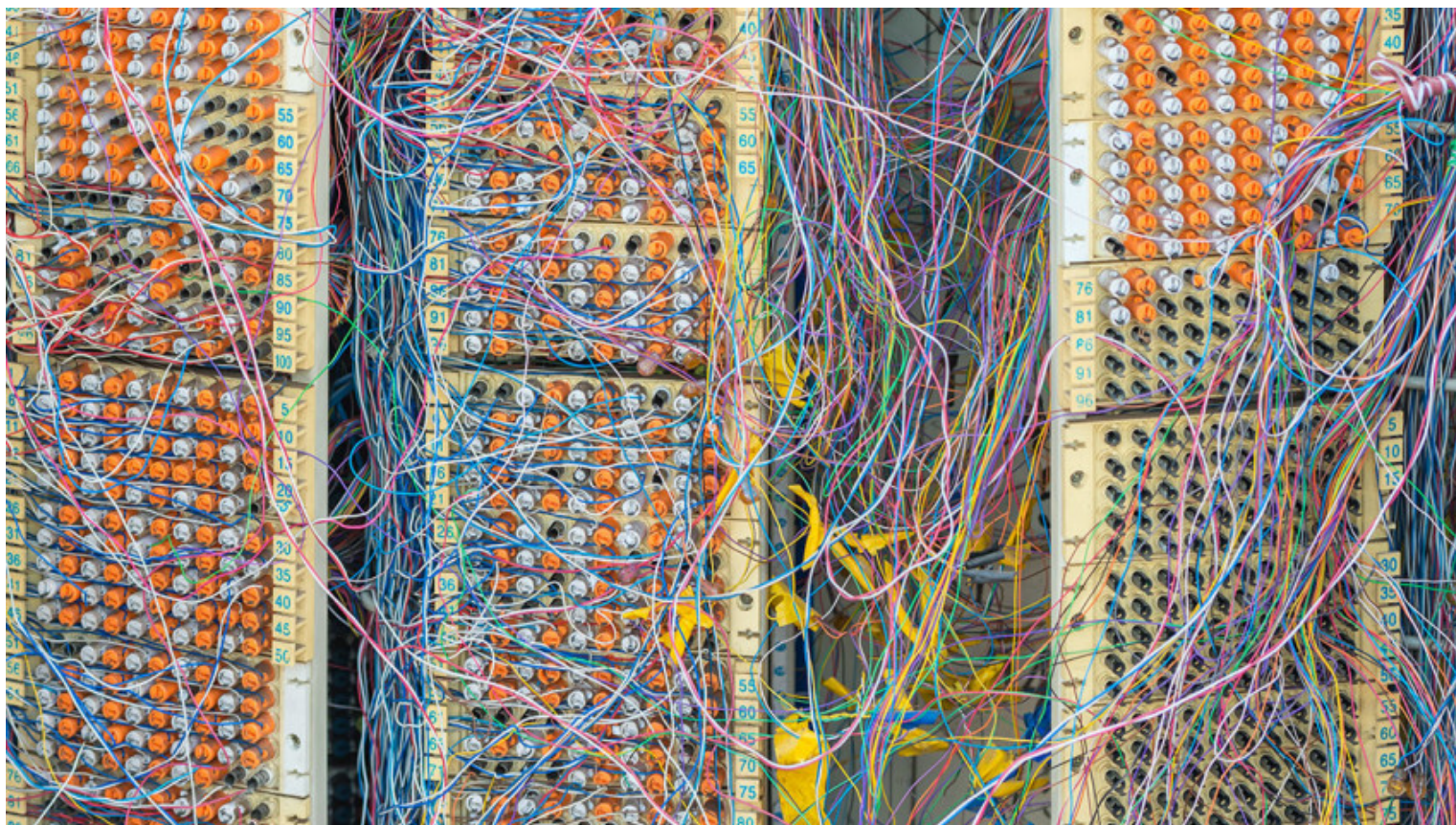


DECISION MAKING

What It Takes to Think Deeply About Complex Problems

by [Tony Schwartz](#)

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The problems we're facing often seem as complex as they do intractable. And as Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying, "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." So what does it take to increase the complexity of our thinking?

Too many leaders default to looking at decisions as either-or: The answer is right or wrong, good or bad, win or lose. This binary thinking has a built-in limitation: Overrelying on any given solution eventually generates the opposite problem.

Consider the familiar story of the esteemed consultant brought in to address the CEO's concern that decision making in her organization has become too centralized. The consultant's solution? A detailed plan to decentralize. Three years later the CEO calls the consultant back in, worried that decision making has become too decentralized. The solution? A detailed plan to centralize.

Simple answers make us feel safer, especially in disruptive and tumultuous times. But rather than certainty, modern leaders need to consciously cultivate the capacity to see more – to deepen, widen, and lengthen their perspectives. *Deepening* depends on our willingness to challenge our blind spots, deeply held assumptions, and fixed beliefs. *Widening* means taking into account more perspectives – and stakeholders – in order to address any given problem from multiple vantage points. *Lengthening* requires focusing on not just the immediate consequences of a decision but also its likely impact over time.

To cultivate this more embracing perspective, my team and I encourage leaders to adopt three core practices:

Forever challenge your convictions. This practice begins with asking two key questions in the face of any difficult decision: “What am I not seeing here?” and “What else might be true?”

Most of us tend to default to what we already know. Confirmation bias is one of the most pernicious and predictable influences on our capacity to see more. Early in childhood, we begin to develop an internal narrative about how the world works and what we think is true. Over time, without realizing it, we come to believe our story is factual, and most of us spend the rest of our lives sticking to it. As Paul Simon puts it in “The Boxer”: “A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” Confirmation bias makes us feel safer, but it also prevents us from seeing a more nuanced picture of the possible.

The reality is that any strength can be overused to the point that it becomes a liability. Think for a moment about one of your primary strengths. Then ask yourself: “What does it look like when I overuse it? What is the cost to my effectiveness, and what is the balancing quality I must cultivate?” For example, too much confidence eventually turns into arrogance. So long as we hold onto the mindset that the only alternative to confidence is insecurity, we’re far less likely to develop the balancing quality of humility, which is critical to considering multiple perspectives.

Do the most challenging task first every day. Most leaders we encounter have every minute of their calendars filled, typically with meetings and emails they write in between, often on the run. But relentless demands and the pressure to respond rapidly undermine more complex thinking. Critical as decisiveness can be, nuanced solutions emerge from wrestling with the most difficult issues, rather than prematurely closing in on a decision.

One of the most powerful rituals I’ve built in my life, one I’ve shared with many leaders, is to take on my most difficult challenge as the first work priority of the day, for at least 60 minutes without interruption. Scheduling this practice is a way of ensuring that I give complex issues time and attention that might otherwise be consumed by more urgent but less intellectually demanding and value-adding priorities.

Pay close attention to how you’re feeling. Embracing complexity is not just a cognitive challenge, but also an emotional one. In part, it’s about learning to manage negative emotions – anger and fear above all. When we move into a fight-or-flight state, our vision literally narrows, our prefrontal cortex begins to shut down, and we become more reactive and less capable of reflection. In these moments our attention automatically shifts from focusing on the task at hand to defending our sense of value. This awareness by itself helps to modulate the inclination to attack, blame, or scapegoat, and instead to turn inward to restore a state of equilibrium.

When we’re triggered, as little as 60 seconds of breathing deeply can be a powerful way to maintain physiological and emotional equilibrium. You can also do something as simple as getting up from your desk and taking a five- or 10-minute walk. Reacting from emotion tends to make us one-dimensional.

Above all, managing complexity requires courage – the willingness to sit in the discomfort of uncertainty and let its rivers run through us. The best practice is to not overrely on best practices, which typically emerge from our current assumptions and worldview. “In complex systems,” says leadership consultant Zafar Achi, “there is no recipe, only art.”



Tony Schwartz is the president and CEO of The Energy Project and the author of *The Way We're Working Isn't Working*. Become a fan of The Energy Project on Facebook and connect with Tony at [Twitter.com/TonySchwartz](https://twitter.com/TonySchwartz) and [Twitter.com/Energy_Project](https://twitter.com/Energy_Project).

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Federico Vigliani 5 months ago

It's a line of reasoning that deals with many aspects of my Problem Solver and Decision Maker career in a European scenario of industrial and commercial electromechanical companies. At the base of the difficult/strategic decisions, it is necessary to have an adequate knowledge of the geopolitical scenario, that I have not always seen, profiling a VISION in accordance with the company's contingent business and with the dynamics of its markets. I would like to exclude BRAINSTORMING because it is often disperse and sometimes composed in a very heterogeneous way, while

a TEAM very competent and complementary and narrow to deal with key aspects and above all OPEN-MINDED and without BIAS would certainly be more profitable. I share the proposed reactions from different points of view, those of the LATERAL THINKING of which I am an advocate. I think I'll get in touch with Tony Schwartz as soon as possible.i

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