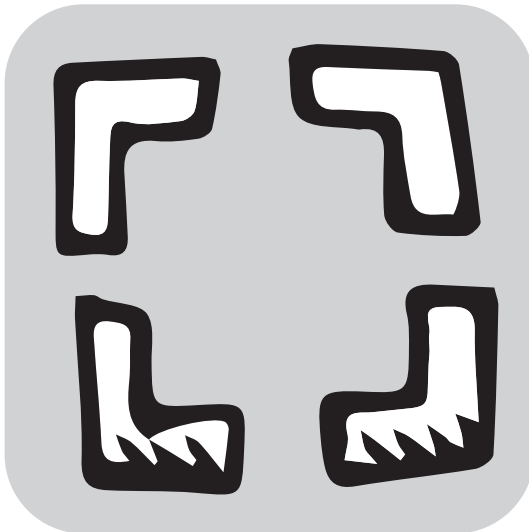


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Move 1: Frame the Decision



It's course selection time and Javid, a high school senior, can't decide if he should take the school band option for his one elective, or go with a new course that blends art and technology. He plays the guitar for fun at home and has always wanted to try the sax, but he isn't sure he wants to lug that thing around on his way to and from school. However, the art/tech course is new so he doesn't know anyone who has taken it – and Javid just learned that the teacher is new too, so it's hard to say if she'll be any good. Either way, Javid's parents want him to select something entirely different – a finance course – as his elective because they think it will open more doors later in life than any arts course ever could. Javid is confused. He thought his choice was straightforward but now, with the new information and his parents getting involved, it has become more complicated.

At times like this, when the way forward isn't clear, framing the choice – a quick check into what the decision is all about – can be helpful. And important. Taking control over how we picture the decisions we face is part of transforming decision problems into decision opportunities. The decision frame determines how we bring who we are and what we care about into the decision-making picture.

How we initially frame a choice will inform and influence all the later steps in the decision-making process.

What Is a Decision Frame?

Imagine a photographer, camera in hand, looking out the window of a city building. How will they frame the photo? Maybe they'll focus on the traffic jam one block over, or the unusual hat on the

person walking down the other side of the street. Perhaps they'll change lenses and zoom in on the small dandelion growing from a crack in the sidewalk. In the same way a photographer chooses what is visible and what is not, how a decision maker frames a decision determines what is possible and what is not.

Javid could frame his decision in many ways:

- What courses should I take this term?
- How do I get the most out of my high school experience?
- How do I make sure I have the required credits for graduation?
- What doors do I want my coursework to open to me?
- What career do I want?

Each frame leads to a different set of concerns and, ultimately, may lead to different options. That's why it's crucial to help young decision makers frame their choices in ways that make sense to them and that account for the potentially overwhelming variety of factors at play. Without support from a decision mentor a teenager may simply turn away from a decision and go along with ... *whatever* (a favourite word among many teens we know). Or they may end up solving the wrong problem and, as a result, miss out on a great decision opportunity. A supportive mentor can be part of a conversation that helps to sort out what's going on as part of this choice – what's at play, what's possible, and what needs to be decided or acted on now rather than better left until later (by which time additional information may be available).

A key role for the decision mentor is to provide reminders to the young decision maker that framing a choice creates opportunities to see and operate in the world in different ways. With thoughtful guidance and support from a mentor, framing can invite creativity and be an opportunity for the young decision maker to exercise their agency (Yeager, Dahl, & Dweck, 2018). Asking three simple questions can help.



1. Who is in the picture?
2. What is the question?
3. What is the scope?

These powerful questions can clarify the possibilities of any decision.

Who Is in the Picture?

For smaller or more straightforward decisions it's usually fairly obvious who is potentially affected by a choice – oneself, friends, family members, classmates, etc. The implication of leaving someone out of the decision frame is that their views won't influence the choice being made. They could still be affected by the decision but they won't have any influence on the action that's selected.

For larger or more complex decisions, thinking about who is involved becomes a choice in and of itself. Many health decisions change depending on who is involved in the decision frame: a teenager's decision to follow a friend's lead and try an unknown drug at a party may at the time be framed as a personal decision but the

emphasis shifts dramatically if the possible effects on friends, family, and even the health-care system are also taken into account. Another example comes from social decisions where government leaders wrestle with the extent to which future generations will be affected by choices made today and, if so, how much their perspective should count. In Canada, for example, many Indigenous Peoples value what author Bob Joseph calls the Seventh Generation Principle – the principle that all decisions must include consideration of impacts on community members seven generations into the future (Joseph & Joseph, 2019, p. 86). This long-term perspective necessarily impacts how decisions are framed around such questions as the use of fossil fuels or policies protecting endangered species.

What Is the Question?

Consider the importance of clarity in this scenario:

Raman wanted to go out with friends and asks her dad if she can. Her dad says yes, assuming the friends in question are the kids Raman has grown up with. Raman grabs her jacket and runs outside, hopping into a car driven by a new friend Raman's dad has never met.

A common framing mistake is to assume you are being clear when communicating with other people: you know what you're saying so others will too!

Effective communication about choices is always a two-way street. Particularly when decisions are collaborative or outcomes can be significant, it's important to make sure everyone has the same understanding of the questions and the language at the heart of the decision frame. One kid asks another "Want to go camping this weekend?" The first imagines a fun opportunity to be out in the woods; the second perceives an invitation for intimate physical closeness. Your child says "I need help with my history paper." Is this a request for you to get involved or will it result in a phone call with a friend? Is there a need for ongoing support or for specific, one-time assistance?

Are You Clear? Really Clear?

Ralph Keeney is a renowned expert in decision making and a consultant for governments and industries facing tough choices. He tells a great “what’s the question” story about a presentation he gave in California to a group of earth scientists. Keeney’s talk was designed to encourage clear thinking and foster good decisions about how public officials should deal with the uncertainty associated with earthquakes. He first asked participants to complete a short questionnaire, starting with this question: “Is it true or false that there is a reasonable chance of a moderate to large earthquake in the San Francisco Bay area in the near future?” Everyone answered *True*. Keeney then asked participants to define each of the four key elements that together framed his question: reasonable chance, moderate to large earthquake, San Francisco Bay area, and near future.

As he expected, the participants’ responses showed little agreement regarding what the question was asking. For example, one expert defined the San Francisco Bay area as within five miles of downtown while another included a span of over 140 miles in all directions. One said the “near future” meant up to three weeks away; another said it meant the next 100,000 years. You can imagine the sharp differences in the responses of public officials and the messages sent to citizens depending on how they interpreted the question: if a possible earthquake in the “near future” means it could occur in the next three weeks there would be urgent warnings and panicked citizens, whereas if “near future” instead referred to the next 100,000 years residents would probably go about their business as usual.

Despite the huge (and troubling) disparity in these outcomes, the expert participants had happily given answers to what amounted to very different questions because they framed their decisions in dramatically different ways. “What’s really surprising about this,” Keeney told Robin, “is that the scientists weren’t aware of the large variations in how they were defining [i.e., framing] my question” (personal communication).

What Is the Scope?

The third question to consider in framing a decision is its scope. How much should the decision maker zoom in or out on a decision? For instance, when making choices about organizing end-of-year activities, a student council might consider the decision frame and realize there are a lot more options available beyond holding a traditional dance. They could zoom out and ask the open-ended question: How do we want to celebrate the end of the year? This decision process might include consultation with school leadership to come up with a short list of activities, which could then be included in a survey of students. Or they could reframe by zooming in and asking: What style of dance do we want? This decision might include consultation with the student body and local DJs.

A common mistake in framing decisions is to assume too narrow a scope. This omits potentially interesting options, as in the example above. It also omits potentially important consequences. Consider climate change: not long ago climate change was generally referred to as “global warming” due to the effect of CO₂ (and other) emissions on average annual temperatures. A focus on warming led to boosts in sales of air conditioners and thoughts of longer summers. But reframing the scope of the issue – and the language used to describe it – brings in many other factors, like the increased risk of forest fires and loss of animal habitat (to name only two). And maybe all the electricity used to run those air conditioners will make things even worse? These changes in scope – whether the decision frame is larger or smaller – have important implications for policy makers as well as for families and individuals.

This all sounds great: answer three questions to frame a decision and open up new decision-making possibilities. And it's true. However, it's also a human tendency to see the world, and to frame our decision

options, in a way that is familiar and perpetuates our current reality. This characteristic is often referred to as the *status quo trap*, and it makes it easy to miss out on new decision-making opportunities.

Often the best ways to help overcome the power of the status quo is simply to remind ourselves that what is currently going on is only one of many ways of being in the world. Sometimes it helps to ask the decision maker: if things weren't already like they are now, is this what you would choose? If not, what changes can realistically be made to help the decision maker get to a new place, one they might well prefer?

Decision framing is an exercise in strategy and creativity. If decision makers start with the right decision frame – one that makes sense to them – the final outcomes will prove far more meaningful.

Framing Matters

Let's go back to Javid and his decision about what elective to take. How he frames his decision will impact the action he takes. Javid needs to frame his course selection decision realistically regarding

- his ability to implement the decision
- the decisions he needs to make now versus those he can make later
- any direct constraints on his choices

Part of what turns a decision *problem* into a decision *opportunity* is recognizing the increased flexibility that goes along with how the decision is framed. And because it takes place early in the decision-making process, framing or *reframing* a problem often allows the decision maker to insert their own preferences and exercise agency. In some cases, the choice of a frame will go a long way

toward resolving whatever issue or concern has prompted the need for a decision in the first place.

When a young person comes to you with a decision they are struggling to make, they probably already have landed on a decision frame – but in most cases they will have done so unconsciously. So right at the start of your conversation it's worth checking to see if the decision they are wrestling with is actually the decision they want to be making. Perhaps the goal of the decision is unrealistic. Or perhaps you get a feeling that someone else has framed the decision for them. Thoughtfully considering (and sometimes altering) the decision frame helps a young decision maker gain more ownership over their choice and build their sense of agency. Here are some questions that decision mentors can use to dig a little deeper:

- Why are you making this decision?
- What exactly are the issues here? (zoom in)
- What do you hope will happen, sooner or later, through this decision? (zoom out)
- Is any part of this decision already made for you?
- Can any part of this decision be postponed and made later?
- Are there any important gaps in what you currently know about this decision?

Listen deeply to their answers, especially if you believe there might be a misalignment between the way they initially frame the decision and the potential to frame it in a way that better aligns with their personality and the decision context. You might use language like this:

- I wonder if this decision is really about ...
- It sounds like what you're trying to figure out is ...
- How important do you think it is to find out more about ...
- What if this problem is actually an opportunity to decide how ...

Here's how Javid's English teacher helped him reframe his course selection choice:

The teacher asked: "Javid, what's really at stake here? Are you trying to please your parents? Are you trying to set yourself up for a future career that you don't yet know if you want? Or are you trying to explore your own passions and interests while still in high school?"

These questions helped Javid see his decision in a new way. Zooming out helped him shake off the traps he was falling into by assuming the decision was about picking a course and instead look at it from a wider perspective. Zooming in helped Javid realize he needed to have some conversations, first with himself and friends and then with his parents so he could think through what his own real interests were and how they might link to possible education, experiences, or training after high school.

Framing a decision in a way that feels right can be an empowering way to assert (or discover more about) the decision maker's personality and opinions. If you are talking with a young decision maker about an important choice, helping them align the decision frame with their personality and opinions shows a deep respect for the person they are growing up to be and also the person they are now.

Framing and Advertising

Advertisers exert influence by framing decisions for us. Marketers are master manipulators: they want us to decide to buy their product, so they appeal to our fast thinking by playing with our emotions: *Of course, I need to buy that thing – it will make me so much cooler and I'll have more friends!* Strong emotions – whether they are true to our nature or are falsely created to serve someone else's purpose – are difficult to override. Successfully reframing the choice on your own terms requires access to slow, effortful thinking: *Wait a minute! What do I hope to achieve by taking on this choice?* As the baseball manager (and amateur philosopher) Yogi Berra is reported to have said: "If you don't know where you are going, then you won't know when you get there."

Types of Choices

Frames will and should vary with the type of decision a teenager is making. Being familiar with a distinction among four main types of choices can help frame a decision quickly and in a way that helps it be understood. This recognition of the type of choice makes it easier to emphasize the key points of a decision and, in many cases, also makes it easier to bring in what has been learned already as a result of other similar choices of the same type.

- *Personal vs. group*: Decisions made only by ourselves compared to decisions made in collaboration with others – what shoes to buy versus what to do on the weekend with friends.
- *Urgent vs. relaxed*: There is an urgency to some decisions – sometimes choices need to be made very quickly, so framing has to take place in a matter of minutes or hours. With other decisions, it's okay to be more relaxed and take your time, checking out the opinions of other people or collecting initial information that might help to identify the decision scope or other participants.
- *Immediate outcome vs. delayed*: The consequences of your choice are either visible right away (you achieve your goal – a desired test score or a sales target – or you don't) or delayed (you only find out later if it was the best decision – perhaps much later). Remember that the meaning of words like *sooner* or *later* will vary for each of us; youth have a strong short-term emphasis, so what's "later" for a teenager may be days or weeks, whereas what's "later" for an adult may be years or decades.
- *Stand-alone vs. linked*: Decisions made on their own, without influencing or being influenced by other choices, are stand-alone decisions. Decisions that have a domino effect are linked because they set a stream of other choices in motion (e.g., go to my local college or switch to one in another city). Because they can lack the perspective gained by decades of living, young decision makers

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often see decisions as stand-alones. As a decision mentor you can be useful by pointing out the linked choices that are likely to follow. As the great Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote in his novel *War and Peace*, although it's easy to second-guess the decisions of others, a real leader (such as Tolstoy's character General Kutuzov) never finds himself "at the beginning of some event" but perpetually in the middle of a chain of events. Decisions made today are often the result of choices made yesterday.

Being aware of the type of decision under consideration can greatly help in framing the relevant values and options. Consider the fourth decision type, stand-alone versus linked choices.

Javid may have decided to take band but neglected to consider the linked-decisions aspect of all the other things he would now need to choose, from when he would practise, to what fun graduation activities he would have to opt out of due to his performance schedule, to which post-secondary programs require more math courses. So in Javid's case, he isn't really making one decision; whether he realizes it or not, he's setting himself up for a series of decisions.

One other suggestion. If a young person is feeling overwhelmed by a tough decision, try to reframe their choice so they can focus on a small part of the decision that feels approachable at this point in time. Then help them to choose another small part. By practising on these smaller steps they can work their way into the larger decision bit by bit, over time, learning about the decision context and gaining confidence along the way.

The Decision Sketch

Whenever the best decision frame isn't obvious, it's helpful to run through all the Decision-Maker Moves using what we call a **decision sketch**. The analogy comes from painters or composers who often

make a quick sketch of a landscape or rough out a piece of music before spending a longer time on a painting or composition. A quick sketch enables the decision maker to gain perspective on the best decision frame by quickly working through the other five moves to get a feel for what is possible. It can provide important insights and save a great deal of time, energy, and frustration.

Before starting on the decision sketch, it's helpful for the decision mentor to ask if anyone else should be involved in sketching the decision. If possible, input from everyone likely to be directly affected by the choice should be accessible. Why? Because a decision sketch needs to address the major issues associated with a choice, so it's essential to get the right people (as the "holders" of values) involved.

One of the main goals of a sketch is to decrease ambiguity, so encourage clarity about the words being used. Words like "comfort" and "happiness" might seem clear as things that people are wanting to achieve, but if you poke at them a bit it turns out what feels comfortable to one person – the passenger seat in a car or waking up at 6 a.m. – could feel highly uncomfortable to others. Similarly, what brings happiness to one person may not to another. Whenever an ambiguous or vague word comes up, ask questions like, "What do you mean by that?" to make sure everyone is on the same page. Your main role here as a decision mentor is to ask questions that will clarify the nature of the decision and how it is best addressed. Here are some decision sketch questions for each of the Decision-Maker Moves:

- **Frame the choice.** What's really the issue here? Who else is involved in making the decision? What is already decided and what can you decide later? Why do you feel you should be making this decision now?
- **Clarify what matters.** What is really important here? Why? What do you mean by that? Who else might be impacted and what do they think is important?

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- **Generate options.** What are all the ways you could achieve what you're wanting with this decision? Stretch your list of options: how else you can achieve what matters? What other ways might be possible?
- **Explore consequences.** If you go with that option, how would your values be affected? How confident are you with these predictions? Is your information reliable? What would another person have to say about that? Do you know enough yet to predict consequences? What else do you need to find out?
- **Weigh trade-offs and decide.** What option looks best? Why do you prefer that one option over another? Would you really want to give up this for that? Can you think of better options?
- **Stay curious.** How will you know if you've made the right call? What questions do you still have?

A sketch can be super helpful when the range of options is broad or some outcomes are unfamiliar. A sketch also can help whenever the decision maker is not used to exercising their own agency. In such cases, a quick sketch can provide a helpful new perspective on what a choice involves, where it could lead, and what elements remain unknown or might require further investigation.

Asking the Right Question

Gaining insights through a decision sketch is all about asking the right questions. If you fail to ask the right questions the sketch is likely to repeat well-known paths to decision making and, more often than not, fail to highlight new values, generate new alternatives, or help participants learn new things about possible consequences – all the stuff a decision sketch is capable of doing.

There is a famous scene in the movie *The Pink Panther Strikes Again* (dir. Blake Edwards, 1976) that serves as a reminder of the need to ask the right question. Inspector Clouseau is checking into a hotel and sees a

dachshund sitting in the lobby. He asks the hotel owner “Does your dog bite?” After the owner replies “No,” Clouseau walks over to pet the dog, who promptly and decisively bites his hand. The Inspector is shocked and tells the owner “I thought you said your dog doesn’t bite!” He responds “But that is not my dog.” Clouseau had made assumptions that weren’t true and, as a result, failed to ask the right question.

Sometimes a sketch dramatically changes the decision frame because it brings to mind something important – a new perspective – that otherwise would have been forgotten. And sometimes doing a good job on the sketch is all that is needed to resolve an issue. Remember, a decision sketch is only a first cut. It’s okay for it to be messy and incomplete – that’s what it’s for!

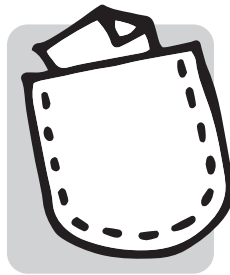
A decision sketch also encourages discussion, inviting questions, and insights. Especially for more complex choices, the use of a decision sketch can be a cyclical process, one that goes through the Decision-Maker Moves more than once because new insights keep coming up. As you help the decision maker work through what matters and what’s possible, listen carefully for new ideas or new information that might inform and even shift the decision frame.

Questioning what might be viewed as constraints or limitations on what is being decided can also help youth avoid a decision trap known as *illusory control* which can undermine how a decision is framed. Illusory control happens whenever a person assumes that either they or someone else – a teacher, friend, or employer – is more responsible for, or has more control over, what happens than is actually the case.

Illusory control is a common trap among younger people for two very different reasons. First, decisions facing a young person often come up for the first time – no big surprise, since a young person simply has less lived experience. Getting fired from a job can make a teenager think they’ll never be employed again; getting dumped

by a partner can make them feel a life of loneliness lies ahead. The newness of this decision situation can leave the impression that others have all the power, resulting in unwarranted feelings of vulnerability. Second, illusory control often arises when a young person feels that what will happen depends only on their actions. This can lead to dangerous consequences. For example, if a young person joins a group of classmates in an outdoor activity and feels invincible because they know what they're doing but forgets that others might not, they may end up taking inappropriate risks for themselves or their friends.

Using a decision sketch to help young decision makers realize the limits of what is actually within their control can help avoid disappointment and frustration. It can also help them gain a new appreciation for how much they can do and the opportunities that remain available, despite the presence of real constraints and limitations.



Frame the Decision: For Your Back Pocket

- Correctly perceiving and framing the decision problem means addressing the right set of choices – otherwise a young decision maker could be putting effort into solving the wrong problem.
- As the decision mentor, you can encourage a young decision maker to slow down their fast-thinking system and make sure the frame they

choose fits their preferences and deals with the issues or concerns that prompted the need for a decision in the first place.

- Leading a young decision maker through a decision sketch can realign a decision process. Often, the decision sketch can reveal gaps in available information or a new action that wasn't considered previously.
- Many decisions are better understood when characterized by their type. Recognizing decision types helps in understanding key aspects of a choice and choosing good responses, ones that connect with a young decision maker's values.

Decision Traps

Status quo bias: framing future decisions in a way that encourages the decision maker to continue to choose what has been done before.

Illusory control: the perception that someone – whether another person or group or the decision maker themselves – has more control over the outcomes of a decision than they really do.

Practice

For Parents

Tell your child about a decision *you* have to make and invite them to help you think about other ways of framing the choice. They might find it easier to practise on one of your decisions than on one of their own. Practising this thinking through a vicarious choice will map the thinking process in their own brain. And, by modelling your own thoughtfulness, you are showing them that making decisions well is a life-long skill – one that as an adult you are always practising, refining your skills, and learning new things.

Here are some questions you can ask to prompt a young decision maker to look at their decision in a different way and, perhaps, to see a new approach:

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- What's really the issue here?
- What do you ultimately hope will happen?
- What's the best/worst possible outcome?
- Why are you making this decision right now?
- Are there things you can set aside for now and decide on later?

For someone who works with kids, consider mentioning a news story that discusses a decision being made or a problem that exists. For example, you might find a story about something as broad as climate change or as specific as whether or not a new playground should be installed at a city park. Brainstorm all the possible ways you might frame decision opportunities about this situation. Discuss the merits of the various frames. (If you are a teacher, you could even formalize this as a lesson and classify the frames according to types of decisions.)

Go Deeper

- Explore some *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoons by Bill Watterson. There are hundreds of good ones. Calvin and his stuffed tiger Hobbes have a great knack for framing activities in a self-serving and often annoying way that differs from the frame used by Calvin's parents, teachers, or school friends. It's hilarious and revealing, because from Calvin's standpoint he is always right – even if no one else agrees with his perspective.
- Read *Give Yourself a Nudge* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), by Ralph Keeney. This is an accessible book that introduces many of the ideas we discuss in these early chapters. It includes great examples of the importance of framing a decision correctly. With a simple search you can also watch Keeney discuss his ideas online.
- The *Choose Your Own Adventure* books have been a favourite of young readers for decades; since its launch in 1979 the series (originally published by Bantam Books) has sold more than 270 million copies.

Sorting It Out

Each of the books invites kids to exercise agency and push against the walls of what might at first seem to be immovable barriers. Often the books set up a conflict between what might be best for a lead character and what the reader might prefer. Every *Choose Your Own Adventure* book starts with this advice: “You are responsible because you choose! Think carefully before you make a move!”