make decisions is to raise awareness of the individual preferential decision making process, which hopefully may inspire change that can result in better decisions. The better decision process will invariably translate into improved consequences. We also have to take into consideration that we are always changing, either for the better or the worse, and this includes the way we manage decisions. Change is inevitable, yet change alone without awareness carries a great risk. Advertisers know this and pave the change path for us, realizing a successful conversion from our bank account to theirs. Either we take the trouble to proactively introspect and change our habitual thinking patterns, biases, prejudices, etc., or we allow those external processes to change us even without our awareness. Your first decision: "Where do I place on the awareness scale?" This question may appear peculiar to some, thinking that the question is asking you to make a choice rather than a decision.

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, there is the obvious question; "which way are you going with your decision making capability?" You are born, grow, learn, experience, age and then die. I think that most people will agree that within these boundaries there may be a peak, and it is probably a short lived peak where highly profitable decision making is a feature or consequence of the life experiences that we are immersed in. No argument on the fact that when we are young we are poor at it, and when we get old, we again lose the cognitive agility required for it and we regress. So to ask the question of you now as to whether you are improving or regressing, would probably be equivalent to asking you which way the bus in figure 1 is moving?

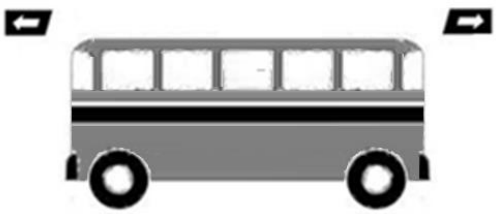


Figure 1: Which way is this bus going?

Most people would respond that the bus can be going in either direction, or that it isn't moving at all, just standing still. You might answer the question about decision making in a similar way indicating that depending on the context your decision making capability can go in either direction. Maybe you like to fancy the idea that it is standing still, high on a plateau of excellence. Like the bus problem, one needs to take on different perspectives to make a determination.

When it comes to important decisions, even when we go through the rigors of laying out all the options, weighing the possible consequences, and determining a reasonable course of action, we more often violate that self-made contract of reasonableness than to honor it. Self-prescribed improvement programs, like weight loss, fitness, smoking cessation, diet, relationship intimacy, education etc. fail to be fulfilled. There is another factor here besides rationale and logic, it is the emotive response. Plato's chariot allegory presents us with the idea that in our human condition we are comprised of three prime elements.

Figure 2: Image: Plato's Chariot Allegory

One is Reason, another is Desire and the third is Rationality. The imagery is intended to show that one horse is dark, unruly, seeks to act on impulsive desires, and is strong in emotion. The other horse is white, well bred, temperate, and dignified. These horses represent the drives and motives within each of us. The dark horse has to constantly be reined and whipped to keep it moving in the right direction because its tendencies are to bolt and fulfill its own desires, while the white horse responds to word and gentle admonition. It is the charioteer's job to keep them running together in the same direction. This may be navigating a battlefield or simply traveling from one place to another. This allegory relates the various elements of our essence in a unique way, and allows us to recognize that we are not totally rational logical, and that we are susceptible to spontaneous emotional responses. It requires the actions of the charioteer (reason) to moderate these elements of our nature.

1. An approach using lateral thinking

Thinking is the essential element in this quest to develop a more effective and profitable decision making process. In doing that I will loosely align the structure of this thought piece with Edward de Bono's "6 Thinking Hats" which promotes lateral thinking. That is lateral thinking as opposed to vertical thinking. For those who had trouble determining which way that bus in figure 1 is going, it is probably because they are habitual vertical thinkers. Lateral thinking is thus very much about standing back, looking at the big picture and understanding concepts. It also requires that you focus in on the parts that have perhaps been

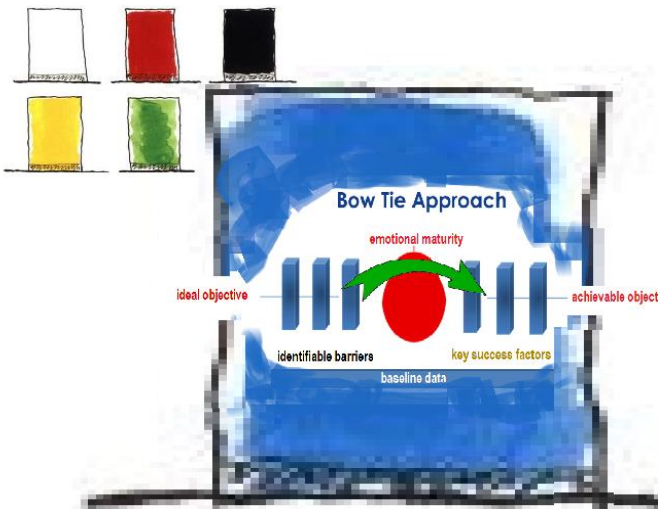
overlooked, challenging assumptions, and seeking alternatives. To be more simplistic:

- vertical thinkers – choose
- lateral thinkers – change
- vertical – looks for what is right
- lateral – looks for what is different
- vertical – one thing must follow directly from another
- lateral – makes deliberate jumps
- vertical – concentrates on relevance
- lateral – welcomes chance intrusions
- vertical – moves in most likely directions
- lateral – explores least likely directions

This 6 Hats approach employs positional thinking with a unique twist in that the positions taken are pre-established. It should come as no surprise to anyone reading this paper that they have already taken a position on this material and on me as a thought leader as well. It is a good exercise to take a moment to discover what that position is. If your immediate response is that you are bias free so far, you may want to sound an internal alarm, because that is not the way we are wired. The lateral thinking exercise will demonstrate the usefulness of what could be termed structured positional thinking. Using 6 Hats it's necessary to begin by establishing the meta-rules for the investigation. The 6 Hats are as follows; Blue Hat for the rules that govern the exploration, White Hat to explore the data/evidence, Black Hat to explore all the negatives, Yellow Hat to explore the positives, Red Hat to explore the emotional elements and finally the Green Hat to explore innovative paths for advancement, overcoming hurdles and navigating around barriers. This will force some meta-cognition, some thinking about our thinking. For the purposes of exploring this topic on Decision Governance, the rules will be to actively take 5 different positions. It is already taken that the Blue hat is established, which defined the rules for proceeding. The first position then is intent on engaging the reader to take a look at the facts, the data, and the real evidence. This forces the implicit question "how good am I at making decisions?" and is akin to the de Bono White Hat. Once we have looked at the evidence, we will move to the category of the Black Hat. This category requires that we explore and make the case for all the things that can go badly, that is, to reveal all the intrinsic elements of our psyche that will result in us concluding that we are not in need of improved Decision Governance, or more importantly, not capable. If the goal is to come through this exercise with an enlightened view and a plan (strategic objective) of being a better decision maker, then the Black Hat will reveal where the barriers and hurdles are. In order to prepare a reasonable plan of advancement, consideration will need to be given to the barriers (which cannot be overcome) and the hurdles (which can be overcome). In one case we will make plans to 'work around' and in the latter case, plans to 'overcome'. The next step will be to explore the 'success factors'. This is the category of Yellow Hat thinking. A category of strengths, skills, potentials, and assets that we have used to ensure that we will achieve an objective of better Decision Governance. Once we have laid out this terrain we will look to discover the emotional signals that we have been experiencing as we navigated through the previous exercises and get a reading on the present response from our emotive center. The title hints that our emotions act as saboteurs. This can be good or bad, depending on what decision we are confronted with. For most of us emotion is the black horse in Plato's chariot allegory, running in a direction that it seems to have chosen for itself and in spite of the clear directions we had set for it.

2. What does the evidence tells us?

White Hat. Try to take the position of a casual, non-judgmental observer. This view should include an overview of your entire life as far back as you can remember. Take into consideration things that people have told you about your personality and decision ability. That's not to say that the observations of others are accurate, only that the added information may be useful in finding some central theme to the way you approach and make a decision. Some simple introspection will reveal that you carry with you an abundance of experiences that still, after years and years of living, learning and life experiences, persist in having a profound influence on the way that you internalize information and make decisions. Whether it be the early adoption of some formal organized religion, past good/bad emotional experiences, influences by teachers, mentors, bullies, etc. they still have a great influence on judgment, choice and decisions. To be honest in this assessment one must consider things like financial failings, successes, failed relationships, job changes, epiphanies, trauma, etc. as well as the decisions that were avoided which resulted in accepting whatever circumstances fate would deliver. Such an approach can even be promoted, as does John Krumboltz in his theory of "Planned Happenstance". Although our attention is on how many decisions, non-decisions or



choices were the result of some cognitive decision making

Figure 3: 6 Hats using Bow Tie

process as opposed to the gold fish approach. It is also fair to consider what portion of these 'decisions' would fall into the category of 'luck', good or bad. This exercise of evidence collection is difficult, but yet like the direction of the bus, the critical information is there, and we will strive to surface it.

Figure 3 strives to aid this process by adding a visual. For those not familiar with this Bow Tie approach let me add a few quick words. It communicates that objectives are probably set in an ideal sense, and that it is likely that the achievable outcome will vary from the ideal. Psychocybernetics defines the path and how close we are able to come to the target. It also illustrates that we need to look at the barriers up front, so that any planning can take them into consideration and not risk them thwarting the key success factors. The centerpiece is the emotional element, and the green arrow the creative 'jump' taken to stymie any emotional sabotage.

3. Everything that can go wrong.

The Black Hat. Take the position of the cynic, the pessimist, the devil's advocate. Knowing that improved decision making can only help matters both immediately and in the future, what types of things can stop someone from serious consideration of this material and getting to a place of making better decisions? Probably the first thing that comes to mind is the egoist response. One thing that can derail the effort is a defense that being academically accomplished, or being in a position of authority, or having the title of leader or having been published, etc. somehow automatically qualifies one as a better decision maker than most. It could also be the emotional response, feelings that they must be good at this decision making process because they just feel it. Then again it may be a claim that others tell them how good they are making decisions thus no further work needed on that front. Its not easy to admit that as a decision maker there may be some flaws and biases that result in simply poor decisions. The point is that there are plenty of things that can stop this introspective process from being effective. Its hard work, it requires honesty, thinking, and then thinking about our thinking. Having this list of potential barriers and hurdles that can stop the process is important because it alerts us up front to the types of things we need to watch for. It is also a worthwhile exercise to revisit past goals that were abandoned and to try to understand why. This would be a good place to introduce the difference between goals, desires and commitment. One can have a great desire to accomplish something, and may even set specific goals, yet the failure to achieve the goal is most often in the failure to properly commit.

4. Everything that can go right.

Yellow Hat. We have in us and around us, many supportive elements that can lead us in the direction of better decisions and ultimately better consequences. We need to catalog them as key success factors. Some people are great at making commitments, and sticking to them. Perseverance and persistence are traits that are an asset. Being able to set goals and objectives in a meaningful way is also an asset. Making the time to pursue the goals is a positive way to support the initiative is a necessary condition. This deliberative, introspective process will require time and energy, so budgeting for it can is an important success factor. Some people are not so good at these things, and as a result may have had to resort to other means of establishing commitment. Some interesting approaches are to employ the help of others. For example, you could set up a reward/penalty system with trusted allies so that when you honor your commitment you get a reward, and when you violate it, you end up with a penalty. This is a way to make sure that things go right and because rewards (if setup properly) will trump penalties, and will thus make the effort a positive reinforcing experience. Reflecting on past similar positive experiences can also reveal things about oneself that are intrinsically positive in this regard.

5. Seemingly idiopathic emotional sabotage.

Red Hat. This is the emotional response which is manifest on multiple levels. On one level, using the Hats approach, we ask for the emotional reading that we get when we just consider this process of Decision Governance. It's the 'right here, right now' emotional assessment. On another level, argued by some very credible authorities, emotions are theorized to be at the root of all our decisions. What emotions do you think you could list? Most neuroscientists would probably agree that there are six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness and surprise. That seems to feel somewhat limiting. I'm not the only one that feels that way. For example, Emily Elert, who has published articles in magazines like Discover, Popular Science, Scientific American, etc., contends that there are an additional 21 emotions for which there are no English words. Feelings without verbalization, now there is a dangerous place to be! That might explain a lot of responses where we acted contrary to our reason, and without a readily recognizable way to express the underlying complex emotion. That could lead one to make the conclusion that the 'decision' was probably more reason that emotion. To make the case more compelling, we know from historical evidence and recent studies on brain damage to the area of the brain that is responsible for emotions will inhibit the individual's ability to make decisions. Take the case reported by Dr. Damasio, a neuroscientist/neurobiologist, University Professor at the University of Southern California. In one account of a particular patient who had a brain tumor which was surgically removed, it was discovered that tissue that was removed with the tumor had inhibited the patient's ability to emote. The inextricable resulting consequence of the emotive inhibition resulted in the patient not being able to make decisions. The patient was able to delineate and fully

summarize particulars about choices presented to them, but without their emotions to guide them, they were unable to make a decision and select one over the others. More recent studies in the discipline of neuroeconomics which studies the brain's role in buying and selling decisions sheds more light on this topic. Economists have embraced the idea in recent years that irrational psychology, rather than cool calculation, plays a key role in these decisions. The brain study goes further and suggests that emotions rule decisions almost completely. When laying out the Black Hat scenario it is highly unlikely that anyone would list emotion as a possible barrier to sound and profitable decision making. It is not difficult to find examples of this type of behavior even among the experts who study these disciplines. One example comes from Dr. Daniel Kahneman, who has been instrumental in bringing to us a new theory of Decision Making, tagged 'Prospect Theory'. He recounts his experience in setting about to develop a university curriculum on Decision Theory. He notes that although the data was clear in indicating that the chances of the new curriculum being accepted was slim, he and his collaborators were excited about it and forged on for an extended period of time developing it only to discover that it would not be implemented. Dr. Kahneman reports the decision to do the work in spite of data to the contrary as unjustified optimism, and makes the declaration that it was a mistake. He also testifies that it is a mistake that he will never make again (to ignore the baseline data). Yet, emotions being what they are, there is a good chance that he will have similar experiences in the future. This realm of emotion is apparently critical to the decision making process, and we would be well served to put a priority on its management. Taking another example, where obesity and diabetes are at epidemic levels in our society. We can say without hesitation that individuals do not want these conditions. They undoubtedly set goals and objectives to deal with them and spend lots of money trying to overcome them, yet it would appear that goals set using logic, reason and rationale is not enough to change unhealthy behavior. I would venture to say that what needs to be addressed is the emotional relationship with food. Another example of decision governance and emotional sabotage is the recent story that my niece had shared with me. Her and her husband enjoy camping, and as they get older they decided that using a tent was burdensome and that getting a pull along pop up camper would be a much better solution. So having made the decision, they set out to visit the local camper dealer. A few hours later they arrived home driving a RV. This happened in the fall, meaning they would really have no chance to use the RV this year, but would have to winterize it and store it. They did make one trip across 3 states, apparently driven by the emotion that compelled them to make the purchase, and came to the stark reality that the trip would have been cheaper had they took a flight and stayed at a hotel. Good salesman or lack of commitment on what they had actually agreed to when they set out in the direction of the camper salesman? A little bit of both, and a tip of the hat to the salesman who recognized the overwhelming power od emotional persuasion. Now having made the case for the inextricable significance of emotion in the decision making process, if one is to attempt to improve decision making, one has to address the somewhat confounding role that emotions have. I recall the story by Robert Bly, American poet, author, activist and leader of the mythopoetic men's movement, regarding a past relationship that he had. He recounts that his significant other at the time had expressed her felt emotions about him with ease. He was then asked "how do you feel about me?", and recounts that when he looked inside himself his emotions seemed more like hooded strangers who were moving about in a dim light, unrecognizable and for the most part, undefined. It is a step in the right direction to decide that we are all very similar in this respect. Simply knowing this although doesn't necessarily make us better decision makers. For example, when we set a goal we need to leverage our possible success by imposing an appropriate level of commitment.

6. Bringing it all together, and applying some creativity.

Green Hat. People are the product of a lifetime of 'programming', and to think that an individual can simply flip a switch and make a change in the way that they govern their decisions is highly unlikely. It requires a change in the way one thinks and the way one emotes. It is estimated that we make thousands of decisions on a daily basis. The majority of these decisions are at a very low level, driven by heuristics, habitual and ungoverned by our cognitive oversight. For example, deciding on whether to push the snooze button in the morning, brush your teeth or shower first, which cologne to use, etc. and this continues as you move from the house to the car to the place of employ and throughout the course of the day. Many of these decisions are seemingly automatic, and for the most part we don't even pay them any attention unless the routine is somehow unexpectedly disrupted, like when you discover that there is no toothpaste. We would like to address these 'auto pilot' controls because we can make improvements in the responses and get a more profitable result. This can be approached by enforcing a meta-cognitive routine. For the next week carry a pocket note pad with you, and every 15 minutes or so stop, register what it is that you are doing at that moment, and what it is you are thinking about while you are doing it. This serves as a good head check to discover where you are thought wise during the majority of the day. This exercise has the potential to make several improvements. In figure 3 the emotional maturity bubble is at the center of the illustration, intending to illustrate that everything revolves around it. There is a lot that can be said about this context of emotion, and anyone who has investigated the study of emotional intelligence will feel the connection and sense the benefit. This paper is only intended to open up a conversation on the topic of decision governance, meta-cognition and the inextricable influence

that emotions have on our decisions. The essence of this piece is to bring awareness to the forefront, recognizing that personal change will come as a result of a greater level of awareness. Figure 3 is intended to advise us that the emotional core is not something trivial and to make meaningful progress in thinking, decisions and emotional maturity, we will need to be creative in the way we establish our commitment. The idea is to deploy creative tactics that can override the emotional impulse. Following are some behavioral heuristics to watch for.

Priming – introducing a categorical feature can trigger behaviors reminiscent of that feature. Exposing students to words and images that vaguely have to do with old age causes them to walk slower.

Anchoring – comparative alternatives strategically positioned around a choice is meant to imply a supposed "norm". for example showing $149, $30 and $10 bottles of wine cause people to buy $30 bottle more often.

Framing - decisions get framed around a linguistic concept like customers seeing a sign "limit 12 per customer", will compel the customer to take 5 rather than the 2 soup cans they had on their shopping list.

Expectation - the mind makes models, and fits behaviors to the model, e.g. the placebo effect – people who are told an inert hand-cream alleviates pain will notice immediately a reduction in pain. Past studies on knee surgery testify to this profound effect, in that the group that only had some small incisions made to indicate surgery (but no surgery performed) had the same beneficial effect in pain reduction and mobility improvement that the group that did get the surgery.

Inertia - the mind does not like expending cognitive energy. Behaviors that uphold the perceived (or even synthetic) status quo are common. For example, college professors rarely change their retirement investment asset allocation from their initial selection.

Arousal - sexual or other forms or arousal will condition behaviors, like a picture of a smiling woman, that ended up selling more insurance policies to men more effectively than offering a 5% discount.

Loss Aversion - behaviors typically minimize loss rather than maximize gain because losing money brings more pain than winning the same amount of money brings pleasure – traders sell shares that have been going up sooner than shares that have been going down

Some further thoughts. It is good idea to employ a quick scan of the boundary conditions as well as to take a moment to do the head check and capture the resident thought/feeling when a decision is being considered. Reminding oneself of the first rule in life as it were the constant mantra; "nothing is ever as it appears to be". To more effectively deal with the seemingly idiopathic emotional sabotage, consider a routine script of replacement imagery as proposed in the practice of Rational Emotive Image Therapy (REIT). This practice puts a tested image in place of the present one and brings with it a desired shift in brain chemistry to avert the ungoverned emotional response. All of this is good advice, but a properly secured commitment is inarguably the ace in the hole. Enforcing the rules and making change requires commitment, and that in itself may require some formative causation for overcoming a lifetime of habitual neural reinforcement. The good news is that neuroplasticity is viable and effective; it just needs to be chosen.

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David is the senior Reliability Engineer on Corporate Quality staff at Volvo/Mack truck located in Hagerstown Maryland. An ASQ Validated trainer and frequent presenter at international symposia and conferences, David has delivered workshops, trainings and papers on a wide variety of topics that serve Reliability and Quality practitioners as well as those in management and leadership positions. David is an ASQ certified Reliability engineer and a Certified Quality Manager. David's academic credentials include an AAS in Electrical Technology and a BS in Electrical Engineering, with honors, from the Rochester Institute of

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