10.10: Our Critical Decision-Making Style

There is no one ultimate decision-making style. Each of us develops our own style of making decisions. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of our style is an important aid to help us make higher quality decisions. We call this metacognitive understanding. Metacognition means, “Thinking about thinking.” So, to take a look at how we think, we need to determine our comfortable decision-making style.

Have you ever known the answer to a situation instantly? Did you have a “gut feeling” that something was right or wrong? Or were you just “thinking fast?” In an attempt to explain what happens here, Author Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book titled *Blink*. Malcolm Gladwell explains his ideas in an interview.

“It’s a book about rapid cognition, about the kind of thinking that happens in a blink of an eye. When you meet someone for the first time, or walk into a house you are thinking of buying, or read the first few sentences of a book, your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions. Well, “Blink” is a book about those two seconds, because I think those instant conclusions that we reach are really powerful and really important and, occasionally, really good.”
You could also say that it’s a book about intuition, except that I don’t like that word. In fact, it never appears in “Blink.” Intuition strikes me as a concept we use to describe emotional reactions, gut feelings—thoughts and impressions that don’t seem entirely rational. But I think that what goes on in that first two seconds is perfectly rational. It’s thinking—it’s just thinking that moves a little faster and operates a little more mysteriously than the kind of deliberate, conscious decision-making that we usually associate with “thinking.” In “Blink” I’m trying to understand those two seconds. What is going on inside our heads when we engage in rapid cognition? When are snap judgments good and when are they not?

What kinds of things can we do to make our powers of rapid cognition better? In his book, The Confident Decision Maker, (Dawson, 1993) Roger Dawson describes four distinct decision making styles and how you know which one best fits you. The following chart is based on his ideas.
Understand the Decision Making Chart

The horizontal line of the chart describes how you react to decisions. Do you react to what you already know or what you observe? Moving to the right on the line is the inflexible thinker who makes decisions on what he already knows, while moving to the left we find a more flexible decision-maker who relies more on what he observes.

The vertical line is the way people process information in making a decision. Conscious thought is the gathering of information through the five senses, while with the unconscious thought you just “feel” the information. As you move up the line, the more conscious you are in using information.

Your style is a combination of these two axes. There is no best style. Each style has strengths and challenges. More likely you are a combination of styles, but usually there would be one style that plays a more significant part in your personal decision-making.

The Decision-Making Styles Explained

The Bloodhound is an analytical decision-maker, who makes decisions on facts rather than feelings; on what is observed rather than pre-established emotions. They consciously and unemotionally observe the situation in a non-assertive manner. The Bloodhound is a cautious decision-maker, who relies on more and more information to base their decision. Their motto: “Let’s not jump into this, we need more data.”

The Bull is a pragmatic-decision maker, who makes decisions on facts rather than feelings; on preconceived beliefs, rather than observation. They consciously and unemotionally feel they know what is going on and conduct themselves in an assertive manner. The Bull has confidence in making decisions quickly. Their motto: “Strike while the iron is hot.”

The Eagle is an extroverted decision-maker, who makes decisions on feelings rather than facts; on preconceived beliefs, rather than observation. They unconsciously and emotionally feel they can make decisions in a knowing and assertive manner. The Eagle makes quick and often not well thought out decisions, but is enthusiastic, creative and focuses on people. Their motto: “This idea sounds like fun.”
The Bee is an amiable and friendly decision-maker who makes decisions based on feeling rather than fact. They make their decisions on what they observe rather than pre-established emotions. They unconsciously and emotionally observe the situation in a non-assertive manner. The Bee does struggle with decisions that involve change and shows sincere concern for others. Their motto: “Will we be comfortable with the decision?”

The Bull and the Eagle styles (located to the right of the chart) have pretty much made up their minds before they go into the decision-making arena. The Bloodhound and the Bee are much more open to new input.

The Bull and the Bloodhound make their decisions based on facts. The Eagle and the Bee are more aware of things without being conscious of them. They know in their heart the problems, but couldn’t tell you why they know them.

Which style best describes you? There are two important ideas about your decision-making style you need to know:

1. You are actually all four styles, there is just one that is usually preferable.
2. Your situation or environment may cause you to respond in a style that is not your preference.

Making decisions has become an increasingly complex challenge for most of us. Very few decisions are made with absolute certainty, because complete knowledge about all of the alternatives is seldom possible. Good decisions come from disciplined thinking.

How should critical thinkers evaluate arguments to make their decisions? The easiest way is to focus on the outcomes, the results of the argumentative process. However, since some decision-making outcomes can be influenced to more or less of a degree by chance, looking at only the results can be misleading and downplay the importance of good preparation and sound reasoning. Critical thinkers need to examine not only the outcome of a decision, but the process used to make that decision. Only by looking at both can we determine why the decision succeeded or failed in obtaining its desired outcome.

We also need to be aware of the ethical implications of the decisions we make. Decisions we make can impact the health and welfare, not only of ourselves, but our family, our community, our state, our nation, and even our world.

As Warnick and Inch write in their book, Critical Thinking and Argumentation,

“We must be aware of the quality of our arguments and knowledgeable about standards that will enable us to distinguish arguments that are ethically or morally right from those that are wrong. Millions of people in Europe died because the Nazis believed Adolf Hitler’s arguments that their misfortunes were caused by the Jewish people. Many lives and careers were ruined in the early 1950s when the public believed Senator Joseph McCarthy’s claims and accusations about Communist infiltration in all aspects of life.”² (Warnick, 1989)

Examining our decisions and decision-making style allows us to improve our own personal style and thus take more control of our lives.

Reference