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Smarter COVID-19 Decision-Making

How to apply sound principles from decision science to your own life

Cassie Kozyrkov • Medium © 2020

Leadership / Decision Making
Coronavirus Pandemic

Take-Aways

- When reaching decisions – those related to COVID-19 or otherwise – avoid irrational thinking.
- Let your personal ethics inform your goals.
- List the actions you could take in response to the pandemic.
- Consider which decision criteria could prompt each potential action on your list.
- Determine the bar your sources need to meet before they trigger an action.
- Start collecting information only after establishing your standards.
- Choose whether to act based on the credible information you find.

Recommendation

Panic, fear, uncertainty – as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, these emotions can trigger a string of irrational decision-making. Data scientist Cassie Kozyrkov offers a more level-headed approach. As the head of decision intelligence at Google, she offers a systematic blueprint to help you reach rational decisions as you respond to the crisis. While the information is a tad simple for true “data nerds,” concerned laypeople will rest easier having a framework to help inform virus-related decisions moving forward.

Summary

When reaching decisions – those related to COVID-19 or otherwise – avoid irrational thinking.

Two cognitive fallacies – confirmation bias (a tendency to believe only information that substantiates your existing beliefs) and ambiguity aversion (a preference for known risks over unknown risks) – can entice you to make uninformed assumptions about the pandemic and then gather data that fit those views. To strengthen your ability to reason through problems, consider the litany of actions you could take, and develop standards for making decisions before you collect information. Some suggestions – from a data expert rather than a physician – may help you make better judgment calls during the COVID-19 crisis.

Let your personal ethics inform your goals.

Home in on the principles and values you cherish most. Ascertain whom you believe you have a responsibility to protect – yourself, your family, your friends, the broader community or the world.

“Now is as good a time as ever to have a grown-up moment and face unpalatable general questions like, ‘Under what circumstances, if ever, am I willing to put a stranger’s life at risk? How much risk?’”

Once you’ve figured out what you consider to be right and wrong, you’ll have a better perspective from which to make judgments. For example, is the freedom to eat out in a restaurant more important than protecting the health of your family?

List the actions you could take in response to the pandemic.

Maybe you’re wondering if you should pay closer attention to handwashing, establish a home office in your spare room or completely quarantine yourself. The COVID-19 crisis presents myriad options, but by addressing each dilemma with two questions – “Is making a careful decision about it important to me?” and “Could anything convince me to do it?” – you can easily eliminate options that don’t align with your goals and priorities.

Something like washing your hands more isn’t an important action to mull over, even if it turned out to be futile in the prevention of contracting the disease, because it doesn’t take a lot of time or money. Once you’ve narrowed down your potential actions to consider, tackle your most pressing decisions first.

Consider which decision criteria could prompt each potential action on your list.

For every potential action, contemplate the triggers that would cause you to deviate from your regular behavior. If, say, you have tickets to the theater, your default action would be to attend the performance, and your alternative action would be to stay at home if one of your triggers were to arise. Bear in mind your priorities when settling on triggers for each action. For instance, if your focus is on preserving your own health, you'll think about your own demographic and risk level before attending the theater. If your chief concern is to protect others from infection, you'll read up on ways that society can flatten the curve of infection. Triggers can include laws, a certain incident, scientific research, social norms and behaviors, advice, cost considerations, risk estimate fluctuations, and other factors.

Determine the bar your sources need to meet before they trigger an action.

Fact-check the information that less credible sources spew against ones that meet your minimum standards. If, say, one of your triggers relates to your city banning gatherings of a certain size, resolve to verify any such legal information on a government website. Similarly, support research claims from random scientists by cross-checking the information against the views of a qualified epidemiologist.

“Never panic in response to chatter by a source that does not meet your personal quality bar for each trigger.”

Other credible sources may include the US Centers for Disease Control, reputable newspapers and renowned research publications, but you ultimately judge the validity of each source.

Start collecting information only after establishing your standards.

Most people make shortsighted decisions after seeking information that complements their existing views. Inoculate yourself against confirmation bias by settling on your decision-making criteria and then habitually mining reliable, high-quality sources for information that can inform your decisions.

Choose whether to act based on the credible information you find.

Depending on the information you gather, either move forward with your default action or go with an alternative action. If you set out your decision-making process before you're faced with a tough choice, your preparations will guide you toward an informed, data-driven choice. Structured decision-making will boost your resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

About the Author

Cassie Kozyrkov is Google's head of decision intelligence. She is an expert in data and decision-making.



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