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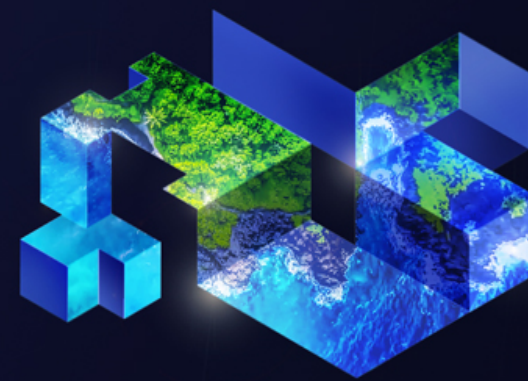
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Decision Making And Problem Solving

Make Better Decisions by Challenging Your Expectations

by Cheryl Strauss Einhorn

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Summary. When we face a difficult decision, we often unconsciously set expectations — for ourselves and for others — about both the decision-making process and the outcome. Embedded in our expectations are our biases, which are always part of our thinking, so... [more](#)

We all want to believe that we see the world as it is. But as many behavioral psychologists have demonstrated, we actually see the world through a dirty windshield of bias, assumption, and judgment. So, how can we tease out and identify the mental mistakes that cloud our windshield and impede clear thinking? And once we identify our biases, how can we control for and counter them to make better decisions?

One of the best ways to thwart bias is to confront our underlying expectations, namely the assumptions and judgements that undergird our decision-making process.



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Expectations aren't passive actors. They have a momentum of their own because they lead us to act on assumptions that may or may not be true. Without examining our expectations, we won't know what kind of momentum we're generating. Are we opening ourselves up to inquiry and connection with others? Or are we shutting down pathways and opportunities for inclusion and more holistic problem-solving?

Expectations can inform — even dictate — our decision-making process because even when we're looking forward, our thinking is shaped by our past actions and perception of past outcomes. We often don't recognize that we've set expectations because we jump into the decision-making process without making the implicit explicit.

The BIAS Framework

So how do we understand and account for our expectations? I've created a framework that asks you to consider your decisions from four vantage points: your behavior, your information, your analysis, and the structure, or environment around you as you make your decision. I call this the BIAS framework, taking the the first letter of each vantage point. The goal is to use a structured approach to keep your mind open, further your analysis, and prevent paralysis, because the best decisions, even if shaped in part by instinct, are better for being the product of a process of thinking, not just a thought.

To illustrate how to use the BIAS framework, I want to introduce Bill, the middle-aged son of aging parents. Bill's parents wanted to move out of the multi-story home where they had raised their family. They came to Bill to help them with this high-stakes decision. Together they would decide where Bill's parents would go next. All three assumed the move would be difficult both emotionally and physically. They believed that a

single move to an eldercare facility that offered a continuum of care would be easiest. But was that really the best option?

Behavior

The first step in challenging expectations is to confront your assumptions about your own behavior, as well as the behavior of anyone else involved in your decision-making.

Bill had never had to help his parents with a decision of this magnitude. He was flattered that they had asked him but having tangled with them on other high-stakes decisions, he was eager to be supportive. Bill also recognized his discomfort with difficult, emotional conversations. So, when his parents focused their search only on eldercare facilities that offered a continuum of care because they didn't want to face multiple future moves, Bill happily joined them. He assumed they would reject any option other than a single move.

In examining his behavior, Bill recognized that his acquiescence with his parents' focus on eldercare facilities was partly driven by his desire to avoid difficult conversations. Bill identified an anchoring and a framing bias in his behavior that could lead him — and his parents — astray. The decision they needed to make was not about simplifying the moving process; it needed to be about the kind of lifestyle Bill's parents wanted now, and what they might need in the future.

To more clearly understand how your expectations around behavior impact your decision-making, ask yourself:

- Is there a behavior around your upcoming decision that may impact your ability to see the situation more objectively?

- How are past decisions driving your behavior? And how is this decision different from past decisions?
- How do you expect the other stakeholders to behave?

Biases to look out for: framing bias (making decisions based on the way in which information is presented); anchoring bias (relying heavily on the first piece of information received).

Information

The next step is to understand your expectations around the information you need and want to make your decision.

Bill is comfortable gathering information; indeed, he likes data-gathering. As he and his parents began researching local facilities, he assumed he'd be able to get transparent pricing information, and a list of services and quality-of-life amenities each place offered — and that this data would be the important data.

Bill expected that his parents would care about information relating to how they could live independently now and that they would want to be assured of having whatever care they need in the future when they need it.

As Bill examined his assumptions about what information they all would need, he again circled back to the behavioral expectation step: If he and his parents began solving the problem from an incorrect frame (i.e., only one move), they weren't actually collecting the information they needed. How could they possibly assess his parents' future needs accurately? Further, would they be able to assess how a particular institution would be able to meet those future needs? Might they assume that a lot of care equaled good care? This is called confirmation bias.

To more clearly understand your expectations around information and its impact on your decision-making, take a look at your information-gathering habits. Ask yourself:

- How is this decision like others you've made in the past and how is it different?
- What are the expectations you have about the kind of information you will be able to gather?
- What information do you expect the other decision stakeholders will contribute?

Biases to look out for: confirmation bias (looking for, favoring, or interpreting information in a way that confirms your existing beliefs); attentional bias (focusing more on some pieces of data than others).

Analysis

The way we analyze information can also introduce bias into our decision-making process.

Bill usually begins with a pro/con list to assess his options. However, he realized that his analysis of the situation might not be relevant for this decision. Decision ownership actually belonged to his parents. It was their future home that was at stake, not his.

This step made it clear to Bill that he did not want to push his parents toward what *he* believed was best. That could introduce a projection bias, a common feature of our thinking where we believe others have the same priority, attitude, or belief that we do. Bill realized that he needed his parents to share how they'd like to analyze their living options so that he might best support their efforts.

In addition, Bill knew that his parents were focused much more on maintaining their current freedoms than on future potential and unknown problems. This overweighting of a single, data point, called salience bias, might incline his parents to favor information about services catering to their current lifestyle while ignoring undetermined health needs down the road.

By making these concerns explicit, Bill could have a conversation with his parents ahead of time about how they would analyze the information. He realized that maybe the decision should not be made by the three of them alone. He decided to ask his parents about meeting with each one's primary care doctor to get some professional advice about the kinds of future health care services to focus on given their specific medical histories.

To more clearly understand how the way you analyze information might impact your decision-making, ask yourself:

- What analysis do you typically conduct? Is that relevant for this decision?
- What are your expectations about your ability to synthesize and understand the information related to the decision you currently face?
- What can the other decision stakeholders contribute to the analysis process?

Biases to look out for: projection bias (believing others share our same priorities, attitudes, or beliefs); salience bias (overweighting a single data point).

Structure

The final step is to examine the structure, or environment around you as you make your decision.

Bill's parents did have a deadline, although it was a self-imposed one: They wanted to be out of the house before winter. Their budget was also fixed: They would have the sale money from the house and a comfortable monthly pension.

While Bill felt that he and his parents were allowing enough time to make a decision without too much time pressure, he realized that they'd all focused on annual costs without a good understanding of what future medical expenses might be. But perhaps that was unknowable; there was likely a limit on how much the family could really plan.

Although Bill's parents found two facilities that met many of their criteria, each had a fatal flaw. At one place, although they could buy in to the type of housing they needed now, there was no guarantee that housing with more care would be available when they needed it. The second facility, they realized, meant they would have to change primary care doctors because the drive would become too long. Both very much wanted to maintain their relationship with their primary care doctors, as they each had complex medical histories.

To more clearly understand how structure might impact your decision-making, ask yourself:

- What are the opportunities and limitations of the decision you are about to make?
- Is there a time deadline?
- Might the decision be flexible or constrained by money or other external pressures?
- Are the other stakeholders under any constraints?

Biases to look out for: planning fallacy (underestimating the time it will take to complete a future task, despite knowledge that previous tasks have generally taken longer than planned); status-quo bias (preferring the current state of affairs resulting in a resistance to change).

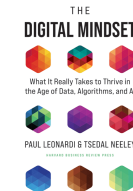
After applying the BIAS framework to their decision-making, Bill and his parents realized that they were solving for the wrong problem. They didn't need an eldercare facility, and by trying to shoe-horn themselves into one to prevent a second move, they could have made an expensive and unhappy decision. They simply needed a house without outdoor stairs and with a master bedroom on the first floor.

When Bill turned the decision over to his parents and pushed them to make their expectations explicit, they were all able to see that it was anxiety and stress that led them to focus on the single move.

William Shakespeare once wrote, “expectations are the root of all heartache.” When we face a difficult decision, we often unconsciously set expectations — for ourselves and for others — about both the decision-making process and the outcome. Embedded in our expectations are our biases, which are always part of our thinking, so can be very hard to bring to light.

The BIAS Framework breaks down what is knowable into its components — our behavior, our information, our ability to think critically about our decisions, and the external forces affecting the decisions. This framework allows us to examine our expectations and habits so that we may check and challenge bias, assumption, and judgment to better engage with others and with our decisions. Heartache is a part of life, but expectations don't have to lead there.

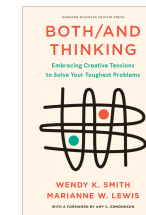
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Cheryl Strauss Einhorn is the founder and CEO of Decisive, a decision sciences company using her AREA Method decision-making system for individuals, companies, and nonprofits looking to solve complex problems. Decisive offers digital tools and in-person 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. 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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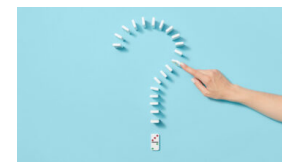
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