

# Which factors hinder good decision making?

Overview and brief explanations

Target audience: everyone interested,  
no special knowledge necessary

Reading time: 10-20 minutes

Page layout: allows easy reading  
without scrolling,  
even on  
very small screens

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Before we begin, you may want to know this:

This text is a (slightly edited) **excerpt** from the book 'Decision making, politics and quality of life' by Edgar Hartel.

Most examples, and all persons or organizations appearing in them, are invented.

**Contents**  
of the  
PDF e-book  
Decision Making,  
Politics and  
Quality of Life  
by  
Edgar Hartel



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Where do they come from?
3. What is a 'good' or 'bad' decision?  
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# **Which factors hinder good decision making?**

Overview and brief explanations

Estimated reading time: 10-20 minutes

The human mind has extraordinary abilities. And many limitations.

Some we know and accept.

Example: divide 1232 by 56 in your head and say the result within 5 seconds.

Most likely your mind was **not capable** of doing this, but you are neither surprised nor embarrassed.

Other limitations we are not aware of, or find difficult to accept.

Example: having limited abilities in decision making would really hurt our pride (especially if decision making is our job). Wouldn't that mean we're stupid? No way. Hence there is nothing wrong with our decision making abilities.

Voilà. You just heard a human mind in denial mode.

This sort of denial may keep our self-confidence up, but doesn't bring us any nearer to good decision making.

While looking at the following diagram you might think: 'well, I have seen **other people** with these limitations'.

Hmm. You will get most out of this text if you sacrifice a little self-confidence and **think one step further: 'also my mind has these limitations'**.

(Mine certainly has)

## Progress

Intro **done**

Overview diagram **up next**

Hindering factors that are ...  
... always present but unintended  
... often present but unintended  
... often present and intended

Summary

Always present,  
unintended

Inability to fully grasp complex situations

Slow analytical thinking

Intuitive decision made before reasoned decision

Selective perception obscures view of situation

Emotions interfere with reasoning

Poor foresight

Peer pressure

Assumptions mistaken for facts

Prejudices mistaken for facts

Manipulative statements mistaken for facts

## Hindering factors

Often present,  
unintended

Poor understanding of probability and risk

Oversimplification / polarization

Wishful thinking / doomsday thinking

Poor logical thinking

Overconfidence

Old wisdom applied to fundamentally different situation

Poor attention to details

Lack of imagination

Open conflict of interest

Often present,  
intended

Hidden conflict of interest (hidden agenda)

Fig. 6.1 : factors hindering good decision making



**20 different factors**, and this is not a complete list.

Which ones actually are present in a given decision making situation will vary. But very likely there will be more than 10 of them.

The next pages show **brief explanations** for most factors mentioned in the diagram.

Please note that it is possible **to overcome all hindering factors by using appropriate techniques.**

How? Chapters 7 and 9, and appendices B, C, and E-G of the original book suggest solutions.

## Progress

Intro done

Overview diagram done

Hindering factors that are ...  
... always present but unintended  
... often present but unintended  
... often present and intended

up next

Summary

Hindering factor:

Inability to fully grasp complex situations

A complex situation consists of many elements such as facts, processes and relations between them. There may be tens, hundreds or more elements.

In order to fully grasp a situation, we must develop a **mental model** of it.

Unfortunately our minds fail to do so if there are more than about 5-10 elements involved.

As a workaround for this limitation, we often **resort to focusing** on just a few elements at a time, while disregarding all others.

This means **we never see the whole picture**, only small parts of it.

However, from these small parts we may be able to develop a much simplified mental model of the situation.

**This model would be inaccurate**, but in most cases better than nothing.

Unfortunately we are usually **not aware** of how simplified and inaccurate our own view of the situation is.

Hindering factor:

Slow analytical thinking

Usually there is only **limited time available** before a decision must be made.

In order to get the best result, the situation (and expected outcomes of different choices) should be analyzed completely within this time.

Very often **this is not done**, mostly because we are **not able** to do that kind of thinking fast enough.

Hindering factor:

Intuitive decision made before  
reasoned decision

Every new situation we face  
is very quickly evaluated by  
our subconscious mind.

It then often advises (or alerts) us  
by making us feel an **impulse  
to think or act** in a presumed  
correct way.

This first impulse serves us well  
as a survival mechanism, and as  
a guide in familiar situations.

**In unfamiliar or complex  
situations, this impulse is  
often wrong.**

Nevertheless, it influences or  
even dominates our conscious  
thinking. Often it urges us  
to search for arguments that  
support it, and to discard others.

Hindering factor:

Selective perception obscures  
view of situation

'We see what we want to see.'

Our senses can deliver  
information at a much higher rate  
than our conscious mind can  
process it.

Fortunately, physical and **mental  
filter** mechanisms save us from  
information overflow. They do this  
by **blocking seemingly  
unimportant information** from  
reaching our conscious mind.

Unfortunately, this often includes  
valid information that contradicts  
our already established views.

Hindering factor:

Emotions interfere with reasoning

Bodily conditions, emotions and thoughts influence each other mutually. But conflicts between them are common.

Example: sometimes people, while in a rage, smash something expensive they own. Not because of sound reasoning, but because of interfering emotions. Along with certain hormones in their bloodstream.



## Progress

Intro done

Overview diagram done

Hindering factors that are ...  
... always present but unintended done  
... often present but unintended up next  
... often present and intended

Summary

I believe some hindering factors  
in this category need no further  
explanations:

Poor foresight

Assumptions mistaken for facts

Prejudices mistaken for facts

Old wisdom applied to  
fundamentally different situation

The next pages list the ones  
that do.

Hindering factor:

Peer pressure

Societies have social norms that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Peer pressure is a similar **control mechanism**, but limited to a smaller peer group (e.g. your family, neighbours or co-workers), and often more intense.

It therefore feels difficult to say or do something your peers will not approve of.

Even if you believe it is right.

Hindering factor:

Manipulative statements  
mistaken for facts

Much of the information presented to us by other persons (directly or via various media) is meant to make us feel or think in a particular way. Namely the way intended by the other person.

Often enough **we do not recognize these manipulation attempts** and accept biased information as correct.

Such attempts can target us through all common formats (e.g. articles, reports, diagrams, statistics, photos, video footage, speech).

Note that **rhetorically brilliant** statements are almost by definition manipulative.

Hindering factor:

Poor understanding of probability  
and risk

Most of us have no education in risk analysis and rather weak skills in probability mathematics.

Instead, our understanding of probability and risk is usually based on own personal experience and intuition.

Intuition, however, does not work well for estimating probabilities.

We tend to expect outcomes that are in fact improbable, and to be surprised by probable ones.

In familiar situations, we often end up **underestimating** risk because they 'always turned out OK so far'.

The difference between high risk and guaranteed damage is also not clear for many of us.

Example: discussions about the health risks of smoking, where a 'still healthy neighbour who has been a heavy smoker for 30 years' is cited as 'evidence' against such risks.

Hindering factor:

Oversimplification / polarization

Complex situations become easier to grasp if we disregard information that has no bearing on their outcome.

If such simplifications are not made carefully, also relevant information is disregarded.

Later conclusions will then be wrong.

In extreme cases, the real situation is reduced to a 'black and white' only scenario.

This is often done intentionally for **propaganda** purposes, or to meet the demands of fast paced **media**.

Hindering factor:

Wishful thinking /  
doomsday thinking

This is optimism or pessimism  
not sufficiently supported  
by arguments and facts.

In effect, hope or fear replaces  
sound judgement.



Hindering factor:

Poor logical thinking

Many, many things can go wrong in this area. This one is very common:

A statement of the type '**A follows from B**' looks often like a logical and convincing argument in a discussion.

However, if such a statement is true or not depends usually on additional conditions:  
'A follows from B (but **only if C and D are true**)'

Until it is clear what these conditions are, and that they are met, **the original statement is logically not sound** and therefore not a good argument.

Example: 'wider roads give better traffic flow' (but only if traffic does not increase proportionally as a result, and if there are no other bottlenecks).

Hindering factor:

Overconfidence

This is the **delusion** of having thorough understanding and control of a situation.

As a consequence, sensible checks and precautions are considered unnecessary.

(A well-proven recipe for trouble)

Hindering factor:

Poor attention to details

'The devil is in the details.'

Not in all of them, but you don't know in which ones until you actually take a close look.

If a decision turns out to be bad, it doesn't really matter if it is bad because the decision maker lacked overview or 'only' overlooked a crucial detail.

Some decision makers are not willing or able to deal with details.

These need to delegate this task to competent others, and to carefully consider their findings before deciding.

Hindering factor:

Lack of imagination

We see opportunities and threats only within the boundaries of our own personal imagination.

**Very real opportunities or threats that exist outside these boundaries will not be noticed.**

Note that these boundaries differ from person to person.

Hindering factor:

Open conflict of interest

In some situations a decision maker may have personal, professional and/or political interests.

These interests are often in conflict with each other.

Example: a manager who has the option of becoming very rich by transactions that later on may ruin the company

If such a conflict of interest is not kept secret, but readily acknowledged by the decision maker and made known to everyone involved, it is of the open variety.

But even if a hidden agenda can be ruled out, and the decision maker honestly tries to act ethically correct, the decision making process can easily be biased.

Note that the bias could also be against personal (and other) interests, because the decision maker may want to prove his integrity.

## Progress

Intro done

Overview diagram done

Hindering factors that are ...  
... always present but unintended done

... often present but unintended done

... often present and intended up next

Summary



Hindering factor:

Hidden conflict of interest  
(hidden agenda)

As in the 'open conflict of interest' scenario, the decision maker has diverging interests in a situation.

Again these interests are usually of a political, professional or personal nature (meaning: power, money, prestige, pleasure).

But this time the decision maker pretends:

- that there are no other interests (beside the official one),  
or
- that there is no conflict.

At this point it must be assumed that the decision maker has a hidden agenda, and **is not willing to make an unbiased decision** in his official role.

Example: a politician who plans to retire from office next year, but has not made his intention public. The politician wants to work as manager in industry afterwards. In the meantime, he makes political decisions in favour of that industry.

## Progress

Intro done

Overview diagram done

Hindering factors that are ...  
... always present but unintended done  
... often present but unintended done  
... often present and intended done

Summary up next

## Summary

At least 20 different factors can hinder good decision making.

Most are rooted in human nature.

It is **difficult** and **unpleasant** to recognize such limiting factors **in your own mind**.  
Hence they are usually **ignored or denied**.

A single factor can, if undetected and unchecked, 'contaminate' a decision making situation.  
And lead to a bad decision.

This is the last page  
of this excerpt.

If you've read it: Thank you.