The Six Modes of Decision-Making

Richard Barrett

(Extract from Evolutionary Coaching)

One of the subtle but more important changes that occur as we move through the seven stages of psychological development is how we make decisions. The predominant mode of decision-making at the survival stage is *instincts*. At the conforming and differentiating stages we primarily use *subconscious beliefs*, supplemented by conscious beliefs. When we reach the individuating stage *conscious beliefs* start to predominate. At the self-actualising stage we shift to *values-based* decision-making. Values are supplemented by *intuition* at the integrating stage, and by *inspiration* at the serving stage.

The relationship between the universal stages of evolution, the seven stages of psychological development and the six modes of decision-making are shown in the following Table.

*Table* Universal stages of evolution, stages of psychological development and modes of decision-making

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Surviving Instincts

The shift from one mode of decision-making to the next takes place gradually—at the same pace as the shift from one stage of psychological development to the next. Once you reach a new stage of development and have started using a new mode of decision-making, the previous modes of decision-making are still available to you; you just use them less often.

Sometimes, even in the lower stages of development, you may experience the higher modes of decision-making. For example, you may get a sudden flash of intuition or an inspirational thought may suddenly occur. The frequency of occurrence of these two higher modes of decision-making—intuition and inspiration—which are not under your conscious control, increase significantly once you reach the self-actualising stage of development.

The shift from one stage of development to the next and from one mode of decision-making to the next, is also reflected in the shift that takes place in the use of the reptilian mind/brain—surviving (instincts), the limbic mind/brain—conforming and differentiating (subconscious and conscious beliefs) and the neo-cortex—individuating and self-actualising (conscious beliefs and values). When you move beyond the self-actualisation stage towards full self-realisation, the decision-making modalities of the soul begin to take over: intuition at the integrating stage, and inspiration at the serving stage. These modes of decision bypass conscious thought, you just know what it is you have to do. Once you have this knowing, you can then use your rational neo-cortex to work out the best way to achieve what you have to do. Each of the six modes of decision-making is now described in more detail.

**Instinct-based decision-making**

Instinct-based decision-making is more or less the exclusive domain of the reptilian mind/brain complex and is found in all living creatures. Decisions are automatic and immediate. The reactions of the reptilian mind/brain are triggered by pattern recognition in our species memory banks encoded in our DNA. Instinct-based decisions mostly relate to three factors: self-preservation, the satisfaction of physiological needs, and the perpetuation of the species. The basic reptilian mind/brain reaction to a threat is either fight or flight.

The main features of instinct-based decision-making are:
Actions always precede conscious thought. There is no pause for reflection between meaning-making (pattern recognition) and decision-making.

The decisions that are made are always based on past experiences—what species history has taught us about how to survive, keep physically safe, and seeking out opportunities to procreate.

Reactions are automatic—you have no opportunity to reflect before you act.

When you are involved in instinct-based decision-making, you are not consciously in control of your words, actions, behaviours or your body functions. The decisions made originate from the DNA instructions contained in the body-mind.

Subconscious belief-based decision-making

Subconscious belief-based decision-making is the exclusive domain of the limbic mind/brain complex and is found in all mammals. As with instinct-based decision-making, subconscious belief-based decisions are automatic and immediate. However, instead of being triggered by pattern recognition at the level of species memories, they are triggered by pattern recognition at the level of the personal memories.

Subconscious belief-based decisions are always about the protection of the body or ego (avoidance of physical or emotional pain), or the exploitation of opportunities to get more of the basic needs that your ego believes are missing in your life—more security, more love or more recognition (seeking of pleasure).

Whenever you feel impatient, frustrated, and angry or get into a rage, you know that subconscious fear-based beliefs are dominating your decision-making. These emotions, which are being triggered by a present moment event, are linked to your memory of an event in the past when you failed to get one of your needs met at the surviving, conforming or differentiating stages of your psychological development.

Whereas the self-preservation instinct of the reptilian mind/brain concerns only the self, the self-preservation instinct of the limbic mind/brain can include other people with whom close attachments have been formed—those with whom you identify. For example, a mother will instinctively protect her child; a soldier will instinctively protect his comrades.

The main features of subconscious belief-based decision-making are:
Actions always precede conscious thought. There is no gap for reflection between meaning-making and decision-making.

The decisions that are made are always based on past experiences—what your personal history has taught you about maximising pleasure and minimising pain in the framework of existence of your childhood.

Reactions are automatic—you have no opportunity to reflect before you act.

When you are involved in subconscious-based decision-making, you are not consciously in control of your words, actions and behaviours. They are in control of you. When you are experiencing a love-based or fear-based emotional reaction triggered by a subconscious belief, the only way to get back into control is to take the time you need to release your emotions.

Releasing your emotions helps you to clear your mind. If, for whatever reason, you feel you are unable to release your emotions, because you are afraid of what might happen if you do, then the emotional energy will accumulate below the surface of your conscious mind like water vapour in a pressure cooker. Eventually, the stress you feel from these supressed emotions will either make you sick or cause you to burst out into a fit of anger or rage.

The basic limbic mind/brain reaction to a perceived threat is not fight or flight, but avoidance. The main way this shows up is in the shunning of conflict. We avoid conflict because of a learned belief, usually from our childhood, about our ability to deal with what might happen to our emotional or physical safety if we express how we feel. This is one of the ways the ego tries to protect itself: blame is another.

We blame others, not just to avoid punishment, but also because we want to avoid conflict. In our ego-mind, conflict represents separation, and separation for children triggers fears for their safety. In extreme cases, the ego-mind of a child will dissociate from a painful experience by forming a sub-personality—one that is able to function in the world without the memory of the painful experience.

Conscious belief-based decision-making

Conscious belief-based decision-making is the exclusive domain of the neo-cortex mind/brain complex and is found in its most advanced form in human beings. Conscious beliefs, like subconscious beliefs, are assumptions we hold to be true. They may not be true, but we assume they are, and our mind acts on them as if they were true. Beliefs show up in the brain
as neural pathways—connections between events and outcomes (feelings and emotions) that have been learned through repetition in the past. The most deeply engrained neural pathways are those that we learned in our childhood when the reasoning power of the neo-cortex was not available to us.

If you want to make rational decisions, you have to move beyond subconscious belief-based decision-making and shift to conscious belief-based decision-making. This means you have to insert a pause between the event that triggers your subconscious belief and your reaction to it. The pause allows the emotion associated with the belief to subside and gives you time for reflection, so you can use logic (slow thinking) to understand the meaning of what is happening and then make a choice about how to respond. By inserting a pause, you also have time to discuss the situation with others and get advice about the best way to get your needs met. Unlike the reptilian and limbic mind/brains which react to threats (fast thinking), the neo-cortex responds to threats by analysing the situation to understand what is happening (slow thinking) and find the meaning.

The main features of conscious belief-based decision-making are:

*Conscious thought precedes action. A pause is inserted between an event and the response. The pause allows logic or reason to be used to determine the best way of getting your needs met.*

*Decisions are based on past experiences—what your personal history, your culture or your religion has taught you about maintaining internal stability and external equilibrium in your framework of existence. You make decisions based on what you believe you know.*

*You are in control of your actions and behaviours.*

*You can consult with others, who you trust, to support and enhance your decision-making.*

Conscious belief-based decision-making has one thing in common with subconscious belief-based decision-making and instinct-based decision-making: it uses information from the past to make decisions about the future.

Consequently, conscious belief-based decision-making does not serve you well in understanding and navigating complex situations which you have never experienced before. For that, you need a more sophisticated decision-making modality: a decision-making
modality that focuses not on what you want to happen to meet your ego’s needs but on what you want to happen that allows you to live in alignment with your soul’s values.

**Values-based decision-making**

The shift from conscious-belief based decision-making to values-based decision-making is not easy. You have to complete the process of individuation before values-based decision-making is fully and naturally available to you. Until you individuate, your decision-making will be primarily influenced by the beliefs you learned from your parents and your community during your childhood and teenage years.

The process of individuation involves examining the beliefs you learned during your formative years and letting go of those that no longer serve you and those you no longer consider to be true. Once you begin to reflect on your beliefs, you will start to think about what is important to you and you will naturally start to reflect on your values.

Whereas beliefs are the context-related guidance system of the ego, values are the universal guidance system of the soul. Beliefs are always contextual and values are always universal. Everyone on the planet shares the same deeply held human values, but not the same beliefs. Consequently, when people start to make decisions using their values they find themselves drawn together. When they make decisions based on their beliefs they find themselves separated. In other words, values unite and beliefs separate.

When you shift to values-based decision-making, you can effectively throw away the rulebooks you learned when you were young. Every decision you make is sourced from what you consider to be “right action”—actions that are fully aligned with who you really are—your soul-self.

Values-based decision-making allows you to create an authentic way of operating in the world because you no longer hide your feelings. That is not to say there is no place for conscious belief-based decision-making based or logic or rational thinking: there is. However, you will quickly realise as you proceed with your self-actualisation and get in touch with your deeply held values that all the critical decisions you need to make in your life need to pass the values test.

If a decision seems logical, but goes against your values you will feel uncomfortable. You need to give precedence to decisions that make you feel good rather than decisions that focus on getting what your ego thinks it needs. You want to know that you did the right thing.
You know if you did the right thing by how it makes you feel. What makes you feel good is when you are living in internal stability—in other words, when the decisions you make align with your soul’s values.

The main features of values-based decision-making are:

*When you first begin, conscious thought precedes action. You carefully consider what values you want to guide your decisions. The decisions you make are not made on your past history. They are based on who you truly are and who you want to become.*

*You are in control of your actions and behaviours.*

*You do not need to seek guidance from others. You will know what is right from the way that you feel.*

*After a while, when you have become practised in values-based decision-making, you do not have to reflect anymore: It becomes automatic.*

Values-based decision-making has another advantage: it allows you to consciously create the future you want to experience. For example, if you value trust, you will make decisions that display trust and you will be trusted by others. If you value accountability, then you make decisions that display accountability and those around you will be encouraged to be accountable. You create the future you want to experience because the quality of the energy you put out into the world through your decision-making is the quality of the energy you receive back. Honesty breeds honesty. Trust breeds trust. Conversely, fear breeds fear.

**Intuition-based decision-making**

The shift from values-based decision-making to intuition-based decision-making does not happen overnight: it develops gradually as you move through the higher stages of psychological development. Although you can experience intuition at all stages of development, it is not until you begin to focus on satisfying your higher order psychological needs that you can count on it showing up in your life.

Intuition allows you to access the collective unconscious—the universal intelligence that resides in the quantum energy field. You access this field through your soul. Consequently, intuition-based decision-making only really begins to kick-in when you reach the integrating stage of your psychological development. The principal characteristics of intuition-based decision-making are as follows:
Thoughts, beliefs, and agendas are suspended.

No meaning-making takes place.

The mind is still and empty.

The mind is free to make a deep dive into the mind-space of the collective unconscious and emerge with a thought or understanding that provides an answer to a question that has been on your mind.

Intuition arises suddenly out of nowhere, usually when your mind is resting, often in the middle of the night. Even though intuition-based decision-making is not logical, it is the principal source of our most important breakthrough ideas. When you are totally present to a situation without thought, belief or judgement, you create the conditions that allow your mind to intuitively recognise what wants to emerge. When we work with others to create a collective, non-judgemental mind space, intuition can become even more powerful. It can result in new ways of approaching old problems that have never been considered before.

**Inspiration-based decision-making**

Inspiration is the term I use to describe thoughts and prompts you receive from your soul about what you need to do with your life.

Inspiration is always very personal and directive. You will recognise it as a persistent thought that will not go away. It delineates the next steps you have to take in your life journey. Inspiration keeps prompting you until you listen and follow through. It is about what your soul wants you to do. Not surprisingly, therefore, the purpose of inspiration is to support you in living your soul’s values and fulfilling your soul’s purpose.¹

Even though the voice of inspiration can come through at any stage of your psychological development, you will not begin to recognise it as such until you reach the stage of self-actualisation. Up to that point, it will seem like just another thought. Discerning the difference between a thought originating from ego and a thought originating from soul is quite difficult at first. It gets easier as time goes by and you devote your life to serving the needs of your soul.

Some people ask: “How is inspiration different from intuition?” Intuition is non-directive. It is an idea or insight that arises from nowhere at an undetermined moment that provides a solution or a clue to resolving a problem or issue that you are currently facing. Intuition can best be described as a “eureka” moment.
Inspiration, on the other hand, is a definitive prompt. It can best be described as *guidance for keeping your life in a state of flow*. You know you are living in soul consciousness and receiving soul inspiration when synchronicity rains down on you. Your life takes on a magical quality. Don’t expect the magic to happen every day. It may appear for several weeks at a time, disappear, and then re-emerge again when you are least expecting it.

When you receive soul-driven thoughts about an action or direction you need to take, and you do not follow this directive, you will eventually have to deal with the consequences. For example, when you continually allow your fears about satisfying your basic needs to take precedence over fulfilling your growth needs, you may find yourself getting increasingly depressed. You will feel stifled and out of alignment because you are not fulfilling your soul’s potential.

The principal characteristics of inspiration-based decision-making are as follows:

*Thought appears to arise from nowhere.*

*The thought is persistent.*

*The thought is linked to actions or a direction you need to take.*

*There are emotional consequences for not following your inspiration.*

In the preface of *The New Leadership Paradigm,* I speak about my calling to write a book on leadership. I tried to resist the idea, but I could not: it would not go away. For me, that was inspiration in action. When I began to write the book, ideas and insights just kept flooding my mind. Synchronicity was with me almost every day for a full year. Whenever I was stuck with my writing, I would get out of my logical intellectual mind and seek assistance from my higher self. Soon thereafter I would find words streaming into my consciousness without need of editing. At those moments, I was aware that I was experiencing a state of flow.

When you reach this stage of development you begin to realise that your life does not belong to you: your life belongs to your soul. Your ego needs disappear as your soul takes charge of your life. Life is not something that happens to you, it happens through you. To experience this way of being you must learn to befriend, trust and then become one with your soul.
Summary

Here are the main points of this chapter:

1. One of the subtle but more important changes that occur as we move through the seven stages of psychological development is in how we make decisions.
2. Instinct-based decision-making is more or less the exclusive domain of the reptilian mind/brain complex and is found in all living creatures.
3. Subconscious belief-based decision-making is the exclusive domain of the limbic mind/brain complex and is found in all mammals.
4. Conscious belief-based decision-making is the exclusive domain of the neo-cortex mind/brain complex and is found in its most advanced form in human beings.
5. Values are the universal guidance system of the soul.
6. Although you can experience intuition at all stages of development, it is not until you begin to focus on satisfying your higher psychological needs that you can count on it showing up in your life.
7. Inspiration is always very personal and directive. You will recognise it as a persistent thought that will not go away. Inspiration comes in the form of thoughts or prompts from your soul about what you need to do with your life.
8. There are consequences for not following the inspiration of your soul.

In the next part of the book, I will introduce and describe exercises that allow you to identify your client’s primary motivation, their secondary motivations and the stage of development the organisation they are embedded in has reached.

Notes