From Obsessing Over Decision Outcomes to Caring About Decision Quality

Abstract: Metrics are often seen as crucial for leading change, but there is debate. Some argue faithful stewardship requires measurable accountability; others, however, complain the church isn't a business. Missing in this familiar discussion is that outcomes, while important, can be deceptive when it comes to decision-making. While there are times when good decision-making leads to a favorable outcome, this is not always the case. Good decisions often lead to unfavorable outcomes, and poor decisions sometimes turn out well. Leaders must learn to articulate decision quality rather than fixating on decision outcomes to spur traditioned innovation.

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To Measure or Not to Measure?

"You can't measure love. You can't measure the Holy Spirit," one student argues.

"Sure you can measure love," a student arguing the other side shoots back. "If I tell my wife I love her and I'm never there or never show her any affection, actions that are measurable and countable, she should push back on me and say that I don't really love her.

"Yeah, OK. But about the Holy Spirit? How do you measure that? Just because a church is growing doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is blessing it. Just because another church is shrinking doesn't mean the Spirit has abandoned it. The Spirit blows where it will, and there's no human test or measurement you can employ to fix it down."

As a former student and now spiritual mentor of Duke's Doctor of Ministry program, I see this argument play out every year in Will Willimon's seminar on leadership. Divided into two groups, students work furiously to come up with the best arguments for and against the claim that metrics tracking significant outcomes are vital or irrelevant to the church. While I've observed these debates taking place in the classroom there's nothing academic about the conversation. In a world of big data metrics have changed everything from way people invest to how Major League teams pick and assemble their teams. Deciding what, how, and whether to measure the church are hot topics. Some, like Willimon offer a robust confidence in the inherent power that measuring itself seems to have. Sounding like an ecclesial version of the Hawthorne effect, Willimon asserts the inherent power of measuring: "As this book was going to press, Bishop Schol announced that the congregations of the North Alabama Conference were among the most vital in the UMC on the basis of the indicators of vitality as reported in the Vital Congregations Initiative. Bishop Schol also noted that all of the ten most vital conferences had one thing in common— we all stressed metrics as a means of encouraging vital congregations."[1] Even those less convinced in the intrinsic power of measuring outcomes, like Dave Odum, argue that while many of the traditional outcomes that defined successful Christian leadership in the past no longer work, the demand for leaders to redefine these markers in a new season persists.[2]

But wherever there are two gathered supporting the use of metrics in the church, there will always be a third (at least!) expressing reticence about the good that comes from worrying over outcomes as if the church is just some other business. Sometimes the concern stems from the perceived attempt to control a future that is inherently in God's hands. A common theme in the preaching and teaching of Craig Barnes, the current President of Princeton Theological Seminary,

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[1] William H. Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question* (Abingdon Press, 2016), Kindle edition, 63.

[2] Dave Odom, "How to Measure Success," para 9, https://www.faithandleadership.com/how-measure-success

cautions us from putting so much confidence in our metrics and strategic plans that we miss what God's wild spirit is doing right under our noses.[3] Others, especially those with strong backgrounds in sociology and statistics, point out that much of what passes for an emphasis on outcomes is little more than pseudoscientific, emotional assumptions supported by poorly designed studies with sample sizes far too small to draw valid conclusions. Jeffrey Pfeffer's *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense* attacks this tendency in business and easily applies to many church surveys. But the full-throated attack against focusing on outcomes in the church comes from church leaders themselves who figuratively foam at the mouth at the thought of giving the church a slick, MBA makeover. No one represents this view more than Eugene Peterson who attacks the idea of church *qua* business with all the gusto and persistence of a dog gnawing on a juicy bone: "I was watching both the church and my vocation as a pastor in it being relentlessly diminished and corrupted by being redefined in terms of running an ecclesiastical business. The ink on my ordination papers wasn't even dry before I was being told by experts, so-called, in the field of church that my main task was to run a church after the manner of my brother and sister Christians who run service stations, grocery stores, corporations, banks, hospitals, and financial services … This is the Americanization of congregation. It means turning each congregation into a market for religious consumers, an ecclesiastical business run along the lines of advertising techniques, organizational flow charts, and energized by impressive motivational rhetoric. But this was worse. This pragmatic vocational embrace of American technology and consumerism that promised to rescue congregations from ineffective obscurity violated everything—scriptural, theological, experiential— that had formed my identity as a follower of Jesus and as a pastor."[4]

So what's a leader to do in the middle of this push and pull with strong arguments on both sides? Innovative work coming out of Stanford's Strategic Decision-Making and Risk Management (SDRM) department offers the church and other institutions a way through the mess. While acknowledging the importance of outcomes, SDRM helpfully nuances the conversation noting that good outcomes don't always indicate that good decisions were made; nor do poor outcomes always signal that thoughtless decisions occurred. Instead of over emphasizing metrics and outcomes, SDRM shifts the discussion to decision quality, a way of thinking about a decision before it is made rather than after. Uncomfortable with SDRM's overly normative approach, in my doctoral work with Dan Ariely and in my book *The Irrational Jesus: Leading the Fully Human Church*, I have tempered SDRM's naïve rationalism with a behavioral theological appreciation for our fully human, predictably irrational cognitive heuristics and blind spots. The result is a sophisticated decision-making process that can help Christian leaders faithfully discern their way forward and communicate this way to crucial stakeholders.

From Outcomes to Quality

In the middle of the wilderness God made a decision, and it didn't go well at first. God made the call to summon Moses up to the top of Mt. Sinai and give him the law inscribed on two stone tablets. In Moses' absence the people grew anxious and demanded immediate, tangible gods. To mollify them Aaron took their jewelry and fashioned two golden calves. Ready to celebrate, the people ate, drank, and were very merry indeed. Angered by this betrayal, God's first inclination was to destroy the people until Moses talks God down off the ledge. But when Moses descends and saw for himself what was going on, he threw the tablets down and destroyed them.

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[3] M. Craig Barnes. *When God Interrupts: Finding New Life Through Unwanted Change* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), Kindle Edition.

[4] Eugene Peterson, *Pastor: A Memoir* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2011), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 1839–48.

There's no other way to say it: the first attempt to give Israel the law was an epic failure. But was it a bad decision? Was the decision to give Israel the law in the first place a poor one?

Failure is a hot topic in church leadership today, and for good reasons. For one thing as C. Kavin Rowe provocatively puts it: "Failure is at the heart of what Christian leaders have to offer the world."[5] Here is what Rowe means: the leaders Jesus trained abandoned him in his hour of need; Jesus himself died a tragic death; and when he rose again, he didn't stay around but left a struggling organization. The Christian story is not a string of successes going from, as business guru Jim Collins puts it, good to great. So, theologically we have incredible resources to draw upon when thinking about failure.

Also, we know that permission to fail is vital for faithful innovation. Great ideas rarely arrive fully baked. Faithful institutions support experimental cultures that allow leaders to fail until they get it right. In their article "Failure to Learn," L. Greg Jones and Kelly Gilmer write: "We have problems to fix in and across our institutions, and fixing them will require us to dream big and to create cultures of experimentation, innovation and learning. Addressing our key challenges might involve some spectacular failures, but those failures will teach us what we need to learn and do for a more sustainable future."[6] And indeed, there are numerous recent examples of the church learning from social innovators doing a better job not only tolerating failure but anticipating it[7].

For all of this talk, however, we're still missing one crucial element in our conversation around failure: we don't know how to assess the quality of our decisions in the first place. How do we distinguish between good decisions that happen to turn out poorly versus bad decisions that also result in failure? Or, how do we tell the difference between a bad decision that just happens to turn out well versus a good decision that goes according to plan? We rightly talk about the importance of creating cultures of trust and experimentation. We point out the importance of differentiating between good experimental failures and catastrophes caused by bad ethical behavior by leaders. But even more fundamental is assessing the decisions themselves. How do we assess the quality of our decision without resorting to merely judging it by its outcome?

Distinguishing decision quality from decision outcome is challenging. Our default is to assume that good decisions result in good outcomes; bad decisions result in bad outcomes. If something goes well, we assume it must have been a good decision. If something fails, we instinctively believe there must have been a mistake. But life is rarely so simple. Leaders at SDRM remind us we can make terrible decisions that still result in good outcomes, and we can make great decisions that unfortunately head south on us.[8] If we fail to see this subtle distinction, we will continue practices we shouldn't and pull the plug on projects that merit more patience.

Let's say my high schooler attends a wild party, drinks, and then makes the epically bad decision to drive home. This is a terrible decision. If he makes it home without incident, the outcome is good, but we would never say his safe arrival home means he should repeat the initial decision to drink and drive. No. He was lucky. He made a bad decision and experienced a good outcome. On the flip side, if my kid drinks at this party but calls me to come pick him up, we would commend him for at least having the sense to call for help. Then, on the way home if a cat darts out in the middle of the street and causes me to swerve and run our car into a tree, this trip ended with a terrible outcome. But this bad outcome doesn't mean the decision to call me for help was wrong. It was a good decision that just led to a bad outcome. These things happen.

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[5] C. Kavin Rowe, "Failure," para. 3, https://www.faithandleadership.com/c-kavin-rowe-failure-christ-shaped-leadership

[6] Greg Jones and Kelly Gilmer, "Failing to Learn," para. 29, https://www.faithandleadership.com/topics/learning-failure

[7] Fantastic books like Tod Bolsinger's *Canoeing the Mountains* come to mind.

[8] Ron Howard and Ali Abbas, *Foundations of Decision Analysis* (Palo Alto: Pearson Education, 2016), 18.

Church leaders rarely make this distinction, and it's a problem. I started out in ministry leading a new church development. You learn to fail in new church development. A lot. Planters learn very quickly to separate their sense of self from whether they succeed or fail, or they won't be planters for very long. Unfortunately, few on the outside understand this concept. We know that vastly more new church developments fail than succeed. But we have less understanding for why some fail while others thrive. People hail church planters who thrive as creative geniuses. And every time a new plant fails, these same people come out of the woodwork to say they knew it was a mistake all along. Past mistakes become obvious in hindsight. Without even thinking about it, most in the church reason if the outcome is bad, someone must be making poor decisions. We have to stop this flawed reasoning. Good decisions can and will sometimes lead to bad outcomes and *vice versa.*

To avoid this we must spend more time thinking about the quality of the decisions we make. If we don't start this conversation, we will continue to face an uphill battle in creating cultures that nurture experimentation and tolerate good failures. When we don't make this distinction, we almost can't help but punish good leaders who fail well and need to keep trying.

Remember how God's first attempt to give the people the law constituted an unmitigated disaster? I asked whether it was a bad decision. What do you think? I say absolutely not. While the first outcome of golden calves and smashed tablets was terrible, it was still a good decision for God to give the law. When leaders face good decisions that result in poor outcomes, they have to persevere and try again, which is exactly what God and Moses do. And just two chapters after Moses destroyed the first tablets, God tells Moses to cut two more tablets. God again inscribes the tablets with the law. God doesn't modify the plan. God doesn't say mistakes were made. The first decision was a good one, it just had a bad outcome. So God and Moses try the same idea again, and the second attempt happily results in the same Ten Commandments that continue to guide us today.

We see the same dynamic in John 6. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus gathers an enormous following. With a successful miracle and a huge crowd behind him, Jesus is a success by any metric. But then, Jesus tells the crowd they will have to eat and drink the flesh and blood of the Son of Man in order to gain eternal life. Grumbling, the crowd pushes back saying Jesus' teachings are too difficult, and then they leave. Jesus asks the twelve if they are going to depart as well, and their response is hardly a ringing endorsement: "Lord, to whom can we go?" (John 6:68.) So Jesus performs a miracle, gathers many followers, offers an unpopular teaching, and dissipates the crowd just as fast as he established it. Did Jesus stumble?

If the media were following Jesus around like a political candidate running for office, the headline would be that he made a terrible mistake. The question would be whether Jesus would be able to recover from it. But whenever I think about this moment I always remember the words of the late Don Juel who challenged a class I was in to honor that, Biblically speaking, successful evangelism may look like John 6 sometimes. Juel's point: sometimes Biblical success may not look like success as the world defines it with never ending growth. Jesus made a quality decision to tell the truth about being the bread of life and framing it in sacramental language. The poor outcome of the crowd being unable to accept this teaching does not mean Jesus made a poor choice.

Or consider the rich theological tension between the Deuteronomistic theology of life and death and the counter traditions present in the prophetic and wisdom literature. In Deuteronomy 30:14-16 the way of life and death are clearly defined: those who follow in God's ways and adhere to the commandments will thrive, and those who do not will perish. The relationship between choice and outcome is clear. Those who make good choices will know good outcomes; those who make poor choices will experience bad outcomes. While there is some truth to this, the full Biblical witness allows for a vastly more complicated understanding. For nearly the entire book of Job the friends of Job relentlessly badger Job trying to get him to admit that he sinned in some way such

that he merited his punishment. Job's friends are wrong. Job did not sin; rather Job's calamities are thanks to God's side bet with Satan to see how much Job could suffer and continue to keep faith. Prophets like Jeremiah knew in an experiential way that unrighteous rulers like Jehoiakim often achieve great power, while faithful prophets like himself languish in prison. In the New Testament Jesus in Matthew 5:45 acknowledges the rain falls on the just and unjust alike. In John 9 Jesus counters the disciples' assumption that the man born blind must be suffering due to either his or his parent's sinful choice. Theologically, there is simply no easy, fool proof way to focus on outcomes and reason backwards to discern the quality of the decision.
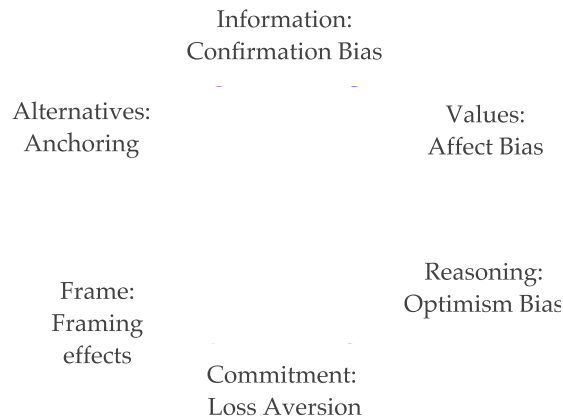
Towards Decision Quality and the Modified Behavioral Decision Quality Chain

With the benefit of history today it is obvious God's decision to bestow the law was a good decision. Rare is the decision that endures for thousands of years. But leaders don't have the benefit of centuries of hindsight. How can leaders discern whether a decision is a high-quality decision regardless of the outcome without the long view? Let's remember that lofty advice in Proverbs 3 that we read in the first chapter of this section—for people of faith to hold fast to "wisdom and prudence"—judgment and discretion—and see what Stanford's decision-making program suggests for actually doing it.

SDRM developed invaluable guide for leadership bodies making decisions together. Leaders at SDRM call this guide the decision quality chain. The chain as they teach it contains six elements: appropriate frame; creative, doable alternatives; good information; values; sound reasoning; and commitment to action. These facets of decision quality aren't ordered, although it does make sense to evaluate the frame as early as possible. Depending on the situation, however, a group may spend more time thinking through alternatives than they do seeking out more information, or vice versa. But at whatever point a group enters the chain, it is important to remember that the overall quality of the decision depends, like the strength of a chain, on the weakest link. A group can spend adequate time on five of the six elements of the chain, but one weak link can doom the quality of the decision.

While deeply grateful for the efforts of SDRM, my work in behavioral theology led me to develop and use a modified decision quality chain. When it comes to rationality, the leaders of SDRM represent greater confidence in our ability to identify and overcome cognitive heuristics and biases than behavioralists such as Dan Kahneman and Dan Ariely believe is possible. The traditional decision quality chain only includes a single step inviting leaders to consider what biases may be influencing our thinking. This single-step consideration implies that heuristics and biases can be dealt with by simply being aware of them. Yet, over and over behavioralists have shown cognitive bias is far more deeply rooted, coloring every perception and thought. To honor the humility of this approach I pair a particular bias with each step of the process, which reminds leaders we need to be attentive to bias throughout every aspect of the decision-making process.

Behavioral Decision
Quality Chain

Information:
Confirmation Bias

Alternatives:
Anchoring

Values:
Affect Bias

Reasoning:
Optimism Bias

Frame:
Framing
effects

Commitment:
Loss Aversion

First, when looking at framing, leaders consider whether they are solving the right problem. Coming up with the right solutions to the wrong problems will only lead to wasted time and frustration, and it happens all the time. I left the new church development I helped start because of a framing issue. The Presbytery I was serving at the time didn't have funds set aside to pay for the land and building should the new start take off. In fact middle government leaders were telling me the land and building model was dead and I needed to be more creative. I was willing, but the people I was called to serve didn't want to live in a temporary space forever. I knocked myself out finding different temporary spaces for us to worship and helping to grow what was a thriving little congregation. I thought we were doing great. Then, one day I was talking with one of the congregational leaders I deeply respected. He made an off-hand comment that he couldn't wait to invite his friends. I paused. I asked him why he wasn't already inviting them? His response: he would invite them when he had a "church." This leader and I were solving two entirely different problems. I was busy creating an *ekklesia,* a group of disciples called to serve regardless of whether they owned property or not. This leader, and the rest of them I should add, were never going to see this as success. I didn't survive that framing challenge. Fortunately they did. Years after I left, leaders stepped up and raised the money to build a beautiful, limestone building in the hill country just outside of Austin, Texas, thanks be to God.

      I pair the element of appropriate frame with the cognitive bias Chip and Dan Heath call narrow framing. Narrow framing refers to the temptation to transform complicated decisions with many facets into overly simplistic questions. Indeed, the worst form of narrow framing leads decision makers to settle for either/or problems. Rather than assuming we understand the challenge at hand and rush to solution thinking, it's important for leaders to slow groups down to make sure they've considered every angle. When dealing with a challenge, groups I lead follow a process in which they move from restating the challenge to asking questions for clarification, and only after this step do they move on to posing solutions. This delay can be frustrating to the voices who want to go immediately to problem solving, but following this process often leads groups to realize a challenge that seemed small and focused at first actually looms much larger upon consideration.

      The second component of decision quality is formulating creative, doable alternatives. Especially when groups feel convinced they are walking on the right path, they find it tempting to skip this step. This is a mistake. Decision-makers have the right to expect several creative, doable alternatives, including the decision of not doing anything at all, which is a decision often overlooked.

Addressing framing and developing alternatives require a different way of thinking. Framing requires concentrating our focus until the decision-making body can agree on the one challenge they are choosing to address. Creative alternatives, however, require divergent, expansive, or what Roger Martin calls "integrative thinking."[9] The brick test stands as the classic test for divergent intelligence: how many ways can you think of to us a brick? You wouldn't settle for just a few possibilities with a brick, and most of the challenges facing churches are vastly more complicated than a building block.

When it comes to creative, doable alternatives, leaders should be mindful of the anchoring heuristic. The anchoring heuristic causes us to get stuck on early ideas, which makes it difficult to think creatively. Design firms such as Lexicon don't use brainstorming, the staple of so many church boards, to avoid this impediment to innovation. The anchoring heuristic causes groups who use brainstorming to become overly focused on the first ideas offered. More effective processes include multitrack efforts in which the group splits up to work on multiple ideas at the same time.[10] At the end of the day if a team only has one or two good options, they should not be satisfied; they should search for more possibilities.

The third link in the decision quality chain deals with assessing the value of our information: is our information based on the intuition of the loudest person in the room, or is it rooted in something more reliable? How many church board meetings have you attended where someone shuts down an idea, because according to one leader's opinion the church tried that idea twenty years ago and it didn't work, as if one data point from a by gone era means the Holy Spirit isn't likely to work through this possibility. Or, someone else will helpfully offer that they used to attend another church years ago, and they saw that congregation implement something similar and it didn't work, as if congregations are simple, culturally interchangeable systems easily compared. But the most insidious challenges facing congregational leaders when it comes to meaningful, reliable data stems from confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias, the tendency for humans to search out information that confirms their existing beliefs, poses the greatest threat to decision makers getting good information. And gathering accurate information is one of the areas in which the church could improve the most. Even experienced pastors have only seen a small number of congregations. Objective data take time to gather and meaningfully analyze. And many congregational leaders got into serving churches to care for people; not argue with them. Yet, confirmation bias requires leaders not only to question unsupported opinions, but to question the facts presented to governing bodies as well, as confirmation bias will lead us to select the facts amenable to our views and ignore or write off as irrelevant facts that challenge us.

Some boards are fortunate to have more democratic cultures (often voiced through lovingly cantankerous individuals) that allow for confirmation bias to be checked without ruffling feathers. But all too often to question the information being presented is considered questioning the personal integrity of the leader presenting. One of the most helpful tools I have found to infuse a greater willingness to endure scrutiny in boards is Edward de Bono's six hat thinking. Rather than rely on a single person to serve as the devil's advocate, de Bono asks decision-making bodies to adopt different perspectives, or to put on different "hats" if you will, in order to consciously examine issues from multiple perspectives. When a decision-making body is wearing the black hat, for instance, they are looking for disconfirming information and ways in which even a seemingly easy decision might turn out to be problematic down the road.

The fourth link in the chain emphasizes connecting decisions with an institution's core values. Boards must ask whether the emerging solution and creative, doable alternatives are

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[9] Roger Martin, *Opposable Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.
[10] Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Decisive* (New York: Random House, 2013), Kindle edition, Kindle locations 807–08.

grounded in the core values of the body they serve. Groups like the fantastically innovative Matryoshka Haus understand the importance of grounding decisions in core values so much they have developed a tool they call the Transformational Index (TI).[11] One of the strengths of the Transformational Index lies in helping organizations not only articulate their deep values, but then, because Matryoshka Haus has worked with a large number of institutions, they can link organizations with others that share their values to glean insights from what others are trying.

Of course identifying core values is one thing; adhering to them over the long haul is another. The affect heuristic, the power of short-term emotions to influence behavior, can lead groups away from the deep values that root them. When we are anxious or tired, common feelings among decision makers, our physical states impact our perception in powerful ways. To counter the affect heuristic, leaders should anticipate that anxiety makes us feel situations in extreme ways, and it is helpful for leaders to remember to consciously articulate the group's deepest values to keep on track. Countering the heat of short-term emotions is one area where the church should really shine in comparison with other institutions. Prayer and theological reflection are not only our birthright, but they are the very practices that help us to slow down and remember that God is God and our fears are not.

SDRM acknowledges the importance of cognitive bias in the fifth link of their decision quality chain, basing decisions on sound reasoning. However, capable, intelligent leaders face the temptation to think that knowing about biases is enough to bypass their effects. In this case those G.I. Joe PSA's tell the truth: knowing is only half the battle. One of the most common biases, the optimism bias, leads us to overestimate our abilities. When we consider the impact cognitive bias has on our thinking, we leaders need to keep the optimism bias front and center. Understanding bias doesn't make it go away. Danny Kahneman tells many stories on himself regarding the ongoing power bias has over his thinking in everything from grading papers to estimating how long it would take to write a book. Kahneman probably knows more than anyone else in the world about cognitive bias and continues to be hindered by it. For all leaders the question isn't whether we are being impacted by cognitive bias but how.

Finally, we come to the last element of my modified decision quality chain: commitment to action. A decision is only as good as it's ability to be implemented. How many hours have church boards spent crafting language and arguing over nuances only to discover the people they serve were ill prepared or dead set against the direction in which the board wanted to go? I learned this lesson the hard way at the congregation I serve. After being approached by members of our congregation desiring our leadership to take steps to be more actively welcoming to the LGBTQ population, I spent an entire year with our board, the session, praying and talking together until we came to what we all felt was a faithful next step. I was so focused on the session, I completely ignored the congregation. When we presented that next step to the congregation at our annual meeting that year, it fell like a sack of hammers. I had forgotten to take into consideration this last and vital step: thinking through all of the stakeholders and determining whether we had enough commitment to act.

The particular bias leaders must keep in mind here is the power of loss aversion. Behavioralists have shown people are twice as unhappy losing an object or practice as they are gaining it. Change, in other words, is painful. Even good change means loss in some way. It's easy for us as leaders to become so focused on our brilliant and exciting solution that we forget that living, breathing human beings who haven't lived through this decision-making process must be convinced to change, to possibly lose something important to them. If we solve an important

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[11] https://www.matryoshkahaus.com/what-we-do/projects/the-transformational-index/
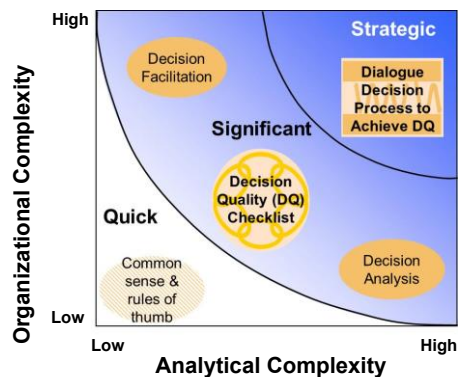
challenge with no thought about how to persuade the rest of the stakeholders, we might have spent a great deal of time with very little to show for it.

Making Decisions about Decisions

Since not all decisions are not created alike, it is as important to know when *not* to use the decision quality chain as when to employ it. We can err by applying too much or too little process. While, we can breeze through a momentous decision only to regret this casual attitude later, some of the worst meetings in the world involve going over insignificant, commonsense decisions in excruciating, pointless detail. I reiterate: judgment regarding how much process to use in the first place ranks right up there on the importance scale.

SDRM offers a simple, powerful chart to help leaders discern the appropriate amount of process. Imagine one axis that graphs the impact of a decision on the organization—the level of organizational complexity. How long might this decision impact the organization? How devastating might the consequences be if a mistake is made? Groups should treat low-impact decisions very differently than high-impact decisions. On another axis picture a line that charts how complicated the decision is—the level of analytical complexity. How many people does the decision involve? Is the decision one that occurs often, or is it new in some way? How certain is the information we have? Just as we would give more thought to a decision with a high level of impact on the organization, we want to deal with a complicated decision with greater care than one that is more straightforward.

Decision-Making Complexity Grid

Decisions that are low in impact and complexity, what SDRM labels quick decisions, simply require common sense. Decision makers should not spend too much time making these calls; they simply need to identify and make this type of decision. In some cases these decisions need to become so routine they don't even feel like decisions any longer—leaders just react appropriately. What about more significant decisions with greater impact and complexity? Decisions with moderate amounts of complexity and impact can be thought of as medium-term decisions. These kinds of decisions can be made well in a few hours or days. They are complicated enough that decision makers should use the decision quality chain to sort out decision quality from decision outcome, but they can probably make these decisions without implementing a full decision dialogue process. In contrast, decisions that are high in complexity and impact are known as strategic decisions. Organizations should treat these decisions with the utmost of care. These decisions not only require more time but demand a version of what SDRM refers to as a decision dialogue process.

In a decision dialogue process a decision leader (in charge of a decision staff) walks the decision-making board through a multistep process in which both the decision staff and decision-making board work together. The decision leader facilitates a discussion during which the board agrees on the frame. With the frame in place the decision leader works with the decision staff, rather than a traditional committee, to develop creative, doable possibilities. Then, the decision leader presents these alternatives for the board to consider. With both the larger board and the decision staff in alignment on alternatives, the decision leader works with the decision staff to evaluate these various alternatives. The decision leader then goes back to the board with solid analysis for all alternatives and repeats the process until the board is ready to make the call. In this model the role of the decision leader is not to advocate for any particular position as a traditional committee does but to help the decision makers achieve the highest decision quality possible given the time frame. The decision board participates actively in the whole process, rather than just being pitched one idea after a committee did all the preliminary work.

The Scriptures brim with examples of all three types of decisions, but here I'll just pull out three. When Jesus was sitting opposite the treasury in the temple (Luke 21 and Mark 12), he observed people giving their offerings. The wealthy threw in large amounts, but what excited Jesus was the poor widow. She threw in only a few coins, but Jesus commended her for giving more than the rest for she gave out of her poverty while they gave from their abundance. There is no indication in the text that the widow hesitated or struggled in her decision to give. She simply walked forward and did what she had done a thousand times before. And therein lies the secret to decisions such as do we want to be generous or not: practice. Part of the power behind spiritual practices such as worship and prayer is that we do them so often and so regularly they form us into being the people God made us to be. It is also what Paul is talking about when he uses the analogy of the games to describe spiritual practice: like athletes, people of faith must practice. Just thinking the faith isn't enough when it comes to routine decisions; they require practice.

Not all decisions are as simple as whether to be financially generous or not. That particular choice may be difficult in that we may be reluctant to give, but generosity isn't a complicated question. Some decisions are more complicated though and require additional thought. In Acts and Galatians we hear about a breakup between the Paul and Barnabas team. In Acts, it sounds as if the dispute is more about Barnabas wanting to take along John Mark, whom Paul perceived as a quitter. In Galatians, Paul hints that Barnabas might not have shared his Gentile inclusion views as zealously as Paul would have liked. Either way Paul and Barnabas have to make a decision about whether to keep partnering or go their separate ways. Now, I'm not saying Paul and Barnabas whipped out their decision quality chain and worked through their options before settling on their decision to part company. What I am saying is that this decision was neither simple nor without consequence; but because it only involved a few people and could be changed in the future, it was a decision of moderate impact and complexity. It's the type of decision, whether to partner or part ways, that church leaders today often face. And much of the time such a decision calls for a moderate amount of discernment.

However the decision that led up to the Paul and Barnabas split, the decision whether to enfold Gentiles into what had been a Jewish movement, was another story. Now that decision was as impactful and complex as it gets. The division between Jew and Gentile was as sharp as they come. As Amy-Jill Levine so eloquently reminds us: Jesus dressed like a Jew, ate like a Jew, argued like a Jew, and so on. The early movement was exclusively Jewish; but with Saul's conversion to Paul and Peter's vision of the sheet full of unclean animals, the movement experienced pressure to become more open and inclusive. Talk about high impact. No doubt many would either leave the movement or no longer be attracted to it over the full inclusion of Gentiles. And once you open that door, there is no going back. And complicated? It involved the entire fledgling church with

communities dotting the Mediterranean, each with its own unique culture. This kind of decision fell far beyond the scope of common sense or even just thinking through the decision quality chain. A council had to be formed to work out the details of this momentous issue; it was a decision that required a great deal of prayer, discussion, and time. And I can only guess that the actual decision was in reality vastly messier than the story Luke recounts in Acts.

Sometimes, leaders will combine elements in an improvisational way to match the needs of the situation. The congregation I currently serve started in 1983. For reasons that are not entirely clear to me the sanctuary never included an American flag. As far as I can tell the decision-making body, the session, never voted to exclude a flag. The issue was just never raised. It didn't come up until one new member noticed we didn't have a flag, became upset about this, and met with the session to correct what he assumed was simply an oversight on our part. Trying to sweeten the deal, he offered to pay for not only the American flag but the Christian flag as well. It turns out the absence of the flag wasn't an oversight. As soon as the issue came up, I could feel a pall of tension fall over the room.

Some in the session hoped I would just make the decision for them. Isn't that what pastors do? I won't say I wasn't tempted, but we agreed on another plan. Because this was a decision that would impact the entire congregation, we decided to make the decision after a series of meetings. I adopted the role of a decision leader rather than a decision maker. I assigned various elders the tasks of researching the Scriptures, our Book of Order, and our Book of Confessions to see what wisdom they might offer. The Scriptures don't speak to the issue of an American flag per se, but they certainly do speak to issues of church and state.

We agreed to meet several times. As people got started on their research, we met a second time to generate ideas regarding alternatives. Were we really stuck with only deciding between accepting the flags or rejecting them? No, we decided there were several possibilities. Perhaps instead of just one flag we could purchase flags from many countries, showing God is the God of all nations and not simply our own. Or perhaps we could stick with the American flag but post it in our Narthex, the gathering room right outside the sanctuary. Or, maybe we could go to some effort and purchase a flagpole so we could fly the flag outside. And, of course, we still had the option of just saying yes or no to the idea as presented. In the end we wound up with many options that could meet the desire for a small number of people to see a flag.

At the next meeting we listened to different elders report on what they learned from consulting the various sources of wisdom in our tradition. A review of the Scriptures revealed no clear answers, but it was helpful to our session to discover how rich the discussion is in the Scriptures and how few easy answers there are. What ultimately carried the day was one of our most conservative elders who spent time with our Book of Confessions. This elder, a man whose voice held a great deal of power in the group, already shared he hadn't realized we didn't have a flag in the sanctuary and tended to agree with the suggestion to remedy this. I sent him home with the Book of Confessions thinking he would probably find something to support his stated position, which would leave me stuck with a decision I didn't like. I couldn't have been more wrong. Not only did this leader read and absorb the Barmen Confession, written in Germany in 1934, declaring Christ to be the head of the church rather than any ruler or state. He also immersed himself in the Confession of 1967 which unequivocally states, "Although nations may serve God's purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling."[12] This elder read that statement to the group and then looked around the table. He said he had been sure he was going to be voting for a flag in the sanctuary, but reading the Book of Confessions changed his mind. Of all the options on the

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[12] "Confession of 1967," 9.45.

table he said he now favored maybe posting the flag outside on a pole or perhaps in the Narthex. I maintained my cool, but inwardly I was ecstatic—not so much celebrating his new position as thinking, "Seriously? You were converted by the Book of Confessions?"

The person who made the suggestion regarding the flags was less enthusiastic about all our creative, doable alternatives. When he realized we would welcome the flag pretty much anywhere but the sanctuary, he decided to rescind his offer. I wound up receiving an angry letter several weeks later complaining that all the churches he ever attended had flags and venting frustration about how people bring coffee mugs into the sanctuary. I was still so excited that anyone could be converted by a theological document that this cranky letter didn't even bother me. I wrote a pastoral response and moved on to other concerns.

Using the Chain

Thanks to a Duke Innovation grant in the Fall of 2016 I led a decision quality retreat for the Presbytery Leadership Commission of Cascades Presbytery. The Presbytery Leadership Commission (PLC) acts as a strategic decision-making board comprised of leaders representing various parts of the Presbytery. I presented on full humanity, cognitive bias, and moving from focusing solely on outcomes to decision quality. We learned three important lessons from our time together: the group found the material practical, engaging, and valuable; but they experienced the actual group process of working through decision quality as cumbersome and too time consuming; and the PLC dockets too many business items, and treats all items with the same level of importance.

The last two points are related. When too many decisions overwhelm a decision-making body, the chances are low that they will be able to shift from outcome to quality. The anxiety of facing a mountain of decisions makes a group understandably reticent to slow down the process by adding conversations regarding decision quality. But the fact that all of the decisions were treated with the same level of importance provided the group an opportunity. In a follow up conversation I raised the possibility that dealing with long-term, strategic issues such as making decisions about how to deal with property from departing congregations might require more reflection than whether it was acceptable to serve bread with gluten along with gluten free options during Presbytery worship or whether churches should simply provide gluten free bread. (And I'm not kidding. These were two actual decisions put before the body given the same level of importance.) The opportunity is obvious: using tools like omnibus motions the choice architects who craft the agenda have the ability to corral less strategic motions into a quick vote, freeing the body up to spend more time on the issues that impact the largest number of people for the longest period of time. Omnibus motions are perfect vehicles for this since the body can vote to remove items from the omnibus motion for further reflection, while allowing choice architects to streamline the work.

The more challenging objection to decision quality relates to the physical implementation. During the retreat, I split the group up into two groups of about ten. Working with a case I asked the group to assess the decision quality of the decisions described. Manually, using pen and paper, I asked each member of the group to write down a number to rate each area of decision quality. Then, using a calculator a leader at each table manually averaged the results then visually recording the results on a spider diagram. The conversations generated by each link in the chain were rich, but the process got in the way.

To make this process more practical I have created a form using Google docs that can be accessed using a phone or laptop. Now, the groups are able to immediately assess each link in the chain, and the Google form gathers the data, averages them automatically, and, using a plug in, visually displays them. My hope is that this new approach will enable more and more ecclesial decision making bodies to engage this conversation. Not only will focusing on quality improve our

decision making over time, but working the chain together provides a small group or committee the language they need to explain their thinking to create a sense of buy-in in the larger community.