

# : *What is a decision question?*

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What should we do? Who should do it? Where should a new facility be located? How should a new product be introduced to the market? Big decisions are linked to answering important questions about future actions and plans. Decisions and more decisions face managers. Some decision questions are seemingly easy to identify, but often much harder to answer. Poorly specifying a decision question leads to poor choices and often bad outcomes. The first step in decision making should be specifying one's decision question --> broadly ask: What is my decision situation about? What is the central issue? What is the decision question?

A decision question is a difficult concept to define. Intuitively it is a statement of the central issue that must be resolved by a decision-maker in a decision process. A decision question is a function or reflection of a decision maker's conceptualization of her/his decision situation. The specific characteristics of a decision question are not clearly specified in the literature. The following characteristics are an initial attempt at enumerating this concept, cf., Power, 1977.

A decision question specifies 1) a question word, i.e. Who, When or How, 2) an action word, i.e. increase, motivate or maximize, 3) the decision-maker(s), 4) the problem or opportunity in the decision situation, and 5) relevant causal relationships.

The first step in decision making, problem-solving, and strategy formulation is to identify the critical issue, the issue that matters most, and then frame the decision question properly. Let's assume a company is incurring high costs for overtime work. What is the correct question? Could it be, "How can we reduce overtime?" or maybe a second question, "Do we have enough staff?" or perhaps even a third question, "Does our staff have the necessary skills to do the work in a timely manner?" Each question would result in different actions and responses. All three questions may need to be resolved, but it is necessary to answer the third question before moving to the second, and only then the first. Unfortunately, some people would neglect questions 2 and 3 and focus only on the first question. Think carefully about the critical issue.

Decision questions are, however, rarely specified by decision-makers and this can create ambiguity in the decision process. It also makes it difficult to avoid an error of the third type. Knowing the relevant decision question you are trying to resolve leads to better decisions. Once a decision question is specified, a decision-maker can identify options and the pros and cons. A decision-maker should examine short and long-run consequences, as well as the best and worst-case outcomes.

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There are six primary question words that should be understood (Power, 2017), but the key is to identify the issue you want to resolve, the real question you want to answer. A decision question asks about what action(s) to take among various choices or alternatives. Question words lead us to different analyses and actions. Consider differences among What, Why, When, How, Where and Who questions, cf., Power, 2017.

Kenichi Ohmae (1982) identified the importance of framing a question properly and of identifying the one issue that matters most, the critical issue in decision making, planning, and strategic thinking. He noted that analytical methods can help anyone arrive at a workable definition of the critical issue. Ohmae argued that strategists need to ask the right questions in a solution-oriented manner and conduct appropriate analyses to formulate a strategy.

The question definition task should help people: 1) minimize the probability of defining an inappropriate decision question (e.g., committing an error of the third kind); 2) view their decision situation creatively; and 3) define a simple, direct and unambiguous decision question.

Computerized decision support can assist in formulating a decision question (Power, 1977), but it is uncertain that managers and other decision-makers want that assistance and "help" from a computer. Would you use a decision aiding voice bot to assist you?

### References

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Last update: 2019-11-13 02:24