

INSIGHT Module: Strategies to Avoid Locking-In Decisions Prematurely¹

When presented with a problem, our cognitive heuristics and our capacity for logical reasoning play critical roles in the natural human quest to find a resolution that we can assert with plausible confidence to be our best available option. We can call this option the *dominant or superior option* in any given context. In decision making we move, more or less quickly, through a process that includes sorting through options. We discard the implausible ones, identify one or more promising options, evaluate it or them on the basis of our decision-critical criteria,² and select the option we come to judge to be superior.³

Most importantly, our judgment coalesces around a dominant option, psychologically we lock-in to that choice, and by doing so we decide to embrace that resolution to the problem and we move forward with sustained confidence in that choice. We call this natural human psychological process "Dominance Structuring" because at the end of the process the choice we have embraced now dominates in our minds over other possible options.

Psychological research by Henry Montgomery and others is consistent with the idea that both argument making and cognitive heuristics are central factors in our search for a dominant option—to move us from cognition to action. In times of uncertainty, when action is needed, dominance structuring is a necessary strategy for deciding between alternatives and swinging into action. Montgomery describes the human search for a single dominant option among our many possible choices in any given context as having four phases.⁴ As a scientist, Montgomery is suggesting that these are the steps we humans would naturally follow. He is not saying, however, that these steps are the best approach to good decision making. In fact, they are not.

1. **Pre-editing**
 - **We define the problem in some manner or other.**
 - **We identify and list decision-critical factors.**
2. **Identifying a promising option.**
 - **We search until we find an option that is good enough.**
3. **Testing the promising option against others.**
 - **We ask ourselves if that option is no worse than any other.**
4. **Structuring the dominance of the "to be chosen" option**
 - **We marshal our facts and reasons to support the option we are preparing to choose.**
 - **In so doing we risk renegotiating the factors, redefining the problem, exaggerating the virtues of our preferred option, or magnifying the defects of all other possible options.**

Our natural tendency toward dominance structuring offers strong advantages to our species. We do, in fact, take action. We are not frozen in perpetual analysis and re-evaluation. We sustain our efforts and persist with confidence.

But there are disadvantages, particularly if we lock-in prematurely. For example, we tend not to re-examine our assumptions or question our prior decision even when we should. And we tend to dismiss the counter-evidence unless it is forceful not only in its content but in its psychological impact or if we begin to see the potential for severely adverse consequences.

The challenge is always, how to avoid locking-in prematurely. Here are some strategies targeting each stage of the search for dominance.

Strategies to Avoid Locking-In Decisions Prematurely

- First of all, be sure you have identified the problem correctly. That is, found the real problem, and not something else.
- Specify which factors and priorities are most critical. Be inclusive, do not reduce the decision to only one important thing.
- Gather relevant information from multiple reliable sources.
- Identify and clearly differentiate viable options.
- Be very clear about why each option is in or out.
- Evaluate all viable options with disciplined impartiality. Do not stop with the first one that is merely “good enough.”
- Listen to both sides first—hear the pros and cons before evaluating them.
- If new critical factors or priorities emerge add those to the list.
- Evaluate options in terms of all the critical factors and priorities, not just a subset.
- Treat all the viable options equally—don’t focus only on the advantages of the one you like and only on the flaws of the ones you don’t like.
- Have the courage to follow the reasons and evidence wherever they lead and to ask all the hard questions before making a final decision.
- Seek advice from independent, informed, and unbiased sources
- Decide when it is time to decide, and then make the decision in a timely way.
- Check to see that the process you used has been reflective, complete, and fair-minded.
- Check to see that the outcomes anticipated are the outcomes being attained. If not, make mid-course corrections to get back on track.
- Have the maturity of judgment to stick with a decision if it is well made, but to change direction if there is good reason to reconsider and revise the decision.

Table derived from Chapter 3, Facione & Gittens, *Think Critically*, 2016, Pearson Education: Englewood Cliffs, NJ. USA.

Notes:

¹ These training modules are designed to assist in the training of personnel and agency leaders responsible for high stakes decision making in all types of organizations. This module, Strategies to Avoid Locking-In Decisions Prematurely, was created by Dr. Peter Facione, Measured Reasons LLC. Dr. Facione is a consultant expert in the training and measurement of critical thinking, higher order reasoning skills and mindset attributes. These modules are distributed by Insight Assessment to assist clients with efforts to develop programs for improving reasoning and decision skills and mindset.

² “Decision-critical criteria” is a short phrase that refers to those criteria the decision-maker deems to be important and relevant for the purpose of evaluating options. Two people working together to make a decision often agree to use the same decision-critical criteria because they both think that the same things are important and relevant when evaluating options. That said, they may not agree on the relative priority or importance of their various criteria. “Cost of production and durability are both important. But which is the most important when selecting materials?”

³ Henry Montgomery, “From cognition to action: the search for dominance in decision making,” *Process and structure in human decision making*, Eds. Henry Montgomery and Ola Svenson (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), 23–49.

⁴ Henry Montgomery, “From cognition to action: the search for dominance in decision making,” *Process and structure in human decision making*, Eds. Henry Montgomery and Ola Svenson (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1989), 24.

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