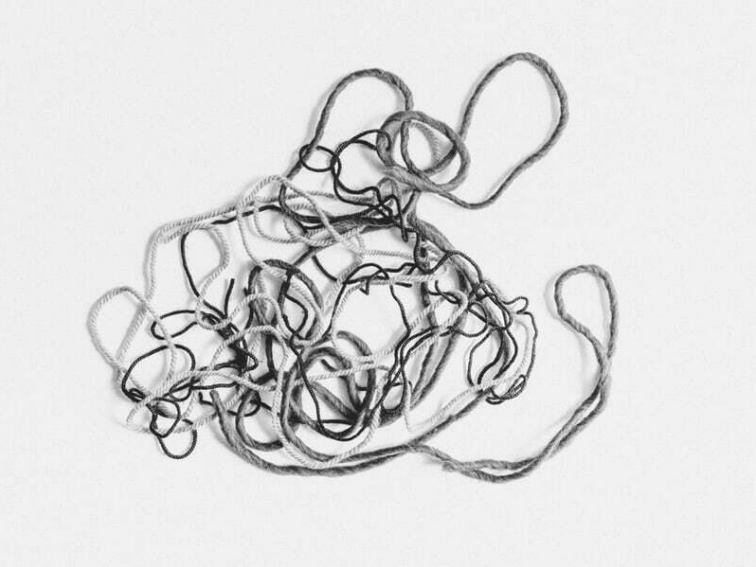
How to Extract a Wise Decision from a Tangle of Strong Opinions

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A major reason many groups make bad decisions is that they don't surface enough diversity of information and perspectives. There’s no reason to expect that a group will have an advantage in decision-making over an individual if previously unshared information isn’t shared or beliefs and assumptions aren’t questioned.

For divergent perspectives to yield value, however, first they need to be understood—and often understood at a level of clarity and rigor greater than the level currently in the mind of the individual expressing an opinion. The best tool to advance toward this greater understanding is for two people with opposed views each to restate the other’s views to the satisfaction of their “opponent.” The benefits of this discipline of restatement go well beyond the decision at hand. Restatement of dissenting views so that they are understood and valued results in people becoming more comfortable diverging from what appears to be a group’s consensus.

When multiple views have been understood sufficiently that the parties to the debate can pass the “restatement test,” the next step is to look for the crux: to identify the key factor or few key factors that determine which of the opposing views will best apply.

The first question to ask in finding the crux is “what is this disagreement really about?” Given opposing perspectives X and Y, a good explanation of the disagreement that can open the door to greater understanding will have a form like: “If we see ourselves as in situation A and believe B, then X naturally follows. If we’re pretty sure that C isn’t the case and we have conviction about D, then Y is clearly the better path.” A good explanation of disagreement enables everyone to affirm the

"if-then" reasoning, even if people disagree strongly about the factors in the "if," like A, B, C and D.

For instance, one might synthesize the crux of an investment decision along these lines:

This comes down to the question of whether the company can build or access a rural distribution model consistent with their margin expectations. Since even those most optimistic about solving that question acknowledge this is a four- to six-year journey to achieve, the second critical question that we're divided on is whether these co-founders have the wherewithal to keep driving the company forward, raising capital, dealing with the inevitable reversals over that period of time.

Stating what one believes the crux to be in this way plays the same role as a trial close in sales. The trial close rarely yields full agreement—its purpose is to invite the further objections that must be addressed in order to advance the sale.

A first attempt to state the crux, like the example above, invites additional thinking, such as: "*… and there's a third key element: whether anyone comes in with a significantly superior play over the next handful of years.*" Perhaps everyone now agrees that these are the three central factors. They may still disagree deeply about how to evaluate each of the three factors. That's fine and good. The decision-maker is now in a position to figure out how to best weigh the arguments on each of the three factors, and then synthesize those three dimensions to arrive at an overall decision.

Dissenting views may or may not carry the day—and the role of the decision-maker is to ensure clarity of reasoning, not to effect a compromise. It is enough that they listen well, learn, and reflect carefully on whether there is a reason to revise their prior views. Even if this process affirms the direction the decision-maker was already pointed, it achieves three important goals:

- Establishing a clear logic for the decision, which can guide further decisions down the road
- Illuminating potential weak points in that logic, which makes it easier to perceive mistakes sooner and take corrective action if it turns out the decision is wrong
- Aligning the team to execute effectively on the decision

Often, however, this process will result in a different outcome than the decision-maker would otherwise have reached: deeper, more nuanced, tighter—and every once in a while, radically different, an option the decision-maker would never otherwise have seen.

Steel is stronger and more durable than iron and holds a sharper edge. Good decisions, like steel, are an alloy: diverse materials, forged in the heat of dialogue into a greater whole.

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