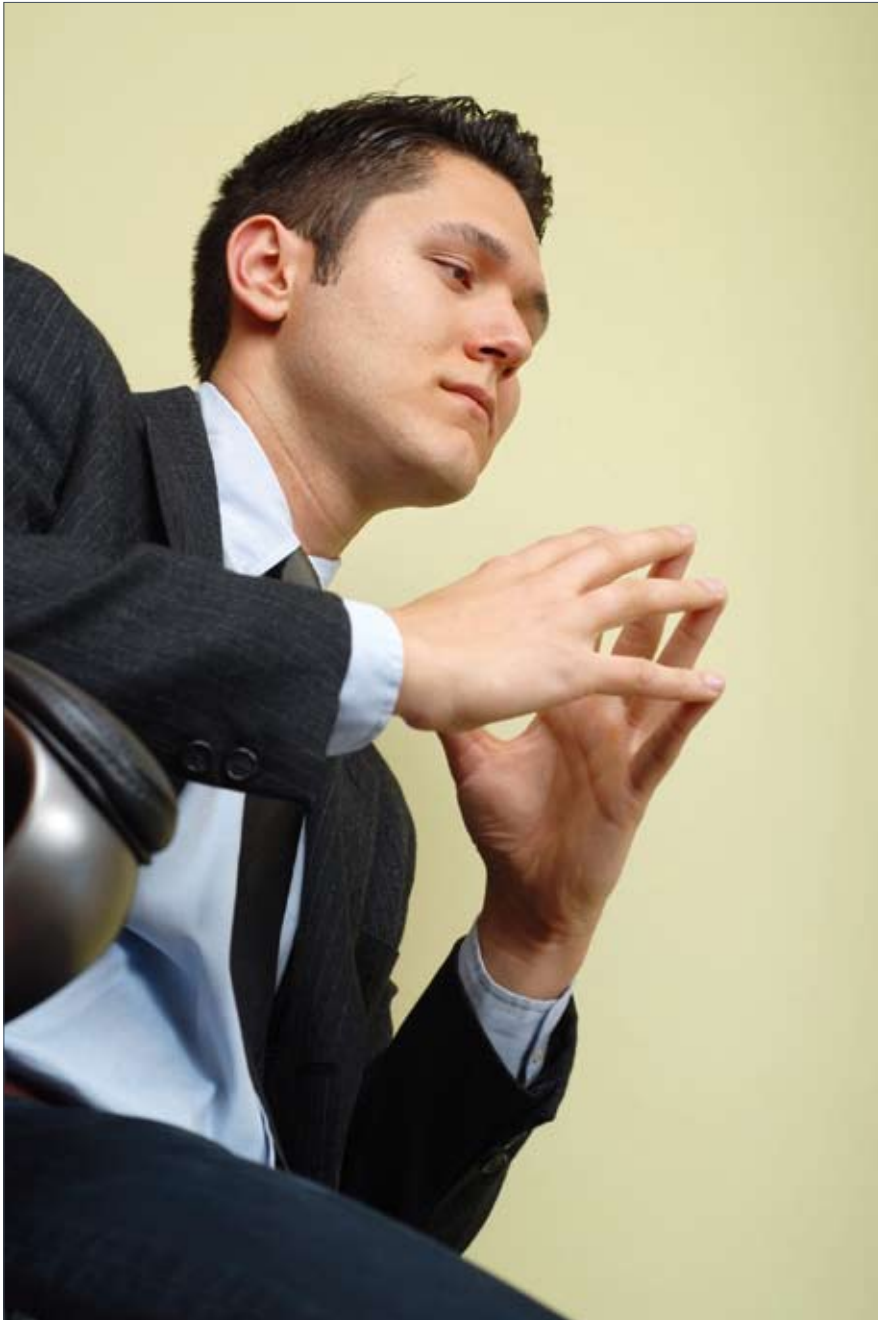


**D**ecision-making is often regarded as a kind of trait that people either have or don't have. Leaders are described as 'decisive'; other people get labelled 'indecisive'. It's my view that, while some individuals do seem to make decisions more easily than others, decision-making is a skill – or rather a set of skills – that can be learned.

So what are these skills? The first basic one is the ability to gather relevant information. The magic word here is 'relevant' – it's easy to glean mounds of facts and figures but which are the ones that really matter? Often the key information has nothing to do with either of these, but is about people. How are certain key individuals, 'stakeholders' to use the current buzzword, going to react to it? The ability

to sound people out in a gentle, tactful way that doesn't commit anybody to anything is a very valuable one. (Clearly, of course, there are legal and commercial limits to this. Fine – know what these are and work within them.)

The second is an ability to plan. It's a myth that a decision is a momentary thing. It is probably the case that there is a moment when the brain says 'yes, I'll do X!' but this is the



product of plenty of preparation and will then be followed by implementation, which is a major decision-making skill that I shall discuss later. The gathering of information – especially the ‘human’ information I described above – is a process that needs to be organised. You may also want to set aside some time to make the decision. Then implementation is very much all about planning.

Negotiation skills are also part of decision-making. One area (linked to planning) where this comes to the fore is the issue of time. People often want a decision from you fast. This suits them; for you, the best deal is often to wait a bit – maybe you need to gather more information. Deals often get better with time, anyway, as long as you can negotiate that time artfully.

Another key decision-making skill is vision. If I am faced with

a big decision, I always ask ‘what is this in service of?’ Anyone who has had to lay off staff to save a business will know that the big picture has to take priority, however unpleasant the short-term consequences.

Perhaps the most important skill of all is flexibility. It is a myth that good decision-makers are ‘decisive’ types who make decisions, usually quickly, then drive them through against all opposition. This is, in fact, usually a recipe for disaster. Good decisions leave some ‘wiggle room’ for implementation.

The reason for this is simple: all decisions are made with imperfect information. This is particularly important in the current situation, where things are changing very rapidly. The recent market turmoil has led to a complete change in views about the need to cut government spending, which a couple of months ago was seen as one of a number of options but which now seems to have become the only choice.

Whether this is a good thing or not is a debate I don’t want to get into but, as other European countries one by one began announcing budget-slashing measures, the argument for delaying cuts for a year looked ever weaker and my guess is, however the election had worked out, the government would have been pushed into making cuts this year. Had this been a Labour government, it would have been criticised for changing its mind but, actually, changing your mind when circumstances compel you to is good decision-making, not bad.

Decisions are models not theories: begin with a simple model, try it out, amend the model, try it out (and so on: estimate, test etc). I learned this the hard way, having to make big changes in my business during the credit crunch: conventional wisdom was no longer working and I needed to move away from

prevailing business theories to a more flexible approach.

Another key skill, or raft of skills, in implementation is the ability to communicate well with people. No decision of any importance is going to have a favourable impact on everybody and there will usually be some important people who will need convincing that the decision is right. Tact, diplomacy and simple respect are essential here.

Finally, good decision-makers have good self-knowledge. They know when they are 'congruent' about a decision – when they really have that gut feeling that the decision is right and that they are going to commit themselves to it. They also know when they are incongruent about a decision, and trust this feeling – if they are incongruent, they respect this reaction and wait for their unconscious mind to tell them exactly what the problem is, rather than beating themselves up for not being 'decisive'.

I have a saying: "A congruent decision is a good decision." Even if such a decision doesn't work out well, due to circumstances changing (or even poor implementation skills), people rarely regret congruently-made decisions. Decisions are how you stamp yourself on life – something we can all feel proud of doing, even if subsequent events don't turn out as we planned.

Actually, there is one further skill I'd like to mention and that is the ability to learn from one's own decisions, good and bad. Poor learners either learn nothing or use past bad decisions as sticks to beat themselves with rather than case studies from which to learn. Research shows that the brain is actually very good at learning from past experience – if we let it.

Any skill can be developed by practice and I have developed a kind of training gym for some of the above in what I call a decision simulator. The analogy

is with the flight simulators on which pilots learn (and which have caused a substantial fall in the level of air accidents caused by pilot error: simulated experience *does* teach). It is based on the concept of the 'well formed outcome' in NLP, a subject that I teach.

Use this to run through decisions in your life and you will soon find that a good decision-making process, and many of the skills above that go with it, become second nature.

The decision simulator is based on the following key questions:

#### **1 What is the specific outcome you want the decision to achieve?**

Many decisions falter because people focus on something they

## Good decisions leave some 'wiggle room' for implementation

want to avoid or stop happening, rather than aiming for a positive outcome.

#### **2 What specific evidence would prove you actually reached this outcome?**

The more specific you can be about the outcome, the more you can monitor your progress towards it, and the more motivated you will be in getting there. This is not just true for personal goals such as weight loss, but for business decisions. What, exactly, will you see, hear or feel when you accomplish the goal?

#### **3 Why is the outcome important to you?**

It is important to understand if the goal serves or violates your higher values or criteria to determine if you are really committed to making it happen. In the business world, aligning organisational objectives with personal goals is one of the most powerful ways of

encouraging staff to perform at their best.

A clear recent example has been the 'country or party' debate in the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties. It seems that both parties have chosen to decide in the context of national, rather than narrow party, interest.

#### **4 What could go wrong? And what could you do about that?**

All too often people see these questions as a bit of 'downer', reducing energy and enthusiasm for a hard-fought-for goal. But answering this question intelligently builds flexibility. The more you are aware of potential pitfalls in advance, the more you can structure your decision to take account of these.

Arguably, the decision-maker needs to wear different 'hats', that of a critic who comes up with answers to this question, then that of a creative thinker who will come up with ways round these answers.

#### **5 What are the first three steps?**

Some people find implementation very easy and will immediately put together a plan and process to get started. Others often remain in 'big picture' mode and go around the problem, sometimes ending up simply ruminating. It's time to put your mind in gear and work out the implications of some practical first steps.

This is another 'hat' that the decision-maker has to wear: not the gloomy critic or the creative dreamer, but the planner who thinks things through methodically, step by step.

#### **6 How does it seem in my head and in my heart?**

This is the congruence question. Note that it is not always the case that all three have to align. The decision to sack staff may never feel good, but if the figures make sense and your gut tells you that you have to do this, you can proceed. Good decisions are sometimes taken with a heavy heart, but rarely with



the taker's intuition – for that's what this is about – shouting 'NO!'

If all this talk of intuition and heart sounds rather unscientific, consider the latest findings in neurology. Research on how we actually make decisions has been revolutionised by various scanning and brain-imaging techniques, and this research has in turn changed our model of decision-making from one that is purely rational to one that is driven by 'informed emotion'. Experiments show areas of the brain 'lighting up' as the brain unconsciously considers a decision: a kind of inner debate is going on. More spectacular still, the brain appears to decide before our consciousness is 'informed' of the fact.

Other experiments show that people who have become cut off from their emotions become incapable of making decisions. Our brain has a big and specifically human neocortex

## Decisions are how you stamp yourself on life – something we can all feel proud of doing, even if subsequent events don't turn out as we planned

sitting on top of a limbic system similar to other mammals' brains. The former is essentially rational and the latter emotional (though one must be careful of over generalising here!), and the main link between them is an area behind the eyeball called the orbitofrontal cortex. When this is damaged, people appear to be highly rational but actually become incapable of deciding even the most basic things.

Decision-making, then, is a complex skill, involving many

sub-skills and the 'whole' person, not just a little computer at the top of the body. This makes it an exciting and challenging skill set, but it remains one that can be learned. Even the best decision-maker is still a student of the art.

I find this encouraging and consoling in these difficult times: fast-changing and often apparently deteriorating circumstances do not doom us to making poor decisions, just challenges us to craft good ones that are well informed, well planned, not hurried by others, in line with a vision, flexible, implemented with tact and which we believe to be wise, not just intellectually but with our whole self. And it's an art at which we can get continually better. ■

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