NLP and the Art of Deciding

By Robbie Steinhouse

In this article I want to explain the NLP principles and the neurological research that underpin my recently published book Brilliant Decision Making. At the end of the piece I shall outline where these have led me.

NLP and Decision Making

Part of my purpose in writing the book was to make some key NLP models, such as the Well Formed Outcome and the Logical Levels, accessible for the non-expert general reader. For a long time I was unsure how exactly to do this, but one morning I woke up thinking about the rather slick manual I had received with my new Ipod the previous evening – a 'quick start guide', a meaty 'how to do everything manual', and then a detailed 'trouble shooting guide' – and suddenly realized I had found my key. The quick start guide would be a 'decision simulator', an eight-step process based on the Well Formed Outcome. The trouble shooting section would be based on the Logical Levels. In the middle would be the 'meaty' fuller section, with a number of other NLP concepts featuring.

One such concept is congruence, which lies at the heart of good decision making. Good decisions are congruent ones, ones where 'head, heart and gut' all say 'yes' to the decision.

> **"A good decision is not necessarily one that works out perfectly"**

It's important to understand that a 'good' decision is not necessarily one that works out perfectly. Circumstances change, and what seems – and is – a good decision at one moment may turn out to be less than ideal later on. But there is no methodology for making perfect decisions, only one for making the best one you can at any given moment. Such a methodology centres round congruence.

In addition to increasing the chances of favourable outcomes, congruent decisions are rarely regretted, even if circumstances change radically and it turns out that the decision has to be reversed or changed.

Incongruent decisions on the other hand are often accompanied by justifications, such as an expert has told the person they should do x, or that conventional wisdom says they should do y. In a fast-changing and complex world, such decisions often turn out to lead to unfavourable outcomes. Even more often, they turn out to be

“congruent decisions are rarely regretted”

causes of regret: even when the outcome has been favourable, the person who hustles themselves into a decision ‘against their better judgement’ is often left pondering how much better things could have been if they had been true to themselves.

A decision once made has to be implemented. I find the concept of TOTE very helpful here. Many people see decision making as a series of discrete steps: you research, you decide, you implement. But actually they merge into one another: a good decision is a flexible one, that leaves room for change as you implement and the world turns out not to be quite as expected. Decisions are models not theories: begin with a simple model, try it out, amend the model, try it out (and so on: test, operate, test, exit…) I learnt this the hard way having to make big changes in my business during the credit crunch: conventional wisdom was no longer working and I needed to move away from prevailing business theories to a more flexible approach.

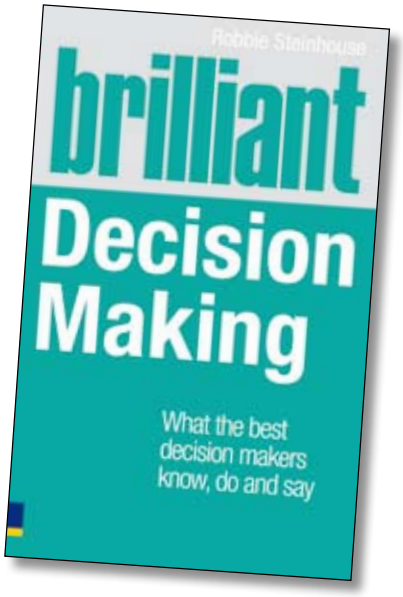
Decisions can also get stuck. The Logical Levels of Robert Dilts provides a perfect template for trouble-shooting in this kind of situation. What level have you got stuck at? Understanding this enables you to find the right procedure to ‘unstick’ it. The levels, remember, are:

- Spirit
- Identity
- Beliefs & Values
- Capabilities
- Behaviours
- Environment

The statement ‘I can’t decide that here’ is worth unpacking.

Is there a conflict between the decision and one’s mission or higher purpose? Does it not fit into the bigger context of one’s life?

Is the inability at the level of identity (I can’t decide…), a feeling that the decision somehow challenges one’s self-concept? Does the decider lack permission or secretly feel that he or she does not deserve the outcome?



‘I can’t…’ Is decision stuck at the level of beliefs and values – it is somehow not possible or unimportant for the decider? Or does he or she lack the capabilities to decide or to implement?

At the level of behaviour, does the decider have some instinct that this is somehow not right to do?

At the level of environment – the person could decide somewhere else but not here. Is the decision affected by conflicting agendas of people around them in this place?

Good decision makers learn to differentiate between a personal issue that is blocking their progress – time to refer to the ‘trouble shooting guide’ above – and the sense of incongruence when a decision is simply wrong. For example, I was recently working with a business coaching client who had to make a decision about restructuring their team. The client ‘knew’ the decision was the right one, in other words he was congruent about the decision, but at the same time he was afraid of having an empty desk. If he delegated all of his work, he would have nothing to do and therefore he would be ‘worthless’ – an issue at the identity level. With a bit of help from NLP, during the session the client resolved this issue and he went away able to implement the decision.

The concept of framing also plays a key part in good decision making. Good decision makers are able to use the ‘as if’ frame to work through various options and consider their consequences. Poor decision makers are often stuck in one frame, and often one perceptual position, too. This is how it looks to me, now… The ability to examine an issue from different viewpoints is essential both to formulating a good decision and to putting it into practice.

Neurology

Research on how we actually make decisions has been revolutionized by various scanning and brain-imaging techniques. And this new research has in turn changed our model of decision making from one that is purely rational to one which is driven by ‘informed emotion’. This, I feel, strongly justifies the NLP approach to such matters: our

insistence on somatic wisdom and on the many limitations of formal, conscious thought is borne out by what science (that most rational of activities) is discovering.

> **“A good decision is a flexible one”**

For example, experiments show areas of the brain ‘lighting up’ as the brain unconsciously considers a decision: a kind of inner debate is going on. More spectacular still is the fact that some research has shown that this debate often concludes with one particular part of the brain lighting up, and eight seconds after this occurs, the subject then claims consciously to have made a decision.

Other experiments show that people who have become cut off from their emotions become incapable of making decisions. The human brain has a big neocortex sitting on top of a limbic system which is similar to other mammal’s brains. The former is essentially rational, and the latter emotional (though one must be careful of overgeneralising here!), and the main link between them is an area behind the eyeball called the orbitofrontal cortex or OFT. When this is damaged, people appear to be highly rational and unemotional, but actually can’t decide even the most basic things.

In an excellent book called The Decisive Moment, American writer Jonah Lehrer quotes a number of such experiments by neurologist Antonio Damaso, including one where a man with OFT damage was asked to decide a time for a meeting, and was still deliberating this 30 minutes later.

Decision making is closely tied in with the NLP notion of unconscious competence, and this in turn is linked to the networks created in the brain by ‘dopamine neurons’. These neurons effectively wire themselves slowly into expert networks – largely as a result of our making mistakes. I quote Niels Bohr to my students – ‘an expert is a person who has made all the mistakes that can be made in a very narrow field’ – and they often find it a consoling thought (especially those who have an inbuilt ‘driver’ telling them to ‘be perfect’). But it seems that neurology bears the great Danish physicist out.

It is these networks that we key into when asking ourselves whether we are congruent about a decision.

There are at least two levels of unconscious competence that we need to tap into when making a decision. One is our knowledge about the area about which we are deciding – our experience in business or relationships or our knowledge of the property market (or wherever). The other is a kind of meta-competence, in decision making itself. It is this meta-competence I set out to describe in my book.

If I could sum up its message very simply, it would be that decisions are organic things. They need to grow and be fostered. They begin with research, and slowly crystallize as more is learnt. Often the right decision, which seems so hard to reach at one time, ‘makes itself’ once more has been learnt. One has to trust this process – and one’s instincts about the process, which manifest themselves in the form of feelings of congruence or incongruence. Once the decision is made, its implementation has to be subtle and timely – swift if it has to be, slow if that is what is needed. The model of the ‘decisive’ person who makes a decision then drives it through, relentlessly and as quickly as possible, despite all kinds of opposition, is rarely a good one.

None of this should, perhaps, surprise us students, practitioners and masters of NLP. But it is good to see the presuppositions of our discipline working so effectively in an area to which it has not traditionally been applied. ■

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