

Decision Coaching: Three case examples, two tentative assumptions and one useful tool

by **Peter Szabo, MCC**
(peer review **Teresa Christen**)

Coaching clients are sometimes confronted with challenging decisions they need to make, while they seem to be trapped in a dilemma. Coaches are just as often confronted with the question of how to be most useful to such clients in a brief and effective way.

Usually clients have already extensively explored their list of pros and cons and they do not need a coach for that. The challenge for coaches is how to invite clients beyond their list of pros and cons and to create a space where clients can get out of the dilemma they are stuck in to find a solution that really fits. Some clients are seeking the “right” decision. Others want to just get passed the indecision and somehow get closer to deciding. Sometimes clients simply wish they had options that were truly attractive to them.

In this paper you are introduced to three real case examples of client dilemmas and how they got to their fitting solution. Emerging from these examples, there are two tentative assumptions on what coaches can do in order to be most useful: creating attractive choice of options and utilizing client goals for the coaching process. In all three examples, there was one simple scaling tool that helped both client and coach stay on track towards solutions.

Case Example 1 Trapped between an unbearable job and the threat of unemployment

The client came for an emergency coaching, which friends had arranged for him, because they were so seriously worried about his health. And, in fact, the client was in a very difficult work and personal situation. He was suffering from the dilemma of either staying in a job that was nearly killing him or quitting and going back to unemployment. He had a very demanding job in bookkeeping and he had to handle very difficult circumstances: the salaries of several hundred people would not be paid if he did not do the work and he had to deal with threatening legal issues. This work should have been done by three people and he was all alone and often working

more than 120 hours a week. Keeping the job meant endangering his own health; quitting the job meant becoming unemployed and not being able to support his family or pay for his children’s school. When the client came to the session, one could obviously see that he was not well. He said he did really not know what to do anymore. When asked about how he would know at the end of the session, whether the session had been helpful, he said he needed to have a concrete idea of what to do other than kill himself working or destroying his family’s future. He said it needed to be an option that he could quickly put into action and was bearable in reality.

I said, ‘Suppose you manage to find something doable and bearable. I am not sure if it is possible at all and if together we can get there in the hour we have, but just suppose you find something. How would it make a difference?’ The client took a deep breath ‘I would finally have space to breathe again, I would be more calm and clear about myself, I would have a clear idea of something that I decide I want to do, and take my life back into my own hands again’. With another deep breath, he added: ‘Anything that gives me some opportunity to move is ok’.



Increasing choice of options (Tetralemma)

The client’s description of “an opportunity to move” triggered a coaching process, which has been developed by Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer of SYST in Germany, called the “tetralemma”. They invite their clients, who are trapped in a dilemma, to define a space on the floor with five different positions representing five different choices of options. The client is asked to physically move from option to option and explore possible workable solutions. The elements of the tetralemma are called “the one thing”, “the other thing” representing option one and option two. Slightly more surprising are the

following elements: “both things together”, “none of these two things” and a fifth element they call “none of the above and not even that”. Our colleague Björn Johansson of CLUES in Sweden sometimes calls the fifth option the “Joker” element.

“Stay in the job” and “Quit the job” were the two options the client named, wrote on a sheet of paper and put on the office floor a few steps apart. I invited him to spend some time standing on each option and asked him to describe what might help to make this decision a little bit more bearable, supposing he would take this decision. He described some of the things he would actually do to raise his chances of surviving in good health if he stays in his job. In the other position he also described what he could do so that becoming unemployed would be acceptable for him. Despite a few good ideas for moves he could actually make within these two positions, none of the two options became truly attractive to the client. So the main thing that we explored in the coaching was to look at clearly different alternatives. We placed another sheet on the floor and I asked him: “Suppose you had a third option which is called “both things together; stay and quit” what might you be doing then? He first said ‘it is not possible, I cannot quit and stay in the job at the same time’, but after a bit of thought he added, ‘ah, well, maybe it is possible to do both, by sequencing my actions in time. I can now decide for myself that I will quit, but not yet communicate this decision and thus continue working until I find another job that pays the money I need to support my family’. Then we explored how he could put this into practice so that it becomes a realistic step to take for him.

Introducing the Scale

The client visibly enjoyed being able to move between three options now even though none of the options seemed perfect yet. Having at least three options is often perceived as distinctly better by clients than being stuck between only two possibilities. Asked to rate his progress on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 meaning that he was able to see clearly what to do and how to decide, the client said he was at 3 now compared to 1 at the beginning of our conversation. I asked him how high on the scale he wanted to get so that he had enough space to breathe, be calm enough and to be clear enough about doable next moves. He said he wanted to get to a 6 or a 7.

We continued the work on the floor by adding a next position called “none of the two – neither stay nor quit”. After some thought, his eyes started to shine. Again, at first he said ‘ah, that is not possible’ but then he said, ‘well, maybe it is possible, I mean, what I have been dreaming to do for a long time is

create my own business and become independent with my woodworks’. Stepping onto that position of course was not very easy to follow through either, because you need time to set the business up, and it takes time until you earn money. Nevertheless, the energized glow in his eyes remained while he was talking about doing what he would really like to do and so we also looked at what circumstances might enhance this fourth option. He was very clear that he did not have the energy now to start his own business but he seemed less panicky, less desperate and more in ‘someone who is taking life into his own hands’ mood. So I asked whether he would be willing to try out something even more different and a bit wild and crazy which was called the “joker” position. This position meant neither of the 4 options that we had discussed so far, but something totally different, something like a joker.



Exploring the Joker

Interestingly very shortly after he heard the word joker and stepped on the fifth piece of paper on the floor, he said, ‘oh, this is very clear, I very clearly know what the joker is. It is about making my next move and deciding something right here and now’. We had our session around 6 o’clock in the afternoon, and in the beginning he was very clear that he needed to go back to the office and work until midnight or past midnight to get things done. He explained: ‘the joker is that I do not go back to work but I just decide to go home and spend some time with my wife and my family and have this one quiet evening now to myself!’ He paused for a while and then he stood up and said ‘Things are good enough for now, and in case you want to know I am at least at 7 now on my scale. I know what I am going to do now and I will take things from here tomorrow.”

That was the end of our session. Obviously the client had been able to utilize the time we spent together to increase his choice of options sufficiently for the moment. The people who had set up the emergency meeting with me have never mentioned this client again. So I suppose he must have found a way to deal with the situation.

Case Example 2: Two job options

This client was about to take a meaningful career decision under considerable time pressure. We held the coaching session at an airport lounge. Since we both had to fly off soon, we had about one hour to work on his issue. Asked about his goal for this one hour, he said he was presented two options and wanted to clearly see which his better option was. The company that he had worked for many years had just offered him two choices of option and he needed to make a decision within three days. Time was running out, and he was clueless since both options had their downsides; however, staying in his current position was not offered as an option. Leaving his company at this time also seemed highly unreasonable.

“Given this challenging choice between two options, suppose for a moment that in fact you do see more clearly by the end of our discussion here, how will that make a difference for you and the upcoming next three days?” I asked to clarify the goal for our session. “Look, I need to take the right decision in the next 3 days and choose the one option that best represents what I really want for my career. And right now to be honest I am not sure if either option is what I really want.” Asked to scale from 1 to 10, how confident he was to take the right decision he said he was at 4.

Offer number one was the job of a CEO in Venezuela, which was in a way tempting, because he had always said that his goal was to become CEO by the age of 40. However, this specific position was challenging since it required a very difficult turnaround task with rather shaky chances of actually succeeding. He was not sure if he was really up to the job and was not really looking forward to become CEO with a high risk of failure. And becoming CEO for the first time in his life, he had a lot of respect for the double struggle of a new position and highly challenging circumstances. Offer number two was to become Assistant Regional Director for Asia. It was not exactly the position of a CEO, however with a lot wider responsibility and potential power than the Venezuela offer. The Regional Director is head of about 15 CEOs of different companies and he would be the Directors number two in line. His concern was that the job would not be challenging enough, not give him enough power or enough opportunity to show what he can do and get the best out of himself.

How would it have to be, to offer what you really want?

I am surprised how simple that coaching conversation had become in the end. The one and only question that I asked repeatedly for the next 30 to 40 minutes had been offered by the client at the be-

ginning of the session: ‘I really wish I could choose between options that represent what I really want for my career’. Consequently my leading question for our entire conversation was to invite him to get a clearer idea of how he wanted things to be really attractive: ‘How would option CEO in Venezuela have to be so that you would say yes this is a good choice and I really want it for my career?’ When I asked the question, he took a long pause as if he had not yet thought of this, but then soon he came up with a lot of clear ideas and action steps. He said he needed a very strong backup from the Board Member who was sponsoring him for this CEO position to strengthen his position towards the other stakeholders. ‘I want to talk to this Board Member and I want to have his ideas and advice of how to go about an almost impossible job.’

What else?

I simply asked, ‘what else would need to be in place so that you can with a good feeling and a good conscience look forward to take this CEO job?’ He said, ‘I need another piece of security, I would need the freedom to have someone like a personal coach who accompanies me through this procedure and who gives me enough reflection time so I can learn quickly from whatever happens and take best decisions as early as possible.’ I said ‘what else?’ And, he said, there was this issue of his own self-confidence, which needed to be high: ‘It is ok if I take occasional wrong decisions; what I cannot take are insecure decisions’. So whatever he would do after stepping up as CEO, he would need to do it from a very self-confident, determined, clear-cut position. That was the only chance to actually create the hope for forward movement. Any kind of uncertainty from his part would endanger the results he needed to achieve. I asked, ‘how could you make sure that you manage to come from a position of security?’ We then looked at earlier experiences of where he had faced difficult jobs and managed to be very clear and very determined and very self-assured about himself. While he was talking about these examples, I could observe him becoming more self-assured about what he had already accomplished in his professional life, and how he had managed to do it.

I asked him how confident he was to take the right decision concerning Venezuela on the scale. He said that 6 was as high as he could get for now and that he would get to 8 within the next days by clarifying some facts and stating some conditions he wanted guaranteed.

Same question, other option

'So for the other option where you become Assistant Regional Director, how would this job have to be shaped so that is attractive and you want to decide for it?' 'It is starting to become pretty clear to me now, I only want to take the job if I know that it is a true calling or true challenge for me. This means, I need to talk to the Regional Director, I need to clarify with him to which extent he wants to use me to create something big or very challenging, and I need him to give me a concrete task of, for example, get 30% more benefit or double sales. I want a very challenging task that is within my power and for which I am fully responsible. It is important that he believes I can do the task and he gives me the full responsibility to carry forward. If that happens, then I am interested in taking the job. Then I know that it is something where I will be able to learn a lot and where I will be able to be proud of what I achieved.'

That was basically the end of this coaching session. He said, 'now I know what I have to do during the next days to see how I can create circumstances for option A or option B so that it becomes really attractive for me and so that I can say yes, I take A or B, with a good feeling.' His confidence to take the "right" decision had interestingly moved up to 9 by the end of our session. Later I heard back from him that he had decided for the option of Assistant Regional Director. Obviously he had managed to negotiate more favourable circumstances in order to do what he wanted to do.

Case Example 3: Writing the book or burying the idea

This decision coaching took place in my second session with the client. In the first session, he had asked me to support him in moving forward with writing his book. He hoped for ideas of how to get started, because he had been planning to write a book for a long time. However, he always procrastinated and finally never really got started. He felt 'it is about time that I do write my book'. In the first session, we explored how he could raise the likelihood of actually writing the book, and we looked at that in many ways. But then when he called me for the second session, he said, 'look, I did some starting but it has not really taken off. Writing the book is still as strenuous as it was before and so despite my effort it did not start to fly. Now I need to take a decision. The decision is either to somehow really decide to write the book and do it in a way that I manage to stick it. Or, I need to decide to let go of the idea and forget about writing a book. I should just be able to say that this is something I decide not to do and I am fine with not doing it. Then I could forget it and not even worry about it anymore but keep on living my life instead.'

How close are you to take the decision?

He said he really had to decide and once and for all get rid of this "neither-nor of two options" which had become more and more unbearable. He was hoping for a fast clear cut – the sooner the better.



"How close are you to taking your clear cut decision and live happily ever after?" Knowing me from the first coaching session he said that on a scale of 1 to 10 he was at a 3 and he also pointed out that he really wished to get to 10 today. So I asked him how he would walk of the door differently after having reached the 10 today. He said he would walk out the door like a free man. Someone who can in peace and confidence do what he wants to do and not do what he does not want to do. He said it would be a total relief from a huge pressure, which had built up over the years.

In contrast he said now when he was talking about the two options, both options seemed a burden to him. Writing the book, he said, 'I am too old to force myself to do something, I so much enjoy being old and being able to do the things that I like to do, I would hate to fall back into doing something the hard way just because I decided to do it.' And on the other hand, he said, 'hey, I have been so lucky and so blessed in my life, I received the luck of, discovering and developing so many things, it would be a shame not to do something with my talent, and I do not know how to be at peace with myself if I do not do it. I would need to find a very congruent, good way of burying the book project.' And I kind of got triggered by the word 'burying', because it was, what, this was a heavy word, you know, you bury dead people, so I thought I might want to come back to that later.

The attraction of something attractive

"If we were going to have a closer look, which one do you want to start with, 'write' or 'bury'? He wanted to start with "write" so I asked: "Suppose you have decided for "write" and you were at 10 on your scale, and things were totally appropriate to your age,

and totally appropriate to your way of choosing to do things and not to do things.’ Cheering up he jumped in saying: ‘Then, all of a sudden writing would be totally light and easy, it would be almost inevitable. So I would be able to grant myself the benefit of only doing it if it goes smoothly! Yes, it should be totally smooth. I asked him to elaborate a little bit more how smoothly would be, but then I also asked him ‘and how would it change the writing process if it were smooth?’ And he said, ‘oh, that would be wonderful! Then I would not have to set aside a full month to concentrate on the book. If writing the book were smooth, actually I would just start by collecting all the papers that I have already written in technical magazines, and see what is already there. That would be very smooth. Or, if I come back from some piece of work that I do and I sit in the plane and I feel ah, it has been such an interesting meeting! I would just write down a couple of things that happened just because I wanted to write things down.’ And then he added, ‘well, actually, if I listen to myself, it sounds like this is going to be so smooth and easy because I regularly do interesting pieces of work which are worthwhile reflecting. And in addition, if I think back I must have at least 25-30 articles where I have already started to describe in a good way what I really do and what is specific about my method. So maybe it is more collecting and viewing of what I already have, and it is less the strenuous idea of actually having to write a book from the scratch.’ He said, ‘This is good enough, I think now ‘writing’ has become really smooth and attractive and it has become so very differently than at the end of our last session.



The miraculous burial

‘You mentioned the word “burial” for the other option and it has made me very curious I must admit. Can you describe the burial for me being at 10 on your scale walking out of here as a free man?’ He was hesitating first, and he started, ‘I think it would have to be really like a burial. I would invite friends and we would celebrate the fact that I let go of something and there would be some kind of a solemn sadness

about letting go of the book. But at the same time it would also become a celebration of the freedom of doing many other things in my life. So there would be friends, it would be some sort of a festive event, we would serve a good meal, we would be drinking, it would be a very formal, beautiful thing.’ I asked, ‘what else would let you know you were truly at 10?’ He said, ‘you know what would be the most interesting thing that would happen during the burial? The sky would open up above me and between the clouds there would be a voice coming from up there somewhere. And the voice would say something totally surprising: the voice would tell me ‘hey, thank you so much for having carried this idea of the book for such a long time, we truly appreciate in how good hands this idea has been with you and how much care and thought you have given this talent of writing. And as a sign of our gratitude towards you we now grant you a new talent’. You know writing had been a true talent of me, since school time I have always been an excellent writer and I knew it. Then he looked totally struck and added, ‘I just remember this not the first time something like this is happening to me. Now I remember that when I had let go of a large engagement that I thought was another true talent of mine, and the moment I let go of the project a new talent showed up and was gratefully added to my life’,

The joy of truly being able to choose

I was just about to ask how close he was now to taking a decision when he looked at me with a peaceful calmness all over his face, and he said the most surprising thing: ‘I am so grateful, thank you so much. Something very rare and valuable has become possible. It is so seldom in my life that I have the freedom, the freedom to truly choose between two things that are both a gift and both comfortably attractive.’ And he said, ‘and now I feel it is one of the few times in my life where I truly have a choice. I can choose to write the book the way I started to describe, and it is a gift to be able to choose that option, and I can also choose to bury the book the way that I described and it is a wonderful thing to choose and also a gift of an option. And that is all I need for now. Paradoxically now that I am so close to choosing that I am at 10 now all of a sudden I do not have to choose anymore because now I have a true choice. “

And that was the end of the coaching. And by the way, I do not know for sure how things continued. All I know is that I have met this client at several occasions in the meantime, and this dilemma and this discomfort never came up again in our talks.

Tentative Assumptions

Reflecting about what worked well in the three described case examples, I am tempted to draw conclusions of what can be useful when working with clients in a decision situation. I have formulated two tentative assumptions despite the fact that I am hesitant to draw conclusions. This is because the true magic of coaching is co-created between client and coach, and emerges in a unique and unrepeatable way. So every case is different. And my experience is that, whenever I think I know what works, the magic of co-creation with the client disappears.

Assumption No. 1: Always act in a way, which increases the choice of options

This assumption comes from a rather technical point of view. In all three cases, it seemed to be helpful for clients to have more choice of options. More options can mean either actually additional possibilities that they can choose from, or it can mean more choice to actively influence and shape the options, or it can also mean making something attractive so that it becomes a true option. A quote is from Gregory Bateson says: ‘always act in a way that increases the choice of options.’

Assumption No. 2: Utilize what the client offers

This assumption is rather a matter of trust. Trusting the client made the job of the coach a lot easier in all three case examples above. Clients seem to bring the key to their solution along when they come to the session. It pays to carefully listen to what the client wants and to work with it and to trust that whatever the client offers or suggests might be worth following up.

Probably the best example of effective utilization is the client’s idea of the burial in the third case. At first it seemed something weird and intuitively I would not want to go there as a coach. And yet it turned out to be the key to the story the client told about the sky parting. Everything that happened afterwards deeply touched him and deeply reconnected him with very important resources that he could access in his life now. That was not to be expected, that was probably just as much a big surprise for the client as it might have been an initial risk for the coach.

Perhaps the necessary trust comes from a lot of positive experiences with clients as the true experts for their own solution. Experience helps coaches to become more confident that they do not need to do anything smart, because clients come up with whatever is important anyway. It helps to stay simple as a coach trusting the client.

Useful Tool

Scaling questions can be used in decision coaching and of course beyond.

On a scale of 1 to 10...

Asking about scales proved to be helpful in all three of the above decision cases. The scaling questions appeared with three different titles for the scale (depending on the client’s goal)

- Session progress scale (case 1)
- Confidence to take the “right” decision scale (case 2)
- Readiness to make a decision scale (case 3)

The questions along the scales were asked along the following simple model (S.U.R.F.):



Scale progress

- Where are you on the scale?

Upgrade to preferred future:

- How high do you want to get on the scale?
- Suppose you get there: how will it make a difference?

Review existing resources

- what is already making you say you are at 3 and not at 1 anymore?

Foresee upcoming progress

- how will you notice that you have moved up from 3 to 4?



Combining these questions in a decision coaching session can generate some of the following benefits for clients:

Asking clients, ‘on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 meaning you are ready to take the decision and 1 meaning the total opposite, where are you right now?’ helps them take a step back and gain some distance. Then they usually say 3, and so you can ask them, ‘so what is already making you say that it is a 3 and not a 1 anymore’, in order to reinforce what is already clear and what brings them already closer to the decision. When you ask clients, ‘and where on the scale would you like to be by the end of the session?’ and then have clients describe their goal: ‘at 7 I would be more calm, I would be more concentrated, I would be more clear’ like in Case No. 1, you give them a chance to connect with their preferred future by using the scale. Usually if clients have a chance in the beginning of a session to describe what they would like to have at the end and how it would make a difference at the end, my experience is that it becomes much more likely for clients to actually be reach their goal.

Author

Peter Szabo is a Master Certified Coach and specializes in Brief Coaching for executives.

He is founder and training director of SolutionSurfers, the largest solution-focused coaching school in Switzerland with branches on three different continents. In addition, he teaches solution-focused coaching at several post-graduate university programs throughout Europe and North America. Since many years he is an assessor for the certification of professional coaches with the International Coach Federation and holds keynote speeches about the solution-focused paradigm change in the fields of coaching, training and organizational development.

Peter co-authored Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions (Norton, 2000) with Insoo Kim Berg; and Coaching Plain and Simple (Norton, 2009) with his business partner, Daniel Meier.

Peter is a passionate surfer since the age of 50. He likes to use the metaphor of wave riding to illustrate how utilizing existing forward moving forces makes conversations more effective and success more sustainable. (Hence the surf pictures in this paper)

Peter lives in Basel, Switzerland with his wife and three children