

Decision Making

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Table of Contents

[Decision Making](#)

[A Metaphor for Decision Making](#)

[Resistance](#)

[Inner Knowing](#)

[Rational Decision Making](#)

[The Decisions](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Decision Making

At a midpoint in the mediation therapy process, the mediation therapist will express her or his confidence in each individual's ability to eventually integrate rational, sensory, emotional, intuitive, and instructional information into an inner knowing. It is my belief that decision making about relationships is not wholly rational, or even primarily rational. It is with courage that people leap to the knowledge of their decisions, looking backward in an effort to define how and why they know what they know. "I just know." "Now I *understand*." "It is clear as a bell to me, now." These are all expressions of reaching the culmination of the decision making.

As has been said previously, in attempting to make a decision, people frequently look as though they have an adding machine tape behind opaque eyes, the tape emerges from either side of their heads, one side with yes written on it, the other with no written on it. Their eyes move back and forth from one side to the other in an attempt to make a decision. This sashaying, cognitively, from one side of the conflict to the other is painful to watch and employs only one of many faculties for decision making.

Often each side of the conflict, if chosen, represents choices individuals

don't seem willing to live with. What is frequently needed, instead of an external choice, is an internal shift in understanding in the conflicted party. If decision making is not best described as a back and forth look between the choices, in what ways can it be described better?

A Metaphor for Decision Making

My own metaphor for decision making is the afore-mentioned metaphor embodied in the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*: if one builds a field, a desired resolution will take place. On the field (that is, in the mediation therapy process) is planted rational understanding, sensory and instructional information, intuition, emotional and inner wisdom. Cognitive rumination is not planted on the field, only cognitive understanding. The mediation therapist tends the field with basic conflict negotiation attitudes and techniques. When the time is right, a decision with a sense of integrated understanding will grow up on the field—that is, in the human heart, gut, or inner self.

My own image for a decision is a corn plant—not particularly aesthetic, but sturdy, alive, and sustaining. (Coincidentally, Barbara McClintock, a researcher mentioned in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, who won the Nobel Prize for work on the genetics of corn plants, wrote that you have to have patience “to hear what [the corn] has to say to you” and the openness “to let it come to

you.”^[1]) In my image, when the corn plant is full grown on the field, a person has been patient enough to gather all the information from within and without to understand exactly what the corn plant is saying to him or her. Each individual using the *Field of Dreams* metaphor for decision making will create his or her own image for the decision he or she is making.

The mediation therapy evokes a wealth of information, which is planted in individuals in whom a decision will grow. They will not have to ruminate about the decision, or figure it out in their heads. The mediation therapy decision makers frequently look peaceful and calm during the intervention. They have made a decision not to foreclose on an eventual decision without the necessary information. They have their eyes, their ears, and their feelings wide open and are receptive to their intuition and to their inner wisdom. They have suspended a frantic search for an immediate decision. They have trust that they can endure a period of not knowing in order to arrive at silent knowledge or inner knowing. They are told that they will be able to blend a wide variety of information—multiple variables—into the making of a decision. Frequently the structured decision-making process will help frightened individuals engage some calmness and serenity within themselves.

In a workshop on decision making, Ira Gorman explains that “much of human thought is automatic. People reach conclusions by following chains of associations. Although decisions have multiple implications, decision makers

usually pay attention to one or possibly two variables to the exclusion of other important ones. The process of thinking automatically and limiting the number of variables is usually adaptive in a world in which we are flooded with information. We simply couldn't function if we paid attention to everything." The goal of Gorman's decision making workshop is "to help people go beyond automatic thinking when they have important decisions to make. [Individuals] learn to weigh multiple considerations, generate new options, and be open to new information so that they can see decisions sooner and start to think and act when it is possible for them to have maximum impact."^[2] Being open to a wealth of new information through all of the structures in mediation therapy; creating new options through brainstorming and negotiation skills; and weighing many more decisions than the mind typically holds, are all integral to the decision-making process in mediation therapy.

Resistance

Making a decision involves letting go of the familiar. People know the status quo, how things are. A decision typically involves change, something new. Change is frequently resisted, even when it results in a positive outcome. Where decisions entail the possibility of change, resistance is not far behind. Even if the current situation is miserable, it is familiar.

As previously discussed, asking what the positives are in the current situation is one way to address resistance to decision making. The couple mentioned earlier who fought incessantly said that the good part of the way things were in their relationship for him was that he was able to preserve a sense of space and independence; for her it was the ability to maintain her own identity, which she had been unable to do in her first marriage. Acknowledging with the couple the positives in their fighting may have given them permission to somehow say to themselves, “The positives are good, but they aren’t all there is to it; we pay a huge price for those positives of space and identity.”

Another strategy for getting through resistance to decision making is asking *why* making a decision is a bad idea. Typical answers are:

“We will have to do something different.”

“There will be no turning back.”

“We lose options when we choose one option.”

If making a decision, then, truly seems to be a bad idea, then the non-decision makers at least understand why they are not making a decision.

In the reverse, asking why an individual wants to make a decision brings to the fore the desires to finally get out of a limbo state, to put an end

to confusion, to get started in a forward direction. Even though arriving at a decision is experienced as difficult, even painful, realizing the positives in doing so may give the decision makers added courage.

Inner Knowing

Around session seven or eight, the mediation therapist, in an aside, might mention that she or he sees decision making as gradually accumulating new information, weighing many considerations, and creating new options. Once this rational information has been assimilated, individuals may move rapidly and intuitively to a conclusion. If the rational processes are like roads down which the cognitive processes travel, and the conscious mind like a fallow field that is seeded by the answers to the rational structures, as well as by sensory information, emotional sharing and by education, then the decision is like a strong plant that grows up in the field, surrounded perhaps by little wildflowers or tentative answers or conclusions. This image, and other statements made along the way about decision making, is intended to help people relax and trust in the knowledge that they are indeed *doing* the decision-making work, some linear, some nonlinear, and that the decision will spring from the accumulation of their work. Theodore Isaac Rubin talks about “integrated concentration” as “bringing our total selves—all our resources, time and energy—into focus on the action at hand, to the exclusion of all other matters. If it accompanies the carrying out of a decision, it is an

enormously powerful and effective force.”^[3]

During sessions eight to ten of a twelve-session contract, I ask individuals (as does family therapist Sallyann Roth) to take their partner’s position on the question at hand, speaking to and arguing for that position as if it were their own.^[4] The partner’s position may then be experienced as more objective, as more free- floating than being seen as wedded to the partner. Taking one another’s positions can be done repeatedly, and may result in freeing solidly entrenched positions and in experiencing ambivalence about the decision. A newly ambivalent state may contribute to a person’s eventually moving back to an original position, or moving to the possibility of blending both partners’ decisions, or even in moving toward agreement with the partner’s position. Ambivalence allows the freeing up of solid, static positions.

Distinguishing between making or figuring out a decision cognitively and uncovering a decision that has been growing within and has been well fertilized by the mediation therapy process, is important. Not looking back and forth frantically between options, but trusting, waiting, learning, then leaping with courage to a decision is the mode presented in mediation therapy.

Toward session nine, the mediation therapist will say, “Soon, you each

will be able to make your decision without using words. Some people know their decisions in their hearts, others in their guts or in their essential selves or beings." Telling people they will be able to know is highly effective. In *Mindfulness* Ellen Langer says, "Keeping free of mindsets, even for a moment, we may be able to see clearly and deeply."^[5] All of the suggestions of the mediation therapist to tune in to inner knowing, and to clear the mind of rational inquiry, in order to see clearly, are like Langer's suggestion that "In an intuitive or mindful state, new information, like new melodies, is allowed into awareness."^[6] The new information fertilizes the fallow fields so that a decision may grow up and be discovered. Henri Poincare said it well: "It is by logic that we prove. It is by intuition that we discover."^[7] The predominant message to our clients is to get out of their own ways; to have trust in their own rich processes of gathering data (sensory, rational, emotional, educational information) and synthesizing this data into committed, self-connected decisions.

Reconnecting to information that people have screened out, in order to support the status quo, may cause people considerable discomfort. Recognizing a new decision may result in people feeling foolish or wrongheaded about their past decisions. When this occurs I often explain that, faced with a series of alternatives, people make decisions that have certain gains and certain prices. At a later time, the price may well outweigh the gain. The original decision, however, may have been the best decision

available from the alternatives at the time. Because a new decision is currently seen as more appropriate, does not mean that an old decision in its time was in error.

Decision making is clearly a process, not an event. Instruction about decision making is not done of a piece, but in discrete enjoiners throughout:

“The combination of all you are learning will yield creative decisions.”

“The seeds for your decision are within you.”

“How would you feel if you did know what direction to take with your relationship?”

“If you knew your decision, what would it be?”

“Do you know anyone who knows how to decide?”

“What stops you from trusting your inner resources?”

At times, I will read from Carlos Castenada’s *The Power of Silence*:

I am just considering how our rationality puts us between a rock and a hard place. Our tendency is to ponder, to question, to find out. And there is no way to do that Reaching the place of silent knowledge cannot be reasoned out. It can only be experienced. So close the door of self-reflection. Be impeccable and you’ll have the energy to reach the place of silent knowledge.^[8]

I say that when people know their decisions from silent or inner

knowledge, they may be able to look backward, through all the information they have gathered, to understand how and why they know what they know. To quote Castenada again, “Man’s predicament is that he intuitively knows his inner resources, but he does not use them.”^[9]

It must be clear by this time that I believe that many people in this culture have the illusion that mind or rational senses are what make decisions, that “Conscious mind is too damn cocky,” as Bandler and Grinder put it.^[10] Students in classes of mediation therapy have shared that their important decisions have been processes, not rational conclusions. The above instruction—to merely *include* rational understanding in decision making—is interwoven with instruction that mutual decision making or mutually understood decision making cuts down on one partner’s assuming all the guilt, while the other assumes a victim position. Common sense shows that unilateral decision making results in less well-being for partners and children than mutually made, or at least mutually understood, decisions.

Prior to asking for individual decisions about the future direction of the relationship (or another decision), the mediation therapist may make some statement such as:

You certainly have a great deal more information to use as a basis for making decisions; you have been considerate of your children’s needs during this time of indecision; you’ve learned new skills of assertiveness, communication, negotiation, disagreement, and decision making. With all

these inputs, I believe you can trust yourself to leap, with courage, to a decision, to inner knowing, perhaps only looking back later to understand the decision. May you now move out of the impasse of anger, sadness, stuckness, or immobility to a position where you are able to perceive an inner decision.

Of course, the statement should be tailor-made by the individual mediation therapist. Another example might be:

You most likely see yourself, your partner, and your relationship more clearly now. I hope you have come to trust your intuition, that you have asked and been granted forgiveness and have forgiven your partner what was important to forgive. You are, I believe, ready to know your decision.

Unlike the more explicit rational structures, assistance in decision making through inner knowing is more subtle instructional work resulting in attitudinal and belief shifts which are less visible than overt changes in behavior.

Rational Decision Making

Harold Greenwald in *Decision Therapy* has summarized his ideas, which may be used as part of the rational decision-making process from session six to twelve:

1. State your problem as clearly and completely as you can.
2. Examine past decisions that helped create the problem.

3. List the payoffs for the past decisions that are behind the problem.
4. Answer the question: what was the context in which you made the original decision?
5. Examine alternatives to your past decision.
6. Choose your alternative and put it into practice.[\[11\]](#)

Mediation therapists who attempt Greenwald's six-question model for themselves will understand the usefulness of the decision-making questions. People accustomed to using decision trees might benefit from such an analysis, especially when indecisiveness has taken over.

Robin Dawes in *Rational Choice in An Uncertain World* presents an arithmetic method of assigning numerical weights to choices.[\[12\]](#) For people who enjoy numbers and who are stuck in the decision-making process, Dawes' approach may be the wrench which unscrews the stuck nut of indecision.

Max Bazerman in *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making* describes a six step "rational" decision-making process which mediation therapists may want to incorporate into the rational structures. Bazerman's six steps are:

7. Define the problem
8. Identify the criteria (or objectives)

9. Weight the criteria
10. Generate alternatives
11. Rate each alternative on each criterion
12. Compute the optimal decision^[13]

In mediation therapy the problem is accurately defined as the need and desire to reach a decision. Often, the criteria or objectives for a couple in reaching a decision are to get themselves out of limbo and pain; to become more attentive parents; and to move forward with their lives. Couples know the relative value of their objectives. With the assistance of the mediation therapist, couples identify as many courses of action as they can, seeing how well each alternative solution achieves each of their criteria or objectives. In mediation therapy, what Bazerman calls “computing the optimal decision” could include his elaborate prescription for computation and/or factoring in the above steps along with sensory, emotional, intuitive, and educational information.

The Decisions

It is a momentous time when individuals are asked for their decisions. Often people will have known a decision before the conclusion of mediation therapy. Sometimes decisions come as a complete surprise. Frequently people

will acknowledge that it isn't the decision they want to make (in the case of divorce), but it is the decision they know is the right decision for all concerned. A lot of pain may well be experienced frequently at this point, as well as relief that a decision has been made. Each individual will be helped to clarify how he or she regards and feels about the decision. Each will be helped to be comfortable with the decision, however painful. Often, the essence of Theodore Isaac Rubin's following statement is conveyed to clients: "Working at decision-making means taking advantage of the human prerogative. We alone, as a species have the potential of choice and decision—of options beyond instinctual, biological dictates. This is real freedom. This is real power. Making decisions gives us the freedom to exert power in living our own lives."[\[14\]](#)

The critical final step in mediation therapy is to help the partners negotiate their integrated individual decisions to a mutually acceptable or, at least, mutually understood decision. If both individuals have decided to be further committed to the relationship on an ongoing basis and want to work with a professional or professionals to enhance their relationship, the mediation therapist may provide them with referrals or entertain their request to work with the mediation therapist in a new capacity, after a break in time. If the individuals have both decided to divorce, assessment of their children's needs and their own ongoing personal and legal/mediation needs is in order. If one partner has decided to commit to the relationship and the

other clearly wants out, sometimes all that can be done, as stated earlier, is that the partner who wants the marriage goes on record as being in opposition to the divorce. Hopefully, he or she can state why the other finds it necessary to dissolve their union, can understand at minimum, why something so painful is necessary from the partner's point of view. More than occasionally a partner will not want to leave a marriage but will say that under the circumstances he or she also desires a divorce, since a marriage involves two people who want it.

In the negotiation of individual decisions, I strive for the highest level of agreement or understanding possible between partners. Certainly angry feelings are legitimate at this stage and help the couple disengage from one another. The anger may coexist with an attempt, at least, to understand the partner's need for such a drastic decision.

Once people have reached the highest level of agreement and understanding possible at this point, plans to implement their decision are begun. Getting to those decisions involves men and women learning to respect and integrate their own rational, emotional, sensory, and intuitive knowledge into what Castenada might agree could be described as "the somersault of thought into the inconceivable."^[15]

Notes

- [1] Belenky, et al. 143.
- [2] Gorman, "Decision Making Workshop."
- [3] Rubin, *Overcoming Indecisiveness*, 181.
- [4] Roth, "Designing Tasks That Help Couples Continue Their Therapy At Home" lecture.
- [5] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 118.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p.118
- [7] Henri Poincare, "Intuition and Logic Mathematics," 205-212.
- [8] Castendada, *The Power of Silence*, 87.
- [9] *Ibid.*, 249
- [10] Bandler and Grinder, *Frogs into Princes*, 185.
- [11] Rubin, 204.
- [12] Greenwald, *Decision Therapy*, 299.
- [13] Bazerman, *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*, 3-4.
- [14] Dawes, 227.
- [15] Castenada, 132.

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