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Frequently Asked Questions

How can the use of case studies in the workplace improve decision making? Let's start out with the premise that the brain loves stories. Because the brain operates on associations, case studies appeal to this function. Besides, people themselves, love stories. (Think about, "Once upon a time . ." for instance.) People also enjoy solving puzzles and problems. In essence, case studies foster creativity and give people the option to come up with what they is the best solution. Put a group of people together to work on a case study and they will not only learn about solving problems, they'll learn about each other. Notice here, that we did not say "solve the case study." Most case studies, especially ones involving people, don't have one clear solution. There can be a number of successful ways to resolve the issue. Effective decision makers recognize this.

What can supervisors do to assess and improve the decision making and problem solving of those around them? To put it simply, ask lots of open-ended questions and pose lots of situations. For instance, you might ask someone, "How did you come up with that solution?" If they say, "I don't really know," remain silent and wait for them to reflect a bit. Chances are, they'll begin to explain their approach. From there, you can ask clarifying questions, not to catch them in a mistake, but to better understand their reasoning. If their reasoning is solid, compliment them. If not, ask them questions to help them discover a more effective approach for next time.

The same is true in posing situations. You might, for example, ask someone to reason through one of the situations you see your people facing on a regular basis. How does this person approach it compared to others. What steps does he or she take? How does he or she gather information? How does he or she draw conclusions about what to do? You get the idea.

Do this with both individual and groups. Consider setting aside time during staff meetings to process some of the typical mistakes and challenges you observe in the workplace. Over time, they'll come to expect these opportunities and might even embrace them. Do all this enough and you begin to see patterns how people approach problem solving, how they make mistakes and where they tend to get stuck. Than you can focus on certain areas.

What do effective managers do to improve the decision making and problem solving around them? They concentrate their efforts around modeling and mentoring. Good managers recognize and accept that their words and actions are being constantly analyzed. Even a simple request such as "Please come into my office," can raise momentary tension in the workplace. Chances are, you've experienced this emotion. These managers hold themselves to a higher standard. They are careful not to let their guard down by saying things like, "Life's too short" or "Good enough for government work." If those around them perceive that the manager takes lazy short-cuts or dodges the tough decisions, they will too. This doesn't mean these managers try to be super-

human. Everyone makes mistakes. They are just cognizant that their decisions are receiving more scrutiny.

Effective managers also take the time to mentor those around them in making better decisions. They take the time to help someone work a problem through rather than just giving an instruction. They process mistakes without passing judgment. They compliment those who work hard to make the best decisions. They encourage those around them to take the time and care to make the best choices and deal effectively with the outcomes.

How can supervisors find the balance between managing today's technology and compelling their people to be better problem solvers? First of all, technology use and problem solving are not mutually exclusive. They each serve valuable roles in reaching productive outcomes. The key is user confidence. In other words, those used to relying on their own "smarts" need to be open to using software apps and on-line resources to gather additional information and possible solutions. At the same time, those who have grown dependent on looking to a screen for all the answers need to be open to solving daily problems without looking for options programmed by someone else. While everyone may feel some discomfort at first, persistence will produce confidence and better outcomes. It is up to managers to compel those they supervise to stretch outside their comfort zone and attempt new approaches.

During a program, Bob Wendover mentioned that effective decision makers have become comfortable with being uncomfortable. What did he mean? Dealing with the unknown produces stress. "What will happen? How will the other person respond? What if I make a mistake?" And so on. Effective decision makers realize they cannot eliminate this stress. They need to manage it. First, they accept that it will be a part of their thinking. Second, they find ways to compartmentalize it. Third, they look for patterns of when and how stress appears so they are prepared to deal with it without allowing it to distract their thinking. There is a more complete explanation in this blog post: How to Be Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable.

How does the brain manage decision making and problem solving. While much of this is still very much a mystery, neuroscience has uncovered some valuable insights over the past decade. This question is really too broad to be answered as a frequently-asked-question. We recommend the following books to obtain a basic overview of how the brain solves problems and approaches decision making. The reference for each can be found in our suggested reading list.

- *Brain Rules* by John Medina, Ph.D.
- *Your Survival Instinct is Killing You* by Marc Schoen, Ph.D.
- *The Organized Mind* by Daniel J. Levitin, Ph.D.

Why do different generations approach problem solving and decision making differently? The simple answer is because everyone is a product their experiences and the times in which they came of age. These differences are not right or wrong. They're just different. What hangs up many people are their assumptions about how people ought to act, the values and beliefs they ought to have, the clothes they're supposed to have, and so on. When it comes to making decisions, the same thing holds true. This issue does not just reside with older individuals, by the way. We see it in the actions and comments of young people as well. Before jumping to conclusions about what's

wrong, we should all ask those we're judging about their choices and decisions. Chances are, we'll all learn more, not just about them, but about ourselves.

Are you defining problem solving, critical thinking and decision making all as the same thing? You seem to use the terms interchangeably. Obviously, they do have different meanings. For our purposes, though, they all mean getting to productive outcomes in the workplace.

During a presentation, Bob Wendover mentioned that decisions don't have answers, they have outcomes. What does he mean? In many ways, we have become conditioned to think that any question or problem will have a well-defined outcome. It's how education teaches most subjects. It's how digital technology presents solutions (in a menu of choices). It's the way today's media and politicians present issues (you either agree us or you're wrong). But any decision requiring reason, from choosing a soup for lunch to asking directions can result in a host of outcomes. When it comes to decisions involving others, the possible outcomes can be endless. To quote Forest Gump, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get." This is why good decision makers learn to think several steps ahead to better predict outcomes and be prepared for the unexpected.

What is state of mind and what role does it play in our decision making? A state of mind is your clarity of thinking in the moment. One researcher compares it to a glass of water with sand in the bottom. It is clear until you stir the water. Then it becomes cloudy and gray. State of mind is a balance between how open and receptive your thinking is and how closed and cluttered it is. Since our state of mind can change from moment to moment, it can have a significant impact our decisions. After all, our emotions play a role in most choices we make.

What role does the stress we feel play in our decision making? Most people believe that they make mostly logical decisions. The reality is just the opposite. The vast majority of our decisions are based on our state of mind at the time of the decision. (See above.) When we feel uncertain about the outcome of a decision, the Limbic system in our brain kicks in because its core function is to keep us safe, both physically and emotionally. If we are facing a threat to our physical well-being, this is a good thing. But if the uncertainty causes stress due to a perceived threat to our emotional well-being, this stress muddies our thoughts and gets in the way of logical thought. That's why we act impulsively, angrily, out of sadness, out of fear, and other emotions. When our mind clears later on, we sometimes look back with remorse on a "stupid" decision. This just reinforces our belief that we don't make good decisions. That's why the best decision makers have learned how to manage this kind of stress. (See above.)

Is trial and error still relevant? Absolutely. We have been led to believe that over time, digital technology will relieve us from thinking. But while our refrigerator may start reminding us to buy more milk, any decision of significance will still require us to make choices and live the consequences. Here's the one thing digital technology cannot provide – reasoning. Decisions are made through a combination of logic and emotion. As pointed out in a previous question, emotion tends to dominate logic because of the brain's desire for security. While artificial intelligence may learn to approximate this process in isolated situations, AI is still based on logic and computer code and will be forever limited for that reason.

Trial and error, while it may initially produce discomfort, also produces a feeling confidence when the obstacle is overcome or the problem is solved. If you think about it, trial and error is an essential part of everyday life, in spite of all the technological assists around us. The best decision makers have learned this and embrace trial and error as a means for scaffolding their learning. The more they attempt new approaches to solve problems, the "smarter" they get about dealing with similar situations that arise over time. In one universal example, consider how your driving improved with trail and error. (And no, driverless cars will not be taking over anytime soon.)

Where is the balance between digital technology and analog thinking? There isn't really a balance. At its very essence, digital technology only provides information. It does not make decisions. You still have to do that. That's where so-called analog thinking comes in. In a way, analog thinking is the same thing as trial and error. While it's easy to think that every answer can be found on a screen someplace, this only holds true for the ones driven by data. Examples of these would be the instructions to operate a device, the solution to a mathematical equation, and the directions needed to reach a destination. Any problem requiring judgment compels you to make a choice based on the factors involved, calculated risk and, of course, your emotions. While digital technology is beginning to creep in around the edges, any decision of significance will demand your reasoning for a long time to come.

What impact is digital technology having on everyday decision making and problem solving? The answer to this is very complex because it involves so many interrelated factors. In short, there are three major influences: 1) The manipulation of information and choices due to the way on-line information is presented and software applications are designed; 2) The dependence fostered because of how digital technology is programmed. We call this phenomenon "menu-driven thinking;" 3) The impatience engendered by the "promise" of instant answers and outcomes. This leads to frustration, impulsivity and, over time, mistakes. Decisions of significance require research and reflection. The influences of digital technology are the anti-thesis of this. For a more complete discuss of this impact, we recommend two books: *The Shallows*, by Nicholas Carr and *The Overflowing Brain* by Torkel Klingberg. References to both can be found in our suggested readings.

During a seminar, Bob Wendover mentioned that we all need to be "students of error." Please elaborate. The best decision makers recognize that everyone makes mistakes. But rather than bemoaning those mistakes, they learn from them. The decision makers we've interviewed approach this process a number of different ways. They embrace the value of errors and have developed an attitude of curiosity about what happened. Rather than thinking, "This stuff always happens to me!" they think, "That was unfortunate, but interesting. What can I learn from it?" They take time to reflect on the outcomes of decisions made, especially the significant ones. The vast majority also maintain some sort of diary to remind them of mistakes they've made or unexpected outcomes they've experienced so they don't make the same error twice.

You say there is a tension between efficiency and effectiveness in how digital technology impacts decision making. Explain this tension. Digital technology, at its essence, is nothing more than data presented on a screen. Programmed correctly, it provides us with information and options, the likes of which have never been experienced in history. The one thing it does not provide is certainty. You, the user, still have to process the information and options presented and make a decision using your brain. This is the brain, as we mentioned above, that is dominated by

an emotional desire for security. Effective decision makers remember that a computer, in any form, is only a source of or conduit for data. It can only make decisions or perform tasks for which it has been specifically programmed. As time goes on, artificial intelligence is beginning to relieve of many of the repetitive tasks we perform, but human judgment will continue to dominate. Look elsewhere in these FAQs for addition insights about managing this tension.

How can managers foster better team decision making between the generations? The best way to start is by observing and asking questions. Place those from different generations on the same project and you may be surprised about how they reach solutions because they are compelled to rely on each other. Take time to reflect on how team members of different generations are contributing, or perhaps not contributing, to the team's process. From there, you can fine tune team function and expectations. To a large degree, this is a process of trail and error. As you might recall, effective teams proceed through four phases in their development – First, they *form*. Then they *storm*. In other words, team members discuss and perhaps fight about the ground rules. Then they *norm*, or settle on the rules that work best for the common good. Finally, they begin to *perform* effectively. Part of this four-phase process is resolving generational differences.

How can managers do a better job of assessing for decision making and problem solving skills during selection? The short answer is simulations. Interviews have lost their effectiveness for the most part. Experienced applicants can predict what they're going to be asked. Experienced managers pretty much know the answers the applicants are going to provide. Putting applicants to work in realistic simulations require them to perform in the environment, react to those with whom they will deal and cope with the stress of making typical day-to-day decisions. This, coupled in some cases with validated personality assessments, will provide a much clearer picture of applicants' strengths, weaknesses and approaches to problem solving and decision making. We also recommend a technique we call "interviewing by walking around" which will also elicit better insights during the inevitable interviews. See Bob's blog post on this topic for more detail. Does all this require more up-front preparation? Yes. But every hire represents an investment of tens of thousands of dollars.

What do effective managers do to foster a culture of effective decision making and problem solving? We recommend ten strategies that employers should use to improve overall workplace decision making. If you have attended one of our programs, chances are you received a "drop card" with the attributes of a DecisioNinja™ on one side and these ten strategies on the other. If not, e-mail us a request to info@commonsenseenterprises.net. We'd be happy to send you one.