

How to separate skill from luck when making decisions

"I think we consider too much the good luck of the early bird and not enough the bad luck of the early worm."

Franklin D. Roosevelt¹

Introduction

This document provides the bonus material for Chapter 8 of the book *W.I.S.E. Choices at Work*. It includes additional ideas for conducting effective process oriented After Action Reviews (AARs).

Why you need to separate skill from luck

When something turns out well, we credit skill. When something does not turn out well, we blame luck. The table below shows how skill and luck intertwine. A desirable decision outcome can happen regardless of the strength of process usage. Using the techniques in this bonus material will allow you to untangle them and learn whether your process worked and what to improve the next time.

Strength of Process Usage	Decision Outcome	Decision-Making Process "Conclusion"
High	Desirable	Great! We did a super job of deciding. We should make all decisions this way.
	Undesirable	Awful. We should <u>never</u> use this process again.
Low or non-existent	Desirable	Great! We did a super job of deciding. Do you really think that putting all the options on a slip of paper and pulling one out of a hat is a good method?
	Undesirable	It was bad luck. We will do better next time.

What you can expect from using this material

These bonus materials will provide you with reliable techniques to conduct effective AARs for decision making. This starts with documenting the information from the 5-Minute Question and discussion and includes both 1-Hour sessions.

How to use this document

Use the Score sheet to document your answers to the 5-Minute question and tally your composite score. Remember to gather all meeting documentation regardless of how it looks. This can include photos of flip charts or whiteboards.

If you scored less than 5 on your composite score, then proceed to the 1-Hour Process Improvement meeting. The meeting process and agenda appear below.

¹ 32nd President of the U.S.

If you scored 5 or more on your composite score, then you have finished, unless you feel the need to discuss more.

If the organization rates the decision outcome as undesirable, then you will need to conduct either a 1-Hour or 1 Day AAR session. Typically, it would be longer than 1-Hour. I recommend using a facilitator for these sessions. The meeting process and agenda appear here.

Note: This document follows the information in the *eBook for planning and executing meetings to make W.I.S.E. Choices*. I have modified some aspects to meet the specialized needs of the AAR and process improvement meetings.

Score sheet for the answers to the 5-Minute Question: "What made the choice W.I.S.E.?"

Deliberate Decision-Making Step^a	Used	Score^b	Not used^c	Reason for not using a step or improvement ideas for next time
1. Clarify decision purpose and create a clear decision statement.				
2. Assess options using meaningful criteria including Must-have and Want-to-have characteristics.				
3. Prepare for the downside using the Pre-Mortem process.				
4. Make the W.I.S.E. choice including the implementation actions.				
5. Document rationale for the decision.				
6. Assess decision-making process ^d				
Total				
Composite score (divide Total by 6)				If you scored 5 or more on your composite score, then you have completed the process. If less, then continue to process improvement.

^a Step 1 to Activate System 2's Deliberate Thinking does not apply because by doing the other steps it means you did use deliberate decision making.

^b Use a 1-10 scale. Suggested scoring scales are on the following page. Some scoring doesn't use all 10 numbers. When in doubt, round down.

^c Your reason for not using a process step should be consistent with process, e.g., if you had a true dilemma, then you would not have a decision statement. Having no time to take a step should not serve as a valid reason except in rare circumstances that have iron-clad documentation.

^d You better check that you have used this step! 😊

1. Clarify decision purpose and create a clear decision statement.

Rating	Performance Description
1	We had one, but not written.

5	We had a written one.
10	We had a written one ratified with all stakeholders.

- Assess options using meaningful criteria including Must-have and Want-to-have characteristics.

Rating	Performance Description
1	We used intuitive criteria and voted on the option.
3	We used a subjective scoring system, e.g., 1-10 with 10 being the best.
5	We had data for the Must-have criteria and for the Want-to-have criteria we used a subjective scoring system, e.g., 1-10 with 10 being the best.
7	We had data for the Must-have criteria and for the Want-to-have criteria we used a calibrated scoring system that allowed agreement on performance levels and enabled differentiation between options
10	We had data for all the Must-have and Want-to-have characteristics using a written evaluation matrix.

- Prepare for the downside using the Pre-Mortem process.

Rating	Performance Description
1	We did not have time to look at the downside.
3	We identified the downside and factored it into the decision.
5	We conducted a Pre-Mortem to understand the downside failure points.
7	We conducted a Pre-Mortem to understand the downside failure points and identified potential actions to mitigate the impact.
10	We conducted a Pre-Mortem to understand the downside failure points and identified potential actions to mitigate the impact. We also identified preventive actions to take to prevent some potential failures.

- Make the W.I.S.E. choice including the implementation actions.

Rating	Performance Description
1	We verbally agreed to the decision.
5	We have an evaluation matrix that shows the winning choice.
10	We have the evaluation matrix and the Pre-Mortem to show the choice is W.I.S.E.

5. Document rationale for the decision.

Rating	Performance Description
1	We can talk people through the rationale.
5	We have the evaluation matrix and the Pre-Mortem to show the choice is W.I.S.E.
10	We have a written rationale that includes the implementation plan along with the recovery plan. We also have the evaluation matrix as back up.

6. Assess decision-making process

Rating	Performance Description
1	We did not do it.
5	We did a verbal assessment.
10	We have the score sheet completed.

Make your AAR and process improvement meetings work

*"Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything."
John Kenneth Galbraith²*

Introduction

John Kenneth Galbraith had good reasons for saying what he did. Nevertheless, we must have meetings to conduct AARs and decision-making process improvement meetings generate success. Therefore, we need to make them productive. Some basic process thinking helps to create an effective meeting. Don't worry, even if you hate processes, I think these basics will help. Here are my tips for preparing for effective decision process review meetings.

A quick definition

A process is a set of steps to convert input into an output. This means we must identify the input for the meeting, the desired output of the meeting, and, of course, the steps. I will start with meeting inputs and outputs.

Required decision process review meeting input

Only hold the sessions in this document when you have the required starting point. These inputs come from the score sheet for the 5-Minute Question along with all supporting decision documentation. Until you have the right input in writing, do not plan any deliberate decision-making sessions. I have identified the inputs for each type of meeting outline in the book.

You will also need to prepare the participants to engage productively in the session. For me, this means providing pre-reads and, at times, pre-work. As a bare minimum, they must know the agenda and why they

² American Economist

must attend. I will provide ideas for creating meaningful pre-read and pre-work.

If participants can't complete pre-work prior to the session, then it will often take multiple sessions to produce the expected output.

Expected output

Each session format has a clearly defined goal. You should let people know this. Typically, this will appear on the agenda.

The general process steps for a successful meeting

A general meeting flow has these steps:

- Prepare participants for effective engagement. The minimum preparation is having an agenda, but often includes pre-read and pre-work. I have outlined what this looks like for every decision meeting.
- Kick off meeting with an Agenda review/ratification along with a reminder of the meeting process and Ground Rules. **Note:** This means you must have an agenda for every meeting. (A suggested list of Ground Rules appears at the end of this document.)
- Cover all agenda topics.
- Review action items with what, who, and when.
- Conduct a Plus/Delta on the meeting and meeting process.

Note: The meeting 'starts' with preparation, NOT kicking off the meeting.

Supporting roles for meetings

I recommend using a facilitator when you:

- Have important input to provide to the discussion.
- Suspect people will not follow the meeting rules.
- Worry that people might stray into placing blame rather than focusing on process evaluation.
- Have seven or more people attending the meeting.

I also suggest having someone serve as a note taker or alternatively, you can "invite" a voice-to-text bot from any of the various meeting platforms.

Supporting Environment and Elements

Henri Lipmanowicz and Keith McCandless wrote an interesting book entitled *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures*³ that outlines many suggestions for creating effective meetings. One framework they offer covers the idea of macro- and microstructures along with elements. Macrostructures cover the location of the meeting, e.g., an office versus hotel. Microstructures include the type of room the meeting uses, e.g., a boardroom versus a classroom. Meeting elements include seating arrangement and support materials like easels, whiteboards, post-it

³ <https://www.liberatingstructures.com/>

notes and markers. I have incorporated some of these ideas into all the agendas. I encourage you to develop your list of “must haves” for your meetings.

.1-Hour Process Improvement Session

Required input:	The score sheet from the 5-Minute Question assessment session and all available decision-making meeting documentation.
Expected output	Documentation for how to improve application of the deliberate decision-making steps to future decisions and if necessary, what caused the decision makers to not use any of the deliberate decision-making steps.
Things to consider	This meeting requires the right mindset, namely looking for improvement ideas, NOT complaining about what did not happen. Use the spirit of Plus/Delta: what worked (and should be repeated) and what can be improved for the next time. Keep the focus on the decision-making process. The meeting will produce more value when the participants have access to as much information as possible. When a decision has limited documentation on process usage and strength, the results will have more hypothetical rather than fact-based improvement suggestions.
Pre-Work	Share the Agenda and Ground Rules. Provide the score sheet from the 5-Minute Question assessment session and all available documentation from the decision-making meetings.

Sample Agenda

Topic	Who	Timing	Comments
Ratify the Agenda and Ground Rules	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	5 minutes	If the group works on decisions frequently, then this activity will take less time. But do not skip even a fast review to remind people of 'the rules.'
Review the high-scoring deliberate decision-making steps to understand how they helped the decision process and why they worked. Document to reinforce what to do in future decisions.	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	20 minutes	Times can be adjusted depending on need.
Look at the low-scoring deliberate decision-making steps and identify how to improve their use and effectiveness in future decisions.	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	25 minutes	If you need more time then schedule a second meeting to ensure all improvement opportunities are captured.
Review and Document the Action Items to identify who does what by when	All with meeting leader or facilitator capturing input for all to see.	5 minutes	Provided you or the note taker have been documenting throughout the meeting, then this will go quickly.
Plus/Delta for the meeting to capture what worked and what could be changed.	All with meeting leader or facilitator capturing input for all to see.	5 minutes	Don't skip this step because it provides an opportunity for continuous improvement and maintaining what works.

After Action Review (AAR) 1-Hour or 1-Day

Required input:	The score sheet from the 5-Minute Question assessment session, all available decision-making meeting documentation, and the results of the option's actual performance.
Expected output	Recommendations for improving future decisions and preventing repeated mistakes.
Things to consider	<p>You should only use this approach when you have documented information on the deliberate decision-making process usage and strength.</p> <p>This meeting has lots of overlap with the process improvement meeting. The outcome of the option's performance adds more information to assess. Generally, an organization requests this investigation when the chosen option produces an undesirable result. They tend to look for placing blame on someone. This mindset will undermine the investigation. Therefore, this meeting requires the right mindset, namely looking for improvement ideas NOT placing blame. The meeting will produce more value when the participants have access to as much information as possible.</p> <p>A traditional After-Action Review typically looks to answer four questions.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did we expect to happen? 2. What actually happened? 3. What went well and why? 4. What can we improve and how? <p>These questions also work for evaluating the use of the decision-making process. The advantage to doing this comes from understanding how the process helped or hindered the selection of the option. For example, evaluating the option's predicted performance from the evaluation matrix versus actual performance can provide valuable insights. If a gap exists, identify what caused it.</p> <p>The decision to take one hour or one day depends on how much available information the participants have to review. In some cases, it may make sense to split the session into two parts to allow for additional data collection and verification.</p>
Pre-Work	<p>Share the Agenda and Ground Rules.</p> <p>Provide the score sheet from the 5-Minute Question assessment session, all available documentation from the decision-making meetings along with actual performance of the selected option.</p>

Sample Agenda

Topic	Who	Timing	Comments
Ratify the Agenda and Ground Rules	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	5 minutes	If the group works on decisions frequently, then this activity will take less time. But do not skip even a fast review to remind people of 'the rules.'
Planned vs. actual option performance gap assessment to identify what went well and why, and what can be improved and how.	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	20 minutes up to several hours	You can consider using sub-groups to generate more input and ensure engagement. This will require allowing time to 'compare notes,' and allow consolidation of information.
Planned vs. actual deliberate decision-making process usage gap assessment to identify what went well and why, and what can be improved and how.	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	20 minutes up to several hours	You can consider using sub-groups to generate more input and ensure engagement. This will require allowing time to 'compare notes,' and allow consolidation of information.
What other insights should we discuss?	All led by the meeting leader or facilitator.	5 minutes or longer for a 1-Day session	
Review and Document the Action Items to identify who does what by when	All with meeting leader or facilitator capturing input for all to see.	5 minutes	<p>Provided you or the note taker have been documenting throughout the meeting, then this will go quickly.</p> <p>If the group makes a W.I.S.E. Choice, then have an action item to document the rationale.</p>
Plus/Delta for the meeting to capture what worked and what could be changed.	All with meeting leader or facilitator capturing input for all to see.	5 minutes	Don't skip this step because it provides an opportunity for continuous improvement and maintaining what works.

Suggested Ground Rules

The list below outlines suggested ground rules.

- Have an agenda for all meetings. No agenda, no meeting.
- Understand that NO choice is perfect, and every option has a downside.
- For AAR sessions, focus on evaluating the decision-making process NOT placing blame.
- Be open-minded.
- Avoid defensiveness.
- We will use a consistent and active approach to gauge consensus level. See Five Finger Consensus Check below as our way to accomplish this.
- Address technical conflict with appropriate people focusing on the issue, not the people. We will use five-finger consensus. (See method below.)
- Address interpersonal conflict privately. No triangulation. Work with the person directly.
- Use a Parking Lot for off-topic issues. Review the Parking Lot regularly.
- Avoid truth by repetition. If you feel we have not captured your thought, ask to place it in the Parking Lot.
- Document agreements. Including pros and cons as appropriate.
- Capture action items with who, what, and when. Review before concluding the meeting.
- All meetings will end with a Plus/Delta Assessment—what worked and what can be improved.

The Five-Finger Consensus approach allows a quick assessment to gauge consensus level.

The process has one step. Everyone provides their support level using the following finger number scale:

- 5 fingers mean total support. (No further discussion needed.)
- 4 fingers mean support with some minor reservations we don't need to discuss now. (Be sure to capture the concern to work on at the right future time.)
- 3 fingers mean I am ambivalent and see both sides. Will go with the group's choice.
- 2 fingers mean I object and want to discuss now.
- 1 finger (index!) means stop; I am against this decision.

NOTE: One or two fingers require discussion and reassessment!

*Additional and very important note: People who are ambivalent as a 'three' must Live with the Decision. They do not get to discuss their ambivalence.