

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

DECISIVE

HOW TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS IN LIFE AND WORK



CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH
THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF *SWITCH* AND *MADE TO STICK*

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Introduction and the WRAP framework

1. All of us make dozens of decisions every day. Many are inconsequential: Picking a flavor of yogurt for breakfast. Some are critical: Pulling the plug on a particular product line. And some can provide the difference between life and death: Calling a cab after that fourth Dos Equis.

Replay for a moment all of the choices you made on a recent day—today? yesterday?—including everything you decided, from lining up a babysitter for Saturday night to defining an all-Twitter marketing strategy. How many of those decisions do you remember *deliberating* about, as opposed to picking instinctively? Did you use a conscious process (pros and cons, etc.) with any of them? In retrospect, do you think you may have let your “spotlight” stay too fixed? If so, share your reflections.

2. When advising a friend on whether to take a well-paying but uncertain

job, Benjamin Franklin recommended a type of moral algebra: “divide a sheet of paper by a line into two columns, writing over the one Pro and over the other Con.” This “Pros & Cons” technique continues to be one of the most popular approaches to decision making. Have you relied on “Pros & Cons” in the past? Do you agree with the Heath brothers’ skepticism about the limits of the technique?

Widen your Options

1. Sometimes the smaller choices we make in daily life add up to patterns so routine, so familiar, that we fail to recognize them. Sometimes we are so busy making choices between what is right in front of us, that we fail to see the potential options that sit just outside of our view.

In the first section of *Decisive*, Chip and Dan Heath advise pulling out of your own life, Martin Scorsese-style, and taking a cinematic view of what is happening – and what you might be missing.

Conscientious doctors making a diagnosis force themselves to look at all the patient’s symptoms in a different light and ask: “What else could this be?” At the end of every interview, good journalists ask their subjects: “What haven’t I asked you? What else do you want me to know?”

The authors provide a simple but intriguing example of limited thinking in their description of a study of video purchasers. Given the choice whether to buy or not to buy a video they want for the special sale price of \$14.99, 75 percent of those surveyed said they would buy. But when given the choice between buying or saving the \$14.99 for another purchase on another day, 45 percent of those surveyed said they would NOT buy. A simple (even dumb) reminder helped them snap out of a “narrow frame.”

Can you think of a time in your life when you were caught in a narrow frame? A telltale sign is often a “whether or not” choice: Whether or not

to quit a job, whether or not to go back to school, whether or not to end a relationship, whether or not to fire an employee. Were there other options available to you that you didn't consider at the time?

2. One of the core principles of “Widening Your Options” is to *find someone who has solved your problem*. Name a time when you actively sought out someone or some organization that you knew had experienced a problem you were now having and asked for pointers. What did you learn? Why do you think we don't do this more often?

3. Many people report having only considered a few colleges/universities before enrolling—even though it's such an important decision. Why do you think that happens? If you'd had a “college counselor” like Caufield Schnug, what school do you think would have been the “perfect fit” for you? (Or if you did consider a wide array of options, what prompted you to do it?)

4. Once concept the authors bring up frequently is the notion of “thinking AND not OR.” Did that spark anything for you? Are there any decisions looming for you where you can “multi-track” and try several options at once?

5. In Chapter 3, there's a discussion of the “promotion” and “prevention” mindsets. The promotion mindset is concerned with pursuing positive outcomes, and the prevention mindset is focused on avoiding negative outcomes. Promotion is open-minded and creative; prevention is wary and conservative. Do you find that you slip into one of these mindsets more frequently than the other? Do you and your partner balance each other out or do you both lean the same direction?

Reality Test Your Assumptions

1. By Widening Your Options, you surface more choices and stretch your sense of what's possible. Afterward comes the difficult process of assessing

your options, gathering information to analyze which options are strong and which are weak.

To do that assessment, the Heath brothers advise us to zoom out and then zoom back in. The authors note that getting down to the granular level allows you, at times, to see details that turn your natural assumptions on their heads. Remember the Bounty paper towel lab workers who were forced to do tests on their *competitors'* products.

One Bounty marketer was stunned to find he liked many of the qualities of the other guy's product. Suddenly he had to reconsider the competitiveness of Bounty. How could you and your colleagues arrange a close-up of your competitors products or services?

2. In Chapter 5, we learn about the concept of a “deliberate mistake,” in which we identify the assumptions we are making and then pick one of them to test with a “mistake.” Sometimes, those “mistakes” turn out to be fortunate, as with DSI's million-dollar consulting contract—not to mention the woman who found a husband by going on a date with him after previously writing him off. Think about either your professional or personal life. Identify a couple of “unspoken assumptions” you're making. (E.g., *We can't hire people right out of college.* Or, *I have never enjoyed hosting dinner parties.* Or, *Our customers stick with us because of our speedy support times.*) Which one of those assumptions might be worth questioning? How could you concoct a “deliberate mistake” to test it?

3. The Heath brothers have reported that one of the most popular concepts in the book is the idea of “ooching”—that is, to test our decisions in the real world rather than assess them in our heads. Had you heard the term ooching before the book? Was there a time in your life when you wish you had ooched before leaping? Or can you think of a time when ooching worked for you—when you learned enough with a quick experiment to make a confident decision?

4. In the book, Dan Heath tells the story about how much he agonized about whether to hire Rob Crum, an obviously qualified artist. Studies have shown that personal interviews are less diagnostic than we think. Can you think of an example where one of your job candidates aced an interview—only to flop in their position? What are interviews good for and not good for? What have you learned over time about the best way to hire good people?

5. The hubris of bosses who think they are right can be counteracted by disagreement. Try to think of a time in your organization when a decision was reconsidered because of dissent or alternate points of view. What allowed that disagreement to be aired out? Is your boss good about allowing differing points of view, or did you use a process to “bake in” disagreement? Given the way your organization is run, do you think a fiasco like the Snap-ple acquisition could have happened to you? Why or why not?

Attain Distance Before Deciding

1. Do any of you know someone who swore they’d found the “perfect man” or “perfect woman” – even though everyone else could tell Mr. or Ms. Perfect was ...psychotic? Some people are more prone than others to allowing what they want to cloud their thinking about what they need. And it doesn’t happen only in college love stories – it happens professionally as well. When have you seen the enthusiasm of short-term emotion get in the way of solid decision-making?

2. There are, of course, times when even short-term emotion cannot quell the internal angst some decisions provoke. The authors note that this is often a sign of conflict between your core priorities. Think of the Interplast story that hinged on a seemingly simple decision: Should family members be allowed to join surgeons on the trips? And yet, underlying that simple dilemma was a profound conflict between values: The quantity of children served versus the satisfaction of the crucial volunteer surgeons. Talk about

a really difficult decision you've witnessed (or made) recently, whether at work or at home. When you replay the decision in your head, was there an underlying priorities conflict at stake? Were you stuck at the "surface level" of the decision, or were you aware of the priorities conflict? How did you eventually resolve it?

3. The "mere exposure" principle says that we like things more when they are familiar. This principle extends, unfortunately, to our perception of truth. The Heaths make a provocative statement: "All of us, in our work, will naturally absorb a lot of institutional 'truth,' and chances are that much of it is well-proven and trustworthy, but some of it will only *feel true* because it is familiar. As a result, when we make decisions, we might think we're choosing based on evidence, but sometimes that evidence may be ZAJONC—nonsense ideas we've come to like because we've seen them so much." What do you think is some of the ZAJONC at your organization—ideas that "feel true" because of their longevity but may not actually be true? (You might tie in this idea with the earlier discussion of making a deliberate mistake.)

4. Think back to a time when you feel really good about the advice you gave a friend. What did you perceive about their situation that they couldn't see for themselves? Did they follow your advice? (If not, why do you think they didn't? Did you spot in their behavior any of the biases discussed in the book?)

5. The Heaths say that the "the single most effective question, in helping us to break a decision logjam, may be this one: *What would I tell my best friend to do in this situation?*" (The professional equivalent of that question is Andy Grove's question, "What would my successor do?") Consider a dilemma you're facing right now ... do either of these questions help tip you one direction or the other?

Prepare to be Wrong and the Conclusion

1. Consider the strategies that emergency-room doctors and nurses apply every day. They anticipate the multitude of ways that things can go wrong, and the myriad mistakes that could be made—and then they prepare for all of them. Of course, for these medical professionals, human lives are at stake, and that forces them to exercise foresight. In other areas of life, people consider themselves “done” after they’ve made a decision, and they don’t prepare to be wrong with the same rigor. Why do you think that is? Do you think it’s overconfidence, or a lack of time, or something else altogether?

2. David Lee Roth’s ingenious “brown M&M” trick is a great example of a tripwire—something that snaps us to attention when a decision needs to be made. Think about a contentious decision that was made at work in the last 6 months. Some people were in favor of it and some people were against it. Reality will eventually prove one side right—but how will you know? What outcomes or metrics could you watch to know whether to reconsider the decision (or double-down on it)? Discuss how you might apply tripwires to ensure that you make a considered decision at the right time.

3. So many of the things we do throughout the day are done on autopilot, without conscious thought. Think about the example the Heath brothers give of the Alabama woman who has always dreamed of going to Italy—but waits too long. She got stuck on autopilot. Can you think of an equivalent in your life? What’s something you’ve always dreamed of doing but have let slip for years? Could you use a tripwire to ensure that you don’t miss your chance?

4. Trusting the decision-making in a home, or in an organization, relies on the fairness of the process. Bargaining is often key to a shared sense of that fairness. Several of the experts quoted in the final chapter of the book had recommendations lending to the perception of fairness. For instance, the entrepreneur said the best way to defend a decision is to point out its flaws. The mediator said he states back the other side’s position, more powerfully.

Which of their suggestions did you find most persuasive?

5. What did you think of the concept of “procedural justice”? Can you think of a time when you felt treated poorly because of a lack of procedural justice? (Can you think of a time when you actually got a good outcome but still felt uneasy because of the lack of procedural justice?)

6. The Heath brothers write, “Being decisive is itself a choice. Decisiveness is a way of behaving, not an inherited trait. It allows us to make brave and confident choices, not because we know we’ll be right, but because it’s better to try and fail than to delay and regret. Our decisions will never be perfect, but they can be better. Bolder. Wiser. The right process can steer us toward the right choice.” Do you agree with this sentiment? What would you say were your top 1 or 2 takeaways from the book? Have you found yourself using the WRAP process (or elements of it) in your decisions since you read the book?



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Chip Heath is the Thrive Foundation of Youth Professor of Organizational Behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. Chip has spoken and consulted on the topic of “making ideas stick” with organizations such as Nike, the Nature Conservancy, Microsoft, Ideo, and the American Heart

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Dan Heath is a Senior Fellow at Duke University’s CASE center, which supports social entrepreneurs. Heath has taught and consulted with organizations such as Microsoft, Philips, Vanguard, Macy’s, USAID, and the American Heart Association. Previously, Dan worked as a researcher and case writer for

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