Making hard decisions, easier

By [Deirdre Elphick-Moore](#)   8 Dec 2015

Each day we make thousands of decisions. Most are fairly insignificant, but others carry weight and consequences, like some of the decisions you find yourself having to make.

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I recently read an article about Philip Mudd, the former deputy director in the CIA and FBI, a man familiar with making tough decisions. During his years working for the US government, he developed a system for analysing information and assessing risk when it comes to decision-making. While the decisions he made involved life and death, he argued in this recent article, that all complex decisions, no matter the environment, are significant.

In his his book, *The HEAD Game: High-Efficiency Analytic Decision Making and the Art of Solving Complex Problems Quickly*, Mudd describes a process that can help us all navigate our way through decision-making in all areas of our lives.

He breaks down his decision-making process into five steps:

1. Find the real question

We often focus on the wrong question because we assume questions are self-evident. Mudd says that focusing on better questions up front yields better answers later.

I agree, but coming up with good questions is hard to do. So, start with the end in mind, with what you're trying to accomplish and work your way back to identify the right question(s).

2. Identify your "drivers"

Since our minds have a hard time juggling too much information, break down complex questions into characteristics or as he calls them, "drivers." This approach gives you a way to manage information.

The example Mudd gives is, when he was working for the CIA, he would sort data on Al Qaeda into 'information baskets' that included money, recruits, leadership, communications, training, and access to weapons. When information flows in, rather than adding it to one unmanageable pile, sort through it periodically; file each bit of information into one of your baskets. This could get overwhelming, so limit your drivers to 10 to control your information.

3. Decide on your metrics

Decide what metrics you'll use to measure how the problem and solution are evolving.

Mudd suggests comparing your thought process to the training process of an Olympic sprinter who measures success in hundredths of a second. And this makes sense. If we don't measure, the analysis we provide will suffer the same fate as a sprinter who thinks they're great, but has never owned a stopwatch: they enter an elite competition, and reality hits them.

Metrics provide a "mind mirror", a system for judging your decisions. It provides a foundation for when you have to revisit assess the process to deem success or failure.

4. Collect the data

Once you've built the framework that will help you make the hard decision, it's time to gather the data. Overcome data overload by placing data into their driver categories and removing anything that doesn't fit.

Too much data might provide a false sense of security, but it doesn't necessarily lead to clearer or easier decision-making.

Mudd recommends aggressively questioning the validity of data. Once you have the data sorted, give yourself a mark that represents your confidence in assessing the given question question.

5. Look for what's missing

Complex analysis isn't easy, you must assume that the process is flawed and check for gaps and errors. Mudd says there are three common stumbling blocks:

   1 *Availability bias*: The instinct to rely on what you know or what has been most recently in the news.
   2 *Halo effect*: When you write off the negative characteristics because you're mesmerised by the positive attributes.

   3 *Intuitive versus analytic methodologies*: when you go with your gut.

Sometimes it's good to have a process such as the one Mudd suggests to make complex decisions a little easier to make. As you practice these methodologies, you will be able to work through them more quickly and automatically until, eventually, complex decision-making becomes second nature.

That's the WHAT and WHY. For workshops that help you unlock the HOW, contact info@theofficecoach.co.za.

ABOUT DEIRDRE ELPHICK-MOORE

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