Decision-Making Under Stress

Improving Work Performance & Relationships Through Awareness

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Behavior (What we do)

Deep Dive

Decision-Making

Perception

Basic Cognitive-Neuroscience
Understanding Your Brain
Fast Brain

- Takes the most familiar, well-worn path
- Jumps to conclusions based on initial information (knee-jerk)
- Fast, effortless, & highly efficient (comfortable)
- Runs by default (autopilot)

Slow Brain

- Capable of seeing & making new, unfamiliar paths
- Considers more information, looks broadly, dives deeper
- Thoughtful, deliberate, & effortful (uncomfortable)
- Must be consciously engaged
Perception

Process of organizing and interpreting sensory information to give meaning to our environment and experiences
Perception
Perception
Count every 'F' in the following text:

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF YEARS...
Count every 'F' in the following text:

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF YEARS...
Perception
Perception, Past Experience, & Bias
Perception, Past Experience, & Bias
Because of the way our brains work, WE ALL HAVE BIASES.
Beware! Be Aware.
Stress is a process that occurs whenever a demand exceeds the regulatory capacity or resources of an organism.
Stress & Decision-Making

Prefrontal Cortex

Amygdala
“Fight or Flight” or the Amygdala Hijack

Prefrontal Cortex

Amygdala
“Fight or Flight”

• The brain’s executive functions go offline
• Energy diverted to the body for action
Perception, the Brain, & Decisions

• Our brains evolved to prioritize survival. That means:
  
  • FAST decisions over optimal ones
  
  • THREAT identification
  
  • Social CONFORMITY
  
  • This can result in decision-making errors and other problems.
Perception & Social Interactions

- The tendency to assign meaning (a story) quickly reduces uncertainty (discomfort), BUT our “stories” may not be accurate.
EFFECTIVE decision-making CAN BE more challenging under stress.
There is Hope!!

- **Plasticity**: the brain’s ability to reorganize neural pathways throughout the lifespan as a result of experience
WHAT SHOULD I DO
ABC Practice

**Attention**

**Breathe**

**Curiosity**

... *before* you Decide
Pay Attention

• Are you feeling stressed?

• HALT
  • Hungry
  • Angry
  • Lonely
  • Tired
Breathing...

• Calms fight or flight

• Brings your brain’s executive functions back online

• Opens your focus & your mind
Be **Curious**

- What’s happening right now?
- What do I know?
- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I *really* know?

- What’s important to me right now?
- How do I want to show up?
ABC Practice

A ttention

B rathethe

C uriosity
ABC Practice

A ttention

B ratheme

C uriosity

... before you Decide
Social Perception

• We perceive (make fast decisions about) others in the workplace when...
  • Meeting new people
  • Conducting interviews
  • Doing evaluations or assessments
  • Interacting with others
    ..... So pretty much all the time
The Thing About Social Perception is…

• Our perceptions of others can shape their behavior! (Self-fulfilling prophecy)
• Self-perception works the same way.
• Our thoughts shape our behavior, how WE “show up”.
Karpman Drama Triangle

**Drama at Work**

- **Rescuer**
  - "I can help you"

- **Persecutor**
  - "This is all your fault"

- **Victim**
  - "Poor me"
HOW TO FLIP FROM DRAMA (fast brain)

RESCUER

VICTIM

PERSECUTOR
TO EMPOWERED (slow brain)

CREATOR

COACH

CHAMPION
Reacting → Choosing

**VICTIM**

- **Script**: Poor me. I can’t... I’m helpless. I have no control
- **Focus**: What’s missing
- **Payoff**: Avoid responsibility, gain sympathy & protection
- **Side effects**: Stagnation, depression, lost confidence in self, co-dependency

**CREATOR**

- **Script**: I can. I’m not helpless. I always have a choice.
- **Focus**: What’s available
- **Payoff**: Agency and insight
- **Side effects**: Resilience, self-confidence
**RESCUER**

**Script:** Poor you. You can’t. I’ll save you! I’ll do it.

**Focus:** Short-term relief, unskillful compassion

**Payoff:** Feeling superior and/or needed

**Side effects:** Co-dependency, exhaustion, resentment

**COACH**

**Script:** What are you going to do? What do you need? How can I help?

**Focus:** Long-term relief, skillful compassion

**Payoff:** Actually helping, empowering others

**Side effects:** More time, energy, respect for self and other

**Telling/Doing ➔ Asking**
**PERSECUTOR**

**Tearing Down → Building Up**

- **Script:** This is all your fault! You always/never... Why must you... You’re so...
- **Focus:** Blame, domination
- **Payoff:** Discharging discomfort, feeling superior
- **Side effects:** Fear, distrust, withdrawal, rebellion

**CHAMPION**

- **Script:** What happened? Patience. Learning is uncomfortable, for me and them. Focus on behavior.
- **Focus:** Accountability, growth
- **Payoff:** Developing grit, real accountability
- **Side effects:** Enhanced psychological safety and trust, engagement, growth
ABC Practice

Attention

Breathe

Curiosity

... before you Decide