# WAYS TO IMPROVE POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING: NEGOTIATING ERRORS TO BE AVOIDED

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**PROLOGUE**

One of the missions of the Melissa Institute (MI) is to use evidenced-informed research to reduce the incidence of violence. Over the years, in various conferences, workshops and consultations, the MI has brought together experts to consider various forms of violence such as bullying, gang violence, intimate partner violence and suicide. (See the papers on www.melissainstitute.org and www.teachsafeschools.org )

A form of violence that the Institute has not addressed is "State-directed Violence," where governmental leaders employ violence (wars) as a means to solve international conflicts. How do political leaders come to the decision to go to war? What type of "thinking errors" might they engage in that contribute to such decisions? Moreover, could anything be done to curb such violence?

In the paper that follows, I will address these questions. I welcome your feedback on the possibility of such an intervention program being implemented.

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I have been nurturing a "fantasy" for over a decade and it is now time to go public with this preoccupation. I am sure some readers will characterize this "fantasy" as nothing more than an unrealistic "fairy tale" that would never ever come true. But as the popular entertainer Frank Sinatra used to sing, "Fairy tales can come true if you are young at heart," and I would add optimistic and practical. By the end of this chapter, you can determine if there is any basis for my hopefulness. Perhaps, my "fantasy" will inspire other young-at-heart dreamers.

**Origins of The Fantasy**

In order to understand the roots of this "pipe dream" it is relevant to describe how I spend my professional time. For the last 35 years I have been conducting research on the development of Cognitive-behavior Therapy, and in particular, I have been studying the thinking processes of an array of clinical populations. In fact, I have characterized myself as a "cognitive ethologist" who studies how individuals make decisions, especially under conditions of uncertainty and stress. Like the behavioral ethologist who is an astute and informed observer of animal behaviors, I am an observer (perhaps, even a voyeur) of how individuals tell "stories" to themselves and to others, and the implications this has for how they behave. In turn, I am eager to see how they behave and the resultant consequences, and the subsequent impact on their story-telling behaviors.

For instance, with colleagues we have studied how individuals who have experienced traumatic events construe such events and construct "stories" that they tell themselves and others and what are their accompanying coping behaviors. What factors will determine if they will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Meichenbaum, 2000), or whether they will evidence post traumatic growth and resilience (Meichenbaum, 2006a). I have also explored the heuristic value of adopting such a Constructive Narrative Perspective in analyzing the thinking processes that contribute to such behaviors as becoming angry and aggressive (Meichenbaum 2002), attempting suicide (Meichenbaum 2006b), and not complying with medical procedures and engaging in treatment non-adherence (Meichenbaum & Fong, 1993).

In short, I work with varied psychiatric and medical clients to develop a supportive, nonjudgmental, compassionate therapeutic alliance so they can better appreciate how they make decisions that impact their lives and the lives of others. I help them learn how to conduct cognitive, affective and behavioral chain analyses and how to consider the motivational, developmental, functional and consequential aspects of their decision-making processes. During the course of therapy with individuals, couples, families and groups, I try to help educate them by means of the "art of questioning", discovery-based procedures, guided instruction, generalization and relapse prevention procedures, on how they construct their "realities" and make decisions. I help them learn how they can use feedback to make more informed and adaptive decisions in the future. I work to have my clients "take my voice with them." I ask them the following question:

> ***"Do you ever find yourself, out there, in your day-to-day experiences, asking yourself the questions that we ask each other right here in our sessions?"***

A major objective of my work with clients is to establish a trusting, supportive, confidential relationship where they can collaboratively develop behavioral, achievable, and measurable, short-term, intermediate and long-term goals that can help nurture "hope," and that can lead to behavioral changes (See Meichenbaum 1994, 2002, 2007 for examples of how to conduct such psychotherapeutic interventions).

**My Fantasy**

Here is my fantasy. Could one provide a similar supportive service to politicians who make critical decisions that have widespread impact such as going to war, or decisions that impact the nation's economic well-being, or that impact global ecological concerns? Imagine for a moment, what would happen if every political leader included a cognitive-behavior therapist as an integral member of their closest advisory team. I told you this was a "fairy tale."

But hold on! There is research literature on decision-making that could be brought to bear. In the same way that Behavioral Economics has emerged as a field, as reflected in the research program of the Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues (Kahneman et al. 1982) and in the recent book by Akerlof and Schiller (2009) on how "irrational exuberance" and misperceptions drive economic decision-making, could we develop a similar discipline called Behavioral Politics? In fact, some fine examples of this approach are already evident (see George, 1980; Houghton, 2008; Iyengar & McGuire, 1993; Janis, 1982; Jervis, 1976; Staub, 2007).

Just how far-fetched are these ideas? Appointed commissions, historians and journalists often analyze after-the-fact (post-hoc), the decision-making processes of politicians that contribute to their decisions to go to war. They highlight how these politicians framed questions, selectively attended to certain aspects of data, held confirmatory beliefs (the drunkard's search), engaged in a wide range of cognitive and motivational errors, engaged in impulsive cognitive shortcuts, employed mental heuristics (or habits of thought) and stereotypes, used analogical and metaphorical thinking that distorted and compromised problem-solving efficiency, and used wishful thinking and "denial" procedures that contribute to their failure to both consider the credibility of the sources of information and the long-term consequences of the decisions to be taken. In addition, misperception-induced failures to empathize perspective take and use group think processes can undermine decision-making efficiency. See Tables 1 and 2 for examples of these cognitive errors and distortions that need to be avoided.

My fantasy is why wait until after such decisions have been made to write post-hoc analyses. Imagine the impact, if a politician had someone in his or her cabinet who could observe the group decision-making process in action and in a non-threatening, supportive and confidential manner could provide in situ feedback on the possible impact of cognitive distortions and cognitive errors. For a moment, think through how this could be done both on a preventative basis and on an ongoing feedback basis.

**Preventative Interventions**

Since I have done a good deal of work on Stress Inoculation training (Meichenbaum, 2007), I fantasize how political decision-makers (as well as military decision-makers) can be encouraged to invite psychological researchers who have expertise in decision-making,

Presidential historians and journalists to present the lessons to be learned from such events as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the invasion of Iraq. The examples, need not be delimited to the U.S. historical episodes. One could find similar examples from many international conflicts. For example, consider the failure of the U.N. members to act to prevent genocide in Rwanda (see Dallaire, 2003). In fact, what would be the impact of such ongoing workshops, seminars, invited addresses to world leaders at the United Nations? What would be the impact if all key advisers (members of the "kitchen cabinet") to the President had to take a course in decision making? Surely, this fantasy is getting out of hand.

Two immediate sets of questions emerge. What should be the content of such presentations? What do we know about decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and stress that could inform world leaders and politicians? Could one generate a Decisional Checklist for politicians and their advisors so they could self-monitor the efficacy of their decision-making efforts? The second set of questions concerns whether world leaders and their advisors and politicians would be interested and open to such feedback? Is this a naïve proposal?

As a clinician, I can attest to the fact that I am quite often confronted with unmotivated clients, and even mandated clients, who are uninterested in changing their behavior. Fortunately, there is a good deal of research on how to work effectively with such unmotivated clientele, subsumed under the research heading of Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). There are a number of intervention strategies that can be used and evaluated in an effort to teach decision-making procedures to politicians. The research field on instruction has learned a great deal about how to teach decision-making and problem-solving procedures to all types of professionals such as doctors, researchers, students and negotiators (see Kelman, 2008; Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006). Can we bring this research literature to bear in training politicians on decision-making? Perhaps, there is some basis to this fantasy?

**Translating a "Fantasy" into a Practical Intervention**

What does the research indicate are the major motivational and cognitive errors that contribute to faulty decision-making? Table 1 provides a summary of many of these decisional errors. In working with policy decision makers there would be a need to provide multiple case examples of each error, and moreover, there is a need to have participants, in any workshop, generate their own examples of each of these errors. They can then develop strategies and skills to counter each motivational and cognitive error. The first step in changing behavior is to increase awareness. The second step is to teach strategies and skills in effective decision-making using a combination of guidance-directive exercises and experiential training trials (Kirschner et al. 2006). Kelman (2000, 2008) describes a way to use Integrative Problem Solving as a means to nurture negotiation, mediational and communicative decision-making skills. Brooks (2008), George (1980) and Thaler and Sunstein (2008) highlight that training in effective decision making should include:

a) a search and analysis of the presenting situation or problems and careful consideration of how questions are being framed;

b) a consideration of the major goals, values and interests that will be affected by the proposed decisions;

c) a generation of a wide range of options and alternatives and a consideration of the likely and unlikely consequences of each—namely, the ability to ask critical questions and "think through" the problem and decision-making processes;

d) a careful consideration of the problems and potential barriers that may arise during the implementation and the back-up plans should these be needed;

e) a built in evaluative and corrective feedback process and a willingness to change course, if necessary.

There is a difference between having policy makers be able to articulate these decision-making steps and their actually using them on a regular basis while under pressure. This is when the cognitive behavior trainer comes into play. Like a good coach who is present during a game, the trainer or decision-making consultant can act like a supportive coach or "cognitive ethologist" and provide feedback in private, about the decision-making process. For example, a conversation with a President might go like this:

***"I noticed something and I wonder if you noticed this as well?"***

***"How did you judge the credibility of the information that was presented?" "Whom else did you rely on for advice?***

***"Do you think it would be useful to solicit any other opinions of how you should proceed? Whom else do you think you should hear from?"***

***"I noticed that in today's Press Conference you stated that 'One of the lessons we learned from…(historical analogy) was…' I wonder if we could take a moment and examine the exact similarities that you were referring to and whether there are any important differences between the present situation and the historical example you offered? (e.g., Chamberlain in 1938)? Moreover, if these important differences do indeed exist what are the implications for the decisions you are now considering?"***

***"With regard to possible options, what are the pros and cons of taking such actions, both the short-term and the long-term consequences, including the historical consequences of the chosen option?"***

***"What potential barriers or obstacles might arise and what will be the back-up plans that you should have in place?"***

> ***"How did you come to the decision to do X? Could you take me through the decisional steps you took to come to this decision? What were your goals in this situation and how will undertaking these steps help you achieve your goals? How will you know if you are making progress?"***
>
> ***"How do you feel about our chatting like this about the decision-making process? Do you believe this is helpful? Whom else in your cabinet would you like me to see next?***

The need for such an ongoing consultation on the decision-making process was highlighted by Barton Gellman, who in his 2008 Pulitzer prize winning book on the vice presidency of Dick Cheney in the United States, describes in detail how decisions are made at the highest levels of government. One critical feature that he highlights is the way politicians "game the system" by selectively manipulating the type of information that is inputted to the decision-making process and how this information is framed. Gellman describes how politicians would intentionally and strategically avoid, bypass and misrepresent the views of other advisors whose opinions may differ. Such actions can clearly undermine and bias the decision-making process.

Such "gaming the system" behaviors may arise out of a desire to exert influence, pursue a "hidden agenda" policy position, and avoid admitting a mistake. Whatever the motivational origins of such behaviors, the end result can be quite catastrophic, as Gellman documents.

How can the decision making consultant help a President avoid such "traps?" The President can be encouraged to ask each of his or her advisors such questions as:

> ***"I appreciate your advice and input, but I am wondering if you have 'gamed the system' in presenting your position? Can you tell me with which other advisors (members of our team) you have intentionally avoided discussing your views?"***
>
> ***"How would their views differ from your position? What steps, if any, have you already taken to implement your position?"***

By the way, note that most of the questions asked by the decision making consultant are "How" and "What" questions and not "Why" questions. The consultant wants to help decision makers become more aware and knowledgeable about possible motivational and cognitive errors and cognitive distortions that can undermine the decision making process. Tables 1 and 2 provide examples of the kind of motivational and cognitive errors that have been identified in the research literature that can be incorporated in any training program or consultative session. Such training would have to include concrete historical examples of each type of error and have participants offer their own examples of each type of error and strategies of ways to notice and change them in the future.

**A Touch of Reality Testing**

No "fairy tale" would be complete without an element of reality testing. Some readers may find this "fairy tale" as being too far-fetched. Consider some possible objections.

1. The decision-making processes are not as rational and linear as being depicted in this fantasy. Decision-makers often make emotionally-charged, impulsive, intuitive, "gut" decisions based on incomplete information.

2. Decision-makers are often selecting options based on implicit (perhaps, unconscious) influences that act as "hidden agendas," guiding their decision-making processes.

3. Decision-makers often do not have the luxury of time to engage in such a reflective analysis.

4. There are too many critical decisions to be made in a short time and there is little or no time and little interest to analyze how decisions are being made.

5. Decision-makers believe that they already engage in such steps and are thus unlikely to be open, nor ready, to invite such ongoing probing and feedback. They may feel that they already have such decision-making skills in their repertoire or they would not have been chosen to be political leaders.

6. Decision-makers may be uninterested, feel embarrassed and threatened and not open to receiving feedback of their decision-making processes. Their job is already very stressful. Why add more stress by receiving such feedback on a regular basis? Moreover, they do not want to be accused of being a "flip-flopper."

7. "Saving face" may be viewed as a critical feature and promoting a self-enhancing image may be considered as being central to political leadership. Such ongoing decisional feedback may compromise one's self-esteem and undermine self-confidence. Which political leaders would want to learn that his or her cognitive errors and cognitive distortions contributed to the loss of life, economic downturns, or ecological endangerment? Political leaders have the ability to cognitively reframe events so they do not have to admit errors. "History will prove me correct!"

8. This reflective process involves a level of trust that would allow the observer (psychologist) to be "embedded" with decision-makers. The observer needs to focus on the integrity of the decision-making process and be neutral and

> dispassionate and not have “hidden agendas.” Similarly, a life time commitment to confidentiality is essential to gain such trust.

Any intervention to improve political decision-making would have to anticipate and address each of these potential barriers. How to anticipate and address these likely obstacles can constitute the basis for yet another fantasy for the young-at-heart. But such barriers are addressed on a day-to-day basis by cognitive-behavior therapists and their clients, with some success. Could the same intervention procedures be employed with world leaders and politicians? Dream on!

**TABLE 1**
**LIST OF MOTIVATIONAL and COGNITIVE ERRORS IN DECISION-MAKING**

***"What to Watch Out For"***

## I. Use of Cognitive Shortcuts

1. Tendency to use the most salient or most readily available examples and the tendency to take them as being most representative of a whole class of events. Such "mental heuristics" (habits of thought) may be emotionally-charged and be selectively retrieved in a mood congruent fashion (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

2. Tendency to use stereotypes and black-white prejudicial dichotomous thinking in formulating decisions (Kahneman et al. 1987).

3. Tendency to use metaphors and analogies that may oversimplify and misrepresent the complexity of the present situation. Tendency to draw an experience that is familiar from an historical analysis, but that distorts the present situation (Dodge, 2008; Dyson & Preston, 2008; Khong, 1992; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

4. Tendency to reason by historical analogies by turning to history to justify policies that have already been settled on by misreading historical parallels and engaging in "rhetorical jujitsu." As Lakoff & Johnson (1980) observe "frames trump facts."

## II. Desire for Cognitive Consistency

5. Tendency to employ a confirmatory bias and seek information that is only consistent with prior views or existing hypotheses. This is also known as the "drunkard's search" to characterize someone who looks for his key at night time under the lamp post because the light is best there, even though he has lost his key in the alleyway. The directive to seek information that "fits" what you are looking for, or to only ask those who concur with your opinion for their views, illustrates this confirmatory bias (Houghton, 2008).

6. Tendency to stubbornly hold a mind-set and to "cherry pick" for consistent data and to manipulate information to fit pre-existing notions that may be anchored to faulty suppositions. Desire to hear what one wants to hear and disregard incompatible information and to view non-agreeing participants as not being part of "the team" (Suskind, 2004).

## III. Cognitive Deficits and Distortions

7. Tendency to engage in informational processes that fail to consider how the questions or situations were framed (posed); fail to consider multiple non-violent options or alternatives; and fail to consider the full range of possible consequences; not think through the "aftermath" of decisions; and fail to calculate which course of action is in

your and other's best interests and that are most consistent with your values (Brooks, 2008; Dodge et al. 1990; Jervis, 1976; Tversky & Kahneman 1996).

8. Tendency to hold a "hostile attributional bias" whereby you readily view each perceived provocation as a sign of "intentionality" which contributes to aggressive counter reactions. Tendency to misperceive and misinterpret interpersonal cues and fail to consider alternative interpretations (Dodge, 2008).

9. Tendency to fail to demonstrate empathy with one's adversary and fail to perspective take on what may contribute to the decision-making processes of others. Putting oneself in the shoes of another in order to better understand his/her actions can contribute to conflict avoidance and conflict resolution (Houghton, 2008; White, 1968).

10. Tendency to engage in impulsive and snap decisions when handling complex problems, thus failing to adequately weigh consequences (Gladwell, 2005; Houghton, 2008). As the adage goes, "If there is a simple solution to a complex problem, it is usually wrong."

11. Tendency to make the fundamental attribution error of overestimating the extent to which one's actions are viewed as the result of situational factors, while someone else's actions are viewed as being the result of their disposition. This attribution error can lead to over and under estimation of behavioral responsibility and lead to misconceptions of how alterable an individual's or a group's behavior may be (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

12. Tendency to engage in stereotyped fallacies in their thinking. Decision makers may make unwise decisions because they believe they are so smart, so powerful, and so invincible. Out of "fear," "hubris" and "irrational exuberance," this can lead to tunnel vision and immoral choices. (Sternberg, 2002, 2007).

13. Tendency to make schema-related errors or the tendency to make decisions based on personal and developmental issues ("hidden agenda") that go well beyond the demands of the present situation (e.g., prove one's manhood, not appear weak, win an election, improve popularity, a distraction procedure) (Houghton, 2008; Iyengar & McGuire, 1993; George, 1980).

14. Tendency to lack curiosity, avoiding debates and confrontations among advisers and engage in denial and engage in wishful thinking, reflecting a failure in question posing (Woodward, 2006).

15. Tendency to reason defensively when failure occurs (blame others, or extraneous events, or chance), rather than evidence the emotional maturity of asking the anxiety-arousing challenging questions (e.g., about the validity of deeply held assumptions or

about personal flaws in diagnosis or execution). Leaders need support and guidance on how to learn from errors and failure (Hackman & Wageman, 2007).

16. Tendency to depend on group think processes that strive for unanimity and high group cohesiveness and that contribute to group homogeneity and solidarity and feelings of correctness and invulnerability. The insulation of the decision-making group contributes to self-censorship, a collective rationalization and to self-reinforcing self-analysis, as some group members act as "guardians" of decision makers. These processes are exacerbated when decisions have to be made under time pressure. Such group think processes can lead group members to proceed along a path that in retrospect was obviously wrong-headed. Group think tends to be closed to outside ideas and decision makers, fail to ask or encourage difficult and challenging questions. Group think can skew and close down the decision-making process (Brown & Paulus, 2002; Janis, 1982; Stroebe & Diehl, 1994).

17. Tendency to use "gaming the system" procedures whereby advisors intentionally and strategically decide to avoid, bypass, misrepresent and selectively distort other advisors' opinions and positions in order to manipulate the decision outcome. This form of "bureaucratic combat" may take the form of using back channels and proxies that can undermine the decision making process.

**TABLE 2**

**EXAMPLES OF "THINKING ERRORS"**

| TYPE OF ERROR | DEFINITION | EXAMPLES |
|---|---|---|
| **1. USE THINKING SHORTCUTS** | **Tendency to use well-worn "mental habits/ heuristics." Pick out most readily available other past examples and take them as a general representative example.** | ***It is the same as.., just like..*** |
| **2. THINKING BY HISTORICAL ANALOGY** | **Tendency to seek historical analogies that misrepresent and do not fit present circumstances or situations.** | ***Watch out for "Like a" statements. This is like Lord Chamberlain giving into Nazism.*** |
| **3. DRUNKARD'S SEARCH. USE OF "CONFIRMATORY BIAS"** | **Tendency to seek information that is only consistent with prior views. Seek information that "fits" what you are looking for.** | ***Look for keys at night under the lamp post because the light is best there, although he had lost his keys in alleyway.*** |
| **4. MINDSET THAT LEADS TO TUNNEL VISION** | **Tendency to stubbornly hold firm beliefs that leads to selecting and manipulating data to "fit" what one wants to hear and believe.** | ***"Cherry pick" the data. Frames always trump facts. How one frames questions influences decision making.*** |
| **5. LACK OF CONSEQUENTIAL THINKING** | **Tendency to fail to consider short-term, intermediate and long-term consequences of one's actions.** | ***Little or no planning and forethought. "State of Denial"*** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **6. MAKE SNAP DECISIONS** | **Tendency to engage in impulsive decision making.** | ***"If there is a simple solution to a complex problem, it is usually wrong"*** |
| **7. USE BLACK-WHITE THINKING** | **Tendency to be prejudiced in your judgement.** | ***"You are with us or against us". You did it "on purpose" without checking this out*** |
| **8. "ARROGANCE" WINS** | **Exaggerated pride, "irrational exuberance," and unquestioned self-confidence** | ***Know-it-all. No need to check with others.*** |
| **9. REASON DEFENSIVELY** | **Tendency to blame others, events, chance.** | ***Failure to learn from errors or failures. Use "psychobabble" to explain failures.*** |
| **10. LACK OF CURIOSITY** | **Avoid debate, minimize confrontation, not question the accuracy of the data.** | ***"What we have here is a failure to communicate and question."*** |
| **11. USE GROUP THINK PROCESSES** | **Strive for unanimity and high group cohesiveness, focus on group solidarity, homogeneity of decision.** | ***Self-censorship, closed to outside ideas, close down decision making process.*** |
| **12. GAME THE SYSTEM** | **Strategically bypass, and misrepresent other advisor's positions.** | ***Jumping Chain of Command.*** |

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