



## Intuition in Decision Making

The classical model of decision making tells us to analyse the problem thoroughly, list all the options, evaluate those based on a set of common criteria, figure out how important each criterion is (weighting), rate each option on each criterion, and do the math. Your decision is simply the option with the highest score (an extra column with a weight can be added for comparisons that include probability, next to relevance). This sounds comforting, thorough, rational, systematic and scientific, but it is a myth and does not work well in the real world under time pressure data scarcity. Even if we apply it, we usually know from the beginning which option we really prefer, and if another comes out from the math, we start tweaking the evaluation criteria.

	Weight (A)	Option 1		Option 2		...		Option n	
		Rate (B)	Value (C=A*B)	Rate (D)	Value (E=A*D)	...	...	Rate (X)	Value (Y=A*X)
Criterion 1									
Criterion 2									
...									
...									
...									
Criterion n									
			SUM (C1...Cn)		SUM (E1...En)		...		SUM (Y1...Yn)

So analytical decision making is flawed, or at least insufficient. What other options do we have to further our skills in good decision making? We see at least three dimensions, two of which we will discuss below (while we touch on the third):

- Intuition based on pattern recognition, which can moreover be trained
- Intuition based on openness and connection, which too can be trained
- Training mind and heart to be calm and spontaneous to make decisions

### Intuition based on pattern recognition

In his book “The Power of Intuition” (2003), Gary Klein presents that “Recognition Primed Decision Making” (RPD) is by far the most common basis for making tough decisions (ranging from 80% to 96% in different groups of professions), and states that this is rightly so. But first: What is RPD? It means that, based on previous experience, that in the situation requiring a decision, the decision maker observes essential cues (which may be probed through short questions), that are then recognised to form patterns, that then activate action scripts, or decisions. The interesting thing is that, contrary to what we are taught in analytical



decision making, alternatives are rarely considered, or if they are, it is because an earlier option is rejected, so that there is no comparison taking place. It can be compared to how the immune system “decides” to accept or fight a substance. If it recognises it as similar to a substance that led to trouble in the past, the immune system will ring the alarm and produce anti-bodies. Infants who have a small “experience base” in recognising substances, have a weak immune system and are therefore vulnerable to diseases.

Research by Isenberg further lists reasons why RPD rather than analytical decision making (which is the prime focus of education and management literature) is and should be the prime method applied by executives:

1. Intuition is needed to sense a problem as a problem in the first place
2. It allows for speed, bypassing elaborate routines
3. It integrates pieces of information into a sense-making holistic image
4. It can be used as a check on analytical decision making

This is not to say that RPD has no flaws or drawbacks – in fact it does. The danger is that by acting from guts feelings you simply confirm your own biases, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. “Minh is unreliable, I should give him only minor responsibilities... I have treated him like this for considerable time, and he seems to disrespect and avoid me, to I must be right in my assessment that he is hiding something.”

Moreover, a challenge is how to speed up the process of building up the experience base that experts have. Klein proposes that you fill in the following table, and design your own learning process for decision making:

**Decision requirement table**

Identify a critical, difficult and frequent decision or judgement you need to face:

.....

What makes this decision difficult?	What kind of errors are often made?	How would an expert make this decision different from a novice?

How can you practice and get feedback to help you make this decision next time?

.....

Note that this advice has radical implications for education that are currently not heeded to. Instead of having medical students do their internships and see rare diseases just the rare cases that they show up spontaneously (and thus adding very little to their experience base to recognise the symptoms forming a pattern), they could be exposed to hundreds of pictures in a database and having to screen healthy from sick persons with an unusually high percentage of sick ones.



For information also note that it takes some effort to benefit and learn from the experience base of another person. While the outer symptoms you and the expert look at are the same, you see nothing where the expert might see great significance in subtle deviations. Focussed as he or she is with that, however, it is often not obvious to them at all, why it is not obvious to you. Klein notes that in interviews with expert decision makers they frequently made rather rhetorical statements about what made them stand out, which he advises to pay little attention to.

Finally note that intuitive and analytical decision making each have their niche. So the point is to recognise which style is applicable in a given situation (which in itself will be a RPD). Some hints:

Situation	Example	Decision type
Complex situations you are intimately familiar with	Shall we accept the offer or try to agree a better price?	Intuitive (RPD)
Trivial (but the point is to recognise it as trivial)	Which tie shall I wear today?	Flip a coin
Complex factors you do not but can get to know about	Should I invest in Coke or Pepsi for best returns?	Analytical. Study facts, figures and trends

### Intuition based on openness and connection

While Klein makes a strong case that the intuition he talks about is based on (subconscious) experience rather than on supernatural magic, other management practitioners do believe that the basis of sound decisions they make is the result of being “in touch” with reality in ways that go beyond thoughts and past experience.

To give a concrete example: In systemic organisation (and family) constellations, a coach can help a client sense the current situation. With a minimum of words, which are used just to test and confirm intuitive assessment, the client can come to experience the feelings of himself and other major actors and factors in a challenging situation. The essential intention is *not* to role play (acting as if), but through silence to sense the actual situation. This phenomenon, further described in our syllabus “Systemic Constellations”, is explained by some authors as the result of tapping in to a “knowing field” (refer to e.g. to “Presence” by Peter Senge et al, or “The knowing field: Family constellations as mental and energetic healing”, Albrecht Mahr), although alternative explanations could be thought of for the same phenomena.

Of course a “knowing field” explanation is no longer far removed from the subject of religion (where people also report getting attuned with a state of mind beyond their personal ego). In the West religion has been separated from science for the past centuries – but further elaboration on sameness or differences goes beyond the scope of this syllabus. The only point we wanted to raise here is that besides RPD, we acknowledge that there seem to be other very different types of valid and valuable intuition.



## Training the mind that makes decisions: Calm and spontaneous

Below we share some ideas, but will not attempt at a comprehensive literature overview, as there are many (religious) sources on this topic of developing a healthy mind, capable of good decision making. As discussed above, much of the traditional management literature and advise on decision making suggests that one should make decisions based on assessing their anticipated effect rather than based on freedom or ethical conviction. This requirement to compare the impact of projected options, requires that we calculate, guess, estimate, speculate and predict the outcomes of different courses of action, and then pick the action that best serves your (possibly selfish) purposes.

According to many authors and traditions that pay attention to the person who makes decisions, the “guestimation” approach leads to a fearful, feeble, and flickering mind. It necessitates lots of projection and arguments, and it steals our independence, putting us at the mercy of the outside world. It focuses on our circle of influence rather than on own strengths; it leads to dependence rather than independence; it generally seeks profit rather than right action; it relies on external facts rather than inner knowing, and it makes us lean to the future rather than live in the present.

A few examples may illustrate this: How do you choose the flavour of your ice-cream, your brand of soap, or your partner? Do you choose chocolate because you like that more than vanilla (but then keep wondering whether vanilla would not have been better), or do you take chocolate because you love chocolate, period? Do you float a tender to get the cheapest soap meeting minimum standards, so that you can easily defend your decisions? Do you choose Fluffo over Bluffo because statistical figures indicate that Fluffo delivers better value for money, or do you simply choose Fluffo as it seems it will serve the purpose well? Do you choose Huong over Catharine Zetta Jones because she is in reach (trying to forget that Catharine’s shapes are superior)? Or do you go for Huong because you love to share your life with her?

Many spiritual sources seem to concur on the view that our decisions can be based on spontaneous insight, once we have first tamed our mind. An example may serve to illustrate again:



### **An account of spontaneous decision making**

*“Once I literally ran after an assistant who habitually disobeyed my instructions. Knowing my insecurities, he ruled rather than served me. As he walked away I went after him, stopped him and took him firmly by the arm. It cleared the air – I felt so relieved at that time... Finally I had dared to take a stand. Yet my assistant (instigated by other staff) also drafted an official complaint about me...”*

*Since that event I have wondered endlessly whether I did the right thing in following my intuition - and whether my inclination was pure, or whether it was mainly distorted by ego and anger. I looked for external confirmation or approval, while my inner answer was loud and clear. I cannot rationalise and prove my right, but in this particular case I personally believe I cut a sick pattern. And I recall with gratitude that it felt simply liberating. So it appears that it was the right thing for me to do, even as it may seem wrong from a legal, conventional point of view. It was wonderful and liberating not to allow someone else to play with me, and to dare make a move. And I was willing to face the consequences it might have. But, just for your information, the conflict with my assistant was easily settled and he withdrew his complaint in a joint meeting with our common superior.*

Maybe a good way to look at it is to say that often when we have to decide between alternatives, the preoccupation with what is “right” or “best” is unnecessary. There may not always exist a “best” option and decision, let alone that another decision would be “wrong”, “bad”, “stupid” or “sinful”. The other options may at the worst simply be less beneficial. Our wish to take a good decision should not make us worried to the extent that we always double-check before getting into action.

With a good conscience we can proceed and trust that we will get a result which will be workable. What if the result is unpleasant? Well, then we take it from there! A well known management motto says “There are no mistakes, there is only feedback” (and “the difference between a failure and success is perseverance”). Like in driving a car, when you negotiate a bend: If you steer sharper than needed, you don’t immediately crash. In the next moment you will observe where you are heading and can correct. We can trust the world to help us. That insight and attitude can be a great relief.