

WRAP Your Decisions



Podcast Transcript

We make many decisions every day. Some decisions are inconsequential and carry little risk; and then there are those that truly require careful consideration. As leaders, we are often faced with deciding on a course of action that may have important repercussions in the lives of both the people and the organizations we lead. How we navigate decisions can also have a lasting impact on our reputations as leaders. Therefore, the ability to make choices through the use of good judgment is an essential skill that all leaders must continually cultivate.

Hello, my name is Irma Alvarez with UF Training and Organizational Development and today I'd like to share some strategies for making better choices, as discussed by the brothers Chip and Dan Heath in their recently published book, *Decisive*.

If you've read Chip and Dan Heath's bestsellers *Switch* or *Made to Stick* you know that these authors are especially good at communicating complicated ideas in very accessible terms, and this book is no exception. I'll start by sharing a simple but very useful visual metaphor from the book's introduction. It's what the Heath brothers call the "spotlight" effect and it refers to **our tendency to see the information that's right in front of us to the exclusion of other things that are not being illuminated.**

To quote from the book, the spotlight effect "*in essence, is the core difficulty of decision making: What's in the spotlight will rarely be everything we need to make a good decision, but we won't always remember to shift the light. Sometimes, in fact, we'll forget there's a spotlight at all, dwelling so long in the tiny circle of light that we forget there's a broader landscape beyond it.*"

Keep that spotlight metaphor in mind as we consider some other useful ideas presented in this book – it will surely help you throughout the various stages of the decision process. But before we examine the actual process, let’s take a look at what the Heath brothers identify as “the four villains of decision-making:”

1. Narrow Framing (the way you frame your decision makes you miss options)
2. Confirmation Bias (while weighing in on a decision you gravitate toward self-serving information)
3. Short-term emotions (which trump your ability to choose rationally)
4. Overconfidence (because you think you can predict how the future will unfold).

So how do you protect your decision-making process from these four villains? In their characteristic way, the authors manage to give us an easy -to-remember tool: W.R.A.P - WRAP. They lay out a four-step process that we can employ to “wrap” around the way we usually make decisions. Here are the four strategies in this process:

“W” is for: Widen Your Options

“R” is for: Reality-Test Your Assumptions

“A” is for: Attain Distance Before Deciding

“P” is for: Prepare to be Wrong

Let’s take a closer look at each of these strategies.

Widen Your Options

In order to fully evaluate the possibilities, you must try to see as broad a spectrum of options as you can. When you widen your options, you have more available choices. Ask yourself, “What else might be possible?” Or imagine what would happen if none of your current options were possible – what would you do then? Look also at the opportunity cost of choosing one thing – what else would you be giving up if you chose this, or that?

Another way to help you widen your options is to “multitrack” by considering several options at the same time. Instead of “this OR that”, how about “this AND that”? It’s true that having too many options can lead to decision paralysis. But adding a few extra alternatives can be very beneficial to the decision process and the outcome as you are more likely to see the strengths and limitations of the various alternatives.

Consider also asking people in your team to present not one but, say, three alternative courses of action. Aside from broadening the range of options, this can also help reduce

the potential for politics since individuals might not be as vested as if they had to defend only one approach. Another benefit of multiple options is that they build in a fallback plan; when one alternative starts to lose value, there are others to consider.

If you still want to seek more options, consider asking others who have faced the same problem before. What can you learn from their experience? How did they approach the problem? What alternative solutions did they consider?

Reality Test Your Assumptions

The second step in the WRAP process begins with the letter R: Reality-Test Your Assumptions. Numerous experts have agreed that many errors in decision making come from overreliance on our own perceptions and assumptions. This is the place where judgment comes in close contact with humility and courage. Errors in judgment often have to do more with human flaws than with data miscalculations, and leaders can be led astray by unrestrained pride or self-confidence. A good antidote to this condition is healthy disagreement; purposely seeking disagreement, while evaluating alternatives, will lead to better decisions.

One way to spark constructive disagreement is to assign a “devil’s advocate”, someone whose job will be to express an opinion that disagrees with others. A devil’s advocate can create interesting discussions about the issues and, more importantly, protect your team from falling victim to groupthink. Seek to find contradictory information or altogether consider the opposite by asking disconfirming questions – don’t ask only about the benefits of an option but pursue the weaknesses or detriments it could bring.

An expert (simply defined as someone who has more experience than you) can also help you clarify some of your assumptions. Take advantage of the experience of someone who has obtained knowledge, skill, or practice from direct observation or participation in the options you are considering.

In summary, when you want to make yourself think about ways to reality-test your assumptions, try to answer this question: why would I want to simply predict something based on what I know when I can find information that lets me know how it actually is!

Attain Distance Before Deciding

The A in the WRAP process reminds you to attain distance before making your decision – emotional distance, that is. Often times, through the process of exploring options and challenging your assumptions you get to see a crystal clear solution or approach to follow. But sometimes you get stuck at that point when you actually have to choose. In

that moment, check your emotions as they can lead you toward making a decision that might, in the long run, prove unsatisfactory.

Beware of the tendency to protect the status quo. It is well known that there is more pain in losing than joy in winning. We also like what's familiar to us. Therefore, safeguarding what we know and preventing risk are natural tendencies. To fight these ingrained tendencies, try looking at a situation as if you were a third party. Ask yourself: "What would I tell my best friend to do in this case?"

The WRAP process does not aim to neutralize the role of emotions in our decisions. Once you have dealt with all the rational aspects of decision-making, emotion is all you have left. At that point, recognizing your passions, your values, and your beliefs may be the key to choosing a solution. As stated in the book: "Agonizing decisions are often a sign of a conflict among your core priorities." Make time to get to know your core priorities; state them; then, courageously, stick to them.

Prepare to be Wrong

Finally, the last letter in the WRAP process reminds us to Prepare to Be Wrong. Yes, you heard right! When we make a decision, we are, of course, hoping to be right and that can make us overconfident about how we think the future will unfold. Overconfidence makes us relax and when we are not in a healthy state of alert, we may be unprepared for unpleasant surprises. Therefore, think of the future not as a single point but as a range of possible outcomes.

Another way to promote healthy questioning or revisiting the course of past decisions is to set tripwires. Tripwires can be dates, metrics or budgets. Rather than saying "I'll just wait and see what happens", tell yourself: "I will act when something else happens." That "something else" could be an increase in overall grant awards in a particular research area or a decrease of 10% in course enrollment by a certain date. While setting tripwires may seem overly cautious, it can also have the relaxing benefit of allowing you to find some room for experimentation – you can stay on autopilot until you hit that trigger; you can commit to a course of action that may even be risky but not be blindsided by overconfidence.

Remember, too, that experience can lead to pattern recognition which can also serve as a tripwire, both in terms of threats and opportunities. We may identify these patterns from our individual vantage point. And, as leaders, we can also coach our team members to recognize patterns and foster trusting work environments where their experience and intuition can be safely expressed.

Trusting the Process

In the final chapter, the Heath brothers invite us to recognize that, while our decisions may never be perfect, using a process for decision making not only helps leaders chart a course but also shows those we lead that there was a procedure, which, in turn, makes them perceive the final decision as just. A trustworthy process allows us to together take bolder risks in the right direction.

As a parting gift the Heath brothers remind us in the last few paragraphs that when researchers ask the elderly about their lives, they don't regret the things they did but the things they did not do; the opportunities missed, their indecision.

And I quote: "Being decisive is itself a choice. Decisiveness is a way of behaving, not an inherited trait. It allows us to make brave and confident choices, not because we know we'll be right but because it's better to try and fail than to delay and regret."

References:

Heath, Chip and Heath, Dan, (2013). Decisive, How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work. New York, NY: Crown Business.