

Becoming a Better Decision-Maker

No matter whether you think you make good decisions or not, wise decisions are made using a definite process. They are based on the values and perceptions of the decision-maker and include carefully considered alternatives and options along with periodic reassessments of the decision and its effects.

This process can be applied to any situation where you need to make an important decision. If you follow these ten basic steps, you will find yourself making wiser decisions, both in your professional as well as your personal life.

1. **Define, as specifically as possible, what the decision is that needs to be made.** Is this really your decision or someone else's? Do you really need to make a decision? (If you do not have at least two options, there is no decision to be made.) When does the decision need to be made? Why is this decision important to you? Who will be affected by this decision? What values does this decision involve for you?
2. **Write down as many alternatives as you can think of.** Brainstorm as many different alternatives as you can imagine. Let your imagination run free and try not to censure anything. This is not the time to be judgmental. Just be sure to write everything down.
3. **Think where you could find more information about possible alternatives.** If you only come up with a few alternatives, you may want to get more information. Additional information generally leads to more alternatives. Places where you can look for the information you need include friends, family, clergy, co-workers, state and federal agencies, professional organizations, online services, newspapers, magazines, books, and so on.
4. **Check out your alternatives.** Once you have a list of alternatives, use the same sources of information to find out more about the specifics of each option. You will find that the more information you gather, the more ideas will pop into your head. Be sure to write these down and check them out too.
5. **Sort through all of your alternatives.** Now that you have your list of alternatives, it is time to begin evaluating them to see which one works for you. First, write down the values that would come into play for each alternative. Second, look for the alternatives which would allow you to use the greatest number of your values. Third, cross the alternatives off the list which do not fit into your personal value framework.
6. **Visualize the outcomes of each alternative.** For each remaining alternative on your list, picture what the outcome of that alternative will look like. Here, too, it helps if you write out your impressions.
7. **Do a reality check.** Which of your remaining alternatives are most likely to happen? Cross off those alternatives that most likely will not happen to you.
8. **Which alternative "fits" you?** Review your remaining alternatives and decide which ones feel most comfortable to you. These are your wise decisions. If you are very happy about a decision, but are not as comfortable with its possible outcome, this is a clue that this is not a wise decision for you. On the other hand, you may dislike an alternative, but be very excited about the possible outcome. This decision would probably not be wise for you either. If you feel you can live with both the alternative as well as the possible outcome, this is the wise decision you should follow.

9. **Get started!** Once you have made your decision, get moving on it. Worrying or second-guessing yourself will only cause you grief. You have done your very best for the present. You always have the option of changing your mind in the future if you want to. Remember, no decision is set in stone.
10. **How is it going?** Be sure to review your decision at specified points along the road. Are the outcomes what you expected? Are you happy with the outcomes? Do you want to let the decision stand or would you like to make some adjustments? If the decision did not come out the way you planned, go through the complete decision-making process again. In the process, answer the following questions. Did I not have enough information? What values actually came into play? Were they my values or someone else's? Remember, you can always change your mind!

In addition, below is a list of the most common decision-making mistakes. By learning about these pitfalls now, you will be able to avoid them in the future.

- **Relying too much on "expert" information.** Oftentimes, people have a tendency to place too much emphasis on what "experts" say. Remember, experts are only human and have their own set of biases and prejudices just like the rest of us. By seeking information from a lot of different sources, you will get much better information than you would if you focused all of your energy on only one source.
- **Overestimating the value of information received from others.** People have a tendency to overestimate the value of certain individuals in our society such as experts, authority figures, parents, high status groups, or people who seem to have it all together. When you find yourself doing this, ask yourself: Do they know as much about this problem as I do? Are their values the same as mine? Have they had any personal experiences with a problem like mine? In other words, keep their opinions in perspective.
- **Underestimating the value of information received from others.** Whether we realize it or not, we also have a tendency to discount information we receive from individuals such as children, low status groups, women (yes, believe it!), the elderly, homemakers, blue-collar workers, artists, etc. Just make a note that if you find yourself discounting the information you receive from anyone, make sure you ask yourself "why".
- **Only hearing what you want to hear or seeing what you want to see.** If we have expectations or biases that we are not aware of, we tend to see what we want to see. Likewise, if someone tries to tell us something we do not want to hear, we simply do not hear them. This is a common mistake that many people make. The key is to be aware of your own prejudices and expectations while at the same time staying open to everything that comes your way.
- **Not listening to your feelings or gut reactions.** In moments when we need to make a decision, our bodies provide clues to the answer through feelings or gut reactions. Unfortunately, our society teaches us to ignore these feelings. But by tuning into your intuition, you will find that you will make much better decisions in the long run.