



Introduction

The Decision Compass is a tool to help get clarity in decision making, particularly when that decision has to be made by more than one person. The strength of group decision making is in the breadth of perspective that many people bring. The primary challenges are:

- the length of time that a group will take to make a decision
- ensuring that the decision is not undermined afterwards by individuals that feel that they were not engaged properly.

The Decision Compass helps minimize both challenges, while helping to bring out the variety of perspectives needed for effective group decision making.

It also mitigates two of the major cultural issues relating to decision making in modern society; Black and White Decisions and False Certainty

Cultural Issues

Black and White Decisions

Modern society likes to frame everything as a black and white decision, probably as a result of pressure from the media.

The classic, but extreme, example of this is George Bush's "You are either with us or with the terrorists?" Framing a decision in this way immediately cuts off debate and does not allow for other perspectives that might be helpful e.g. "Get seriously engaged in the issues of the Israeli/Palestinian problem and we might be with you".

As the example above shows, this type of decision making is divisive and confrontational but unfortunately all too common. It shows little or respect for other's opinions and can de-motivate the people that have to implement the decision.

False Certainty

The other cultural aspect of decision making that frequently causes poor delivery is "False Certainty". Culturally, certainty is seen as strength and uncertainty weakness; with the consequence that people often feel driven to be certain when in reality they are not. This uncertainty often has real value, e.g. it may be the wrong time to take the decision or the person may just have a nagging feeling that not all the consequences have been thought through.

One of the best examples of the issues around False Certainty can be seen in the film "Twelve Angry Men" where one juror prevents a murder conviction (and death penalty) because he is not certain that the accused is guilty. Through the film he eventually persuades the rest of the jurors to agree.

Clarity

So what we are looking for in decision making is clarity, particularly being clear that you are unclear. The value comes when helping people find out and explain why they are not clear. This often requires facilitation to avoid the aggressive interrogation that can be a feature of group decision making, because of cultural norms.

What is the decision?

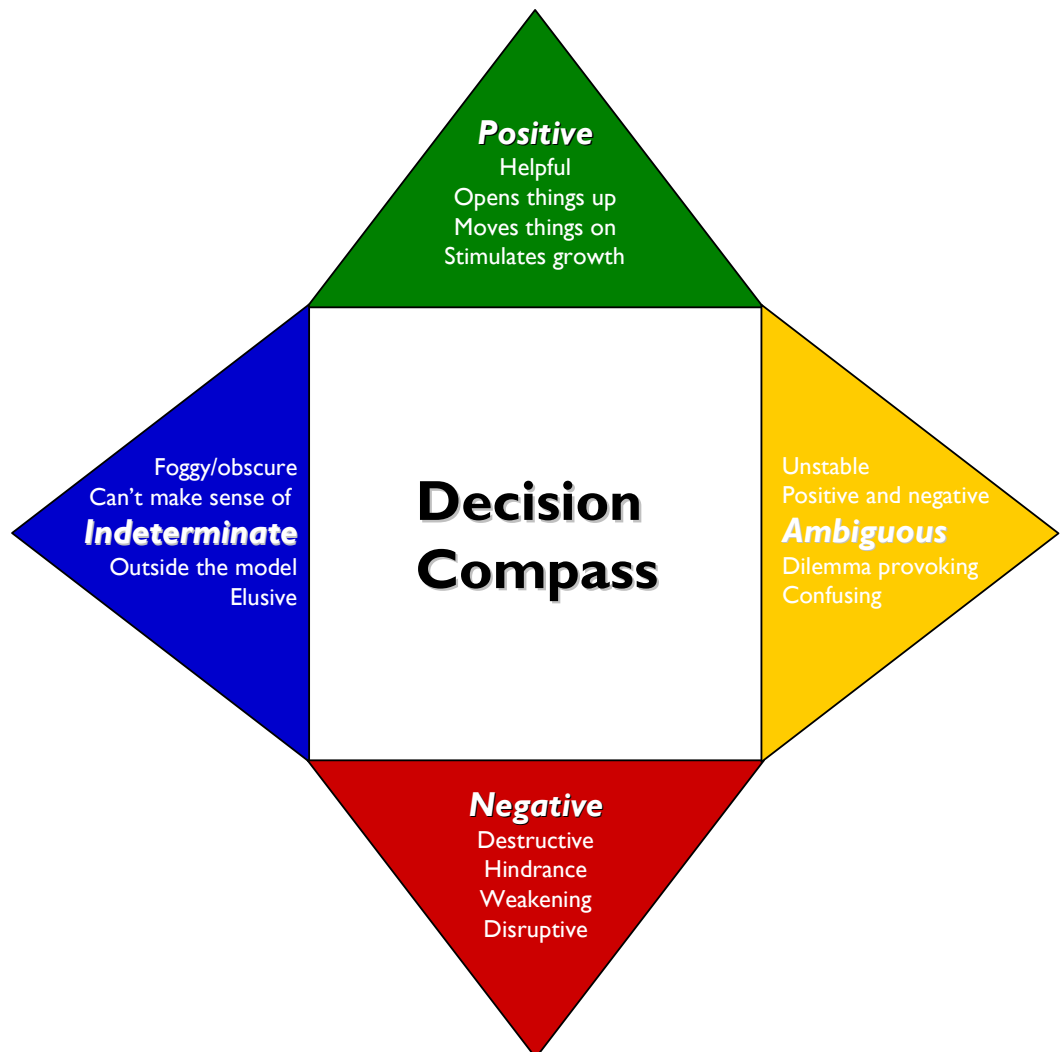
When using the Decision Compass the first step is to frame a set of words that describes the decision. This may not be easy for the difficult decisions that the technique helps facilitate. For the purposes of this paper we'll use a generic question; "Should we spend money on this project?"



Decision Compass™

The Decision Compass

Research by psychologists Tolman and Brunswik in the 1930's established that rather than 2 positions in decision making there are actually 4. Positive and Negative positions are the ones everyone expects; the interesting ones are Ambiguous and Indeterminate which help model the "shades of grey".



Ambiguous

This occurs when we can simultaneously see things we like and things we do not like. The things we like make it impossible for us to be negative, but the things we do not like make it equally impossible to be positive.

Ambiguous has tremendous value – if you hold an ambiguous position, it is because you have thought about the issue and are not prepared to be swayed into false certainty. It may be that positive and negative are balanced in your ambiguity, or it may be that the balance is shifted towards positive or negative.

In our example a person holding an Ambiguous position would say “I can see the advantages of this project, but can't agree until we have deal with these risks”



Indeterminate

This occurs when you cannot figure out how you feel about something. It may be that you simply do not have enough information and therefore cannot commit to anything other than indeterminacy. Or it might be that there is too much information and you need time to assimilate it and come to a clearer position.

Often indeterminacy surfaces as a feeling of frustration coupled with a feeling that “I really should be able to be clear about this”. Again, the power is in the uncertainty. Once you have acknowledged that you are indeterminate for very good reasons, you can start to explore what those reasons are. Invariably, others will find great value in your reasons for indeterminacy.

In our example a person holding an Indeterminate position would say “At the moment I do not have enough information to make a decision”

Positive

This occurs when it is clear that the issue being discussed is in line with your aspirations and takes you in the right direction. A positive position means that you support the issue in question and would possibly like more of the same. In our example “Should we invest in this project?” the answer would be an unequivocal “Yes” and be able to explain clearly why.

Negative

This occurs when it is clear to you that the issue at hand is not helpful and might even be harmful. A negative position means you cannot support the issue and are clear why not. In this. In our example the answer would be “No because.....”

Using the Decision Compass

One of the other important parts of the research is that people go through a psychological process in decision making that takes them through the two “grey” positions. The order is Negative – Indeterminate – Ambiguous – Positive or vice versa i.e. people do not go directly from Negative to Positive.

If we think about it this is also just common sense, if we are negative about something first we must become unclear, then see some positives alongside the negatives before minimising or dealing with the negatives to become positive. It also works the other way if we are positively “gung-ho” about something perhaps doubts will creep into our mind Etc

In groups the Decision Compass model can be used to facilitate discussion about decision minimising conflict between different points of view, providing ground rules are set i.e. respecting other’s opinions.

The process is relatively simple

- Frame the question i.e. “Should we spend money on this project?”
- Establish everyone’s position. This is usually done with everyone “voting” by holding up a coloured card that represents their position at the same time to avoid the “lets go with what the boss thinks” situation that kills debate before it has even started.
- Ask everyone, particularly those with Indeterminate or Ambiguous positions to explain why they are taking these positions. This should start discussion of the substantive issues behind the decision.



Decision Compass™

- After an appropriate discussion ask people to re-vote on the question.
- If there is still a lack of consensus then a decision cannot be made at this time. Action will have to be taken to address points that have been raised e.g. finding out information to satisfy those who are still Indeterminate
- It is worth remembering a number of points during the process
 - A positive position is needed to people to buy into taking action
 - Stakeholder analysis may be important to understand which positive positions are essential to taking action
 - If an initial vote is all positive (or all negative) it is worth asking people to think about the negative (positive) aspects of the decision or what do we not know. This helps ensure all aspects of the decision are explored.

It is fine to change the question as a result of the discussion, but always make sure that a vote is taken on the revised question.

References

The Organism and the Causal Texture of the Environment – Edward Tolman and Egon Brunswik

Sociotechnical Systems – Emery and Trist

Cognitive Processes in Organisations – Karl E Weick

Ian Kendrick – Fractal Consulting

Gary Chicoine – Metabridge AB

Decision Compass is a trademark of Kubernetes Limited
