

Approving recommendations requires wearing the *right* job hat

"Critique, feedback, reaction to one's work or the way they have presented it, regardless of intention, is a gift."
Mark Brand¹

Introduction This material augments Chapter 4 from the book *W.I.S.E. Choices at Work*.

If you have not read the book, a W.I.S.E. choice happens when:

- The decision maker **Weighed** the downside of the choice to put the upside in perspective.
- The decision maker has been **Informed** by those who will use the choice.
- The decision maker has considered the **Sufficient** characteristics for choice to succeed.
- The decision maker identified how to make the choice **Effective**.

Overview

When we have complete control over making choices, we understand why we need to decide, what type of options make sense, and which option performs best. Many times, we must approve someone else's decision making. In these circumstances, we have less information about the decision's background and how the options stack up. This short mini-chapter will help you understand how to make W.I.S.E. Choices even when you have not done the evaluation of options.

I am writing this from the perspective of approving recommendations. At the end, I will put some guidance in for people who have to make recommendations.

¹ Canadian chef

The job roles in making decisions

"Nothing will work unless you do."
Maya Angelou²

The jobs for making an effective decision

Regardless of the type of decision, deliberate decision making requires these major steps:

1. **Activate System 2** to engage deliberate decision-making. (We must turn off automatic thinking.)
2. **Clarify decision purpose** based on the need or want to do something and create a decision statement. (This provides a logical starting point.)
3. **Assess options** using meaningful (and measurable) criteria. (Use must-have characteristics to weed out flawed options and want-to-have characteristics to quantify top performers for additional consideration.)
4. **Prepare for the downside** by identifying risks and developing actions to prevent or recover. (Since NO option is perfect, we must know what could go wrong and what we can do about it.)
5. **Make the W.I.S.E. choice**, including the required implementation actions. (This leverages the results of deliberate decision-making.)
6. **Document rationale** for decision. (This provides a record for future review.)
7. **Assess decision-making process** to develop skill and build a knowledge base. (The results of effective System 2 decision-making become available for System 1 to use.)

Each step requires work to complete. When we think of work, we often talk about doing a job. This job framework will help explain how we make decisions.

The (job) hats of decision making

I will use the metaphor of the job hat to describe the work of making a decision. At the risk of over-simplification, based on the seven steps above, decision making requires four job hats:

1. **Initiator** covers Steps 1-2.
2. **Evaluator** covers Steps 3-4.
3. **Decision Maker** covers Steps 4-6.
4. **Process Reviewer** covers Step 7.

² American poet

For many decisions, one person, or more likely, a team, wears all these job hats. Of course, more than one person can wear the same hat. When one person or team performs all the jobs to make a decision, then the process does not require any coordination.

When decision jobs move beyond one person or team, then who does what needs clarification. For many non-routine and semi-routine decisions, a leader or even a leadership team initiates the decision. They then commission a person or more typically a team to do the evaluation. The person or team wears the Evaluator hat to assess the options and examine the downside of potential options. Typically, the Initiator(s) will wear the Decision Maker hat. To 'make' the decision, they approve the recommendation. I will use Approver for the title of this job.

All participants should put on the Process Reviewer hat to conduct their assessment of the decision-making process.

The context of approvers

"For me context is the key - from that comes the understanding of everything."
Kenneth Noland³

Introduction

If you provide approval for the recommendations of others, then you wear the decision maker's hat. Whether you wear other hats determines how you will engage with the recommenders. For this material, I will assume you have the lead role in the approval process, either doing it alone or as the leader of the approval team. If you are a member of the approval team, I will provide you with ideas on how to influence the team leader later in this document.

Who initiated the decision?

As an approver, you receive recommendations in two ways:

1. You expected the recommendation because you commissioned someone to conduct the evaluation.
2. You have the authority to approve recommendations that someone brings to you.

In the first case, since you started the evaluation, you have some idea of what to expect. I will cover this situation next. In the second case, you typically have no idea of what to expect. I will cover this situation later.

How to commission evaluators

Since you have determined the purpose of the decision, develop a first draft of the decision statement. If you lead a team of approvers, then get them on board with your starting point. (You don't want them changing the decision statement when the recommendation arrives!) Review the decision statement with the person or team that will evaluate options and develop the recommendation. Answer any questions they have, so they look at the right type and number of options. Also, if you have any Must-have or Want-to-have characteristics, let them know these as well.

Establish your expectations for

- what process you want them to use,
- what progress reports you require, if any, and
- the recommendation format and process you require.

I suggest you review their Must-have and Want-to-have characteristics along with the measures to ensure they have a complete and valid set. Ideally, do this before they evaluate options. For the recommendation

³ American Artist

format, I have seen presentations with or without pre-read and reports only. Use what works for you.

Be sure to tell the evaluation team to keep in deliberate decision-making mode and out of automatic. Also, establish the rules of engagement for other people on the approval team. The evaluators should not need micro-managing.

How NOT to commission an evaluation team

I honestly wish I did not have to write this. But I must because I have run into these situations too many times.

DO NOT initiate anyone to develop a *recommendation* if:

- You already have a favorite alternative that you want. Just pick it. You can commission a team to look at the downside only if you have an open mind to change your choice if the downside outweighs any upside.
- You want to get into the evaluation details and debate the characteristic weights and performance scores. You can commission a team to serve as information gatherers. For the record, this sub-optimizes the process and demoralizes the gatherers.

How to review a recommendation that you did commission

Check their approach first to ensure they maintained as much objectivity as possible. Things to look for:

- Have they followed the deliberate decision-making process? If not, how did they conduct the evaluation?
- Can they articulate why their recommendation provides upside with acceptable downside?
- Do you understand the downside? How will they manage the downside?

Avoid diving into the details of their evaluation. You can check some areas to test your understanding and theirs. Don't go cell by cell. Approve or reject the recommendation as quickly as you can. Let them know when you will do this. Regardless of your decision, give feedback to the recommenders on their process.

How to review a recommendation that you DID NOT commission AND you have set expectations

If you regularly approve recommendations, then you can brief people about what you expect to see in a recommendation. Typically, this includes:

- A brief explanation of the purpose of the recommendation.
- A decision statement that shows the type of options they evaluated.
- A list of the Must-have and Want-to-have characteristics.
- A summation of how the recommended option performs (the upside) along with information on the downside.
- A plan to minimize the downside, if necessary.

If the recommenders have this framework, then you can use the process from the prior section.

How to review a recommendation that you DID NOT commission and the recommenders do not know your expectations

When the recommenders don't know your expectations, then you must ask questions to understand their thinking. These include:

- What need does this recommendation address? Why are they recommending something?
- What type of options did they consider? Why?
- How did they evaluate the options? What key factors influenced their evaluation? (You are looking to see what Must-haves and Want-to-haves they considered.)
- Why is their recommendation the one to approve? (You are looking for what the upside of the choice is.)
- What downside does their recommendation have? How can it be minimized and managed?

You can also use relevant 5-Minute questions from the "W.I.S.E. Choices at Work" book. If the recommenders provide appropriate answers, then you can approve their recommendation. If they don't, then you can direct them to what they need to do to put the recommendation in a better framework.

How to be a member of an approving team

If you are a member of an approval team, you face two types of situations:

1. The leader of the team uses and supports the deliberate decision-making process.
2. The leader of the team does not use the deliberate decision-making process.

If you have scenario 1, then you just provide support in asking process-oriented questions required by the situation, i.e., a commissioned or non-commissioned recommendation.

If you have scenario 2, then you will need to use some questions from the section on reviewing a non-commissioned recommendation that does not have any structure. Essentially, you will ask questions to gather the relevant information. This may require making the recommender's thinking visible by using flip charts.

The context of recommenders

*"If you're presenting yourself with confidence,
you can pull off pretty much anything."
Katy Perry⁴*

Introduction

Whether or not you like Katy Perry or her music, her advice in the quote above can help you make a strong recommendation. Well, that and bit of advanced planning and thinking.

What scenario do you face?

As a recommender, you face two types of situations:

1. The approver or team of approvers use and support the deliberate decision-making process.
2. The approver or team of approvers do not use the deliberate decision-making process.

If you have scenario 1, then you just provide support in asking process-oriented questions required by the situation, i.e., a commissioned or non-commissioned recommendation.

If you have scenario 2, then you will need to show the approvers that you have done your homework. If the approvers do not know why you have a recommendation to make, then you must present the purpose of the decision before you announce your recommendation. In this case, allow time to answer questions about the need for your recommendation.

⁴ American Musician