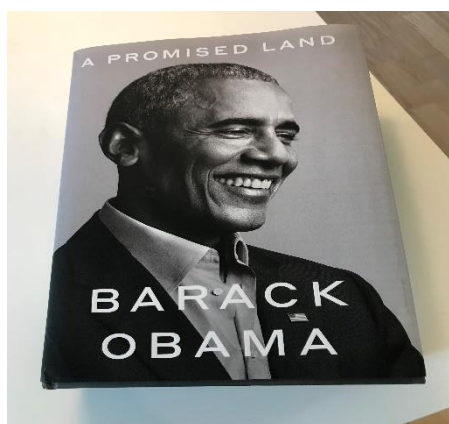


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Obama's decision-making process in 7 steps

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In *"A Promised Land"*, former president Barack Obama tells the story of his journey and presidency. It is a compelling story with a lot of valuable leadership lessons and insights, and if you look hard enough behind his many apparent talents and hard work, we can also decipher some of his successful methods.

One of these "secret" methods is his decision-making process:

"My emphasis on process was born of necessity. No problem that landed on my desk had a clean, 100% solution. Instead, I was constantly dealing with probabilities: a 70% chance, say, that a decision to do nothing would end in disaster, a 55%

chance that this approach versus that one might solve the problem, a 30% chance that whatever we chose wouldn't work at all, along with a 15% chance that it would make the problem worse."

Obama writes that chasing the perfect solution – when the challenges are complex and ambiguous – leads to paralysis, which is why he uses probabilities. Things are rarely black or white, and if you go with your gut too often, you let personal preferences and preconceived beliefs - biases - guide your decisions.

So he uses his decision-making process, and the way he "assembles" his team, to balance out his own biases – and those of others. He later states that: *"I've gone out of my way to create an environment where everyone's views are heard"*, while emphasising the need for truly listening.

He talks about what it means to run a good decision process: *"..that our team had looked at the problem from every conceivable angle, that no potential solution had been discarded out of hand, and that everyone involved...had been given the chance to weigh in"*.

Leaders are often predisposed towards certain thinking perspectives – or mindsets – so, considering every conceivable angle, and each potential solution, takes process, effort and training.

In a video-interview with The Washington Post, Obama talks about the idea that overthinking problems is a weakness in politics, and that it indicates a culture that wants to simplify complexity by eliminating all grey areas. He believes that such an approach is flawed, and that the outcome ends up being really bad, based on poor decisions. He also states that it is because of his decision process, seeing things from different angles, that he feels that he is making good decisions.

In one of his many deliberations about Afghanistan, he states the following about the Vice President: *"The truth was that I considered Joe to be doing me a service by asking tough questions. Having at least one contrarian in the room made us all think harder..."*

This illustrates one of his methods for dealing with a range of biases - for example groupthink. Obama needed a contrarian – in this case Vice President Biden. However, the contrarian mindset is one that we all can (and should) learn, along with several other ways of dealing with biases.

Obama also talks about the need to create space and time to think, so the thought processes can mature, including weighing everything against his overall goals and principles. In our training we call this to “STOP AND THINK” and it allows the brain to “mull things over” and gives extra time for certain brain processes to kick in, so the decision process is sounder, more balanced, and less emotional and biased.

When we try to decipher the main aspects of Obamas decision process, we can highlight 7 main steps:

1. Be aware of your overall strategic aims and goals – what are you (really) trying to accomplish?
2. Involve and listen to others (really listen) – and create a safe and trusting place for them to speak up and be heard. Everybody’s biased, so don’t trust your gut and emotions blindly.
3. View your challenge from all conceivable angles, and consider all possible solutions
4. Use scenarios and probabilities, and appreciate ‘the grey’ rather than eliminate it. The world is rarely black or white.
5. Create time and space to reflect and think – and allow your brain to ‘mull it over’
6. Weigh everything against your personal principles and integrity (what is the right thing to do?)
7. Make the decision, knowing that it could go wrong, but that you have done your best

We hope that you find this inspiring and useful, and welcome any thoughts and reflections you wish to share based on your knowledge and experiences.

Having a structured process for decision-making is vital for any leader and knowledge worker, and required for gaining the necessary understanding of complex assignments and projects.

Our recommended approach to decision-making is very much aligned with the 7 steps above, and part of our training Master Classes within *Critical Thinking, Biases & Reasoning* and *Cognitive Flexibility & Alignment*.

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This article is part of a series of articles specifically about methods to help you excel in leading yourself and others to success in your business and personal life. Any interpretations of the article beyond that are not intended.

References and inspiration:

Barack Obama, “A Promised Land”, Video-interview with The Washington Post, “How I Approach the Toughest Decisions” on Medium.com, Jeppe Albæk Thomsen