

Making Decisions like Ben Franklin

A Decision-Maker's Job Aid

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5/29/2010



This paper presents a decision-making job aid for use by decision-makers at all levels of organization and in all walks of life – public, private, professional and personal. It is based on the decision-making process Franklin described in a letter to Joseph Priestley. An example is provided as is a blank job aid for use by the reader.

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This paper presents a job aid based on Benjamin Franklin's well-known procedure for making difficult decisions. Franklin described his procedure in a letter to Joseph Priestley who was wrestling with a difficult decision and who had sought Franklin's advice.

To Joseph Priestley

London, September 19, 1772

Dear Sir,

In the Affair of so much Importance to you, wherein you ask my Advice, I cannot for want of sufficient Premises, advise you what to determine, but if you please I will tell you how.

When these difficult Cases occur, they are difficult chiefly because while we have them under Consideration all the Reasons pro and con are not present to the Mind at the same time; but sometimes one Set present themselves, and at other times another, the first being out of Sight. Hence the various Purposes or Inclinations that alternately prevail, and the Uncertainty that perplexes us.

To get over this, my Way is, to divide half a Sheet of Paper by a Line into two Columns, writing over the one Pro, and over the other Con. Then during three or four Days Consideration I put down under the different Heads short Hints of the different Motives that at different Times occur to me for or against the Measure. When I have thus got them all together in one View, I endeavour to estimate their respective Weights; and where I find two, one on each side, that seem equal, I strike them both out: If I find a Reason pro equal to some two Reasons con, I strike out the three. If I judge some two Reasons con equal to some three Reasons pro, I strike out the five; and thus proceeding I find at length where the Ballance lies; and if after a Day or two of farther Consideration nothing new that is of Importance occurs on either side, I come to a Determination accordingly.

And tho' the Weight of Reasons cannot be taken with the Precision of Algebraic Quantities, yet when each is thus considered separately and comparatively, and the whole lies before me, I think I can judge better, and am less likely to take a rash Step; and in fact I have found great Advantage from this kind of Equation, in what may be called Moral or Prudential Algebra.

Wishing sincerely that you may determine for the best, I am ever, my dear Friend,

Yours most affectionately

B. Franklin

Some aspects of Franklin's approach practically leap off the page. First, he suggests that the pros and cons should be listed as they come to mind *over a period of time* – not at a single sitting. Second, he *weights* them. Third, having assigned weights, he *ascertains the balance* and decides accordingly.

At the risk of appearing to needlessly complicate a simple, elegant and often adequate procedure, I have found considerable value in adding a wee bit of additional detail and structure to Franklin's procedure in the areas of weighting and layout. These additions yield the decision-making job aid that is the focus of this article.

The Basic Process

Franklin began his procedure with the preliminary step of dividing a sheet of paper into two columns. Let's set that aside for now and come back to it later. The steps of the basic process described in this article are listed below and explained in subsequent paragraphs. Then, after the brief explanations, an example illustrating all the steps will be provided:

1. Frame the decision as a Yes/No question
2. List the pros and cons
3. Assess their importance
4. Assess their probability
5. Weight them accordingly
6. Strike out any offsetting pros and cons
7. Review and reflect then decide

Frame the Decision

Let's begin the explanation of this step with a statement about the nature of decision-making. Although many people think of decision-making as a matter of choosing between alternatives or from among options, choosing is only the part of the story and often the least of it. *To decide is to commit to a course of action.* Consequently, it helps to frame your decision as a simple question that is answerable yes or no in relation to some course of action. For example: Should I seek new employment? Do I take the new job I've been offered? Should I shift more of my investment portfolio to higher-return, higher-risk investments? Should I tell my boss that I would like to be considered for the director slot in the new operation they're setting up? Should we take that dream vacation?

List the Pros and Cons

This is a pretty straightforward step; however, there are some nuances. First, you can certainly brainstorm or jot down an initial set of pros and cons. However, as Franklin noted, not all our thoughts occur to us at a particular point in time or even necessarily when we consciously try to list them. It is, therefore, wise to reflect on the decision facing you over time and add to (or subtract from) your lists of Pros and Cons. In short, don't rush through the decision-making process. In the "live" example we will be reviewing later, the decision-maker went through several iterations of the worksheet over a period of several days. A useful question in this regard is to ask, "When do I have to decide?" And, depending on the decision at hand, you might wish to consult with others and obtain their views.

Assess the Importance of the Pros and the Cons

How significant to you are the Pros and Cons you've listed? A simple rating scale of 1 to 10 works well here. Extremely important would rate a 10; moderately important would rate a 5 and not particularly important would rate a 1. The 10-point scale allows for finer-grained distinctions if you wish to make them.

Assess the Probability of the Pros and the Cons

Here, the issue is your certainty in relation to the Pros and the Cons. Again, a 1 to 10 scale is useful. In your estimation, how likely is it that a particular Pro or Con you've listed will indeed come to pass? In some cases, you might view the Pro or a Con as a given; there is absolute certainty and it rates a 10. In other cases, you might view the Pro or Con in question as likely but far from certain. That might rate a 5. And, in still other cases, you might view the Pro or Con in question as possible but remote, which would rate a 1.

Weight the Pros and the Cons

Franklin's letter did not specify how to weight the factors. Nor did he suggest the two previous steps. However, the assessment of importance and probability allows you to weight the Pros and Cons by multiplying the rating for Importance by the rating for Probability. Suppose, for example, that a certain Pro is extremely important (10) and is likely to be realized (5). To weight this factor, you multiply 10×5 and that yields a weighting factor of 50. Suppose that one of the Cons is of extremely high importance (10) but is a remote possibility (1). That yields a weighting factor of 10. To simplify matters, as Franklin suggested, you should strike out any offsetting pros and cons. Do so on the basis of their importance and probability ratings, not just their weights or the product of the two. After striking out offsetting pros and cons, enter at the bottom of each column the sums of the Importance and Probability ratings as well as the sums of the weighted values.

Review and Reflect

In this step your objective is to review the factors you have listed, their ratings, their weightings and take stock of what they tell you about the decision facing you. The worksheet contains several questions meant to stimulate your thinking. Two stand out from the rest: Balance and Patterns.

Balance

First, simply scan the Pros and Cons and get what most of us call "a gut feel" for the balance. Second, examine the totals of the weighting factors for the Pros and Cons and see what their numerical sums suggest. Here are some ideas in that regard:

- A roughly balanced set of Pros and Cons suggests a difficult decision, one with no clear basis for committing to or foregoing the course of action. Perhaps it needs more thought or some further reflection on the Pros and Cons or their weighting factors. Or perhaps now is not the time to decide.
- A set of Pros and Cons clearly skewed in favor of the Pros might indicate that you should go ahead with the decision. Similarly, a set that is clearly skewed in favor of the Cons might suggest that you do not proceed. But, don't surrender your judgment to the numbers. You also want to look for patterns.

Patterns

Many patterns are possible. You might have several significant Pros listed and only a few significant Cons. The probability of your Pros might be likely and your Cons might be mostly of a certain nature. The point for you as the decision maker is that in deciding to proceed or not proceed with a course of action, you are trading off not just Pros and Cons in terms of their value or importance but also in terms of their probability. So, examining the patterns in and between importance and probability is an important step. Indeed, it just might tell you in some cases why your "gut instinct" is what it is.

An Example

Now, let's look at a decision made using this modified Ben Franklin approach (refer to the completed Decision-Making Job Aid at the end of this paper). In this case, the decision maker was an independent consultant who had been interviewing for a position with a large consulting firm and was anticipating an offer. The consultant's listing of Pros and Cons is shown in the job aid along with the ratings and associated weighting factors for each Pro and Con as well as their sums. It should be noted that these

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Pros and Cons reflect that particular individual's views. Someone else might have produced a very different set of Pros and Cons and rated and weighted them differently.

Here are some of the patterns in the sample job aid:

- The raw number of Pros is greater than the number of Cons.
- In striking out the offsetting pros and cons, two pros had a total weighting of 40 and one con had a weight of 40. The con had an importance rating of 5 and a probability of 8. One of the pros with a weight of 40 had the same 5:8 ratio so it was selected for striking out, leaving the pro with a weight of 40 but having an importance rating of 4 and a probability rating of 10.
- After striking out the offsetting pros and cons, there is a noticeable difference in the total of the ratings for importance: 26 for the Pros and 20 for the Cons (which would also be the case if the ratings were added before striking out any offsetting factors). However, there is a pronounced difference between the probabilities: 37 for the Pros and 9 for the Cons. Consequently, the total of the remaining weighted factors for the Pros (239) significantly outweighs that for the remaining Cons (55).
- The major Pros are tied to pay and financial considerations.
- The major Cons are associated with time demands, moving (i.e., relocating), occasional trips back to Columbus and disrupting current life style.
- The most significant Con in terms of importance is not being able to do the work but it has a low probability.
- The basic trade-off, then, is between some highly probable, fairly important Pros against some less important and less probable Cons.

Some of the other reflection questions came into play in this example. Chief among these is the one that asks about risk. In this case, the consultant was risking his ego and professional identity. There was a chance that he might not fit in and that he might not be able to do the work. There was also some minor financial risk in the event that his employment was terminated early but that is ever present in today's world of work. Although some of the factors mattered more than others, there were no clear-cut, overriding factors and this made the decision more difficult than would otherwise have been the case. The consultant consulted his wife and involved her in the decision all along the way. She completed a worksheet of her own and it was clearly in favor of taking the position.

Initially, this was far from being a "no-brainer" decision. As Franklin wrote to Priestley, "Reasons pro and con are not present to the mind at the same time." But, after going through the process of writing them down over a period of time, weighting them, and striking out offsetting pros and cons, the balance was clearly tilted in favor of taking the position and that is what the consultant decided to do.

Lastly, behind the sample job aid you will find a blank job aid that you may reproduce and use for your own decision-making purposes.

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About the Author

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Note

Benjamin Franklin's letter to Joseph Priestley is available on the Internet at the following URL:
<http://www.procon.org/viewbackgroundresource.asp?resourceID=1474>.

Making Decisions like Ben Franklin: A Job Aid for Decision-Making by Decision Makers

Decision: Do I take the position with Consulting Firm X if it is offered?							
PROS	I	P	W	CONS	I	P	W
income = \$nn,nnn	8	10	80	it's lower level work than I've been doing	5	8	40
benefits	7	10	70	involves a relocation/move	7	10	70
work to do	5	10	50	imposes considerable time demands	8	10	80
people to interact with	7	10	70	entails occasional trips to Columbus area	5	10	50
opportunities/new problems to solve	7	7	49	disrupts our current life style	7	10	70
gets me away from two pesky people	4	10	40	might have to take guff again	5	5	25
makes things easier financially	8	10	80	I won't fit in	5	2	10
it would be nice to bag a job at my age	5	10	50	I can't do the work	10	2	20
larger urban area	7	10	70		0	0	0
good impression of the firm so far	5	8	40		0	0	0
	0	0	0		0	0	0
	0	0	0		0	0	0
Rate Importance (I) & Probability (P) on a scale from 1 to 10	26	37	239	Determine Weight (W) by multiplying I rating x P rating	20	9	55

Review & Reflection Questions:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the Pros and Cons stack up against one another? • How does the importance of the Pros compare with the importance of the Cons? How does the probability of the Pros compare with the probability of the Cons? • What is the "mix" of importance and probability? • What patterns do you see? What do they tell you? What is the overall balance of consequences? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you getting? What are you giving up? Are the trade-offs worth it? • What are you risking and are you willing to risk it? • Are there any inconsistencies to be resolved? • Which factors really matter? • Are there any overriding factors? • Who else, if anyone, should you consult? • When do you have to decide? |
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The Decision: _____							
PROS	I	P	W	CONS	I	P	W
Rate Importance (I) & Probability (P) on a scale from 1 to 10				Determine Weight (W) by multiplying I rating x P rating			

Review & Reflection Questions:

- How do the Pros and Cons stack up against one another?
- How does the importance of the Pros compare with the importance of the Cons?
- How does the probability of the Pros compare with the probability of the Cons?
- What is the “mix” of importance and probability?
- What patterns do you see? What do they tell you? What is the overall balance of consequences?

- What are you getting? What are you giving up? Are the trade-offs worth it?
- What are you risking and are you willing to risk it?
- Are there any inconsistencies to be resolved?
- Which factors really matter?
- Are there any overriding factors?
- Who else, if anyone, should you consult?
- When do you have to decide?