patterns feeds directly into your decision-making skills, as is addressed later in the book.

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**Summing Up**

- Environmental, group, and self-awareness all assist in informing a leader’s decision-making process.
- Self-awareness leads to critically important self care, a crucial part of effective leadership that outdoor leaders sometimes ignore.
- Actively engaging in the collection of information is important. Perhaps even more important is becoming accustomed to subconscious observation.
- Awareness leads to the grouping of subtle cues and eventually to the recognition of patterns; these patterns can indicate a shift in group dynamics, that a potential campsite is nearby, that you may have come into contact with poison ivy, or many other things.

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**In this chapter you will learn:**

- The challenges of decision making for outdoor leaders, including coping with incomplete information.
- How people use natural decision making (also called pattern recognition or intuition) to make most decisions.
- How to make more effective decisions.
- An analytic process for making major decisions, especially when there is more than one leader.
A leader's usefulness to the group is dependent upon the ability to make and implement effective decisions. This chapter can only begin to provide some basic guidance about making decisions. It draws upon established practices in the outdoor leadership field, new research, and my experience.

Western society has traditionally drawn a line between rational decision making and emotion. Current research on decision making places an emphasis on subconscious processes and suggests that it is nearly impossible to box emotion out of the decision-making equation.

Decisions are based largely upon judgment (be it analytic or intuitive), which is the capacity to evaluate and draw conclusions. Good judgment comes from a deep understanding of yourself, others, the activities you are engaged in, and the environment around you, which informs your assessment of a situation and leads to well-formed opinions and effective decisions. Good judgment is also timely. This chapter provides you with some tools to assist your decision-making process—though they cannot provide you with good judgment.

A Bear's Tale

Our wilderness campsite was a half-mile bushwhack from the trail in New Hampshire’s White Mountain National Forest. Two of our teenage participants were cooking dinner, while the other six teens finished setting up their tents and established camp. It was the final night of a two-week backpacking trip. My co-leader, Steve, and I were enjoying the reduced workload that came with the increased experience of our participants.

I was a short distance from camp when I heard someone yell, "Bear!" Oddly, I didn't take it seriously at first, but the increasing cacophony of yelling had me hurrying back to camp. Sure enough, the largest black bear I have ever seen was rummaging through our cooking area and was thoroughly in control of the situation. Our group had been scared off, and everyone was scattered in the woods, away from the cooking area. We had actually reviewed this type of situation with the group—Steve and I instructed them to remain together and make as much noise as possible if they encountered an aggressive bear. That advice had not been heeded as this bear lumbered into camp.

Steve and I got everyone to regroup away from the cooking area. He and I discussed the situation and decided to attempt to frighten the bear away, ideally before it ate all of our remaining food. We instructed our group to find the best noisemakers they could. With sticks banging, whistles blowing, and much yelling, we approached the bear, but didn't get too close. The bear was looking relaxed, sitting and licking the last remnants of peanut butter off the pieces of what used to be a plastic jar.

As we approached, the bear looked up and then continued licking the peanut butter. I was in the front of the group, beating two sticks together. Suddenly the bear rose up more quickly that I had thought bears were capable of and charged toward us with its teeth bared. We retreated rapidly, and the bear casually returned to its peanut butter jar.
Lesson: Make small, frequent decisions as much as possible. You will have many opportunities to make small decisions that move you toward an overall solution. Always trying to develop a comprehensive plan will slow you down, and because the situation may change, your plan could be rendered irrelevant. Constant reassessment is possible if you work in small increments. Once a master plan is devised, people can become overly committed to it. This rigidity can be encumbering in situations in which the circumstances are changing rapidly, demanding decision-making agility.

Dusk turned to night and we still had the pleasure of our uninvited dinner guest. We left the cooking area and returned to our tents and gear, about a hundred yards away. Close to our tents we lit the first campfire of the trip. We hoped that this would help keep group spirits high and perhaps keep the bear away from us.

Steve and I reassessed our situation and determined that getting the bear to leave was no longer a priority; we were more interested in simply ensuring the safety of the group. We saw two options: The first was to stay put, assuming the bear would eventually finish eating and leave; the second option was to pack up what we could and move camp.

We had little information on which to base our decision. The fact that, statistically, black bears in the eastern United States very rarely harm people was an argument for staying. We assumed the bear wanted our food and were fairly certain that once it finished eating it, the bear would lose interest and leave, but neither Steve nor I had previous experience with a bear that acted this aggressively. Waiting made sense because even if the bear did not leave, we could always depart later. However, we knew we would be in danger if the bear did attack.

On the other hand, if we left we wouldn't be able to take all our gear that was close to the bear. We then faced a half-mile bushwhack to the trail with no prospects of finding a camping spot nearby. After a long day of hiking, we were concerned that making our students pack up and then bushwhack in the dark could lead to falls or sprained ankles.

Steve and I agreed that the bear was likely to leave us alone if we kept our distance. We were confident the risk of an attack was almost nonexistent if we let the bear eat in peace. The risks of packing up and moving seemed more serious. After carefully and rationally identifying the problem, the possible solutions, and the possible consequences of those solutions, we decided to stay put.

Lesson: Do not wait until you have every piece of information to make a decision. Often, especially in crisis situations, you will have insufficient time to gather all the pertinent information. Many decision-making models presume every piece of pertinent information is available. Outdoor leaders must have a high tolerance for ambiguity and be comfortable making decisions without knowing everything.

We told the group our plan: They would go to bed with their clothes on, and Steve and I would stay awake and remain near the fire to keep an eye on the bear. When discussing the plan, the group was justifiedly nervous, but soon they went to sleep. Soon after, the bear abandoned the food and wandered into the woods. We tried to monitor its progress but assumed that it had finished its meal and was departing. We were wrong. As Steve and I headed toward our tent, the bear emerged from the woods. It had avoided us by circling around through the woods and was now right next to one of the occupied tents, which it proceeded to sniff and paw at. This time, our noisemaking took on a new fervor.

We yelled our hearts out. I picked up an unoccupied tent and waved it in the air. Steve armed himself with a large stick. The bear moved on to investigate a nearby—and now empty—tent. We did not have to have a discussion this time.
Steve and I—and the whole group—knew we needed to leave. The only question was how much of our equipment we would take with us. The bear had not yet come near the fire, and we worked to pull as much gear as we could toward it. We wanted our clothes, sleeping bags, and other basic supplies, but everyone kept one eye on the bear as we packed. The bear did not rip any tents, apparently interested only in sniffing and pawing. As it moved away from a tent, we moved in and took it down. We were ready to leave—without our equipment if need be—if the bear showed any interest in us, but it did not.

**Lesson:** Aim for the 70 percent solution. Take action once you conclude that your chosen plan is the best one and has at least a 70 percent chance of succeeding. However, you must also ask yourself “What if?” and weigh the likely consequences if your plan fails. The more serious the repercussions of failure, the more confident you must be in your plan. If serious injury will result from your plan failing, you must be as close as possible to 100 percent certain it will work—unless the risks associated with alternative plans or doing nothing are even worse. The opposite is also true; if the consequences of failure aren’t too serious, you can act with less than 70 percent certainty.

With most of our equipment packed, we put out the fire with several potfuls of water from a nearby stream and departed, implementing our contingency plan. The group, including Steve and me, was worried the bear would follow us. Some members wanted to run, but Steve and I vetoed that plan quickly, as we were off the trail with full packs, guided only by our headlamps. We did instruct the group to abandon their packs and run if the bear approached us.

The group’s energy was high, considering that the time was approaching midnight. In what seemed like no time, we made it back onto the trail with no evidence that we were being followed. The sky had cleared and the moon had risen, leaving the trail dappled with light. The walking was easy, and Steve and I hung back while the group hiked energetically and actually broke into song.

Steve and I knew there were limited camping opportunities nearby. Without saying so, we also knew that we were both eager to put some distance between the group and the bear. The idea of camping in the open without room to set up our tents didn’t appeal to us. We continued hiking, reaching the road and our van in the early-morning hours. After a short night of sleep we went out to a big breakfast.

Then came the final step. I was able to convince some volunteers to accompany me on a hike to the previous night’s campsite. Once there, we cleaned up and gathered the cooking equipment. The one thing the bear did not eat was the lentils and rice that had been on the stove for dinner.

The peanut butter-loving bear provided us with a story rife with decision-making lessons. First of all, knowing that we were hiking in bear country, Steve and I told the hikers what to do if we ran into a bear. Although the group did not heed our instructions at first, having prior knowledge of the bear presence in the area and the sense that the leaders knew how to address the situation may have prevented some panic. At each juncture, we clearly identified the problem, thought about our options and their possible outcomes, and made well-considered decisions that we attempted to carefully explain to the group. With each decision we made, we also developed an alternate plan—if the bear had followed us out of the camp, for example, we would have dropped our packs and run. Neither Steve nor I had had an experience exactly like this one, but we were able to safely evacuate the group members and gear because we used strong decision-making practices.

**Micro Decisions and Major Decisions**

Outdoor leaders are constantly making minor, or micro, decisions. Micro decisions typically have limited consequences and outcomes that are relatively predictable—say, deciding where to stop for lunch. Even within the context of a crisis situation, leaders still have many micro decisions to make. Once Steve and I settled on a plan to deal with the bear, we had to make many more micro decisions as we implemented and reevaluated our plan.

Predicting the outcomes of major decisions is difficult. This may be because information on the situation, options, and potential outcomes is incomplete. Often, major decisions revolve around a leverage point, a moment in which any one option may lead to success or additional challenges. Leverage points present opportunities to change the flow of a situation; however, the path where each option leads is not always obvious.

You can think of a leverage point like the moves a rock climber makes, an analogy that Gary Klein uses in his excellent book *Sources of Power*. A rock climber who is perched on a face might notice a series of thin edges ahead, a short, diagonal crack off to one side, and a series of larger-looking holds traversing in a slightly different direction. This is a leverage point. Any one option may lead to success or additional challenges. If things do not go smoothly, some options may preclude retreat or reconnecting with any of the other choices.

Decisions—many made swiftly and with little thought—define leadership. Those quick decisions are far more likely to have a profound impact than the
decisions you carefully analyze. This is because leaders make many more small, quick decisions than carefully analyzed ones. Decisions made on any time frame are challenging; nevertheless, some tools (in addition to training and experience) can be utilized to improve our decision-making skills.

It's possible that had we waited at camp long enough, the bear would have left and we would have been able to reclaim all our gear and exit safely. Our decision to hike to safety at night and return the next day for the equipment provided a similar result. However, it's also possible that the bear could have attacked someone had we waited at the camp. Returning to the original leverage point would have been rendered impossible.

Natural Decision Making

Humans make a lot of decisions, and we typically—though not always—are pretty good at it. Studies show that experts typically make their decisions by intuition, rather than analysis. This is especially true for those operating with incomplete information and under time pressure. Studies of firefighters, fighter pilots, airline pilots, nurses, surgeons, police officers, and chess players have found that most of their decisions are made without having been consciously thought through.

The intuitive process of making decisions shows that our subconscious is always working on solutions. When an idea “pops into your head” this is what is occurring. Experts—people who have been in similar situations in the past (or have received extensive training)—often have a clear sense of what to do from only a limited set of cues. Some people report after an incident, "I just knew what to do." Others feel it is a form of ESP. Malcolm Gladwell, whose bestselling book Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking addresses decision making, explains right in the subtitle what many experts do.

Studies show that experts can make remarkably good decisions even under time pressure. They can make these decisions in situations that are essentially a repeat of what they have experienced before. They can also make effective decisions in situations similar to what they have encountered before. How do people make these decisions? It appears that the subconscious mind is exceptionally effective at recognizing patterns. If a similar situation in the past has had a positive or negative consequence, our brains are aware of this before we become conscious of this understanding.

When the bear charged into our camp, Steve and I had had no experience dealing with an animal that aggressive. We did have anecdotal informa-
tion, gleaned from the oral and written stories of others. As experienced group leaders, we also had a significant amount of practice leading groups and dealing with other crises. We had the ability to quickly relate experience from a somewhat similar situation to the one at hand. We knew how to manage the group and address their fears. We knew to not let the situation create more problems—by running off the trail away from the bear, for example. While we did not have as much information as we would have liked, we did have some experience we could apply to the situation. The ability to quickly connect an experience to a similar situation from the past is an extremely valuable asset for an outdoor leader.

**Analytic Decision Making**

Thus far, this chapter has not been kind toward approaches that present a formulaic plan for decision-making success. Despite this, and despite the fact that most decisions are made with a natural decision-making model, an analytic decision-making model is ideal in many situations.

**Analytic Model**

This model presents seven stages of analytic decision making. See the flow chart on page 73 for help visualizing this concept.

1. Define the problem: What would you like the result to be?
2. Gather relevant information: Collect information that may help you develop or evaluate solutions.
3. Generate solutions (problem solving): This is a brainstorming step. Keep an open mind; encourage and do not critique unconventional options.
4. Evaluate solutions: Weigh the benefits and risks of the options.
5. Choose a solution: Select an option that best resolves the problem at hand, balancing the benefit of the solution versus its risks.
6. Implement the solution: Delegate responsibilities to the group to make your solution a reality.
7. Reevaluate: As implementation proceeds, continue to assess whether your decision is working. If it isn’t, restart the decision-making process.

Like most decision making, the analytic model does not always manifest itself in a linear process. In other words, you may not start out with step one, move on to step two, and so forth. While this is ideal, the reality is that you may need to skip backward and forward within the model to answer different ques-
Limitations of Analytic Decision Making

It would seem that analytic decision making is a logical process and should result in a reliable decision. An advantage is that a full analysis can keep leaders from leaving things out. Implementing a decision based on the analytic model ultimately requires many small recognition- and judgment-based decisions.

The analytic model has the disadvantage of being cumbersome, time consuming, and less adaptable to limited information than a leader’s natural decision-making abilities. Those trained in analytic decision making typically do not use the technique often. Especially in uncontrolled settings (as opposed to closely controlled situations with few variables), where information is incomplete and the situation in flux, skilled decision makers use their natural decision-making abilities since they are more comfortable with that. If applied at all, analytic models are used to confirm decisions that have already been made.

Early in this chapter you learned that leaders should make small, frequent decisions. Analytic decision making is more conducive to developing a master plan, but less practical for making prompt decisions at each of the many leverage points that develop along the way. Investing too much energy in an overall plan can result in a situation in which leaders resist adjusting to new circumstances. Unless care is used, analytic models can result in the belief that decision making is a linear process that leads directly from identification of the problem to resolution. In reality, decision making is not nearly this neat and simple.

When the bear ventured into our camp, Steve and I employed a variety of decision-making techniques. At all times we maintained a flexible attitude and were open to any new information that might force us to alter our plan. The plan we invested the most time developing and analyzing was the decision to monitor the bear while our group went to sleep. It didn’t work. Many of our other decisions were made based on quick applications of judgment—some in very urgent situations. While analytic decision making was too cumbersome for most of our decisions, when we had the time we certainly put this approach to use.

Applications for Analytic Decision Making

Analytic decision making can be very useful when getting an entire group involved in a decision. The different steps allow for the dissemination of relevant information and ideas to the group. The defined stages help facilitate group discussion. Working through a decision in this manner can be a valuable experience for the less-experienced group members as the various aspects of the decision are discussed. In fact, as a situation becomes more complex and more people are involved, the analytic approach becomes increasingly valuable.

The analytic model can also be useful for inexperienced leaders who are attempting to make the most of their limited experience. The analytic model can impose structure on their thinking and, in particular, can help these leaders identify what they don’t know. For this reason, an analytic approach can also be useful when a potential leader is in training. Unfortunately, this framework cannot compensate for a leader’s lack of experience-based judgment, so inexperienced leaders will have difficulty making the decisions needed at the different stages. One of the greatest difficulties will remain a lack of the information that helps decision making, especially in time-pressed situations.

In situations in which time is plentiful, I recommend the analytic model. If information is abundant and more can be gathered, it’s possible to conduct a real analysis. Leaders, however, should be aware of the tendency to waste time validating decisions that have already been made via natural processes.

Real-Life Decision Making

The decisions you make at each leverage point open up certain options and close others. Sometimes you’ll be able to foresee the consequences of your actions, but sometimes there will be unintended results. Although analytic decision making can be beneficial in many settings, natural decision making is the way leaders make the vast majority of their decisions. Knowing more about how this works allows leaders to optimize their decision making and benefit more from learning opportunities.

An analogy can be drawn between the awareness a leader develops and the awareness people develop when learning to drive a car. When first getting behind a wheel, they don’t know what to make of the feel of the steering wheel or the feel of the brake pedal. Things are even more complicated if they learn on a stick shift. Slowly, an awareness of all the cues that are present under normal driving conditions develops. Later, they may develop a broader awareness of how the vehicle handles under different conditions—on wet roads, in the snow, on dirt roads, on ice.

As a driver or a leader, you become aware not only of cues, but also of the appropriate responses to these cues. While a novice driver knows that there is a rule that says a person must stop at an octagonal red sign with STOP written in it, the experienced driver has little conscious use for the rule. The experienced
driver stops at a stop sign almost without thought. These cues are triggered by recognition; when asked to explain a quick decision, these drivers—or leaders—will often say that they “just knew what to do.” This is a result of pattern recognition, perhaps the most powerful decision-making tool that leaders use. This is the first of four real-world decision-making techniques detailed below in order of increasing complexity.

**Recognition**
What people often call intuition, or even a “sixth sense,” is actually just recognition, which is processed in the subconscious. This is what makes you know where to turn when driving (assuming you are an experienced driver), even if you are singing along to your favorite song. Over time, we learn to identify patterns. Outdoor leaders eventually know how to recognize patterns. Some of this recognition comes from learned behavior that becomes deeply ingrained with experience. A simple example is that leaders learn the signs and symptoms of dehydration, but over time need only a glance to recognize a dehydrated person. Recognition can also come from accrued experience, which helps provide a sense of when things are not going well for an individual or the group. For example, leaders may have a bad feeling about a potential avalanche slope or river-crossing site. Although even the most experienced leaders may not be able to identify the source of these feelings, they are worthy of attention. The ability to recognize patterns is obviously not unique to outdoor leaders. Recognition has been studied and shown to be critical not only for chess players but also for firefighters, military commanders, medical personnel, and other experts.

**Satisficing**
When initial recognition does not produce a viable response, leaders utilize “satisficing,” the seizing of the first viable option they develop. When using a satisficing approach, leaders will consider the risks and benefits of a single option at a time. This process continues until a workable solution is found. Obviously this does not always result in the optimal solution; it can, however, be efficient, and it usually leads to a solution that works. Satisficing is utilized by leaders under time pressure when each option cannot be considered via an analytic approach.

If I’m with a group in the morning and notice that a participant is cold, I might employ satisficing to find a solution. I might think that because we’ll get moving soon, he’ll probably warm up. However, I reject this because I see breakfast is still cooking on the stove. Then I might consider asking him to put on some more clothes, but I realize that the rest of his clothes got wet in a rainstorm the night before. Finally, I decide to have the group do some jumping jacks and running around to get warmed up. The decision reached by satisficing may not be the best one—I never even considered loaning him some dry clothes—but it would work.

**Simulation**
When faced with especially difficult situations, leaders often employ mental simulation in an attempt to think through the plan in advance. This is not easy and sometimes takes more time and expertise than is anticipated.

In a crisis, you might mentally simulate different scenarios for a carry-out rescue, depending on the weather, your route, and available assistance from your group or others. Unfortunately, mental simulations are rarely accurate beyond three major steps into the future. Beyond that, the simulation overpowers our brains’ processing power. While a detailed, long-term simulation would theoretically be more accurate, that kind of thinking becomes mentally unwieldy and increases the likelihood of error because the leader must make so many projections.

Simulation can be a valuable technique, time permitting, for two or more leaders who talk each other through the process. A larger group can also employ simulation. Consulting everybody in the larger group will often result in people pointing out potentially important variables that may not have otherwise been considered in the simulation.

**Across the Bay**
In my first paid outdoor leadership position, I led middle school students in southern New England. We offered some interesting programs and, as leaders, had plenty of opportunity to use our decision-making skills. My favorite program was a five-day canoe trip that followed a watershed from near its source to its outlet. We paddled undeveloped sections of the river, traveled past abandoned mills, and went through bits of suburbia. Along the way my co-leader, Carolyn, and I taught our participants about the ecology of the river and the lands surrounding it.

In the early reaches of the drainage, we sometimes had to step out of our canoes and drag them through short sections of shallow water. Soon the channel grew deeper and the water—a deep tannic-brown color—was uninviting to wading. Later, the growing river passed through two sections of Class II rapids.
After four days of paddling we emerged into a wide tidal river. Our fourteen participants seemed to be enjoying themselves, especially the water fights, and maybe even the paddling and ecology lessons.

On the final day of the trip, we let the group take its time leaving camp because our planned pull-out site was a relatively short paddle from there. We paddled out into the small bay where the river met the sea and pulled off onto a sandbar to have lunch and study some of the marine life in the estuary. As we ate, it became windier. When we were ready to continue, we found that the route to our pull-out site across the bay now lay directly in the path of a stiff breeze. Worse still, the shift in the wind brought with it heavy surf.

**Lesson:** Anticipate. Opportunities for major decisions are often most useful before the opportunities become completely apparent. If you understand there could be a problem, you will have more time to make an alternative plan of action.

Stuck on the wrong side of the bay, my co-leader and I were faced with a difficult decision. We had little experience paddling in open water, and none in these conditions. It was obvious that paddling into the wind and waves would be difficult, especially for some of the weaker paddlers. We were concerned about the prospect of canoes capsizing if the paddlers could not keep their bows pointed into the wind and waves.

We spent some time trying to simulate what would happen if we reached the pull-out site late and missed our preplanned pickup; we were unable to reach a conclusion. Lacking resolution in that area, we began to discuss whether the wind would become calmer and whether the outgoing tide might make the waves larger or smaller. Again we had no answers.

Our students relaxed on the beach, unaware of our dilemma, as Carolyn and I tried to figure out how to proceed. Using a form of the analytic model, we tried to compare our two options: going for it or not going for it. Again, we had a difficult time reaching a conclusion. On the one hand, the waves and wind looked and felt daunting. On the other hand, we believed we could make it across the bay. As Carolyn pointed out, the current seemed weak and the wind and waves would push any capsized boats and their participants back toward the beach. Because the water was warm and all the participants were wearing life jackets and knew how to swim, the risk of a serious calamity was low.

Staying put meant we would miss our pickup and would have to spend the night on the spit of land. Going meant a difficult paddle and the risk of capsizing, but a strong possibility that we would reach our pickup location nearly on time. We decided to go for it. Perhaps we could have towed the canoes close to shore, toward the mouth of the river, and then paddled across and back along in the shelter of the far shore. I don't remember considering other, creative, alternatives once we became stuck on the "go" or "no go" options.

**Lesson:** In a difficult situation, consider every option. When you don't have the experience to rapidly identify a viable option, try to think of as many reasonable options as you can. Don't limit yourself to the conventional options that are right in front of you. Once you have thought of all the options, weigh the pros and cons of each, time permitting.

By the time Carolyn and I were ready to talk to the group, they had figured out that there was a problem. We explained to them where we needed to paddle, and they immediately understood our concerns about the waves. Because they were teenagers, most of them seemed to think that canoeing through the surf would be fun. After a short safety briefing, focused on directing the bow into the waves and remaining together, we were ready to go.

We charted the best route through the surf and launched one canoe at a time. The first five of our seven canoes, including Carolyn's, made it through the surf near the beach. The sixth canoe had almost made it through the worst of the swell near shore when the teenager in the bow stopped paddling and turned to speak with the teen in the stern, who stopped paddling as well. I yelled as the canoe turned sideways, but it was too late. The next big wave was already dumping the occupants and their gear. The two participants getting tossed into the surf and clinging to a partially swamped canoe made the danger in our plan quite real. Thankfully, I was able to swim over to the two canoeists and help get them, their canoe, and their gear back onto shore.

**Lesson:** Consider what a successful plan will look like, even if you have only a few seconds to do so. Forming a vision can help you, the leader, see the steps again. This positive imagery of success can also be helpful psychologically, especially in difficult situations.

In our experience crossing the bay, I did not fully anticipate the potential for injury to participants being hit by a canoe in the waves. In retrospect, I realized that the hazards posed by this situation were greater than I had imagined. We could have thought the plan through a bit more, or Carolyn and I could have tried the initial launch ourselves to have an even better perspective on the situation.
Lesson: Always, always consider how your plan could fail. Hindsight is 20/20, as the saying goes. Imagine it has been implemented and has failed. What was the cause of the failure? This new perspective may encourage you to consider alternative plans, or it may help you implement your chosen plan more effectively.

By the time the now very attentive paddlers relaunched, Carolyn and the others were already well out into the bay. Their canoes were struggling to make headway into the wind, and I wasn’t sure they were aware we were having any difficulty. I decided that the best thing to do was to catch up. Once we cleared the shore area, the paddling was just as demanding, and the wind made verbal communication with other boats nearly impossible. I felt I had to hang back with the slowest in the pack of seven canoes, while the others struggled to catch up with Carolyn’s group. Soon, our seven boats were spread out more than half a mile. Even worse, some of the boats were traveling toward the mouth of the bay. If those boats got in trouble, they faced the potential of being pushed into open water.

I paddled ahead, leaving some canoes behind me, and got the outermost boat to paddle toward the center of the bay. Then I dropped back again. Carolyn also recognized that there was a problem and slowed her group to allow us to regroup. Thus we all made it to shore safely. Our program director, who was waiting with the van, saw part of our crossing. While he could not see some of the more dramatic moments, he did not like what he witnessed and was quite direct about this in our program debrief. Our discussion made it clear to me that we would have been better off considering different options or even spending the night on the beach instead of making the risky crossing.

Lesson: Ask yourself, “What would my mentor do?” Think about the way another leader you respect responds to a difficult situation. Having the person there would be better, but simply thinking about it may provide a new perspective on the situation.

While everything turned out okay on my early paddling trip (it usually does), the process was far from perfect. My co-leader and I simply did not have enough experience to make the perfect decision. We also didn’t have experience making leadership decisions like this without sufficient information. The simpler, natural decision-making strategies were not feasible. In this case, we would have benefited from implementing a careful analytic decision-making process. I also do not believe we would have implemented our plan if we had fully considered the questions of “How will it fail?” and “What would my mentor do?” These are vital questions in more difficult and drawn-out decision-making processes for leaders with limited experience.

Crossing the River

While I was observing a backpacking group as part of a safety review, I witnessed an example of how decision making ideally works.

The group was participating in an outdoor leadership training program conducted in spring. On the second-to-last day, I awoke to a tarp pressing down on my face under 4 inches of new snow. It had been raining the day before, so I thought this was an improvement. I figured the snow would stop, but it didn’t.

The first task of the group was a long descent into a valley. As we descended, the snow occasionally turned to slush, limiting the accumulation. Because some of the students were not wearing proper boots for the conditions, their socks became wet. Breaks became longer than usual as everyone warmed their feet on one another’s stomachs. When the group finally reached a stream crossing at the trail near the base of the mountain, they were well behind schedule. The leaders knew they had to make it to a campsite on the far side of the valley that night to reach their pickup point the following day.

Their late arrival at the stream wouldn’t have been significant except that the bridge across the stream had been washed away over the winter. In addition, the normally modest stream had become a raging river because the spring snowmelt was combined with additional rain and snow.

As the group took a brief snack and foot-warming break, the two leaders dropped their packs and scouted a short way up and down the stream. Both immediately recognized two potential river-crossing locations. One leader suggested that the lower crossing would be safer because the water below wasn’t moving as quickly. Having employed recognition, followed by satisfying, the leaders were comfortable with their decision, but they did not share it with the participants. Because they were involved in a leadership training program they wanted to let the participants have a crack at making their own decision.

The group members came into the program with a variety of experience levels, and everyone had gained some river-crossing experience during the trip. To make their decision they sent out scouts for a long distance along the river. They used an analytic approach to consider three potential crossing points, including the one the leaders had selected. The group was clearly nervous about the crossing. They verbally simulated the crossing, using different techniques they had been taught.
Eventually, one participant who was looking at the map suggested that they could hike off-trail a quarter-mile on the same side of the river and reach the trail in the valley, where there was another bridge. The group decided that the risks of the crossing site in front of them were greater than the risk of the off-trail hike to the other bridge. They presented their decision to the instructors, who accepted it, impressed.

Both the experienced instructors and the full group made good decisions. The instructors’ decision took less than five minutes to reach. The students’ took 75 minutes. Both processes worked, even under mild time pressure, but one was obviously more efficient—though it didn’t arrive at the more creative option. The leaders were more comfortable selecting the best of the obvious options, while the participants were less confident with their judgment and skills at river crossings and looked for a more conservative option. Natural decision making is the ideal in many situations, but the leader’s fallback is to use the analytic process. When you’re working with a co-leader, you may have different approaches to making decisions. It’s best to go with the more conservative approach (generally the more time-consuming one), unless there is severe time pressure.

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**Summing Up**

- Decisions are based on judgment.
- Outdoor leaders use natural decision making (also called intuition) in many decision making situations.
- Analytic decision making has many uses, including when making very complex decisions, when getting a large group involved in the process, and when there is ample time to make the decision.
- The time pressure you feel when leading may not actually be a significant concern.
- Decision making requires experience or effective training to master.

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**In this chapter you will learn:**

- The value of vision, selflessness, and courage to leadership.
- How leadership styles are based on the relative degrees of task and relationship behavior involved.
- Conditional application of leadership styles based on the group’s ability and willingness, available time, and the risk present.
- The sources of a leader’s power.