

COMMENTS

Positive Uncertainty: A New Decision-Making Framework for Counseling

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Changing one's mind will be an essential decision-making skill in the future. Keeping the mind open will be another. Positive uncertainty helps clients deal with ambiguity, accept inconsistency, and utilize the intuitive side of choosing.

Over 25 years ago the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* published an article of mine entitled "Decision Making: A Conceptual Frame of Reference for Counseling" (Gelatt, 1962). In the article I presented a totally rational approach to making decisions. The approach required decision makers to define their objectives clearly, analyze information rationally, predict consequences, and be consistent. A compatible frame of reference for counseling was then constructed.

Now I have changed my mind about decision making. In my opinion, what used to be the way to decide, no longer is. Decision making is not what it used to be, or at least the way we view decision making is not. This means that the old counseling frame of reference ought not be what it was. Modern counselors, like modern physicists, are looking at a different world. Today physicists have had to give up their previous ideas about the order of the universe. The new order, the basis of the new physics, is not to be found in the particles of matter. Rather, it is found in the minds of physicists. What one observes appears to depend on what one chooses to observe. The order of the universe may be the order of our minds, and the mind is where decision making occurs.

Quantum physics is showing that there is no such thing as a physical world "out there" (Gleick, 1987; Wolf, 1981). There is no such thing as objectivity. Everything is interconnected to everything else in an unbroken wholeness, and the mind is the connector. But can there be a new science of this new order? Can psychologists have a new psychology of counseling and decision making? Counselors may have to give up some previous ideas about order in decision making—or at least be willing to take on a new perspective. Albert Einstein once said: "Creating a new theory is not like destroying an old barn and erecting a skyscraper in its place. It is rather like climbing a mountain, gaining new and wider views, discovering unexpected connections between our starting point and its rich environment" (Zukau, 1979, p. 19).

It is in this context that I write about a new strategy for making decisions and a new framework for counseling. The new view of the decision-making world does not mean de-

stroying the old approach and erecting a completely new one. It means discovering new connections between the old view and new insights. There is one more caveat before I begin. It is said that "the master's house will never be rebuilt by the master's tools." It may be impossible to construct a new counseling framework if psychologists insist on using only the tools of the old model.

A quarter century ago the past was known, the future was predictable, and the present was changing at a pace that was comprehensible. The rational, objective decision-making frame of reference for counseling was appropriate then. Today the past is not always what it was thought to be, the future is no longer predictable, and the present is changing as never before. In fact, today even the status quo is in a state of flux. If everything is changing, ought not the strategy for decision making and the counseling frame of reference be changing? I believe the answer is yes.

Therefore, I am now proposing a new decision strategy called *positive uncertainty*. What is appropriate now is a decision and counseling framework that helps clients deal with change and ambiguity, accept uncertainty and inconsistency, and utilize the nonrational and intuitive side of thinking and choosing. The new strategy promotes positive attitudes and paradoxical methods in the presence of increasing uncertainty.

This is not to say that classical decision theory or rational decision strategies of 25 years ago, including my own, were wrong. They are simply no longer sufficient for today's complex, changing world. Rather, this is to say that theories can change and even theorists can change their minds. Changing one's mind will be an essential skill in the future.

The old and new decision making is like the old and new science. The past laws of science and a knowledge of the present gave persons an ability to predict the future. It showed an external world that existed apart from the mind. It had scientific objectivity. The old decision strategy was appropriate for the linear, objective, scientific methods of the past. The old decision dogma relied on the left brain, pursued certainty, and asked for consistency.

The new science has shown that in some cases it is not possible, even in principle, to know enough about the present

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to make a complete prediction about the future. Science learned that it is not possible to observe something without changing it. Observers cannot eliminate themselves from the picture. Reality is a subjective creation in a personal frame of reference. The new decision strategy uses the whole brain, accepts uncertainty, and asks for flexibility. The new decision approach is appropriate for the quantum scientific methods of the future.

Positive uncertainty is not the first or only attempt to break away from the scientific, rational model of decision making in counseling. For example: Janis and Mann's (1977) conflict-theory model emphasizes the client's belief system regarding risk taking and proposes emotional role playing and outcome psychodrama as two counseling techniques; Krumboltz (1983), in discussing unfounded, troublesome, and deceptive beliefs, said in his preface, "One outcome of my study was the decision that it is irrational to distinguish between rational and irrational decisions" (p. ix). He suggested that the extent to which a given choice is rational or irrational depends on the point of view, including the beliefs and private rules, of the person judging it. Harman (1981) said that societies have one major decision-making problem: "poor choosing based on a wrong belief system" (p. 5). From 14 propositions of an emerging science of human consciousness, Harman concluded that "a rationale for good choosing" (p. 5) is choosing with the creative-intuitive mind.

Other decision theorists have continued to study the human problem of dealing with uncertainty. Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky (1982), in their review of the influence of cognitive psychology on judgment research, discussed such topics as the role of subjective probability, the psychology of prediction, popular induction, the illusion of control, and improper linear models among others. Their goal, however, was to find ways to help clients become more rational.

Modern information society concepts and techniques were integrated into human decision making by Heppner and Krauskopf (1987). They discussed an information processing approach and described personal problem solving more as a complex, intermittent, and highly interactive process of coping than as a logical decision-making process: "We conceptualize real-life problem solving as involving the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious processes, as well as cognitive, affective and behavioral processes" (p. 376).

Heppner and Krauskopf (1987) then related this conceptualization to the complexities of the various characteristics of different problems and to the variety of personality differences among individuals. If one adds the systems view that everything is connected to everything else, one can understand why Ackoff (1974) called human problem solving "mess management" (p. 21) or why March (1975) introduced "The Technology of Foolishness" (p. 424) as a decision-making approach to balance the technology of reason.

The business literature also has recently acknowledged and promoted nonrational, intuitive decision making for managers. A change in attitude has occurred over the last 10 years as a nonrational deciding process in business has been described first as "muddling through" (Golde, 1976) and now as "creativity in business" (Ray & Myers, 1986).

Heppner and Krauskopf (1987) noted that a lot of research has already examined how people make decisions, and they called the conclusions pessimistic: "People are often quite unsystematic and irrational" (p. 376). My point in reviewing this literature is to suggest that the time may be right for a new approach to decision-making counseling. Should counselors help clients be more systematic and rational in decision making or help them be better at unsystematic, nonrational choosing? Or should they do both? Scientists and businesspersons are seeing their world differently. Can counselors?

The analogy of old and new science with old and new decision making is a good one because uncertainty is at the heart of the new science and also of the new decision making. However, the new does not make the old obsolete. The new discoveries have shown the limits of previous theories and knowledge. The old way of looking at things is no longer comprehensive enough. Counselors need a broader view of decision making that utilizes the decision maker's nonobjective role and incorporates the constant presence of uncertainty. Counseling can then help clients do more than seek certainty and avoid subjectivity.

With the positive uncertainty techniques, I am not actually proposing a new decision strategy but proposing to make commonly practiced strategy legitimate and part of a counselor's repertoire. Decision making is a nonsequential, non-systematic, non-scientific human process. So is positive uncertainty. Three basic positive uncertainty decision guidelines are ambiguous and paradoxical. So is life in the information society. The three guidelines (not rules or laws) come from my new definition of decision making: Decision making is the process of arranging and rearranging information into a choice or action. There are three parts to the definition: (a) information, (b) the process of arranging and rearranging, and (c) a choice of action. All three of these parts have changed.

Today, clearly the amount and availability of information has changed. The process part of arranging and rearranging, which happens in the decision maker's mind, is still the crucial part for counselors. But now there is new knowledge about this processing in the mind from computer technology, artificial intelligence, brain research, and the power of mind in self-healing and personal growth. Psychologists know more about rational thinking, but they also know more about the importance of intuitive thought. The processing skills of decision-making clients (and counselors) need to come from both sides of the brain; they need to be ambidextrous and multifaceted.

The third part of the definition, choice, also requires a change. Helping someone decide how to decide must move from promoting only rational, linear, systematic strategies to recommending, even teaching, intuitive, situational, and sometimes inconsistent methods for solving personal problems or making decisions.

Does it seem paradoxical to be positive (comfortable and confident) in the face of uncertainty (ambiguity and doubt)? Yes. But that is exactly what a person will need in order to be a successful decision maker in the future. Space does not permit a full description of all of the potential decision strategies and counseling techniques in positive uncertainty, but

the three basic guidelines related to the three parts of the definition of decision making (information, the process of arranging and rearranging, and the choice) are outlined briefly.

**Information Guideline:
Treat Your Facts With Imagination,
but Do Not Imagine Your Facts**

De Bono (1985) wrote "If you had complete and totally reliable information on everything, then you would not need to do any thinking" (p. 46). If one had such information, one could go directly to choice without passing through the process part. The process of arranging and rearranging information is thinking. In an information society a lot of thinking is required. The new decision theory and counseling approach recognizes three problems with information today.

First, facts rapidly become obsolete. (Reliability is limited.) How long are the right facts true? What one knows for sure today may not be so tomorrow. The rapidity of change in today's society makes the tenure of knowledge very capricious. What one often learns today is that what one learned yesterday is no longer true. It has become misinformation.

Second, more information equals more uncertainty. (Complete information is rare.) Today one can get more information and faster than ever before. But the amount of information available almost always exceeds a person's capacity to process it. This, together with the fact that one can know more possible options and know about more possible outcomes, increases uncertainty. The more one knows, the more one realizes what is not known. Like an iceberg, two-thirds of knowledge cannot be seen.

Third, there is no such thing as innocent information. (Subjectivity is present.) The new science has confirmed that most information is changed by the process of sending or receiving it. The sender or receiver is very likely to modify information. What information is sent and received and what it looks like depends on what is already in the mind's eye of the beholder. The mind's eye is the mental faculty of remembering and imagining. It determines what one sees and knows. Knowing how to get acquainted with one's mind's eye is a good skill to have.

This new counseling framework must help clients understand that what they know is ambiguous, that their knowledge is the tip of the iceberg, and that information is appraised in the mind's eye. Getting the facts is still part of decision making and counseling, but counselors must now realize that the most important part is the client's attitude about these facts and how they are arranged and rearranged in the client's mind to formulate a choice. Clients need to learn to be uncertain about what they know and to seek other, even different, information or opinions. As Mark Twain once wrote: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that ain't so."

Counselors ought to help clients to use their mind's eye creatively yet cautiously. Using information to predict the future and to prepare for what is predicted is likely to be supplemented with skills in avoiding information overload, recognizing information inadequacies, and rearranging infor-

mation into various possible futures. This provides opportunities for creative remembering and imagining.

**Process Guideline:
Know What You Want and Believe
but Do Not Be Sure**

The new approach changes the decision maker's attitudes about decision goals and rational objectivity. What the decision maker wants are considered decision goals. The old decision theory and counseling approach to goal setting can be summarized as: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else" (Campbell, 1974). I have a corollary to this principle: "If you always know where you're going, you may never end up somewhere else." If you always know what you want, you may never discover new wants. How do people decide on good goals, and how do people make good decisions? These two answers should not be incompatible.

Decision making should be as much a process for discovering goals as for achieving them. March (1975) presented support for this approach: "The argument that goal development and choice are independent behaviorally seems clearly false. It seems to me perfectly obvious that a description that assumes goals come first and action comes later is frequently wrong" (p. 420).

What the decision maker knows is considered *rational objectivity*. The new science should make it clear that the rational, objective approach is not always possible or desirable. The client's mind's eye is the heart of invention; it is where reality is created. A balance between fact and fancy is needed. If one cannot always be totally objective, one ought to know sometimes how to be thoughtfully subjective.

"Be realistic" was the old counseling advice. Self-deception and denial were the great sins to be avoided. Counselors now know that it is not always a disadvantage to believe what appears to be unreal. The new approach recognizes that denial (refusal to believe the facts) and illusion (false beliefs about reality) have their usefulness in coping. One's beliefs are spectacles; they cause a person to see things a certain way. When persons change their beliefs, they change their spectacles; they change what they see, hear, know, want, and do. Beliefs determine how one behaves. The paradox is that denial and illusion can be signs of pathology or can provide hope and motivation to act.

This new counseling framework must help clients avoid the most common problem caused by the old decision theory: pretending one already knows what one wants. It is not so much a question of should one really know what one wants, but should one be encouraged to develop new wants? Always starting with clear objectives discourages a person from making choices that lead to new experiences. New experiences help develop new information, new values, new goals, and new wants. Being uncertain about goals and wants leads to new discoveries. Remember, "The only thing worse than not getting what you want, is getting it" (George Bernard Shaw).

Counseling, in the future, will also need to help some clients develop their subjectivity and challenge and change their convictions. It takes courage—and counseling—to challenge

and change one's own beliefs. This may be an essential skill of the future. The most important part of the clients' future may be their belief about it. The old framework gave a lot of practice remembering the past but not much experience imagining or creating the future. Remember, the client's mind's eye is the mental faculty of remembering and also imagining. Beliefs about the future begin here. Harman and Rheingold (1984) sum up the importance of belief: "Each of us has the capacity to become much more than we think we can be, if we choose to stop believing otherwise" (p. 16). Our decisions today are an expression of one's beliefs about tomorrow. In other words, one's choices today not only determine one's future, but they also reflect what one believes the future to be.

Cousins (1981) wrote about self-induced healing, and many other writers and researchers have recently pointed out the power of beliefs, among them: Goleman (1985), who discussed the thin line between "vital lies and simple truths"; Borysenko (1987), who wrote about "minding the body and mending the mind"; and Zilbergeld and Lazarus (1987), who described techniques for helping clients use their "mind power."

The process of arranging and rearranging, in the mind's eye, is where reflection, imagination, and creativity take place. These are the new decision-making skills of the future. The counselor of the future must help clients learn the importance of these skills, practice using them, and integrate them into their decision-making strategies.

Choice Guideline: Be Rational, Unless There Is a Good Reason Not to Be

The old decision theory and counseling approach taught you to decide the rational way. It was not logical to use any process that was not logical. Although counselors knew people did not always decide rationally, they thought it was the best way. After all, the science of the time was totally rational.

The new decision theory and counseling approach, supported by a new holistic approach to science, a creative approach to business management, and an imaginative approach to medicine, now shows that decision makers are part of their decisions. One cannot separate the decision from the decider, just as one cannot separate the observed from the observer. Holistic choice means using the right brain as well as the left, reflecting on one's future as well as one's past, and being flexible in decision strategies. The process of how the decision makers decide is as important as the facts, truths, and realities about the choices.

Support for this balanced deciding approach has come from many sources: Capra (1982) integrated Western and Eastern approaches to psychology and psychotherapy; Bruner (1986) explained the "narrative mode," the part of the mind devoted to the irrepressible human acts of imagination that allow one to make experience meaningful; Zdenek (1987) showed how imagery can change perceptions and help one "invent the future"; Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) discussed the power of human intuition in an era of the computer in what they call "mind over machine"; von Oech (1986) provides "a kick in

the seat of the pants"; and de Bono (1985) gives us "six thinking hats" to help us think and decide more creatively.

Counselors will be helping clients remember and imagine, reflecting backward and forward. Persons need to be able to learn from their future as they have learned from their past. Counselors will also be helping clients develop flexibility. Flexibility, like reflection, is a two-way skill. It involves being capable of responding to change and being capable of creating change. Responding to change may mean changing old habits. Creating change may mean inventing something new. Positive uncertainty makes both easier to do.

The new counseling framework of reflection, flexibility, and both rational and intuitive thinking will lead to inconsistency in choice. One cannot be flexible, adaptable, and inventive and always be consistent. The future does not exist and cannot be predicted. It must be imagined and invented. There are two choices: One must invent the future or let someone else invent it. The choice of action is where the decision makers express their individuality; it should not be done by formula. The counselor of the future must help clients imagine and invent their own future.

Summary

Decision making is the process of arranging and rearranging information into a choice of action. Positive uncertainty is a new decision strategy with some paradoxical counseling methods, but it is basically attitude—feeling uncertain about the future and feeling positive about the uncertainty. Attitude is important in winning games, getting a job, recovering from illness, and climbing a mountain. Therefore, it is not surprising that attitude is important in making decisions.

Positive uncertainty is compatible with the new science and beliefs of today's society and incompatible with yesterday's decision dogma. It involves ambiguity and paradox because the future is full of ambiguity and paradox. In the future it will help to realize that one does not know some things, cannot always see what is coming, and frequently will not be able to control it. Being positive and uncertain allows one to be able to act when one is not certain about what one is doing.

Decision making has been hard to do by using the conventional wisdom of the past. Even with all the scientific formulas, sophisticated technology, and eloquent theories, making up one's mind has been difficult. Rational strategy is not obsolete, it is just no longer sufficient. We do not need new dogma, just new decision tactics. The mind of the client, the focus of positive uncertainty, will be the next great frontier. Outer space gets all the attention lately, but inner space (the human mind) will be the new arena for exploration.

The counseling profession ought to take the lead in continuing to explore this arena with new and creative research and theory development. Counselors may also need to be willing to validate the new exploration by developing some new tools. If they only use the old tools, such as comparative research and empirical testing, they may not be able to build a new model. Counselors may become, as Thoreau said, "tools of our tools."

The main purpose of counseling has always been to help people make up their minds. Now counselors can add helping

people keep their minds open and even teaching them how to change their minds. The best final decision may actually be a definite maybe.

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