

How We Decide

By Jonah Lehrer, 2009 HMH Books

Good news- Very good book! Nicely written with lots of stories, analogies and examples. Easy to read in a few evenings or plane or train rides. Rightfully on many best seller lists.

Bad news- A little heady and techno-medical when the author (over) explains the brain.

Good news- There are a few simple, immediately usable applications revealed in this book and as usual, I have gleaned the best and most practical ideas from it, and offer them to you. Hopefully you can put them to use right away in your current decision making.

Summary:

People are making very difficult decisions these days about their careers, businesses, finances, and futures. And they are making them in some very difficult times.

I have been teaching workshops on Problem Solving and Decision Making for over 25 years and I thought I knew it all, or at least enough. This book reminds me that there is always more to learn and it also fills a nagging gap I have had for some time. Rational decision making where you first list your objectives or criteria, then evaluate or weigh the criteria, and then screen and score your alternatives through your "musts" and "weighted wants" has served me well. But sometimes your feelings and intuition really do matter and sometimes, when time is really short, we need another approach, or at least a quicker approach.

When New England Patriots Quarterback, Tom Brady, had twenty-nine seconds left in Super Bowl XXXVI and needed to move the ball another thirty yards to have a chance to win the game with a field goal (which he ultimately did), he had to make some big decisions in a matter of seconds. And when huge, fast defensive linemen were about to cream him, he had to make really key decisions in split seconds. When Captain Chesley Sullenberger brought USAir Flight #1549 down safely in the Hudson River, he too had to make a number of decisions in a matter of seconds and his were life-critical!

And when a surgeon has to re-connect an aorta or transplant a heart before the patient bleeds out, he or she is making those life-critical decisions on a regular basis. So what do these decision makers have in common? Good DNA? Nerves of steel? Luck? Maybe all of those, but they absolutely have had a lot of practice under pressure. They learned from that practice and they relied on their instincts to save the day.

Before 1990, 65% of all airline accidents were caused by pilot error. Since 1990, that number has dropped to under 30%. Why? Flight simulators and CRM. Flight simulators have allowed pilots to practice under simulated pressure and learn a great deal about decision making. And CRM (Cockpit Resource Management), the practice of voicing opinions and sharing info in the face of on-board problems to reach team decisions, has become commonplace. In fact, surgical teams now use a similar methodology nicknamed "see it, say it, fix it" when they jointly decide on actions to take to solve problems and save lives.

The author points out in great detail that different parts of our brain kick in at certain times when decision making goes well. He also points out how things can go awry when we use the wrong parts of our brains at the wrong times. A great example of this was Jean Van de Veld in the 1999 British Open golf championship. Van de Veld had a three stroke lead going into the 72nd and final hole. He could get a double-bogey six (score two over par) on the last hole and still win. But....he choked. He looked nervous, sweat poured off of him even in a cool breeze, when he drove his ball deep into

the rough. His second shot was no better and his third was worse, landing in the water. He was thinking too much. He took a penalty, chipped onto the green, putted twice and got a seven. Three over par on the hole, tied with two other golfers and forced into a playoff which he eventually lost. He thought too much, used the wrong parts of his brain, and didn't rely on his instincts! Maybe decision making isn't as rational as I thought!

Applications:

1. Continue to use everything I taught you regarding rational process

A. In problem solving:

- Specify the problem, listing both the is and is not's
- Look for distinctions and changes
- Identify and test for true cause

B. In decision making:

- List objectives or criteria first, then separate musts from wants and weigh your wants
- Generate alternatives, screen them through your musts and score them against your weighted wants
- Then assess risks

C. In planning:

- List the steps in your plan and identify potential problems
- List causes for those potential problems
- Plan preventive and contingent actions

2. Use the CRM (Cockpit Resource Management) Approach

- Work big problems and decisions as a team
- Get input and encourage open communication regarding problem solving and decision making
- Use the "see it, say it, fix it" methodology

3. Think like an NFL Quarterback, an Airline Pilot or a Surgeon

- Practice under (simulated) pressure however and whenever you can
- Debrief and learn from your mistakes (and your successes)
- Revise and codify your processes from your lessons learned

4. Trust your instincts (especially you Myers Briggs Intuitive "N" types)

- Your intuition is usually based on past experience or some other reality
- It isn't really some mysterious "inner voice"

5. Don't over think problems or decisions

- Too much of even a good thing can make us choke
- Remember Jean Van de Veld in the 1999 British Open

And Finally:

I work with many clients on Decision Making, Communication, Team Building, Conflict, Executive Coaching and Organization Change issues and have already put aspects of this book to use with some of them. I intend to continue using what I learn about this topic with more clients in the future. If you want more thoughts about this book, or want to add your own, check out my blog. You can visit it at <http://richsteel.blogspot.com/> This opinion and others are posted on my web site: www.rsbc.com To talk more about this and other topics, e-mail me (Rich Steel) at rsbc@aol.com or call me at my office on 610 388 3680 or on my cell at 610 324 8466.