

Module 5 ~ Risk Decision-Making ~ Video

Introduction

Welcome to Module 5...Risk Decision-Making. You've should have arrived at this module having developed your risk mindset in module one... looked at how we work with risk... analyzing and evaluating and assessing risk, in module two. We've then talked about how we work with and collaborate with people in module three... and then counterbalancing the negativity of risk in module four by focusing on working with strengths.

Risk decision-making brings all that information together in, what I think is, the most crucial aspect of what we do when we're working with risk. It's about making those big decisions... and positive risk-taking is certainly at the forefront of defining and guiding how we can make very challenging decisions.

Let me start off by suggesting to you, that decision-making is also at the heart of everything that happens every single day... you're going to be engaged, several times, almost constantly, day by day, in exercising choices... which ultimately means that we're making decisions. Let's take health and social care as an example... in any one particular day, we could be thinking about a whole range of decisions, that will carry differing degrees of risk... It could be about how we make arrangements or rearrangements with people that we're working with... how we respond to them when they're experiencing a crisis... how we support people to develop plans around the care and support that they need... or even quite simple decisions about where, when, and how we might meet a particular client or service user.

Then if you're in a managerial role... you might well be thinking about staffing cover for the work that needs to be done on that day... the appropriateness of treatments or interventions with people. And then of course, there's that challenge of how we explain our courses of action... explain our plans to the relevant people... whether that's the client, whether it's family members... whether that's your colleagues, or people in other services, other agencies, other teams.

Continuing this theme of a managerial role... you may be a supervisor... you're supervising colleagues... you're working with colleagues... you're guiding colleagues. Perhaps you're involved in meetings... and pondering that decision about whether to make my point in this meeting... or, knowing when to cut your losses, walk away, don't get involved. We're never far away from the next decision!

Next slide (The blame game)

I've mentioned blame in some detail back in Module 1... but, it's important just to come back to that very briefly... again, many of the decisions that we make... and that could be hundreds of them in a day... they're relatively quite simple and straight forward. The vast majority may involve little conscious process, and by and large, they're not going to, or we don't expect they'll produce serious consequences... even if they do go wrong.

However, because we have experience of a blame culture... to differing degrees... then some of the decisions that we make... particularly if they do go wrong, they will be very intensively scrutinized. The danger is that, as we see from the slide... we could fear the consequences of decisions going wrong, much more than we think about how we move forward, taking constructive, positive decisions... getting things right? And, if we've skewed that balance more towards being worried about decisions going wrong... then we will naturally be more cautious... we will naturally be more risk averse... we will naturally attribute more weight to that side of our thinking... about the potential for things going wrong. As I've mentioned in other modules... that results in a risk averse... a cautious decision... possibly greater indecision, as illustrated by the image on this slide.

This will be the right decision, if it's been carefully thought through... but it's not the right decision, if it's only based in a fear of things going wrong... and it's not been really thought through in terms of the context of what the actual decision is about.

Hence, the important messages from Module 4... Working with Strengths.... are echoed here on this slide... our decisions need a positive strengths-based counterbalance. Looking at the negativity of risk is one thing... but we're also counter balancing that with the positivity of a strengths approach.

Next slide (Decision-Making Quotes)

Here are a few selected quotes to get you thinking about decision-making... you can respond in your own way to the slight humour conveyed in each of these messages.

Where better to start than with Mark Twain, when we're looking for some interesting quotes. He suggests that... *good decisions come from experience, and experience comes from bad decisions*... I like this one... firstly, because it's talking about the importance of experience... and, as I've already said in the introduction... decision-making is part of everything we do. It's integrated into all those experiences across every single day. But I also like this quote, because again, it's getting us to reflect on the fact that things will go wrong... but we learn from these experiences. That's genuine experience... and perhaps, there's the cliché... that we learn far more from the mistakes we make, than we do from getting things right? So, experience... and particularly those difficult experiences... uncomfortable experiences... are things that really do help us to think about our decision making.

I'll add some information that's not on this slide, but is relevant to this point in the presentation... next to where I'm recording at this moment in time... on my office desk... I have a postcard that I picked up many years ago. What it says is this... *"I've learned so much from my mistakes... I'm thinking of making a few more!"* Clearly I'm not thinking about mistakes that led to tragedy and disaster... but the message does invite us to be a little bit more nuanced in how we respond to things going wrong!

Moving on swiftly to another quote... Scott Adams suggests that... *informed decision-making comes from a long tradition of guessing, and then blaming others for inadequate results.*

This one instils a bit of humour into our thinking, into our reflections. Interestingly enough... what I like first, is that it's about 'informed' decision-making... based in information. But this notion that we don't have a great deal of scientific basis or great big evidence-base for a lot of the decisions we're making... there is a degree of guesswork... that's an important message to always keep in mind.

But then putting the humour to one side... we operate, we function, we live, we work within what can loosely be called a blame culture. Society is very quick to try to point the finger of blame when things are going wrong... and what Scott Adams is suggesting is, having really just based everything that we're doing on guessing... perhaps it would be better for us if we also get the blame in quicker... get the blame in first, before others do.

The Irish writer, Brendon Francis says... that *some people are very decisive... when it comes to avoiding decisions*. This one is dear to my heart... because I'd have to say, let's own it as well... ownership, yes... I've been in the situations of avoiding decisions... I've certainly observed it in a whole range of team meetings that I've been involved in, observing, reflecting on, supporting the development of teams.

This notion that it's so important to have democratic decision making... we all come together... we all sit around... we all share the information... we all decide. Well, actually, quite often, when that decision is a challenging one... it can become the place, the arena, where we keep passing the buck... keep pushing it around... hopefully somebody else will make the decision.

Ultimately, we're all trying to avoid that very uncomfortable, difficult moment... when a decision needs to be made.

Next slide (Intuition)

On a very practical level I have asked hundreds of practitioners over many years what role intuition plays in their own decision-making... and, off the record, they all agree that it plays a very significant role. But what is it?

Let's begin to answer that question by reference to the work of Daniel Kahneman... a renowned expert in the field of decision-making. He reminds us that intuition has a place in informing decisions... but it can't immediately be explained, to the satisfaction of others, if it was put under scrutiny. So, there's something we know... but we're not sure why, or how, we know it... It's based in experience... we just can't pinpoint that experience.

If a person says... where's the evidence, now, immediately... that's the challenge that we're having to work with, the not being able to provide the clear and immediate evidence... but at the same time, we have a degree of conviction in a gut feeling, an intuitive sense of what is, or what might be going on.

In my own practice development work I have specifically focused on intuition... by asking questions such as what it is, how can we use it, how can we document it even... but also

most importantly, how we need to treat it with caution. I always think of it as being that alarm bell... saying to us, we need to try and find out more information.

Like I suggested earlier, we've got to try to find more information to help us reduce the levels of uncertainty. Well, similarly with intuition... we have an intuitive feeling, but, can we find more information that would help us to build up a clearer picture of what it is, that we're working with... and where that intuitive feeling is coming from?

You'll also see from this slide, a reminder from Kahneman about the need for caution... with a statement that... *True experts know the limits of their knowledge... on the other hand, many pseudo experts have no idea that they do not know what they're doing.*

And that's quite an important message to take into account. He suggests that the pseudo experts create illusions of validity... because they hold very high degrees of confidence in what, ultimately, tend to be unfounded intuitions. What they do is, they work with the concept of... 'what you see, is all there is'... and they ignore the fact that there's an awful lot more out there that they don't know, that they should be trying to draw into this picture, in order to support their decisions.

That's why there's a high degree of caution needed to be exercised, when we're talking about intuition, and how you use it?

Next slide (System 1)

How do we make decisions? Are there any academic references relating to the previous concept of intuition? Back to Daniel Kahneman, in conjunction with his former colleague Amos Tversky, for some of the key answers. They revolutionized our thinking... by focusing specific attention on the intuitive aspect of how we make decisions... and how they link, or don't link, to the logic... to the rational side of the mind. They designed a series of iconic puzzles and exercises to examine how we make decisions... and came up with a distinction of Fast & Slow methods of thinking or making decisions.

System One... if we're thinking in terms of fast and slow, then... system one is mostly fast... it's automatic, it's effortless... and it's responsible for most of what we do, and the stimuli that we respond to. So, it operates automatically and quickly... it takes little effort or control on our behalf. It's the system that covers most of those very simple daily decisions... thousands of them, that we're doing without conscious thought... it's intuitive in its response to processing information. And by and large, it's focused very much on the feeling element of our decision-making... our intuitive feel for what's right or wrong... or the direction to take.

Next slide (System 2)

System two in this concept of thinking fast and slow... this is the slow, more deliberate, logical, rational system. This is what we think we are really about... but in fact, most of the time, we're not! We like to think that we're rational... we like to think that we think things

through when we're making decisions. Whereas in fact, we probably do tend to use much more system one than we are prepared to acknowledge ourselves.

So, in system two, we're talking about attention to effort, for mental activity, complex computations. If I'm going to ask you what two times two is, you could use system one... and pretty much everybody would give an instant answer, of four, straight away. If I was to ask you what 17 times 24 is... this is very different... a much more complicated challenge. There are very, very few people out there would be able to say 408 to me straightaway... I know... I'm not one of those people... I checked it out on the calculator before putting this presentation together! But you get the message... system two is a lot slower... it presents bigger challenges. These are our more challenging decisions, that we must make... it takes deeper analytical thinking... we have to draw on particular types of strategies. Ultimately, we focus on reason and logic when we're using system two ways of thinking.

Next slide (High rise image)

There's an image for you... If we want to look at how systems one and two... how they're battling together... we have this beliefs element of system one... then we apply system two to it... in terms of reason. There's a battle that's going on... driving our decisions... And because there's this battle, we can often make mistakes. But you don't want to be making mistakes where this kind of image is happening. Having said that, system one looks at this and says... hey, hang on... that's not a good thing to be doing... you don't want to be sitting on a ledge, some 30 or 40 stories up, on the top of a building. However, if system two was to kick in... then maybe, it would be saying... let's just pan that camera back a bit... let's take a picture of the broader context of what's happening. And we may find that this person is on the ledge, firmly gripping the railings around the top of a building. Still... system one should be saying... hang on, this is a bit dangerous... not really sure we should be doing this.

But, it's not quite the same as perhaps our initial gut reaction to that image on the screen. Perhaps system two then enables us to see, that this is a person who's about to abseil down the building... in fact, they're already very rooted to the building itself... and in preparation, they're just sat on the edge, just taking in the view... before they get on with the task of abseiling down the building.

It's about how systems one and two interact with situations that confront us. So, given an image like this... we can think of it in different ways... whether they were operating by system one alone... or whether we're bringing system two in, to try and reason what it is we're seeing... and what might be happening.

Next slide (A Structured Approach)

The idea of a structured approach to risk decision-making is, perhaps... the keystone of the whole positive risk-taking course... it's about providing something, that guides and supports confident risk decisions. An approach that is light years away from the traditional tick-box risk assessment formats, beloved of so many regulators, auditors, managers... and anyone else not directly doing the job.

Good practitioners will focus attention specifically on the bridge between what they've assessed, and how this informs the subsequent plan... which is what will make it a very personalized process. And this bridge, between assessment and plan... depending on the range of, the degree of complexity of the risks involved... this bridge may be referred to in a number of different phrases... it can be summarizing the situation... it can be a critical analysis of the information... it can be about our clinical reasoning... or, ultimately... it can be about formulation.

So, what is this notion of formulation... particularly when applying it to risk? I would suggest to you... it's about developing those 'why' questions, our hypotheses... that will help us to disentangle complex information about a person, a person's experiences, a person's risks. You test out whatever your initial thoughts are about what you think might happen... while being open to see that those hypotheses may not ultimately be rooted in reality.

And so, formulation, or risk formulation... is very much about identifying thoughts and intent... thinking about signs of things going wrong... the risk factors, the emotions that contribute to, let's say, elevating a risk in very specific situations. And it's about balancing these with the protective factors that I also talked about in Module Two: Working with Risk... balancing risk factors and protective factors... remembering, that the protective factors are what diminishes or mitigates against the risk.

Risk formulation should be seen as a long-term process or analysis... it's about looking at a person's history, and influences... what's happened in their past, that we might also be seeing in the here and now... that could then influence future behaviour.

Then the last point on this slide, is about a risk decision-making checklist... which I'm offering you as a pdf document resource in this module within the main training resources. This is the culmination, in a way, of all the information throughout the modules of this course. This particular risk decision making checklist, is something that emerges from my own experience, my own decision-making... myself, individually, and in groups and teams of people... what I've observed when I've been doing training and practice development... focusing in on people and how they make decisions. And, equally importantly... it has emerged out of several years of detailed semi-structured interviews, with people from a whole range of different professions and backgrounds... specifically focusing in, on trying to get them, to identify how they go about making difficult decisions. That checklist is then brought together from all that mass of information.

This checklist will act as a guide, and a prompt... and you're required to follow it sequentially... in order to help you draw, in a structured way, the relevant information that will help you to arrive at a decision. One of the points, on that list, will also identify how to succinctly and clearly capture and document what the decision is... particularly with an emphasis on weighing up... going back to the definition of positive risk taking... it's about weighing up, the pros and cons of the different alternatives. A good decision must also state what the alternative was... a good decision is about the reasons for what you decide... it's also about the reasons why you didn't take the alternative choice(s). So, this checklist is the most important resource across the whole of the positive risk-taking course.

Next slide (Favourite risk-taking quote)

Here is a favourite of mine... a much-used quote... from when I first discovered it written on a seat in the back of a black cab taxi way back in 1998! It just resonates with me about the dangers of being too risk averse as a default way of being. It reminds us that we need to take risks to achieve many of the outcomes we desire... and if we don't take the risks we simply don't gain the benefits!

Next slide (Questions of management)

How does the organization... how does your management... or, how do you, as the manager, respond to the information set out across this module... and, indeed, across this course? This could be a separate course in its own right... but, I'm mindful, here, that this course is focused on frontline risk decision-making.

However, a fear of blame... and a risk averse decision-making stance... can't possibly change, if there isn't a material change in the way the organisation supports its staff... in the way the organisation fully understands the concept of positive risk-taking... the challenges of risk decision-making... and how to be transparent in the ways it guides and supports its employees.

Here's a few questions, that, again... for the organizational managers amongst you... I would also like you to ponder. How much emphasis is placed within your organization on its reputational risk? To an extent, the focusing on the reputation so much, hinders the reality of decisions being made at the front line by people... that wider more abstract sense of how will the organisation be perceived by others... this can easily cloud the more focused detail of a specific decision regarding the welfare of an individual service user.

How do you, as an organization, as a manager... reflect on individual decision-making versus collective decision-making... how do you manage that? Isn't it easier to have individuals making decisions... so, when it goes wrong, we can pin the blame that much quicker, that much simpler... no, that does not generate confidence in our workers. But collective decision-making should not be seen as something that everybody can just conveniently hide behind either... it is a very nuanced challenge that we're dealing with here in practice.

Is a risk decision-making hierarchy operating at different staffing levels in your organization? So... the more complex decisions can only be taken at particular levels within the organization. If so, how clear is this hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities?

Do you promote the use of a structured approach? If you don't... I'm offering one here... but if there is an existing one already, is that well promoted, supported, and used?

And, ultimately, good decisions need to be captured and documented in various ways... how does that happen within your organization? Are you more in favour of using the bureaucratic tools... which I don't believe capture it in a very good way... or, do you have more flexibility, and allow your workers to capture good quality information, with very

succinct and clear decisions being made, clear decisions being documented and communicated?

And when something goes wrong... how is that situation immediately managed? This is a very significant factor influencing the degree to which employees perceive a blame culture to be existing, or not! *"Have you done the risk assessment?"* should not be the first question levelled at people... though what the question implies should be something that all people strive to achieve just as part of good practice. Strengths-based inquiry would only attribute blame in the rare circumstances where it is justified... and always as an end part of a process, not implied from the beginning of the process.

Next slide (In conclusion)

In conclusion... as I draw this part of the presentation on an organisational perspective towards a close... there's, a number of points I would like to emphasise... consistency of good practice should emerge out of clear risk policy... I've seen policies written, that are not very clear at all... and certainly don't emerge, or reflect, what happens on the front line. Good clear risk policy should preferably emerge from a bottom upwards approach, not a top-down approach... in that way, it is more rooted in reality... not just convenience and jargon! Routine procedures and routine protocols need structured approaches... and that's why, again, I keep coming back to the importance of having a recognised structured approach to making decisions... to give us confidence in making those difficult, challenging decisions.

Documenting the risk... the decision in particular... is not about completing excessive forms. That's a theme throughout the positive risk-taking course... but it should be about documented, accessible and reasoned decision-making. That, to me, is the ultimate in what we're about when we're making decisions.

And, there's also a very important role for supportive supervision and collective decision-making. Again, it's about enabling practitioners, employees, to feel, empowered... that's another one of those broad phrases, easily banded about (empowerment)... but, they certainly need to feel supported, and engaged, in their work... and respected in their work. A part of that, is by not having supervision that is just checking up on people... and managerially imposing restrictions on people... it needs to be about developing people!

Then, there is this nuanced idea about collective decision-making... whether it's the very challenging decisions that will achieve risk averse, cautious decisions, where that's pertinent... but, collective processes that will ultimately, provide us with a basis for more confident, positive risk-taking decisions... which are particularly relevant to the whole content of this course.

Next slide (images Head v Heart & Light bulb)

Whether we are using intuition or more detailed analysis... we are often left with a head v heart decision to make. Adopting the Structured Approach outlined previously should put us

into an occasional position where we, and the people we are working with, experience some of those light bulb moments!

A sprinkling of luck is always welcome... but remember... with insightful and hard work we create more doors for luck to enter.