

How to Develop Your Intuitive Decision Making

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Intuitive decision making is the way people make decisions naturally, without the use of formal tools and procedures.

Some talk about intuition as happening without any thought at all. Like “trusting your gut” or “using the force” in a sixth sense kind of manner.

Our quickest intuitive decisions may sometimes look or feel that way. But it’s not quite all that’s going on in our heads.

Getting a deeper understanding of intuitive decision making is essential to devising ways to improve it. First, many personal and professional decisions need to be made relatively quickly. Formal decision analysis methods far exceed the resource and time constraints.

Secondly, even when deep analysis is suitable, it builds and elaborates on human intuitive decision processes. Ignoring the human element can set back the entire enterprise.

Fortunately, considerable research has been devoted to understanding intuitive decision making since the 1970s and 1980s. The results provide important clues for training and development.

Jenny Phillips, Gary Klein and [Winston Sieck](#) examined ways we can improve intuitive decision making in [their paper](#), “Expertise in judgment and decision making: The case for training intuitive decision skills,” which appeared as a chapter in the *Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making*.

Their work was based on [studies of experts](#) who make life and death decisions as a normal part of their routine.

Expertise and intuitive decision making

Gary Klein and colleagues at Klein Associates developed the “recognition-primed decision” model based on observations and interviews with firefighters, tank platoon commanders, neonatal intensive care nurses, and others who work in fast-paced, high-stakes jobs.

Their early studies are described in [Klein’s book](#), *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*.

The general idea is that experts make most of their decisions by matching them to their past experiences.

If they are in a familiar situation, the decision is automatic. They recognize a situation as being like ones they’ve encountered before, and an option comes to mind. In this sense, the decision feels intuitive at the “gut level.”

Thus, your intuitive decision making is often done by matching situations to relevant past experiences, and quickly using them to draw conclusions.

Yet, this doesn't necessarily mean the experts act without thinking. According to the model, they think about the plausible results of taking the action to determine whether the option is workable or not. And if it's not, they come up with an alternative.

They rely on the principle of [satisficing](#) as described by Herbert Simon, an early cognitive scientist and Nobel prize winner.

Hence, applying hypothetical thinking to evaluate options, and sequencing the evaluation process efficiently are also essential aspects of intuitive decision making.

Finally, in real world critical decisions, the situation may often seem unusual or ambiguous. In these cases, the skilled intuitive decision maker tries to figure out what's going on.

Once they gain some sense of clarity, say by coming up with a story that seems to fit the situation, they get back to the decision at hand.

Being able to deal comfortably with ambiguity, uncertainty, and risk, as well as to decide without a complete picture are further aspects of competent intuitive decision making.

The recognition-primed decision model shows how experts draw on highly developed intuitive decision making skills to deal with a range of circumstances.

In fast paced environments like those most often studied by Klein and other cognitive field researchers, the decisionmaking process is sorted out quickly.

Developing intuitive decision making

What are the implications of the recognition primed decision model for building your intuitive decision making skills?

According to Phillips, Klein, and Sieck, the essential idea is to strengthen the kinds of knowledge you draw on to make decisions within your job context.

With this approach, you're not trying to become a better decision maker in general. Instead, you focus on decisions specific to your job. That is, you're looking at domain specific improvements.

For starters, you aim to improve that very fast assessment of situations and the initial options that spring to mind.

To do that, you need to build up a large set of cases involving critical decisions, so that you have patterns to match. Knowing what kinds of decisions you'll face is a solid first step.

Also, you should study sets of cues that signify what's going on and what to do in that situation.

And, you'll want to develop a deeper understanding of how things work, or what causes what. This kind of knowledge is sometimes called a "mental model."

Finally, to think through possible outcomes and cope with ambiguity, you need to go beyond building core knowledge. You also need to develop your [critical thinking skills](#).

One way to build up your knowledge base is with on-the-job-training and coaching. At the most informal, you can carefully watch the seasoned, skilled performers at work. You can ask them tons of questions to get their stories and insights.

These vicarious experiences become part of your knowledge base that drives your intuitions. Naturally, this relies on you to take ownership of your learning.

A leader, trainer, or other talent development professional can formalize this general approach by creating case studies and scenario-based training approaches. Material for these can be reaped from subject matter experts using knowledge elicitation methods, such as [cognitive task analysis](#).

By studying critical cases, you accumulate examples, notice patterns among them, and draw lessons learned. The scenario-based (or critical incident) instructional method is similar. With it, the facilitator leaves out the solution and outcome of the case.

Here, the learner practices assessing situations and making decisions, typically under time pressure. A coach or facilitator asks questions to get the learner to describe current critical events, options they're considering, and how they anticipate those playing out.

With this approach, you improve your intuitive decision making with deliberate, focused practice. Much as you would when learning to ski or ride a bike.

Decision making is something you do naturally, all the time. You draw on your intuition to clarify situations, sort out your options, and make choices.

That doesn't mean you call on your animal spirit guide or trust your untrained gut to make tough choices.

Instead you study and practice making the specific kinds of decisions you are trying to improve. And you solicit feedback to tune your intuitions.

Image Credit: [12019](#)

References

- Klein, Gary. (1998). Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions. MIT Press.
- Phillips, J. K., Klein, G., & Sieck, W. R. (2004). Expertise in judgment and decision making: A case for training intuitive decision skills. In D. J. Koehler & N. Harvey (Eds.), Blackwell Handbook of Judgment and Decision Making.

Further reading

Here are four excellent books to dive into the promises and perils of intuitive decision making:

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