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Decision Making And Problem Solving

What Are Your Decision-Making Strengths and Blind Spots?

by Cheryl Strauss Einhorn

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Yaroslav Danylchenko/Stocksy

Summary. Many of us approach decision making from the same perspective over and over. We use the same tools and habits every time, even if the decisions are vastly different. But following the same strategy for every problem limits your abilities. To make better... [more](#)

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The truth is many of us approach decision making from the same perspective over and over. We use the same tools and habits every time, even if the decisions are vastly different. But following the same strategy

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for every problem limits your abilities. To make better decisions, you need to break out of these patterns and see things differently, even if it is uncomfortable.

First, you need to understand your own decision-making strengths and your blind spots: What is the psychology of your decision making? What is your typical approach? What mental mistakes or cognitive biases tend to get in your way? Looking inward to what you value can illuminate why you make decisions the way you do — and how you might be shortchanging yourself with your approach. From there, you can disrupt your traditional processes.

The Problem Solver Profiles

Through my research and work in decision making, I have identified five different decision-making archetypes, which I call Problem Solver Profiles (PSPs). As I describe in my book *[Problem Solver: Maximizing Your Strengths to Make Better Decisions](#)*, these PSPs are personal approaches to decision making that are built from our individual strengths and weaknesses. Each have their own specific cognitive biases that reveal habits and patterns of behavior that drive our choices. They aren't proscriptive; once we gain awareness of what we tend to do, we can take steps to become more dynamic, flexible decision makers.

Below are brief descriptions of the five PSPs. Read through them to see if you recognize your own habits in one of these profiles. (You can also take the full PSP assessment at app.areamethod.com.)

- **Adventurer:** You make decisions quickly and trust your gut. When faced with a challenge, big or small, you'd rather do what feels right than spend your valuable time thinking through all the choices. You

know who you are and what you want — so you aren't afraid to go get it.

- **Detective:** You value information and are always looking for facts and data. You don't decide based on how you feel — you want to see what the evidence says. You believe that the more you learn and soak in the details, the better you'll do.
- **Listener:** You've got a whole village of people in your life whom you trust and who support you. When you are faced with a challenging situation or a complex decision, you rely on these people, asking for their input and opinions. You feel comfortable knowing you don't have to decide by yourself.
- **Thinker:** You are thoughtful, resisting the pressure to make quick decisions. You carefully weigh options, wanting to understand the positives and negatives of each. You don't need a lot of data, but you do need the time and headspace to feel like you have both a reason for the choice you're making and a rationale for why it makes sense. Speed is not your goal; process is.
- **Visionary:** You don't want to settle for the ordinary, and you like to go your own way. When faced with a clear set of options, you're more interested in finding a different one, preferably one that hasn't yet occurred to others. You keep everyone guessing — and often, you surprise those around you with your decisions.

Which of these profiles do you identify with? Most of us can be more than one type of problem solver, although we almost always have one dominant approach that we lean on. Once you've identified the style or styles that best represents your approach, you can then learn how to better work within and outside of it.

Cognitive Biases and PSPs

There's no question that each of these archetypes comes with great strengths — but strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. Each PSP is also associated with a set of cognitive biases that can impede effective decision making. Fortunately, you can avoid these pitfalls. Here's how.

Adventurer

Your *optimism bias* makes you feel unstoppable, which can lead you into danger. Because you like to move quickly, and are optimistic about most everything, you don't always have an accurate sense of how long something really takes. This can lead to a *planning bias*, where you run the risk of falling behind schedule and not accomplishing everything you want to.

To avoid this, pay attention to your first inclination. What is your gut suggesting you do? Then consider how that's worked out in the past for this particular type of decision. Your adventurer spirit might be great for some decisions but not for others. Working with the other stakeholders involved in your decision will help as well. But be careful: Are you running roughshod over them? Do you understand their goals and objectives — and are you taking those into account? Make sure to listen to them without judgment and note any concerns that something can't be done on time.

Detective

Your *frame blindness* can mean that you miss the bigger picture, leading to situations where you solve for the wrong problem (or only part of one). More information does not always make for a better decision; it may just put you further in the weeds. Detectives can also fall prey to *confirmation bias*, cherry-picking through reams of data to support a

avored hypothesis. More information is not always unbiased information, especially if you're only collecting it to prove that you're right, and published research (which detectives favor) is not the only type of information out there.

Instead, recognize that other voices are valuable. All information doesn't come as data — some comes from people. Go beyond the data to speak to knowledgeable sources. Lean on coworkers to help you see the forest *and* the trees. Use their knowledge and expertise to put the data you have into perspective.

Listener

Being a listener means that you may rely too heavily on other people to make decisions for you, whether they are family, friends, or coworkers. You can fall victim to *authority bias*, being swayed by the opinions of people in positions of power. You're loyal to those you trust, sometimes making decisions based on what — or whom — you like, which is called *liking bias*. While others may be well intended in their advice, they may not be aligned with your inner voice, especially if you have not listened to it yourself.

Recognize that your inner voice is valuable: Before getting input from others, sit with yourself and identify what is important to you in the outcome of your decision. Only after you do this should you reach out to others for their thoughts and perspectives. And remember, just because listeners naturally include others doesn't necessarily mean that those people will have divergent viewpoints. When discussing a problem with others, listen not only for opinions, but for *differences* of opinion. If your go-to group doesn't provide that perspective, look for others who could play devil's advocate.

Thinker

Because you are so cautious, you may fall prey to *loss aversion*, avoiding failure by picking a safe option rather than the best one. And because you like to compare and weigh options, *relativity bias* may keep you from seeing things as they actually are. Instead, you may be inclined to compare the situation to something else, which may frame a problem too narrowly.

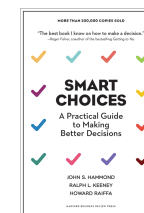
Recognize when you are stuck in your own head. Your time is valuable. Set a decision-making deadline before you begin your process to limit how long — and how often — you can ruminate. Whether working alone or with a team, thinkers benefit from creating a vision of success first to identify success metrics and invert the problem. By working backward and focusing on the solution, you will have an easier time staying on track and working with others.

Visionary

With your propensity for being drawn to exciting ideas, you may experience *saliency bias*, getting attached to the most prominent solution or boldest idea, even if it isn't ultimately the best option. You also overvalue originality because it's rare, a form of *scarcity bias* that devalues what is common or plentiful, which can lead you to invest in being different rather than making the smartest choice.

Recognize the value of the ordinary: By communicating your (precious) vision to others clearly and then collecting data to test it out, you'll have a better sense of which inspirational ideas to pursue and which ones to shelve — for now. Actively solicit feedback from your colleagues, asking others not only what they've heard, but also what they've understood. Is the idea feasible? Are there gaps that need to be closed for everyone to be

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aligned? Do team members know where their responsibility lies? Their answers will help you to hone your thinking.

Decision Dynamism

There is no “perfect” PSP. While some decisions — or even stages of a decision — might be better made by certain PSPs, a truly successful decision benefits from combining different thinking processes. By breaking away from your standard approach and learning about the other PSPs, you can better check and challenge your biases and bring out a more holistic understanding of a situation, better ensuring that you are solving the whole problem.

More dynamic decision making begins with knowing more about yourself, so you can sidestep potential bias and gain new perspectives about a problem. While it’s not always easy to think outside your own box, remember that you’re building both strength and flexibility in the decision-making muscles you need to make your big decisions better.

A version of this article also appears in the HBR Guide to Critical Thinking , which is forthcoming from Harvard Business Review Press in January 2023.



Cheryl Strauss Einhorn is the founder and CEO of Decisive, a decision sciences company using her AREA Method decision-making system for individuals, companies, and nonprofits looking to solve complex problems. Decisive offers digital tools and in-person training, workshops, coaching and consulting. Cheryl is a long-time educator teaching at Columbia Business School and Cornell and has won several journalism awards for her investigative news stories. She’s authored two books on complex problem solving, *Problem Solved* for personal and professional decisions, and *Investing In Financial Research* about business, financial, and investment decisions.

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Her new book, *Problem Solver*, is about the psychology of personal decision-making and Problem Solver Profiles. For more information please watch Cheryl's [TED talk](#) and visit [areamethod.com](#).



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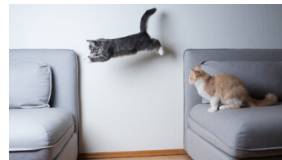


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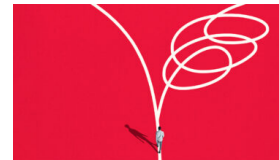
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