You Are Your Decisions

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By

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Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*
(Translation Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

When the old order changeth, make sure you're
the bugger who changeth it.

Churchill, Stalin, or Dalziel, according to Reginald Hill,
Midnight Fugue (New York: Harper, 2009)

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PREFACE

Our book is directed to those of you who seriously want to gain real success for yourselves, your surroundings, and your organisational contexts and who seriously want to become involved in your lives and the lives of others. We want to give you the tools to become good and conscious decision makers.

To start with, you might like to consider the difference between those who earn € 24 000 a year and those who earn € 240 000 a year, or between someone who becomes a celebrated artist and someone who will never be known in spite of an ambition to seduce the whole world. What is the decisive characteristic, at least allegedly, of successful people?

- Could it be that they have rich parents? They undoubtedly have greater chances if they do, but many offspring from rich families nevertheless have lacklustre careers.
- Could it be their education? Success in life can depend on one's education, but not always.
- Could it be how intelligent they are? Intelligence can lead to success if you know how to use it, but even intelligent people are often not able to effectively deal with reality.
- Could it be how creative they are? Although this can be a great advantage, creativity often ends in dreams that never materialise.
- Could it be how stubborn they are? Stubborn people go far, but they also tend to get stuck in erroneous thinking.

Whatever the real secret may be, we can entertain many ideas about what helps people attain success. But are these ideas true? In this book, we look more closely at success in the important sense of having actually developed an organisation or a context, or having achieved whatever goals one at least believes oneself to have. We'll concentrate on a characteristic that is decisive for success—a characteristic that is fundamental for realizing your dreams.

You must have the ability to make good decisions

Certainly, pure luck can occasionally determine the outcome, but without structures and analysis it's hard to make decisions. The core of the matter is that you need good models and you need to know how to collect relevant background information. Put simply:

- The better your methods . . .
- The more factual your information . . .
- The more structured your situation . . .
- . . . the better your decisions.

In many situations, there aren't enough facts available to allow you to make a good decision. But astoundingly often, people just fail to find out what they need to know even when this information is available. Those who make spontaneous decisions often get more done than people who analyse the situation. Getting more done may seem to be a good thing. Many people would make that argument, but it's not uncommon for things to go awry for them. Are our spontaneous decisions the right decisions, and how would we know? Or is there some other factor that determines whether things happen to turn out well after all? Instead, perhaps we should pause to ask just why we feel we don't have time to prepare before making decisions—and what consequences this lamentable behaviour can have.

Most often people are not aware of the need for deliberate decision making. Yes, we could all live our lives any which way we want, but when our ways affect others, and they invariably do, then it's simply wrong not to take responsibility for what we do. It's downright wrong not to devote time to investigate and structure the available information and avoid considering our own limitations and what to do about them.

But here's the catch. Taking decision making seriously is hard, and we can't just sit down and wait for flashes of insight. For those inclined, there's a plethora of books that describe how limited we are and what deficiencies we have. But these usually contain no clue as to how we can mitigate our shortcomings. Though our failings are often interesting, even entertaining, we need more than self-examination of our limitations to become good decision makers.

We would like to address people who are interested in improving their capabilities, especially present and future leaders. Perhaps you already are or would like to become one of those leaders. Take this as an opportunity. We want to show serious leaders how they can improve their ability to analyse, as well as to make and execute decisions. Decisions that matter. Decisions that create, change, and improve both individuals and organisations.

We see this as an evolutionary process. It'll be like an absorbing hike, in several stages, perhaps through unfamiliar terrain. And we know that it's easier for the reader to follow the analysis precisely because it's so obvious that any simplistic solution to a decision only leads to new decision problems that require new refined methods and new structures. It'll be a journey towards greater clarity in our recurring confrontations with complexity. The difficulties with making reasonable decisions cannot be overstated. Decision making is an art that must be learned and practiced, and we'll argue for this in the following thirteen chapters, which thus constitute a kind of exploration of increasing maturity, starting from the way people behave to the way they should behave as policy makers and organisational leaders. We'll successively describe increasingly difficult decision-making situations that can be read as a series of dialectical processes. Such processes evolve through syntheses between opposites. Decisions evolve dialectically because every solution creates a new problem, the solution of which in turn creates another new problem, and so it continues.

We begin with everyday decision making on the basis of common ideas, assumptions, and examples. Decision problems and the methods for handling them become progressively more difficult and more complicated with each chapter. Again, look upon it as a process of maturing, in which there is a gradual development towards a better organisation, but also as gaining a broader understanding of our existence in general. As you learn why it can be difficult to make decisions in certain situations, more elaborate methods and structures will be introduced in order to deal with these difficulties. We start with relatively simple problems from a personal perspective and end with more complex organisational problems. You'll acquire an increasing ability to understand limitations and to use proper methods with which to manage them. At the end of the book we offer some suggested further reading for each chapter aimed at the readers who wish to more extensively penetrate this fascinating world.

Our hope is that you can accompany us in what is actually a rather dramatic story about your own possible development, and an account of how you'll realize your full potential. During this journey, our aim is that you will assimilate substantial insights about structured methods in decision making and organisational analysis.

The authors, January 2018[1]

[1] The authors are grateful to Dr. Guy Miklos for highly valuable discussions when writing this book.

CHAPTER ONE

ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY

It's quite typical that people don't understand how their feelings of stress and dissatisfaction are related to their bad decisions. How can we then understand our feelings better? Certainly the first stage is to fully recognise the feelings and understand that what you're experiencing correlates with the quality of your decisions. Experience comes from being attuned to what's happening. By this we don't mean neutral or meaningless experiences, but rather experiences that are emotionally significant. Experiences that matter. Experiences that involve reflection and criticism.

Decision Qualms and Their Opposite

But what if we aren't in contact with any clear feelings about what's happening? We may experience many feelings, but they might be so conflicting and fragmented that they become more of a hindrance than a help—or even worse, we might become so fed up with it all as to be indifferent to what's going on.

Making decisions becomes particularly difficult for matters that most concern us.

- Should I enter into a relationship with this or that person? Or at all?
- Should I take the job offer that's challenging, or the one that's secure?
- Should I buy that luxury residence downtown or the less expensive house in the suburb?
- Should I say yes to the challenge of more tasks at work, or should I prioritise my family?
- Should I even bother carrying on living, when I've lost so much?

We may think it pointless to more or less unsystematically wander around deliberating over problems that we actually believe to be unsolvable.

Many people simply have trouble making decisions even if they spend a lot of time pondering the problems. And many decisions are truly difficult. We might consider needing to live with our decision problems for a while, and dwell obsessively upon them until some kind of solution appears that we might consider an adequate model of our options. Someone who's invested significant energy focusing on a specific problem may one day suddenly wake up and shout, "Eureka! I have it". The sum of all unconscious processes really can sometimes lead to one decision option weighing emotionally more than an alternative option. Not having a clue as to how that decision was reached might seem immaterial. Surely it's the result that matters. We just needed to brood a while in order to build up enough feelings about the possible options in order to reach our decision.

This is how it often happens, and it's not uncommon for this to be sufficiently functional for us to pull through. Not surprisingly, however, there are a number of problems with this approach. Often it requires an unnecessarily long period of time, and the decisions we make aren't always the best. Also, how could we even know what's best if our process is more or less unconscious and devoid of structure? The reasons for making the decision aren't even clear to us ourselves. Furthermore, we'll never be able to explain the decision so that others can understand it. An important aspect here is that to not make a decision is also a kind of decision, but a decision in which one may lose control.

So why do many people have such difficulty making decisions? There are various reasons:

- They're listless
- They don't know what they want
- They see themselves as victims in a situation they can't control
- They don't understand what to do
- They don't care
- They fear something or other
- They feel comfortable with their fantasies

When we don't want or cannot make decisions, what happens is that we fail to exploit opportunity, and instead we become more like passive observers of our own lives or cause unintended harm to others through our passivity. We don't live life to the fullest and instead are reduced to a piteous appurtenance to the mindless masses. History and our surroundings are filled with what the mindless masses bring about through their irresponsible passivity.

There is another type of decision maker: one who is active but doesn't ponder. These decision makers think that there's power in making

decisions—preferably quickly, preferably assertively—commandeering without explanation, neither to themselves nor to others. Occasionally such decision makers are even worse than the passive ones.

There are many psychological aspects of decision making that have nothing to do with the decisions themselves. But there are many other problems in our decision making, even when we are seriously trying to make good decisions. We may not think we have enough information, knowledge, experience, or training in a field, or we may believe that we simply don't have the knowledge and methods to be able to make decisions at all. Most decision problems are a result of the attitude we have towards decision making. These attitudes are easier to perceive in others because it is uncomfortable to see them in ourselves. So first we need a short survey of the attitudes that we ourselves bear.

- *It's not my fault*
  To avoid blame is a very common and destructive way to deal with decision-making situations.

- *It wasn't me*
  I bear no responsibility for things having turned out this way.

- *I can't control what happens*
  The reasoning is often founded on the problem being seen not as something that we need to fix, but rather that "others" must set right. In this way, we create a reason to avoid the problem and focus our attention on something more agreeable. The sad thing about this attitude is that it rarely leads to improvements; to our great surprise, those "others" don't jump in of their own accord to arrange things the way we'd like to have them.

- *It's someone else's fault*
  This variation on the above is the seductive *blame game*, which assumes that someone else has done something stupid or wrong, and it's therefore their duty to fix it all and possibly compensate me for the loss I suffered. Unsurprisingly, in this case we clearly slide into a victim mentality.

Harry has been heading his management unit for five years. He loses his position as boss in conjunction with two care units merging and thereby has to revert to performing tasks that constitute the basis for his employment as a nurse. The information about the merger came suddenly, from above, and was presented somewhat clumsily to the whole team only one hour after Harry found out that his appointment would not be extended. After a month or so, Harry still feels discontented. This manifests in his taking two weeks of sick leave due to stress. When he returns, he spends most of the workday in the break room, where he predicts the entire clinic's downfall, instead of making a plan to hand over responsibilities to the new boss and acquainting himself with the practical routines that have changed since he last worked clinically.

A short-term benefit of Harry's strategy is that it can be a good way to force other people to work toward a goal he himself had no desire to work towards. Harry may also feel superior and think he has insight without having to try especially hard by sitting in the break room feeling offended. This attitude often creates long-term problems with a hostile ambience and bad relationships within the group. Harry is likely to deal with his own situation very badly, ending in acrimony. Regardless of Harry's personal reactions and decision-making problems, his co-workers are now inextricably involved. A good way to fend off blighters like Harry and people who avoid responsibility is to ask them to describe precisely how they think the problem should be solved, and then ask them how they would like to handle it. Hopefully this results in their being forced to engage in the substantive issue in a form in which sweeping dismissals are no longer reasonable. Without intending to, they then become involved in solving the problem. As often as this fails, at least it significantly reduces their status and influence.

- *There's really nothing I can do about all of this*
  Even when people don't have a strong tendency to avoid decisions by distancing themselves, they may still have low self-esteem and a strong sense of powerlessness in the face of a complex decision situation. They don't deny that they should take a position, but they believe that they simply have neither the capacity, the will, nor the energy to imagine any constructive solutions or alternative courses of action.

Ann is a unit manager at a university who often has problems with her subordinates. She's continually criticised for decisions taking too long and lacking outcome. Ann is becoming increasingly unhappy and can't break this repeated pattern. Ann's external image resonates within her, and she becomes increasingly paralyzed and falls ever deeper into hapless inaction, powerless to break this destructive cycle. Her decisiveness just withers more and more until Ann's will to live is annihilated.

In this situation, how can Ann generate strength and self-esteem in sufficient quantity to be able to trust her own capability again? Willpower grows stronger in relation to the feelings and experiences that come from using that will. Willpower grows through its successful use, and there are no known limits to how strong an internal drive we can acquire. The more we succeed when using our incentive, the stronger it becomes. In other words, decisions facilitate decisions. It's about being interested in using our volition. Wanting to bring forth our incentive. Later in the book, we'll focus on the circumstances that can contribute to fostering willpower.

- *I'll do what I want*
  Some people have no trouble using their willpower from the outset. Usually they'll have learnt early in life that it pays to be spontaneous and to refrain from worrying about the consequences of their actions—particularly when they haven't had to bear the cost of those consequences. Perhaps they lived in an environment where this particular strategy didn't encounter much resistance. Maybe their surroundings were pampering and forgiving, or, on the contrary, showed a complete lack of care. Such a person would learn that being spontaneous and impulsive was a strategy that brought integrity and self-esteem. Maybe they never bore any cost at all for the costly consequences of their unfortunate decisions. Whatever the case, we can say that their consciousness was configured so as to satisfy their needs as quickly as possible. Their spontaneous impulses were sometimes afforded the highest priority, and their reactions were too vague or uninteresting to induce any perception of risk that might justify consideration. These kinds of people can have great difficulty adapting to others in their environment, and sometimes they have strong empathy disorders or even psychopathic personality traits. Under favourable conditions, when they're forced to take others into account in order to survive, and given time, they can sometimes develop an ability to use their spontaneous desires in a way that they're at least not

constantly trying to exploit and manipulate their surroundings. But if people with this character do not learn self-control at an early stage in life, they can become very dominating and strong-willed. Often this behaviour becomes counterproductive as well as inefficient.

As was previously mentioned, effective decisions often generate more energy and capacity with which to make even more effective decisions. The principle behind such a process is very simple. Each individual decision a person makes increases his or her perceived capacity to make more decisions. In many cases, because the act of making decisions is character building, under favourable circumstances an accelerating effect of making good decisions can lead to their becoming a successful entrepreneur. Obviously, there must be sufficient indication that a decision will lead to success, and occasionally entrepreneurs accustomed to making decisions are successful in discovering those indicators. However, such people rarely hesitate in taking disproportionate risks, which means they often need to be steered. The solution to this problem in organisations is to mix risk-taking people with careful people when putting together teams.

- *Let's just go for it*
  Creative people aren't necessarily more intelligent than others, but they have often learnt to dare to do things and to take risks. Because of this, creative decision makers often fail more than others, but sometimes they attain extreme success. They fail more because they dare to try new things, but they also learn a lot more, and because they learn more, they can sometimes succeed much better than others, which may compensate for past failures. It's a common belief that you can never become a good businessperson until you've gone bankrupt a few times and nonetheless had the strength to continue. This phenomenon can be found on all levels and in all areas. The often-revered US President Abraham Lincoln was also known for having had many failures behind him. The conclusion is that it is not really hard to become a dynamic decision maker.

It might seem that we're saying that it's really not that hard to become a dynamic decision maker. It may appear that we're arguing that you just have to make a start, take some risks, and dare to decide things, and then

you'll become a better decision maker. It's not like that at all. Such reasoning would ignore the negative effects that arise when decision makers haven't learnt to adapt to the conditions of the world around them, but remain entrenched in their views and their willingness to take risks. The negative effects could become serious. A person who has acquired a habit of never understanding or submitting to external influences has difficulty adapting his or her seemingly powerful decisions to reality. People like this may make spontaneous decisions, but they'll understand neither the whole picture nor the situations that are incompatible with their immediate gratification.

Someone who cannot focus one's will but is instead controlled by impulses without conscious control won't have been able to learn what other people have had to learn early on in life: to understand that we cannot always follow our impulses, and that for the most part we need to adapt to our environment with its moral, social, and economic structures. This is a difficult type of personality to handle. Such individuals must be placed in a context where there is a good deal of control over their behaviour.

- *You can't do that*
  The opposite type of personality is the pedantic and rigid person. Such people find security in their decision making because they have restricted their lives to follow routines or regulations. This makes it easy for them to adjust to unforeseen events but restricts their capacity to deal with more sophisticated decision making.

Genetic or Social Determination

As usual, when it comes to explaining aberrant human behaviour, there are various opinions as to what's biologically determined by genes and what results from socialisation. Often this conditioning is a combination of several causative processes. There are various explanations for why people behave one way or the other, and although it's valuable to know more about this, it has little bearing on our descriptions of the circumstances for making decisions. Obviously, people are biologically predisposed to various degrees in their capacity to develop a strong will while maintaining impulse control. But because this book is focused on the idea that our will and ability to make decisions can be developed through insights into more analytical decision making, we'll pay no heed to discussions of biological and social predisposition.

- *I know what I'm doing*
  Whichever personality type a person belongs to, it's usually easier to make good decisions if we have access to relevant and accurate background information. This needn't consist of empirical and objective facts only, even if these exist. Nor must such facts always be quantified or formalised. In many personally important situations, such as the purchase of a befitting new home or the choice of someone who might be considered a compatible life partner, corresponding to our level of aspirations, it's rather a matter of preference and opinion; that is to say, we experience some kind of inner feeling about something. Such experiences of preferences are often the end result of having projected enough feelings onto our options and this projection having led to our options eventually becoming animated and desirable. In this way, decision making can often turn into pure self-suggestion. During this process, it's likely that we'll make quite a number of smaller decisions that allow various alternative actions to become gradually clearer and more transparent. One could say that it becomes progressively easier to identify with our various options. The cognitive processes that make it possible to identify with decision options need not be rationally underpinned at all; rather, they often are based on accumulated emotional associations.

It is therefore highly likely that these associations will not correspond to the rational processes that should precede complex decisions. We might finally decide on our dream house purely emotionally, because we internalised the way the afternoon light so beautifully illuminated the garden. At the same time, we've not counted the cost of housing when the town council raises the ground rent while the banks raise interest rates, nor read up on legal recourses for a housing association with three members when the mood turns sour over the vote about replacement plumbing, when the drains in our dream flat turn out to date from 1962 and the property turns out to be heated directly with electricity. It may well be that before we get as far as being able to deal with the components of the decision in a more structured way, it might be easier to understand the decision situation if we cumulatively address a large number of small partial decisions and circumstances. The smaller decisions then become a kind of preparation that makes it clear which conditions apply; that is, they allow for a more focused contextual awareness and systematic analysis, and they allow the decision maker to assimilate the decision problem. This is especially true in situations in which there's great uncertainty.

Pedantic and inflexible people can experience a greater sense of security in their decision making precisely because they've decided in advance to limit their lives based on strict daily routines or rule books. This can make it easier for them to respond to unforeseen events, but it also limits their capacity for more sophisticated decision making. Instead they become imprisoned by primitive taboo relationships with possible solutions that conflict with their daily routines and outlook.

A person's ability to engage with and penetrate a question is largely dependent on how many relevant, detailed decisions the person has managed to make before the final decision needs to be taken. But this must be seen in the context of constraints. This is where we easily delude ourselves.

Free Will

The most important decision in our lives, which is crucial to success in our undertakings, consists of a single basic decision that can be very difficult to make. But those who make this decision get off to a good start in realizing their ambitions, while those who do not make this decision are likely to remain as part of the large number of people who feel that they have control neither over their lives nor over their surroundings. At the risk of slipping into obnoxious New Age terminology, this decision might be seen as a kind of rite of passage into a world of freedom and personal empowerment.

This important decision may be formulated in many different ways. The issue could be formulated as Hamlet does, by stating, "To be or not to be, that is the question". Or you can assert, as various more or less mystical philosophers do, that it's all about having the courage to be yourself. Psychologists put it in slightly clearer terms when they define the basic decision as the capacity to be adult enough to understand and take responsibility for our actions.

But what does it mean to take responsibility for our actions? One possible answer to this question is to require that a responsible person should acknowledge his or her own role.

Whatever I experience in my life depends on me

Many people experience life-changing events and decisions as profoundly unjust.

- It can't have been my fault that I got hit by a car in the middle of the zebra crossing!

- It's none of my doing that I have a crazy boss!
- I'm not to blame for having had epilepsy during my adolescence!

Life is and always will be unfair in a variety of ways, and we can relate to that by various means. If we assume the perspective that most of what occurs really depends on the consequences of our own actions, then we get much better conditions for learning how we can project our will onto realistic goals.

There is a large enough proportion of situations in which it is advantageous to influence our own lives to our advantage if we take more responsibility for them. Our feeling of responsibility enables us to experience logical relationships in the situation, although the relationships are not possible to discern at each moment. Thus, there is a clear statistical relationship between the people who think that they can influence their situation and the people who discover real opportunities to influence it. The cognitive functions of strategic thinking are based on our attitude, and the fundamental decision to take responsibility for our lives facilitates the learning of strategic thinking:

- If there is not a feeling of responsibility, we experience something positive without having contributed to its occurrence. It sort of happened all on its own. Then we note (presumably with satisfaction), "Weren't we lucky!"
- If there is a feeling of responsibility, we assert our will in a certain direction and then we encounter something. Then the question often arises, "What did we do to make this happen?"

The first case is of no interest because no learning function is activated, because the results are difficult to relate to any activities. It's difficult to relate to any specific activities because there were no responsible activities. In the latter case, however, some important learning occurs. It's possible for adults to reflect on the value of more or less conscious choices.

The decision to assume responsibility for the events in our lives is much broader and more complex than simple learning by trial and error. It's about having an approach to life that enables a continuous and often intensive gathering of information relevant to decisions. We must continually reflect on our actions, even when it might be more convenient to just coast alongside like a sidecar to life itself. It's about being willing to learn why we feel good or bad, or why we're satisfied or dissatisfied, and to do so without blaming others or hide behind rigid structures.

Because memory is directly related to the emotional engagement that we have when we assert our will, we have varied capacity to reflect on which strategies can and should be repeated and which should not be repeated. An experience that is not related to a conscious reflection is more difficult to remember than an experience that has been interpreted consciously. Conscious volition makes reflection much easier than for those who don't use their will. And reflection is facilitated even more when we relate our memories to strategic behaviour.

Summary

- Only those who take responsibility for their lives live them to the fullest.
- Willingness to take responsibility is based on the perception that "As long as I don't do anything, nothing will happen."
- Making decisions is initially about having enough emotional energy to create and manage the various decision options.
- Emotional energy can be used to think about options, to gather facts, and to gain a partial understanding for what we do.
- The willingness and ability to make decisions grows when you practice decision making.
- No matter how it's done, decision making requires motivation.
- No development of the decision-making capacity occurs if we aren't willing to see ourselves as being in control of our lives through conscious decisions.

CHAPTER TWO

PRIORITISE RIGHT

In the previous chapter, we described why it's important to take responsibility for our decisions, rather than just sitting and whining while things happen. We described how people learn to take responsibility for creating the conditions that lead to better decisions. We argued that responsibility and awareness can make us stronger, freer, and more enterprising, given that we understand what we're doing and don't just slide into a stream of unconscious or enforced routines.

Now we'll address the dialectical opposite. We'll address new problems that occur when taking more initiative. As we do so more frequently, we encounter increasing resistance and also the demand that much more be accomplished. By taking the initiative, we frequently encounter problems coming from our surroundings in various ways. If, on the other hand, we're merely insignificant cronies or just plain bureaucrats, we don't encounter these problems. Instead our existence loses meaning. But we'd prefer to be something more, right? You may often meet people who more or less consciously follow the principle, "By doing nothing, we make no mistakes". They need to get a real life. But how can they get it?

We have already determined that there are people who take too many decisions without hesitation and without taking responsibility for the consequences of what they do. But if you listen too much to what the bores, laggards, and whingers say, nothing of any importance gets done. We need somehow to qualify our hesitance. So what is reasonable? How do we know what is constructive or destructive in decision situations? On a personal level, people can express trivialities in terms of knowing what they want but need to sleep on in order to be sure; or for harder decisions, they might express that they need a deeper or more profound feeling for the situation. This becomes too diffuse for more professional contexts. In larger organisations, at least, the proper way to evaluate decisions must be formalised in order to verify the validity of the decision making.

If we really try to achieve something concrete, we quickly notice how the world we confront is filled up with small and large obstacles that require both our time and our resources. We must be able to deal with this; otherwise, we may soon just give up. All too many people fail to

implement even relatively straightforward decisions like losing weight, drinking moderately, exercising, or contributing in some small way to making the world a better place. We might choose the easy way out instead of engaging in something boring. Another common issue is that it might turn out later that all was not as we'd intended because we couldn't actually carry it out. Or that we have not understood all the consequences of our decision or how our motivation or preferences might have changed when circumstances changed.

We need to structure problems and opportunities in relation to values as well as develop criteria for assessing how alternative decisions correspond to these values. But this might seem overbearing. It's easier just to do what feels good at the time.

When we work together with groups or other organisations, this will naturally be even more difficult because we have to confront a larger spectrum of people (like the types of personality we described earlier), who for one reason or another don't want to do what we consider a good idea, even though they actually share our beliefs and priorities. We need to confront the people who are manipulative, reactionary, conservative, unwilling, selfish, hostile, or all the other negative characteristics—in other words, all the people who perceive you as a competitor or at least as a bothersome type. In order to implement anything at all, we must therefore adapt our actions to the circumstances. So it's important to consider the circumstances when prioritising what we're striving for, and to be able to say "no" to something that we want, in order to bag something that we want even more. Otherwise, we quickly tire and lose both what's most important as well as everything else.

So what should we do?

In some abstract sense, it's quite simple. We confine our attention to decisions that don't require excessive resources for their execution. It can also be about waiting until the time is right and finding or creating better conditions for both decisions and implementation. This may sound obvious but usually it isn't. This too requires a careful decision process.

We Make So Many Errors

In his autobiography, business executive Percy Barnevik describes how he devotes 10 per cent of his time to solving problems of strategy and 90 per cent to implementation. In turn, the strategy part can be divided into half analysis and half feelings about the decision. Barnevik felt that this highlights how wrong much of higher education is because the teaching there is so focused on analysis, which is to say a mere 5 per cent of the

entire process. His concern is that to some extent people in Sweden are trained to handle initial and theoretical aspects of decision-making situations, but they lack the realism and capacity to implement, which are skills the students therefore have to acquire some other way. Regardless of whether you share Barnevik's opinion or not, it's clear that the implementation process is critical in decision management. In real life, the implementation process is deeply entangled in the analysis, which should therefore not be seen as an independent process.

Two common mistakes in the implementation process:

We use resources in a suboptimal way. At best, we spend energy on analysing the problem we have and how it should be formulated, but ignore a real analysis of the implementation and its efficacy.

We often miss the devil being in the details, that is to say that even if we think we know what should be done at a more general level, it turns out that the whole thing can often be considerably more difficult, or even impossible, once implementation begins. The problem becomes apparent in the details that we haven't thought of, because we'd specified neither the problem nor the proposed solution particularly well. This becomes especially clear in decisions that are to be executed in more complex circumstances.

So, what is it that's so difficult? Rather a lot, actually.

- Surprisingly often, initiative itself clashes with decisions that have already been made. This is fairly common in complex situations with many stakeholders. Or, so much friction arises during the actual implementation that it can't be completed. A proper and early analysis provides time to prepare for countermeasures. For example, this might mean looking at the town plan before starting to plan a complex construction.
- Often ideas are based on estimates and wishful thinking. It may turn out that they don't work at a detailed level or that they won't fit with the present circumstances. If we'd recognised from the outset the need to wait for a suitable time or to modify the circumstances, things might have turned out differently. For example, the captain of the ill-fated Estonia, which sank in 1994 in the Baltic Sea, should have realised that it was more important to reduce speed or change course than to arrive on time, as the whole ship shook with each wave it encountered.

- In a changing world, conditions change from those that prevailed when we originally formulated our idea. Things often happen that weren't really possible to include in initial estimates. This is particularly difficult when you're not really clear about which circumstances shaped the idea. If we build flexibility into the actual process as part of the decision, then we create a considerably better dynamic in the decision-making processes.
- Similarly, we can be too rigid in the implementation model that we initially decided on. New ideas emerge, and various stakeholders try to delay or even block the implementation. Countless are the times when none of what we thought we could accomplish happened, because some madman or other ran amok. We must be extremely vigilant about this and be prepared to change the strategies throughout the whole process.
- People simply give up because it is too laborious. They didn't foresee the workload that would be required. For example, most systems development and infrastructure projects fail precisely because it seems to be very difficult to estimate the resource needs intuitively.
- We may fail to design an organisation for the project implementation. Perhaps there were no clear objectives or processes, or else management and leadership failed. Without a clear plan for the project, unnecessary conflicts increase.
- There actually may be many interesting options, but there are lock-in effects in the implementation plan that prevent us from imagining more attractive options even though they existed as options during the implementation phase. Thus, we only attain smaller portions of the goals we initially envisaged. "It felt so good to write contracts. At last we were underway. Then it turned out that we got stuck with that idiotic contract for two years."

This list could be made considerably longer, but you can safely say that much can be facilitated through a period of contemplation.

Without Any Doubt We Will Become Stupid

People who don't hesitate before making decisions can make unnecessary mistakes. Often there's a preliminary idea for the decision, but before it's fully implemented, it has to be analysed. Possible decisions should be pitched against conceivable circumstances. In the political arena, there's a formalised referral procedure. In organisations, a trial balloon can be

released so as to give the whole organisation a chance to discover any weaknesses in an idea before its actual implementation. At a personal level, it may be sufficient to test an idea with, e.g., the hairdresser while being trimmed. Another variation is to ask your taxi driver. Taxi drivers tend to have opinions about everything from politics to how to succeed in business. Direct responses from unbiased observers who are not stakeholders can many times be surprisingly useful despite how trivial this might sound.

The fear, doubt, or critical review that may present itself as we approach an operational situation arises so as to show us that it's still not too late to put the brakes on. We might ask ourselves whether we really are completely sure that what we're doing is what we want.

Our doubt is not always about reluctance to make a decision one way or the other. It's often about our qualms before an actual implementation. It's about thinking as much as is necessary about whether the time and context are really right for carrying out our intentions. Maybe we need to face a concrete experience of what might happen if our decision is actually carried out, and why we should gather more refined information for making our decision so that we understand what we're doing.

One dilemma is that, in principle, we can discuss or simulate possible future scenarios indefinitely. They're usually quite numerous. An all too extensive discussion can naturally hamper their implementation. A decision maker who publicly displays too much doubt has lower status even when a sufficiently deliberated hesitation can lead to considerably less trouble at a later stage in carrying out the decision. But it's difficult to estimate how much deliberation is sufficient.

Obviously, this doubt must be based on the circumstances. On a purely personal level, perhaps it is enough with a moment's reflection to build up some confidence before beginning. We described in Chapter 1 that once we've made a decision, energy is released that can be used to develop the details of that decision. We can update and refine impact assessments and engage in reflection. Our preferences can sometimes change very quickly. When we're well, we want lots of things, but when we're ill, we want only one thing. However, it's seldom reasonable to make a very detailed impact assessment for all possible decision options in all conceivable situations. That simply uses up too many resources, especially if there's a surplus of interesting initiatives in which to immerse ourselves. Therefore, on an individual level one needs to balance this equivocation over the various possibilities and ponder what looks most doable.

For an organisation, this probably looks different. There it may be our unconditional responsibility to make accurate analyses in order to

investigate how something should be done. Often, we have considerably greater resources, even though it's astoundingly rare that we use them to sort out what should be done and how. In larger organisations, it should also be possible to analyse previously made decisions as well as alternative ones before new decisions can be implemented. On the whole, these kinds of processes are often costly. However, it can be even more expensive not to carry them out along with the detailed planning that is always necessary when implementing complex projects.

What, Then, Are We To Do?

Cognitively, our emotions can be regarded as a kind of imprecise probability calculator in which the emotions are associated with each other and accumulated into more intense emotions, which in turn can be combined into complex models where similar feelings gradually aggregate into a holistic experience, that is, a sort of deeper and more tightly integrated feeling that often creates pleasure and a sense of insight. Feelings are aggregated, integrated, and organised more or less automatically in parallel processes in the brain. This creates patterns that in turn allow new feelings to be related to earlier ones through the principle of similarity. Even if they're not identical, the feelings can still reinforce each other, allowing us to experience an ever-greater sense of insight. Unfortunately, humans are imperfect beings, and although we experience insight, this experience can be highly misleading. We should *not* confuse our belief in something, which has been built up in this way, with it being true.

The antithesis to this emotional probability calculator is something often perceived as boring. It is the rational analysis that processes information more sequentially. This rational thinking runs through a context or reasoned argument and tends to fragment processes and components into small pieces. It's difficult to add rational thoughts to more general summarising thoughts and thereby arrive at some sort of plenary perspective. This makes it more difficult to experience the entirety that must be experienced in order to be able to make a good decision. The foundation for all of this is the analysis, which includes complex considerations and calculations that are usually very time-consuming and also experienced as difficult. The analysis is necessary in order to allow us to make good decisions in situations where our intuition cannot handle the complexity. The rationality is a critical factor, and we will come back to this in the latter part of the book where we describe the advantages of rational decision making.