Chapter 6
Decision Making and Problem Solving

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

<div align="right">T. S. Eliot</div>

Abstract A reasoning life strategy involves making judgments or decisions by deciphering information and sources. We develop a decision-making style, a characteristic way of choosing between alternatives. Cost–benefit analysis is a reasoning strategy weighing benefits and deficits (negative outcomes). Diminishing marginal utility refers to a leveling off, a point where more effort would be needed to produce a decidedly worthwhile benefit. Problems involve uncertainty and risk. Four steps in the problem-solving process are recognition, analysis, action, and evaluation. Differences in adaptive and innovative individuals to problem solving are discussed.

What Is Decision Making?

A reasoning life strategy involves making judgments or decisions on the basis of deciphering certain cues. We make all kinds of judgments about what is success. We make social judgments about how individuals, including ourselves, may act.

> There is something different in the air these days: I feel it when I talk to business leaders, give speeches at high school and college campuses, and engage in conversation with fellow patrons at coffee shops. People are hungry for success – that's nothing new. What's changed is the definition of that success. Increasingly, the quest for success is not the same as the quest for status and money. The definition has broadened to include contributing something to the world and living and working on one's own terms. When I started TOMS, people thought I was crazy. In particular, longtime veterans of the footwear industry (shoe dogs, as they're called) argued that the model was unsustainable or at least untested – that combining a for-profit company with a social mission would complicate

and undermine both. What we've found is that TOMS has succeeded precisely because we have created a new model (Mycoskie 2011, p. 18–19).

Is there something different in the air these days? Consider the following.

> Judgment problems great and small are an essential part of everyday life, What menu items will I most enjoy eating. Is this book worth reading? Is the boss in a good mood? Will the bungee cord snap? These and other common judgment problems share a similar structure: On the basis of cues, we make judgments about some target property. I doubt the integrity of the bungee cord (target property) on the basis of the fact that it looks frayed and the assistants look disheveled and hungover (cues). How we make and how we ought to make such evidence-based judgments are interesting issues in their own right. But they are particularly pressing because such predictions often play a central role in decisions and actions. Because I don't trust the cord, I don't bungee jump off the bridge (Bishop and Trout 2005, p. 24).

Decisions are conclusions or judgments about some matter. They vary in importance and intensity. Consumers use information to make buying decisions. They get the information from a variety of sources and some are more market-driven or market-aware than others. As stated in previous chapters, social influence research has gathered considerable evidence that majority sources (leaders) are usually highly influential. On the other hand, "a high need for uniqueness undermines majority influence. Need for uniqueness (a) is a psychological state in which individuals feel indistinguishable from others and (b) motivates compensatory acts to reestablish a sense of uniqueness" (Imhoff and Erb 2009, p. 309). Thus, we think if everybody thinks or acts a certain way there must be something to it, yet we also desire to make original choices or to be different. In Asch's (1956) seminal study, he found that a quarter of subjects would not yield to majority influence. In fact some participants revealed that they received pleasure from being different, from not conforming. Cultural differences exist in the need for uniqueness which is thought of as generally positive in Western societies but may be deemed deviance in East Asian societies (Kim and Markus 1999).

Critical Thinking: Desire for Uniqueness versus Conformity
Can you recall specific events when you conformed to the majority (did what most did or thought) and also times when you were unique or different from the crowd? Erica Jones decided to be different for her prom so she made a dress out of duct tape. She was the center of attention and the local newspaper ran her photograph. Erica has since become an architect working on the 40th floor of a high rise in a city far from her hometown. Can you think of other examples of non-conformist clothing or appearance?

Decision making involves choosing between two or more alternatives. Planning involves a series of decisions leading to action. Implementing is putting those plans into action. We develop a decision-making style, a characteristic way of

making decisions. Someone may be quick and impulsive while another is deliberate and slow, mulling over decisions before acting. The first person may say to the other "Hurry up and make up your mind." Decision-making style is linked to personality. Consider how the following personality traits might affect decision making:

- Compulsiveness
- Excessive neatness
- Open-mindedness
- Innovativeness
- Confidence
- Courage
- Honesty

A decision may be about someone you want to spend more time with or get to know better. Maintaining social connections are lifelong challenges. As adults, not everyone you love or like is in the same place at the same time. To increase the amount of time you spend with people you care about consider:

- Who it is: Spouse, partner, family, friends.
- Distance
- Work or school schedules
- Interests shared in common
- Cost
- Amount of entertaining or travel desired

As people move away from hometowns or home bases such as campuses or a long time workplace, then the question is how to meet new people and establish new relationships? One suggestion is to join classes, clubs, and organizations; volunteer and entertain more; and go out of the house to places where people gather. One club at a large state university found the best way to meet others and gain new members was to hand out popsicles on a hot day at noon in the student Union courtyard. It did not cost them much and was a great success and a lot of fun too. As another example, an out-going person, Emily, found herself in this position in a new part of the country with a new job and no near family or friends. She heard a speaker at a women's forum put on by the Chamber of Commerce and was so impressed with her, she talked to her afterward and said "We will be great friends." The speaker was taken aback by the boldness of this statement but it turned out to be true, after another shared organization event or two they did become friends.

At retirement, the greatest losses that many people experience are the losses of a regular schedule and the social interaction that work provides. It is important before retirement to take an active role in building and maintaining support networks outside of the workplace. This involves making thoughtful decisions and reaching out in new ways. A former professor found she missed teaching so much that she signed up to be a substitute teacher at a local private school for grades K-12.

Thinking About Others

It is one thing to make decisions for yourself, it is another matter to decide what is best for others. A relevant expression is "try walking around in someone else's shoes." Being in a decision-making role for others could include positions in the ministry, urban planning, communities, parks and recreation, schools, and families. Anything to do with transportation, activities, or schedules involves decisions. In families, there are all kinds of cooperative decision making from what to eat to where to live. We have heard the term boomerang phenomenon referring to adult children returning to live with their parents. There is another trend called parachuting parents referring to parents coming to live with their grown children. Consider the following case study.

> **Case Study: Multigenerations Living Together**
> Chip and Alicia Hardin found out her mother was going to come live with them after the sudden death of Alicia's dad. This made for some quick adjustments and advice seeking.
> "The typical home is designed for families and commuting to school and work, but an aging parent may face boredom, isolation and lack of resources," notes David Baxter, senior vice president of the research and consulting company Age Wave. "Consider availability of health care services, transportation, and whether your parents will be able to easily visit friends." He says. "Don't just ask yourself what your day will be like with your parent in your home – ask what *their* day will be like."
> Source: Jennifer Pellet. (Special Family Issue, Fall 2014). 3 Generations Under 1 Roof.
> *Merrill Lynch Advisor*, p. 27.

Difficulty Making Decisions

Not believing in oneself, self-doubt can cloud the ability to make decisions and move forward. Self-ambivalence can lead to indecisiveness because a person is experiencing a conflicted attitude toward self. Being unsure over and over again can indicate self-ambivalence. Any big life change such as a new job or living in a new place or retirement can bring to the surface the plusses and minuses of one's decision-making ability. For example, George on graduating from college landed a major job at a company headquarters but it was over a 1000 miles away from where he was brought up and went to school. Over and over again his friends and family expressed concern about how he would adjust to the weather and cultural change but he assured them he would be fine. He had no self-doubt and was looking forward to the new job and apartment.

The fear of making decisions is called decidophobia, mostly it is about fear of failure. The cause can be too many choices leading to confusion or a decision with no best outcome. A person, can in a sense, be frozen from making a choice and acting on that choice. They may say they need more time. It can be a learned form of behavior that can be worked with so things move forward. It can be a form of helplessness or stem from a form of perfectionism. Talking decisions over with others can help the person who feels unable to make a decision when one is clearly called for as in the case of a looming deadline.

Peter and Hall (1969) proposed that indecisiveness sometimes occurs because people reach a point in their work when they can no longer successfully function. This idea was named the Peter Principle and it can refer to people who have been promoted beyond their level of competence. It does not have to be applied only to employment situations, one sees this at work in politics, homes, organizations, and communities. Thousands of people in the U.S. every year go to the emergency room from falling off ladders. They take that one more step with no one holding the ladder and fall.

Decisions in Crisis and in Complexity

Jonah Lehrer, the author of *How We Decide*, starts his book this way in the Introduction:

> I was flying a Boeing 737 into Tokyo Narita International Airport when the left engine caught on fire. We were at seven thousand feet, with the runway dead ahead and the skyscrapers shimmering in the distance. Within seconds, bells and horns were blaring inside the cockpit, warming me of multiple system failures. Red lights flashed all over the place. I tried to suppress my panic by focusing on the automated engine-fire checklist, which told me to cut off fuel and power to the affected areas. Then the plane began a step bank. The evening sky turned sideways. I struggled to steer the plane straight (p. xiii).

Lehrer goes on to explain he was on a flight simulator that allows you to investigate your own decisions. He says, "In the end, the difference between my landing the plane in one piece and my dying in a fiery crash came down to a single decision made in the panicked moments after the engine fire. It had all happened so fast, and I couldn't help but think about the lives that would have been at stake had this been a real flight. One decision led to a safe landing; the other to a fatal stall… there's a thin line between a good decision and a bad decision" (p. xiv).

Philosophy has sometimes been called the art or science of wondering. People have wondered about how they make decisions for a long time. The ancient Greeks assumed humans are rational meaning they can analyze alternatives and weigh pros and cons. The problem is that this is limited because not all decisions are internally made, many are altered by social influence, other people's opinions, news, weather conditions, and all sorts of things outside the body. Feelings, affect, and relationships come into play. "Whenever someone makes a decision, the brain is awash in feeling, driven by its inexplicable passions. Even when a person tries

to be reasonable and restrained, these emotional impulses secretly influence judgment" (Lehrer 2009, p. xv).

Decisions and Goals

> The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.
>   Eleanor Roosevelt

We have had goal discussions in previous chapters. Goals involve a journey and they require decisions along the way. Goal seeking should involve interest and enjoyment in what is going on. Goals change.

> People often ask me what I consider to be my goal at TOMS. The truth is that it's changed over the years. When we first began, the goal was to create a for-profit company that could help relieve the pain and suffering felt by children around the world who do not have shoes. And that objective continues to be a powerful driver for me and everyone else at TOMS. But recently my attitude has shifted. Today I would say that my goal is to influence other people to go out into the world and have a positive impact, to inspire others to start something that matters, whether it's a for-profit business or a non-profit organization (Mycoskie 2011, p. 182).

The right goal will spark curiosity and the desire to learn more. Procrastination is less likely to occur if the goal seeker really cares what happens. They are motivated to reach the goal. It can be diagrammed this way:

Vision (Dream or Idea)-------Plan-------Action---------Tracking--------Achievement

Goal strategy can be about promotion or prevention. In promotion, the person seeks speed over accuracy. The person may paint a room quickly to get it done but miss a few spots. A prevention-minded person will get the room painted but in a slow, purposeful way so mistakes do not have to be corrected. How does this play out in other life activities?

> Promotion-focused goals lead to energetic and enthusiastic motivation in the shorter term but can be less adaptive when in long-term maintenance. Prevention-focused goals, on the other hand, remind us that slow and steady can sometimes win the race. For example, in two studies that looked at success rates in programs for smoking cessation and weight loss, promotion-minded people had higher quit rates and more weight loss in the first six months, but prevention-minded people were better able to not light up and keep off the weight over the following year. The best strategy might be to approach a difficult goal with a promotion focus, concentrating on what you have to gain by quitting smoking (or losing weight, or landing a new job), and then once you have achieved it, tackle maintenance with a prevention focus so that your hard-earned gain doesn't slip away (Fuglestad et al. 2008, 260–270).

To further connect decision making and goals, consider an entrepreneurial person—someone with dream or a vision and a plan. The first steps in reaching goals

are to define the goals (for example, own a business or company or set up a trust fund for children) and then to establish milestones for reaching them. Goals have attributes as described in chapter three, here they are again with some additional ones:

- Specific
- Desirability
- Intensity
- Priority (which are most important)
- Resource allocation
- Timebound (set a deadline, completion in two years? Five years?)
- Flexible (open to change and alteration)
- Actionable
- Realistic (how much money or energy will it take to bring your vision to life?)

Critical Thinking: What Do You Want to Achieve?

First, answer the title question "What do you want to achieve?" You might have several things you want to achieve but for this critical thinking exercise, pick one and be specific. What is a reasonable deadline for achievement? What action steps do you need to take? What might happen (obstacles) to stall goal achievement? How will you keep yourself on track? Here is an example, an Associate Dean of a college wants a change and a higher salary and decides he wants to be Dean at another university and in one year applies for Deanships at five universities. He gets one interview and the other four do not invite him for interviews. In the end, all five turn him down. What should he do next? Check the list of goal attributes and see if there are some answers there.

Regarding achievement, consider these remarks by Psychologist Heidi Halvorson:

> Your beliefs about your strengths and your weaknesses play a large role in determining the goals you set for yourself. If I believe that I'm good at math and science, then setting myself the goal of becoming an engineer makes sense for me. If I believe that I am uncoordinated and slow, then trying to make the varsity basketball team probably doesn't make so much sense. Our beliefs about our abilities influence what we think is possible – and what we might realistically be able to achieve (2011), p. 33.

Also consider this life story from Halvorson:

> When I was twelve, I begged my parents to buy a piano, and I took about a year of piano lessons. Then I realized that I would have to work really, really hard to become even a halfway decent pianist, and I quit. It's a decision that I have always regretted. You see, because I quit, I robbed myself of all the enjoyment and satisfaction I could have gotten from playing the piano, even if I never played particularly well (2011), p. 36.

Avoiding Mistakes

Setting goals is such a positive experience but actually achieving goals as the Halvorson story illustrates is another matter. Buying a piano was a mistake.

There are all kinds of mistakes. There's real estate you should have bought and people you shouldn't have married. There's the stock that tanked, and the job that didn't work out, and that misguided attempt to save a few bucks by giving yourself a haircut and then there are the errors of other people (Hallinan 2009, p. 1).

We spend a lot of time trying to make sense of the world, to do this we sift through information, make choices, and have preferences. For example, many of us have a favorite color or number. For many Americans that color preference is blue and the number seven. A five-year-old when asked his favorite colors said red, blue, and golden. On a situation comedy television episode of The Big Bang Theory, the lead character named Sheldon Cooper, a theoretical physicist, says the number nine is really a four (meaning he ranked it a four in preference). Our expectations, biases, or preferences shape our world view, what we think should happen or in Sheldon Cooper's case his vision of the true reality. Realizing within ourselves these expectations, biases, and preferences are part of the solution to avoiding mistakes. If a person knows they are impulsive or odd (not mainstream in approach) then he or she can try to slow down on important decisions.

Author Joseph Hallinan says, "We happen to be very good, for instance, at quickly sizing up a situation. Within a tenth of a second or so after looking at a scene, we are usually able to extract its meaning, or gist. The price we pay for this rapid fire analysis is that we miss a lot of details. Where the problem comes in is that we don't think we've missed anything: we think we've seen it all" (2009, p. 4). Listening more and saying less is a solution in unexpected or new situations. Sebastian makes it a point to say very little at staff meetings when there is a new boss. He has learned from past experiences that his quick remarks are not always appreciated and come back to haunt him.

A solution, then, to minimizing mistakes is to learn from experience including engaging in hindsight analysis as Sebastian has done. Certain professions make hindsight an everyday necessity such as in accounting, in finance, in airlines, in medicine, and in the military. It is important to figure out what went wrong to avoid future mistakes and save money or lives.

Cost–Benefit Analysis and Sustainable Consumption

Decision makers try to minimize the cost of their decisions. They weigh the pros and cons, assessing the potential for success. Cost–benefit analysis is a reasoning strategy that permits one to gauge the tradeoffs in decisions weighing the positives (benefits) against the negatives (the costs). By placing a dollar value on a certain option or direction it helps the decision maker determine if a course of action

is worth the resources it is going to take. Does the outcome justify the resources spent? Since other resources besides money should be considered there is a drawback to strictly looking at costs, but it is a starting point in problem situations. Should a university retain a faculty member versus hiring a new faculty member? What are the start-up costs involved in hiring a new faculty member? Will they want a laboratory or studio or assistants, for how long and how many?

Sustainable consumption is the subject of much debate and decision making at the individual, community, and organizational level. "Sustainable consumption is a field characterized by complex system relations that do not allow prescribing easy solutions for changing consumer behavior…We advocate for a more comprehensive and effective conception that goes beyond the narrow focus of training skills, providing information, and testing for results" (Fisher and Barth 2014, p. 193). What are the costs and benefits associated with the forming of a Sustainability Center or Institute on a college campus? The goal of the institute could be to enhance campus sustainability efforts as well as to bring together and synthesize the extensive knowledge and expertise of faculty and staff—to provide real solutions to some of the world's greatest and immediate environmental needs. Experts can earn Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) accreditation and in due course lead such centers or institutes. A director of such a center or institute will have a salary (a cost) and will probably have staff members, office space and equipment, and a budget (other costs). The benefits would be derived from outreach and outcomes.

Travel is another good example of how to apply cost–benefit analysis. It can provide solitude and rest, adventure, relaxation, and companionship. A group tour has a built-in social network and schedule but would not provide the solitude of an isolated mountain cabin. A vacation planner would have to look into cost and estimate how much benefit/happiness would be derived. First the person considers the reason behind the travel and then moves on to the destination (perhaps open, perhaps specific), then the how to get there decisions, then the length of time involved, and whether it will be solo travel or involve others. Destinations vary greatly by cost. Elaine figured out that being a bridesmaid in a wedding was going to cost her $1500 for the dress, flight, hotel, and other expenses. In five years she had been a bridesmaid four times and said it was difficult to keep up with these expenses as a newlywed herself and just getting going in the job market.

Decisions should have utility, a use. A central economic decision rule is that a rational person seeks to maximize utility. Through repetitive decisions, skills should increase. The more we do something, the more automatic it becomes—the more it is controlled by unconscious thought. Goals can be triggered by cues in the environment. Someone says something and the person hearing it is reminded of someone they have to call or a task they need to accomplish. Another example is an advertisement or a brand stimulating someone's awareness and perhaps need to buy. The purchase has to have some utility, it cannot be pointless or harmful.

Diminishing marginal utility refers to a leveling off. At what point would more effort produce a decidedly worthwhile benefit? For example, if someone had a nearly perfect cookie recipe would it be worth testing for five more years to make it better? In decision making, this is part of considering when to quit, when does the decision produce enough desired effect or outcome. We all have finite resources, what is available to be used. We differ in our resourcefulness which is the ability to recognize and use resources effectively. One of the goals of socializing children is to build their resourcefulness through choice making and evaluation of outcomes.

Dreams are often about helping others. What people mean the most to you and how do you want to support them? Are there causes or organizations you currently support and want to continue supporting? How do they represent your values? Usually supporting others falls into one or more of these categories:

- Community
- Culture
- Education
- Family
- Friends
- Health
- Politics or policy

What Is Problem Solving?

Often the terms decision making and problem solving are used interchangeably but in most cases they are not the same thing. A problem is a question or situation that involves uncertainty and risk. Uncertainty is that feeling of doubt. Should I take Friday off from work or should I go to work? Will I get in trouble if I call in sick on a Friday and am seen fishing in my boat? What is the probability, likelihood, that will happen? Risk is personally defined, what is risky behavior to one person is not at all risky to another.

An easy decision like choosing which breakfast cereal to eat, with two boxes offered, is not usually a problem because it is routine, habitual. Problem solving involves many decisions made to reach a successful conclusion by minimizing uncertainty and risk. Information is sought. Will it involve an internal search (within oneself) or an external search (looking for new information outside—family, friends, media, other people). The external search may involve looking for external rewards such as coupons, discounts, contests, and cash incentives to motivate purchase behavior. Resilience refers to the ability to overcome obstacles to achieve positive outcomes after experiencing difficulties.

> **Critical Thinking: Where to live?**
> Where do you want to live? Do you want to be part of a community? Do you want to try a new climate or overseas? Do you want to live in a place for five years and move on? Try to answer this—where would be the ideal place to live in the next five years? In the next ten years? Explain your answers.

Problem solving implies there is some difficulty involved. A person asks "How do I solve this problem of an angry boss?" or "How do I decide where to go to graduate school?"

Steps in problem solving involve first starting with *recognition* stage followed by an *analysis*—defining the type of problem, who is involved, are shortcuts possible or, for example, do all the forms have to be filled out and submitted at the same time? What if a student finds out the professor he or she asked a recommendation letter from did not follow through and write the letter? Or, what if the student finds out the letter was submitted and it is less than flattering and therefore hurting their chances for a job or entry into a graduate program or for an award? Then the next step in problem solving is *action*. For example, does the student confront the professor or move on to other professors or sources for letters? Giving up and doing nothing is a form of action. The last step is *evaluation*—was the problem solved?

An adaptive type person may not be on the lookout for problems (they want to conform or to slowly and methodically come to solutions) but an innovative person may be searching for problems to solve, when things get too steady they are bored. They may be impulsive or quick decision makers. They may sell one business and quickly hop into another one. When it comes to sampling new products the innovator is more likely to want to try them than adaptive types. Think of innovators as explorers and adaptors as maintainers, needing clarity before making decisions. Trying new products involves taking risks. Risks can fall into many categories such as functional or performance risk, financial risk, physical risk, social risk, time risk, and psychological risk. One way to reduce risk is to seek information from credible sources.

Some problems are small, others are large (for example, to get married or not). "The call to allocate our cognitive resources to significant problems places specific demands on the excellent reasoner" (Bishop and Trout 2005, p. 100). Are you an excellent reasoner? According to these authors, excellent reasoners set priorities and find projects to keep happily occupied.

Success

> Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. — Mark Twain

This Mark Twain quote encourages all of us to explore, dream, and discover. We started this chapter with an introduction to the subject of success and the suggestion that there are new definitions of success. Consuming and producing more sustainably can be a symbol of successful living. The process of problem solving involves seeking success. One definition of success is being the most like you that you can possibly be. In other words success is being yourself, being authentic and genuine. When job interviewers say what they are looking for is the right fit between the organization and the interviewee this is what they mean. Is there a natural fit between the person interviewing and the values and goals of the organization?

Success implies the achievement of something desirable. One of the ways to approach defining success for the individual is through framing.

> Every time people are given the chance to do something, they ask themselves (often unconsciously), "What kind of opportunity is this? What is this all about?" Just like an actor, we want to know: "What's my motivation?" In real life, you usually need to figure this out on your own, but in a psychology experiment, we provide the answer for you, by creating the frame. Basically, all we are doing is presenting participants with a task and then talking about it in a way that elicits a particular goal (Halvorson 2011, p. 137).

Visualize the steps you need to take to be successful. How does Step A lead to Step B? Picture yourself crossing a step (event, activity, task) off a list, that is achieved, now what? If you are to win a marathon, how much training will you need to do? Be realistic about obstacles you could face and what strategies you will employ when you face them.

Critical Thinking: Defining Success
Define success for yourself. What would a successful life look like? Where would you live? What would you do? Describe your family and friends. Name a person who you consider to be successful and describe their life.

Summary

In this chapter, decision making and problem solving were differentiated. Problems involve some form of difficulty, uncertainty or risk versus the more mundane, everyday decisions we all make about what to eat and how to dress. The Peter Principle refers to someone being promoted beyond their level of competence. Problem solving goes through four stages: recognition, analysis, action, and evaluation. Goal seeking strategies vary by individual and by tasks and end states involved. Goals seeking should also be enjoyable. A person training for a marathon not only wants to place well but feels better while practicing with neighborhood runs.

Personality plays a large part in decision-making style and ability. Self-doubt and self-ambivalence, uncertainty, can hinder decision making. Utility refers to the usefulness of a decision. People are influenced by their reference groups such as past or present family and friends or role models such as teachers and leaders. Specific decision-making challenges for families are boomeranging children and parachuting parents.

Achieving something desirable is success. It was suggested that success is being redefined. There is a cultural shift toward contributing to the world and living and working on one's own terms. Part of this is a renewed commitment to sustainable consumption.

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