

How to Make Decisions in a Crisis

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Speed is at a premium at the outset of a crisis, and being able to trust your gut and [having good pattern recognition helps you move fast when facts are scarce](#). However, once you get farther into the response, the challenges are more complex, and patterns become less clear: your gut can start to let you down here.

So you need a better way to make decisions, but when we talk about having a system for decision making, it's not as complex or cumbersome as it might

sound. Here are five key things that will give you a simple, robust way to overcome uncertainty and make decisions quickly and effectively.

First is to identify and remain focused on the ‘Central Question’: ‘what is the real problem we are trying to address right now?’ This acknowledges that it’s all too easy to get distracted by things that appear significant but aren’t and miss the things that truly are important. So have the Central Question written on your whiteboard, in your notebook, or at the top of your meeting agenda. Keep reminding yourself and your team that this is the problem you need to focus on so you won’t get distracted.

Second, you need a way to filter information, so decision-makers can see what’s relevant and cut out what’s not: you need to separate the signal from the noise. Remember, you’ll be constantly bombarded with new information, but a great deal of this information will be irrelevant and interfere with your thinking. So you need a way to remove these distractions and present decision-makers with what’s relevant and critical: [you don’t want them distracted by meaningless updates from social media](#). Referring back to the central question is a big help here – ask ‘does this information relate to the Central Question?’ – as does differentiate between new information versus a rehash of what you know already.

The third thing you need are tools to help you compare and weigh options. These tools are invaluable if you need to choose between the two least bad options, giving you a way to assess them and compare them. There are many different tools, such as SWOT analysis, the important vs. urgent grid, and one of my favorites, the 2×2 matrix. However, the important thing is that you find tools that are suitable for your organization and that your decision-makers will use. There’s no point proposing a great tool if your executives won’t like using it. Once you have your toolkit, ensure everyone knows what’s in it and how everything works.

Fourth, you need a way to tie you need a tie-breaking process. There will be good healthy tensions in a crisis, and everyone is trying to do the right thing. But sometimes, there are different points of view, each of which is valid.

That will pose a challenge because the resources or capacity to do everything simply isn't there. At other times, there may be two feasible options, but you can only choose one. Someone will have to make a final informed decision which might fall to the most senior person there, but you may also need a more democratic tie-breaking mechanism. Whatever the case, you need to establish an effective way to balance all of the feasible opinions and [decide on an appropriate course of action](#).

Fifth and finally, you need a way to transmit decisions to the broader organizations quickly and efficiently. That way, decisions can be put into action as quickly as possible and make the best use of the time and resources available.

Remember, the further on in the crisis, the more complex the problems become, and there are no simple left or right/black or white type of decisions, only varying shades of gray. So if you don't have a formal process for making decisions in these situations, you'll get bogged down.

[However, a simple set of decision-making tools like the five above helps avoid getting stuck or distracted, allowing you to maintain your speed](#). These tools also help prevent the unhelpful biases that can creep in if you rely too much on your gut feeling or what worked before.

So make sure you put a decision-making system in place. That's going to help you accelerate your response and make good decisions when information is scarce, the situation is confusing, and times are tough.