DECISION-MAKING TOOLS

Like so many things, smart decision-making can benefit from the addition of structure, focus, and a bit of metaphor. While imperfect in their own ways, the kinds of tools that support this mental corralling can help tremendously in quieting the chaos, surveying the available options, and then collecting and evaluating the information you need to choose the best course of action. The always-informative Mind Tools shares eight of the most popular and reliable tools for decision making.

1. **Pareto Analysis**
   Often better known as "The 80/20 Rule," Pareto helps you locate where you can derive the greatest benefit by expending the least relative effort (or cost or resources or what have you). In the go-go dotcom days, the bizdev guys used to call this "low-hanging fruit." *Ew*. (Seriously, though, once you learn about the 80/20 rule, you start seeing instances of it everywhere).

2. **Paired Comparison**
   Compose a table that pits each option directly against each other option, *mano a mano*, cage-match-style, and weighting each for relative importance. It's a fast and bloodless way to plow through what would otherwise be a huge mess to evaluate.

3. **Grid Analysis**
   Evaluate a larger set of options based on numerous criteria, then weight the importance of each criterion to derive the best choice. Given the complexity and arithmetic required, this one really benefits from using good old Excel.

4. **Decision Trees**
   I've never personally used this, but it looks kind of promising. Basically you build a set of "what-ifs" based on a tree of possible options, assigning the estimated value, cost, or savings associated with each choice.

5. **PMI**
   One of my favorites that I actually use quite a lot. List all the pluses, minuses, and implications behind any decision (I've also seen this "I" column referred to *interesting* or *intriguing* data points). Then assign a + or - numerical value to each based on the positive or negative impact. Tally up the columns, and your better option emerges. Takes the emotion and guesswork out of complex decisions, with the side benefit of forcing a brain dump. By the way, although you can totally do this in Excel (or on paper), I made a template for Omni-Outliner that works like a champ for more lengthy or detailed option sets.

6. **Force Field**
   I've never completely gotten this one, but I know some folks swear by it. You identify all the forces for and against a theoretical change, weighted for amount of force exerted by each "side." I suppose I could see this being useful for touchy political decisions or any time a well-established more is going to be challenged. Might help in mitigating risk and knowing where best to allocate your resources and influence.

7. **Six Thinking Hats**
   Recently added de Bono's book on this subject to the left rail (See it? Over there by all my hippie meditation books?). It's a method for seeing an issue from all perspectives by forcing yourself (or more often your team) to—one at a time—adopt different "thinking hats" that reflect opposing and orthogonal points of view (analytical, positive, negative, creative, etc.). I'd be curious to hear how this has worked for folks in real-world projects. Seems like it could get tedious in the wrong hands.

8. **Cost/Benefit** - This is an evergreen you've probably used a dozen or more times; estimate the costs and the benefits and decide if the delta is worth the hassle. As ever, be sure to account for *all* the costs of a change, including the meta stuff.