

How you can make better choices about your life and career

Margaret Beaton 01 April 2013

Do you make the mistake of jumping too quickly to conclusions about your life and career because you give too much emphasis to the information in front of you? Do you fail to search for new information that might change your views or disprove your beliefs?

I am sure all too often, the answer is 'yes'. There are consequences for your life and career. And you know all about them, don't you?

When we face decisions about life and career it's crucial we give ourselves the best chance of making the right decision. *Decisive* is a new book that brilliantly tackles one of the most critical topics in life and career: how to make better decisions.

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman—author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*—explains the tendency to jump to conclusions in the phrase “what you see is all there is.” This is one reason we don't make good decisions; there are many others. We're overly confident. We look for information that fits our thoughts and ignore information that doesn't. We're too influenced by authority. We choose the short-term over the long-term. Once we've made a decision we find it hard to change our mind.

Knowing about these and other biases is helpful, but insufficient to avoid the problem. We need to structure our thinking to make decisions. In *Decisive*, the authors explain a four-step process designed to counteract bias and refer to the tendency to see only what's in front of us as a “spotlight” effect.

And that, in essence, is the main difficulty of decision-making. What's in the spotlight will rarely be everything we need to make good decisions, but we won't always remember—or have the courage—to shift the light. For most of us, if we do use a structured process it's usually a pros-and-cons list. While better than nothing, this approach is still flawed because it doesn't really account for our biases.

Decisive lays out the 'four villains of decision making':

Narrow framing which is the “tendency to define our choices too narrowly. We ask, “Should I break up with my partner or not?” instead of “What are the ways I could make this relationship better?”

Confirmation bias occurs because “when people have the opportunity to collect information from the world, they are more likely to select information that supports their pre-existing attitudes, beliefs, and actions.” We delude ourselves that we want the truth, yet all we really seek is reassurance.

Short-term emotion blinds us, for example “when we've got a difficult decision to make, our feelings churn. We replay the same arguments in our head. We agonize about our circumstances. We change our minds from day to day. If our decision was represented on a spread sheet, none of the numbers would be changing—there's no new information being added—but it doesn't feel that way in our heads.”

Overconfidence about the way we see things and think we “know more than we do about how the future will unfold”.

Chip and Dan Heath, the authors of *Decisive*, describe a process to help us overcome these four villains and make better choices about our lives and careers. While you really need to read the book to grasp the depth beneath their process, it's summarised here:

You encounter a choice. But framing your options too narrowly you will miss different ways of going forward, so widen your options. You need to expand your set of choices.

You need to analyse your options. But the confirmation bias can lead you to gather self-serving information, so reality-test your assumptions. You need to get outside your head and collect information you can trust.

You decide—you make your choice. But short-term emotion may often tempt you to make the wrong one, so attain distance before deciding. You need to overcome short-term emotion and conflicted feelings to make better choices.

Then you live with your choice. But too often you'll be too confident about how the future will unfold, so prepare to be wrong. You should plan for an uncertain future so that you give your decisions the best chance to succeed.

The authors call this the WRAP process. "At its core, the WRAP model urges you to switch from "auto spotlight" to manual spotlight.

Decisive is a great book and guide to making better life and career decisions.

Additional readings

You may find these additional readings helpful in understanding this important topic:

- + **Is fear holding you back?** This post is about the insecurity and concerns about due process and fairness that cause many to fear what's happening at work and wonder how they can cope with the stress they experience.
- + **Could this be you?** This was one of my most popular posts in 2012 about Simon, a real person. "After a lifetime in the firm, Simon's career was over. He was not yet 60, and the firm didn't need him any more..."
- + **Steer your career decisions with no regrets** Understand why Polonius's advice to his son "This above all: to thine own self be true" applies to you too.

And, finally, I recommend the [Farnham Street blog](#) as a fabulous repository of brilliantly curated ideas, including the essence of this post about *Decisive*.

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