



Episode 44 – Emotion at Work in Decision Making

Chatting with Simon Ashton

Phil: Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we take a deep dive into the human condition, having conversations that you might not necessarily expect. Now people make decisions all of the time and some of those are deliberate and purposeful decisions and others maybe less so, so we make decisions about what we say or not say, what we do or don't do. Often I think when you think about decisions as there's almost a synonymous link with logic and actually emotions are a massive part of decision making, a huge part in decision making. The reality is that emotions drive an awful lot of actions and decisions that we take. So today's episode is going to delve into that area. Now we are like 43 episodes into the podcast I think and we haven't yet talked about decision making. I know we've mentioned a couple of decision making podcasts on previous episodes and I've talked about the freakonomics podcast and others that are in there as well. But we haven't explicitly really delved into this idea on emotion at work and decision making, which is the title of the podcast today. When our guest and I had our usual pre-call, I really enjoyed the discussions and debate that we had, I thought you know what I think this is going to make a great podcast to put out on the air. So let's get our guest on the air. So welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, Simon Ashton.

Simon: Hello, how are you?

Phil: Hello, I'm good, how are you?

Simon: Very well, thank you.

Phil: Good. We are recording in the midst of the coronavirus, COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. So when I was thinking about my innocuous yet unexpected question, which is how we traditionally open this podcast, I was inspired by that. My unexpected yet innocuous question for you this morning Mr Ashton is, what makes for a good neighbour?

Simon: Oh, yeah, in these really uncertain times. I think actually I've actually got to know my neighbours better in these times than I ever have before. I think a good neighbour for us is one that keeps their distance right now, but also that there is a sense of checking in or asking if you are making a trip to a supermarket or you're getting an online delivery that actually my neighbours not adjacent to but across the road as well, everyone has asked, can I get you anything? If I'm going to the shop, do you need anything? Or actually it's really good time to go now because it's pretty quiet up there or down the road or wherever it is and they've got these things in stock. So actually I think this neighbour thing, I suppose you could take it even further than just being neighbours in terms of on your street, that actually people seem to have got much more connected much more quickly. I'm just going to expand slightly, my friendship group I think I've seen and spoken to my friends and my family more than ever in these last five or six weeks because of the Zoom and the Webex and the different opportunities. I think it's driven this connectivity, this connection, this wanting to spend more time with people. Now that might be different for others but I've found that in my world that everybody seems to have been looking out for, spending more time, talking to each other much more frequently and I think that's a wonderful thing. Whether it will continue, the cynics may say maybe not, I think it

might just go back to the normal as it was and people look after themselves, but who knows, hopefully we'll continue in the same vein.

Phil: Would you say is it the depth of the interactions that's, I don't know if the word is improved, you mentioned with your friends and family you've not seen them or talked to them as much as you have. But with your neighbours is it about the frequency of connecting with them or is the depth of connection or both?

Simon: Yeah, I think there's a depth of connection in that now we're all in this together and I think there's that war time spirit that everyone's doing the same things at the same time and everyone's gardening. We're fortunate enough to have a garden so we look over the fence and everyone's out in the garden tending to whatever they can do. So we're always sharing in that and sharing in advice and expertise and my neighbours have helped me with getting my roses a little bit sorted, because the house that we inherited they were all over the place. But I think the connection and the understanding that actually the NHS going out and celebrating the carers on a Thursday evening, just to see how many people on our street have really taken to that as well, and that we're all complimenting each other for doing that as well. I think that again shows that there's a connection on the street that probably wasn't there before and a community on my street that probably wasn't there before. I think that's an amazing thing. So, yeah, I think the connections are deeper, I think the information that we're sharing is much more maybe intimate as well. I think it's been a really fascinating time from a people getting to know each other, who have lived next to each other, I've been in this house for six years and you just get to know people much quicker and much better, and for the greater good in my opinion.

Phil: We haven't got anybody opposite us, so we've got a church opposite where we are and we've got neighbours each side and it's been really interesting, the neighbours to our right if you look at our house, we get on really well with them anyway. So we used to call them our fair weather neighbours because what would happen typically is the moment it got sunny, because both they and their son, and then my wife and I and our three children we love being outside. So whenever the weather got good we'd then end up all being outside at the same time and that then invariably would turn into barbecues or get-togethers or those sorts of things. And typically we didn't really see them that much over the winter because they were in their house, we were in our house, and it was almost just being outside in the same place prompted the socialising rather than being something planned or organised. We're quite lucky that the weather has been good in April so we've seen them a lot actually, there's been lots of conversations happening over the fence, appropriately distanced and all that sort of stuff. I was in Asda yesterday doing our weekly shop and I heard the idea of a socially distanced barbecue, so they have their barbecue in their garden and we have our barbecue in our garden. I thought I like that idea because we'd been having the conversation over the fence but we hadn't really done the chatting and socialising essentially getting drunk together. I thought that might be a nice thing to do because we haven't done that.

Whereas the neighbours the other side we've got a really different relationship with, it's been neighbourly, we've been checking on each other and similar to you appreciating when everyone's been outside clapping for the NHS and keyworkers on a Thursday night. It's interesting, apart from the fact we're drinking together less, it doesn't seem to have changed the dynamics of the relationships



either side. I quite like that because it's about keeping your distance and checking in but not being on top of each other and not constantly being in each other's pockets type thing as well.

Simon: Yeah. I was going to just say I think that, going onto our topic today, you decide who you want to speak to, you decide how you interact with those people and you decide has the context of your world changed the way you now want to interact with those people I guess? Does it give you a different mindset around actually oh it's good to talk, as Bob Hoskins said on the BT advert.

Phil: Congratulations on getting context in before me. A guest getting context in on the podcast before I do, that's almost unheard of.

Simon: Yes, it's an occupational habit.

Phil: Let's link that into the topic of today then, what might be some of those factors that are driving the decisions that people might be taking at the moment?

Simon: Yeah, I think the biggest one for me is fear. Fear and uncertainty drives people's behaviour but also it drives what they do. We've all got different opinions, but the decision to go and run out and buy stock up on a million toilet rolls when COVID-19 was first announced and coronavirus and schools were closed, is that the right decision for the country? You've heard of the Prisoner's Dilemma scenario where do you go out there and cooperate or do you look after yourself? I think in terms of people who have gone out initially stockpiled goods, toilet paper, in my opinion not the right thing to do and a stupid thing to do. But you can understand why they made that decision because they were thinking about survival and keeping themselves alive and keeping their families safe. I think that for me is the one key factor, why people are doing what they're doing right now is first of all a fear and a survival, and then off the back of that there's any number of other factors that will impact upon their status, their standing. There's lots of things, but I think the first one is fear first and foremost.

Phil: For the listener that may not have heard of the Prisoner's Dilemma, do you want to just expand on that a little bit?

Simon: Yeah, so the Prisoner's Dilemma is a fairly old experiment where if let's say two individuals are caught shoplifting and they are taken to the police station and you are then given a certain scenario whereas if you dob in your fellow shoplifter...

Phil: Nice use of dobbing in I like that.

Simon: If you tell or rat on your fellow then there's a different scale in terms of how long you're going to go away for. So if you save yourself you'll have a shorter prison sentence, if you rat in on your other one then you're going to have, or you both cooperate, you're going to have a prison sentence but it will be the optimal scenario. I think what we're trying to say is that most individuals don't cooperate, they tend to go and decide to save themselves, which is great for one party but for the other party in terms of having maybe a longer prison sentence. I think, Phil, you might be able to explain that Prisoner's Dilemma slightly better, but from my perspective and in my role in terms of leadership development and what we know is the optimum scenario, is if we can work in unison and work in cooperation and



cohesion, and if we are then staying silent in this prison's dilemma, which means that we're agreeing to say the same thing, then our optimal scenario as a group is better. Rather than it just being as one individual succeeding and winning and taking the cash prize and going home. I think it's about maybe sharing that cash prize and sharing the resources that we have to be able to succeed as a group, rather than just individuals.

Phil: I agree with you that I think there is a lot of fear around, and that's then affecting and impacting the decisions that people are making often because when you're, I don't really like the phrase 'in the grip', but I can't think of a better one. When you're a heightened emotional state, that sounds a bit more waffly and academic than in the grip, but anyway, when you're in that heightened emotional state there's a technical term that's called, and I suppose if I'm going to go with in that heightened emotional state, I can therefore go on to talk about what's called the refractory period. Which is refractory, so the refractory period is a period of time where you're in the grip of an emotion, it clouds the filter that you perceive data and information through. It deliberately focuses the senses to attend to stimulus that reinforce the emotion that you're already experiencing. So if for example fear is in response to a threat of some description, whether it be a physical threat, a psychological threat, something along those lines, if we're in midst of that heightened emotional state, then we look around, hear things, see things and what we interpret that in a way that reinforces the emotion we're experiencing. Now that's often where the catastrophising stuff comes from, where it might begin with oh if I do this and I get it wrong then I'm going to be in trouble and if I'm in trouble that means that I'm going to get a poor rating on my performance review. If I get a poor rating on my performance review I'm going to be underperforming and if I'm underperforming then I'm going to be performance managed. If I'm performance managed I'm going to be sacked and if I'm sacked I'll lose my house and if I lose my house I lose my family and if I lose my family I lose my purpose for being and then that rapid catastrophising stuff can happen. That can be because of that, that heightened emotional state that then reinforces the emotion that we're experiencing.

In addition to fear though I think there's a lot of sadness going around, so if fear is a threat of harm thing then sadness is about loss. And that can be a loss of physical things, it can also be a loss of psychological things, but what's happened especially with the social distancing and being in lockdown is there's been a lot of loss, I've lost connection with my family, not I have, sorry, there's potentially it could be perceived as I've lost my freedom because I can't go out, I've lost choice because I can't actually choose what I do, I've lost my work because you think people have lost their job and/or they've been furloughed and/or what they were meant to do, what their job was has changed so dramatically that they've got to work in a really different way. I've lost my connection with friends, I've lost my connection with family, I've lost my opportunity to go to the pub, I've lost my opportunity to go out for meals. We've lost so many things and I wonder if there's an element of what some people are trying to do is exercise choice or exercise what they might perceive to be some degree of choice by taking some actions that they take. Which might for example panic buying but it could also be I was reading a piece on the BBC website just yesterday about beauty spots in Yorkshire and how beauty spots in Yorkshire are seeing a really high footfall. That there were more fines issued in Yorkshire over the weekend than there were in the rest of the country combined and people who had journeyed from Kent and Lancashire and other places to get there, and visit these places of natural beauty. I'm reading the behaviour thinking hmm I wonder why that is then? Because at some point whoever drove that car and all went with them made a decision to go and do that. Which it's "against" the guidance



yet it was a decision they made anyway. And part of me wonders is that because it's a pushback at choice, it's a pushback at trying to get something because I've lost so much else? Sorry that was a very long...

Simon: No, I think that's brilliant and if I can come in on that, I think the choice thing is choice architecture, the way that we go about making our decisions are built around habits as well. So those people may have done that every single, I don't know, at that time of the year they've gone to that beauty spot because it's what they've done. But I also think that we have more choice than ever before, our generation, the people who are alive right now, more choice in terms of the products that we consume, the activities that we can engage with, be those social activities. The alcoholic drinks we can buy from these artisan gin distilleries, through to whatever it may be out there, the choice is unreal. I think that we've now created a world where expectation is very high and almost a feeling that we deserve this because we work so hard. Whereas if you went and talked to my parents or grandparents and certainly my grandparents they would go, no, you do what you're told to do, you behave, and actually the number of choices that they had to make was much slimmer and much smaller. Therefore I think we're almost a product of the way that the world has developed. And because of, and again going to decision making long term, the amount of information that we consume and that is available right now is unreal and the brain just can't deal with it anyway in the first instance. I'm sure we'll talk about biases and how the brain takes shortcuts to process all this information is key.

But I think that the choices that we've made are because we've created these habits of what we do and we now know that we've got lots of choice and we can do what we want to do. Again the question is generationally do we believe we are, and this may be quite controversial but more important than before? So some people think actually I am who I am, I am a special human being and I can do what I want to do at times. I know that might be because of loss and that might be because I can't go to watch my team play football or I can't go...

Phil: Oh yes, I forgot sport when I do my list of losses earlier.

Simon: Which is a massive one for lots of people and that is then creating its own challenges around in terms of relationships and people not being able to a) see their mates but also that people are at home with partners for long periods of time as well. But I think decision making and choice is a fascinating subject and it's huge and what does it sit into and where does it fall into around, is it down to habits? And we had a very interesting conversation about key books out there and one of them is The Chimp Paradox which is the Professor Steve Peters who's a psychiatrist up in Sheffield and who's a lecturer in Sheffield University and he has broken down the neuroscience of how the brain, going back to this fear, the emotional part of the brain, how it overtakes the more rational thinking part of the brain. That for me I found it quite an interesting book and I know it helped a lot of people. You have a different view and we can probably talk about that.

Phil: Yeah.

Simon: But I think we're talking about the brain in the first instance and how does the brain deal with these choices, deal with these decisions. I think it's such a fascinating subject and if we've got now four hours, brilliant, we can sit and talk about that, actually four days maybe.



Phil: Shall we start with, because there was a line in there from both what you were saying and some of the bits I was adding earlier on, so shall we start with the biases and heuristics, would that be a useful...?

Simon: Let's do that.

Phil: Go on then, let's start from there then. So mental shortcuts, biases and heuristics?

Simon: So I think the first thing that we need to talk about is the big myth out there is that we are rational, logical creatures, that we make decisions because we think them through, that everything is well thought out and that we are very economical with our brain power. And actually that's not true at all and I think what we've seen through the research and the heuristics, and biases that the key works done by Daniel Kahneman who in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, and there are lots of authors who are around that subject as well, but I think he made it, with his partner, made it very, very tangible and we could understand it. But I think the whole point of this is that the brain, because of the amount of information that we have, the brain can shortcut and take it and try and predict and decide through a much quicker means. It's much harder work to go and take it into the prefrontal cortex and use what they call executive functioning part of the brain, which is planning and decision making and strategy, that all takes place in that frontal lobe. But I think that actually what we found is that probably 95% of our decisions are made on this level two thinking, a much more quicker thinking, which is done in different parts of the brain and it's certainly not one specific area but it's done by almost a reflex, rather than a reflect. So in terms of the reflect is the thinking part, the one that you do the hard work and then the reflective thinking is the one that's in the System two, which Daniel Kahneman talks about, which basically allows us to go and make that decision nice and quickly, the brain doesn't really want to work too hard therefore by making those decisions.

There are lots of heuristics and biases and I think at the last count I think there's about 220 biases that they've identified so far in our thinking and what we do. And we can touch on some of the specific ones and there's a key module in terms of how I train and some of the key things that I try and help leaders and managers in, is critical thinking as a topic. I think critical thinking it's an area where the World Economic Forum they did a survey, a bit of research 2015, what were the top ten skills that you need? 2020, what are the top ten skills that you need? And critical thinking, creative problem solving are at the top of both lists and I think will be continuing in the next five years as well ultimately, particularly with where we are now and what the coronavirus, COVID-19 crisis has created for businesses. Those who can crunch a problem, make a decision for the greater good of their organisation and their people, but the key factor is, are we aware of all these biases, these shortcuts, the things that our brains naturally go to. Be that, is it about experience, do we just rely on our experience as one of them, that we just go back to what we've done time and time again because we know we're super experienced. Now some might argue that's great because I am super experienced, I know exactly what I'm doing, but is that always the best source or rely on to make that next decision and decision for your business? Other ones such as let's say you've hired an individual in your organisation and you did the hiring and you appointed the person, but this person just isn't cutting it. They're not right, they're not right for the business, and they're not right for your team and the amount of time you invest in to try and get that person up to the level and try and get the training and

the capability up, just isn't working. Now because we don't want to admit to either our wider group or to ourselves that we've made a mistake and it's that fear of failure or looking silly to a group, we will continue to invest in that person. Whereas actually maybe the best decision, the best option is actually that person is managed out of the business or we place them somewhere else in the organisation that's better suited to them. So they're just a couple of examples but I think that we could talk all day about heuristics and biases because I think again it's a really fascinating part of decision making, critical thinking, how we operate on a day to day basis.

Phil: Absolutely. So that pattern making thing I talk about as well from a linguistics point of view, which might sound a bit strange, like Phil why are you talking about patterns and language in decision making? Often we make decisions about what people are saying based on the patterns that we've had with that person and/or people like them before. And what that then does is it interferes and impacts with our ability to listen and that therefore that then can lead to less effective decision making approaches. I guess I'm talking to you and the audience at the same time, if you think about somebody that you know really well and think about a typical, if you want to keep it in the workplace you can or personally either one is okay. Think about a typical interaction with them and there'll be certain phrases or certain sayings or certain stories that when that person begins on that narrative or they say a certain number of words in a row, you know what's going to come. You know what's going to come next, you can script it out in your head to know exactly what that person is going to say. And the challenge that we have is that the person doesn't always say that, it might be that nine times out of ten they do and of which case that mental shortcut then therefore for you is a really helpful and useful thing to do. Whereas for the one time out of ten when they don't say what you expect them to say, actually you miss all of what they've actually said. And if you miss all of what they've actually said then whatever decision you make on how you apply or what you do with that information or what you do with what happens next, then you've just lost all of that.

I see it all the time in meetings that I'm part of, I'm bought in to consult with an organisation about when they're going or strategy, I watch the interactions happening with the senior leadership teams and they're just not listening to each other in any way, shape or form. I'm sat there just blown away by how much they are filling in what other people are saying based on what that people typically says and they're not actually listening to what the other person's saying. And that takes them down a track where they make some really poor decisions and I'm sat there working really hard to be attentive and listening to what somebody's actually saying, and what they're not saying, but that's a whole other thing, we'll come onto that maybe later. Then I'm sat there going I don't understand where you're going and when I play it back often the response is, yes, that was what I was actually saying and it wasn't what that person thought I was saying. Okay, well we need to do something with that then. And that for me is another example of those shortcuts because it's easier for us to not really listen because it just eases capacity in the brain. A previous guest on the podcast Cliff Lansley he talks about us being cognitive misers, as human beings we're cognitively lazy, if we can find a shortcut then we'll use that shortcut, if we can find that rule of thumb then we'll use that, rather than give all of our attention to whatever that particular thing is at that particular point in time.

Simon: I think that hard work, do we feel that hard work in the brain? That's when we get home after making lots of decisions and especially when you get further up the hierarchy in organisations, that is your role ultimately to make decisions, to make the calls why that business is going to go and invest



or acquire or launch new products, whatever it may be. I think that when you get home you feel cognitively depleted, you can feel you're tired and done in. Because I think that prefrontal context, that bit that does the decision making and also self control part as well, is when you step through the door and I've got three young kids and they can be a handful at times, if you don't check yourself before you walk in through that door, you make the wrong decision in terms of you react in the wrong way because you're exhausted because you've made all those decisions all day. I think it's a really interesting point around those meetings, you know when you're sat listening to other executives or leadership teams talking and you're right they don't listen to each other, a) because listening is hard work. They're also in their own mind thinking about what they need to do next and their own decisions and tasks ahead, and also I think sometimes, and I don't know whether you agree, Phil, but sometimes the meetings are arranged at the wrong time, so people tend to have different peaks and troughs in where their attention and where their ability to make decisions is because of their cognitive resources. So let's say for me my power hour is ten till half eleven, and that's when I can get a lot of stuff done and make some good decisions and eat those frogs.

Phil: Nice Brian Tracy reference there.

Simon: Yeah, and again a decent book worth reading although it's a little bit maybe dated now but it's still got some good stuff in there. But anyway I think when you make those decisions is imperative to how good the decisions are as well. So if you're doing them at four o'clock, five o'clock in the afternoon, that might be necessary, I'm not saying that we can organise everybody's diaries when everybody's in their power hour. But I think it's important that we recognise that there are certain times in the day where we don't make the best decisions because we are cognitively tired.

Phil: There's a really interesting study and I think it's Thinking Fast and Slow actually, it might be a bit of an older study now, the research was into parole and the likelihood of gaining parole. So it was in the US in particular the study and depending on what time of day your file went before the judge could dramatically affect the chances of which you would receive parole.

Simon: I think it was before lunch time I think that's what he said because then after lunch they've maybe have a heavier lunch and something to eat and therefore felt a little bit more lethargic, and they've made a lot of decisions, they've made a lot of parole decisions during that day. So if you got to the end of the day you stood no chance basically.

Phil: I was talking to somebody recently when I was doing some coaching, we were talking about decision fatigue and we were discussing how at work they find themselves being really decisive and when they get home, the last thing they want to do is to make a decision. When they get home what they want is somebody else to decide for them. It was interpreted by their partner, I can't remember if it was spouse or partner, I'll just go for partner, as ambivalence, as interpreted as not caring. The spouse would say I want to know what you want to do because I want to account for your preferences and your wants and needs in whatever we do. And the person was like I just don't care. And that's not ambivalence it's I'm just exhausted from making decisions, I've been making decisions all day and I don't want to make any anymore. They were talking about how it can then affect that relationship at home because it's interpreted as they're not caring, but also then it causes friction in the relationship at home, because what the other person wants is to be considerate and kind and thinking about the

other and not dictating everything that happens, but the individual wasn't able to articulate that. So it was only through the sessions that we got to the output where they were like oh that's what it is, it's decision fatigue. So we talked about was the friction that was happening at home and how difficult they found that and over the course of the conversation we got to the point where they realised what it was, that actually it was that they've run out of energy for making decisions because they made so many during the course of the day.

Simon: Yeah, which then explains why we tend to watch the same things on Netflix or our go-to programmes and this is one that we do because both my wife and I work full time, we have a menu that's set ready every week that we've already sorted on Sunday to make sure that we know that we're having Monday to Friday for evening meals.

Phil: Oh, I thought you were talking TV, I thought you had a TV menu and I was like wow that is super organised.

Simon: No, not that organised but certainly for meals we get in and know what we're having so that it's all sorted, rather than having to think, oh what do I want to have this evening? Because even that small basic choice can be hard work and then you eat poorly and then if you're eating poorly, you're sleeping poorly, and if you're sleeping poorly, it all cascades into the physiological as well as the psychological. It all links in together massively. So really interesting.

Phil: That was one of the other practices, I did a quite a few years ago now actually I had a long term contract three days a week with a particular client, I got fed up with everybody saying about back to back, oh I'm back to back all day, just back to back. I made a decision that I would only meet for 45 minutes, so I was going to give myself a 15 minute window in between meetings. They were like, "You'll ask me to finish this at two, so can I meet you then?" "No, you can have me at 2:15?" "Oh, but I've got another meeting at 3:00." "That's fine, we can just do 45 minutes, it doesn't need to be an hour." "Oh, do you really need that break?" "Yeah, if you want me and you want all of my attention and you want me to be fully present and you want me to contribute effectively and make a difference in that meeting, then, yeah." Because if I don't I'll just be fuelling up on, I don't drink coffee, but filling up on tea and sugar, that then leads to impatience and impatience leads to poor decision making and so on, and so on, and so on.

Simon: Yeah, and all you're doing is relying on the information that you know about yourself. I think decisions are made based on good data, good information, but you've got to be aware of that information even if that's psychological information about how you perform and where you perform well in decision making during the day, and that you know if I can have 45 minutes, a good strong 45 minutes and 15 minutes then of a break, stretch, walk, water and then back into the meeting, that's the data I know works for me. I think that it all starts with good information first of all to make sure we're taking on that information and being aware of that information. And particularly if it's for you as an individual making decisions, putting that flashlight onto you as an individual, your self awareness, what are my assumptions, my biases, my beliefs? But also what are my actions, what am I doing if I'm having five meetings back to back each an hour long, where am I even going to go and have a comfort break? My wife has talked about that in the organisation they've shortened their meetings to make sure that people can actually go and have a stretch, and go and have a comfort break and then come

back. Rather than having five hours of just back to back because I think lots of organisations have found that now, that although you can't now walk down the corridor to an office or to another person's desk and say, hey how you doing? It's now I've got to organise meeting after meeting, virtual meeting after virtual meeting and actually people in certain organisations are busier than they've ever been right now because of those back to back virtual meetings.

Phil: Yeah, and that's where it potentially links into some of that societal/ego pressure to be busy and to be online and to be present. Either potentially from a line manager to members of team perspective which is if I can't see them they're not busy and they're not doing anything and what are they doing? I don't know. Or there's a I need to be showing that I'm present and showing that I'm busy and showing that I'm on. A friend of mine told me a while ago that when her husband worked for one particular company, the implicit competition between a group of managers was who could be the last person to comment before the day ended? It was like a WhatsApp group of a group of leaders, peers and then their boss. The unwritten rule was the boss was interested in who was commenting last and who was commenting first? So what it meant was some people would go on WhatsApp at half past midnight to go I had this great idea and then somebody else would be on at half five in the morning going oh yeah, I've had an even better one type thing. Because of the pressure or the expectation to be on, that must be a real challenge at the moment. Almost coming back full circle to where you began with the fear and the uncertainty, and I've got these people that are disparate and spread all over the place and I don't know what they're doing. If I don't know what they're doing they could make me look bad, if they make me look bad that could mean I get a poor rating and if I get a poor rating then I'm underperforming and so on, and so on, and so on.

Simon: I think that point you were making, and it's almost that social conformity isn't it, I need to show that I'm doing what other people are doing so that I'm not out of that group, in group/out group, which is again something that we all fall into. I remember an experiment by Zimbardo, The Human Zoo and he talked about where one person was set aside, they weren't told about the scenario, the other 13 in the room were told that they were going to set a fire or a pretend fire under the door of this room, and they blew the smoke into the room and the 13 people were sat there just carrying on listening to whatever was happening in front of them. And one person was going can you not see that smoke that's coming through the door? Didn't say anything and kept just looking at people going there's no reaction here, I don't understand why people aren't reacting. The smoke kept coming through and kept coming through and kept coming through, and the person didn't move. The point is that they would have ultimately not died but the severity of that situation gets worse and worse, and worse but the person is not going to move because everyone else is doing it, everyone else is staying where they are. That bias of being able to just stay there, and I think that's what you're talking about there is that we're accepting the fact that I want to keep going until half 12, one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning to prove that I'm in part of the group, but also that I'm in the eyes of the boss doing the right thing. That from an emotional and psychological and just a stress perspective is well, yeah, that's a challenging place to work if you want to be on all the time, wow.

Phil: Yeah, and I think it links into, I say it links into, I'm going to link it into, because we all craft identities, we craft identities all of the time and regular listeners of the podcast may have heard me going on and is something that I talk about a lot anyway. So we craft these identities that we have by taking lines in terms of what we say or what we do or the actions that we choose to make. And then



what that does is once it starts to create that identity we then want to act in accordance with it, you can link into Cialdini's stuff if you want to with the Consistency Principle, that once you've made a commitment to do something you want to act in line with that. But also organisations and/or managers put those identities on people because they can say they're the type of person that succeeds here is, and organisations do it with their values or their purpose statements or their organisational behaviour, competency framework things because they say these are the behaviours that are needed to succeed here. They can do it explicitly in that way but also managers or organisations or groups I guess as well can place identities on people, to say well if you work here you are one of these. So if you work at Amazon you're an Amazonian. If you work at Google you're a Googler. And those things then come with those identities that are put on you, come with a set of expectations. And if you don't conform with those expectations, thinking back to your point, if you don't conform with those expectations that has implications. I say it does, it potentially has implications and ramifications because if you don't comply you're then part of the out group, and if you're part of the out group that's maybe a good thing but it may not be a good thing.

Simon: No.

Phil: Another organisation that I used to work in regularly said right we need to bring in some different kind of people, we recruit our own image, we need to shape things up, we need to bring new people in. Routinely what would happen is you would bring them in, they'd last anywhere between 12 and 18 months and then the organisation would metaphorically chew them and spit them out, because the individuals were so different to what the rest of the organisation was like. Even though the organisation is saying we want different, when different arrived it would be like oh actually I'm not sure we do want different because different is challenging and hard, and asks different questions and doesn't conform and pushes back and acts in a way that is different to what most people do and actually do I want that? I'm not sure if we do want that so maybe they need to move on, maybe there's a new opportunity waiting for them somewhere else.

Simon: Yeah, that homogenous groups, the ones that if everyone thinks the same then they're easier to manage but the results are pretty average. Well it's safe and it's a group I think isn't it and I think that's where this opportunity to be able to stick your head above the parapet and just say something different. That's where the great ideas come from, the great decisions come from, the great problems come from but actually if that leader, and I think I talk about this a lot, but if that culture and the leadership team are saying the same thing all the time, why would you stick your head up and go, I've got a different idea, I've got a different way of doing it. But it's psychological safety, I suppose that's the other thing isn't it, psychological safety, to be able to say do you want hold on a minute, no that's not right. I know that Amazon do have one of their values is to challenge assumptions, to go out there and really challenge assumption consistently. Whether it's said and whether it's done are two different things because that's the same with lots of organisations, but I think that this challenging of other people and having a really diverse mix of human beings. Because individual decision making versus group decision making that's a whole different topic isn't it as well? Getting a group of people together to make a decision versus, so is that leader very experienced and isn't open to ideas and listens but doesn't listen, and therefore the group just carries on. If the group themselves are all the same, quite homogenous. So what's the decision making process within a group? There's lots of really interesting studies around group thinking and group decision making but, yeah, again culture going

back to your point, has a huge impact on the way that lots of organisation decisions are made without a doubt.

Phil: Because earlier on we talked about biases and heuristics and that decision making group bit, one of the ones that, when I started to recap Tversky's stuff, one of the ones that really stuck with me was the anchoring heuristic. Especially from a facilitation point of view, whether it be facilitating meetings or facilitating events or facilitating learning, it's something that I'm really mindful of now when I'm opening up a discussion and opening up a debate when I'm asking people to make a judgment or make a decision on their thoughts on something. Whether that be I'm asking them to rate their belief in our ability to succeed out of ten or whether I'm asking them say do you think we should do a, b, c or d? The first person to go will then create an anchor that everyone will tend to hang around, that initial vote for want of a better phrase or that initial opening is going to create a point that you then anchor yourself around. Whereas actually if people were able to take some time and think more independently and individually you might get a broader range of answers. One of the things that I'll often do is ask people to write something down on a Post-It note or equivalent to do it individually in response to a question, so that we don't get that heuristic or that bias at play, well the aim is to get a maybe more authentic view of responses. People might not think they're influenced what that first person said, whether they might think they're influenced by them or not, is less relevant than whether they are actually influenced by them.

Simon: I've done that myself in training events and facilitation events and I've asked one person how would you score yourself on whatever exercise it was. And then if you go around the room and ask other people how they're feeling, you're never going to get an honest or a true perspective of what that person's feeling. So that anonymity, as you say write it down on a piece of paper and I think also letting the boss speak last as well, if you're in a meeting, or you're in a group, the boss goes out there and asks for individual opinions and asks for what people are thinking, rather than speaking first. A lot of the time it's almost classed as the leader of that group to say this is where we're at, this is what I'm thinking, this is where we're going and you've already then primed them, anchored them straightaway into what they're going to say or maybe challenge what they were going to say and go to a safer option. If you are a leader sit back and let the team talk first so that you can then at least get maybe a truer picture before anchoring them with your own views and opinions.

Phil: There's a few things that are running through my head, so one is that we mentioned a couple of things that I'm not sure we've explored or maybe there's more opportunity to explore, if I say we haven't explored them fully that's me putting my value judgment on it. So we've talked about habits and I'm not sure we've really explored habits, I'm not sure if there's any more you want to explore around habits? We've also talked about is there potentially something generationally or culturally about people feeling or being more important, because that was after we talked about the Prisoner's Dilemma and thinking about am I in it for me or is it for the collective good? There might be something around that to explore. Are there any other biases and heuristics that we want to explore and talk about? And then we've talked about The Chimp Paradox as well. Those are the things that I've noted as we've been working our way through to think do we want to go back and explore those some more, because I'm just conscious that I want to make sure that we explore all the different areas that you're looking to talk about. Is there anything else that you would want to add to that list, Simon, that we haven't talked about so far?

Simon: I think one of the things that I would put in there is the skill of questions and questioning yourself but also questions that allow us to open up the floor to make a better decision. What I mean by that is I think that lots of individuals we don't ask brilliant questions or beautiful questions to be able to get to the decisions. And if we ask the questions because a question is what shall I have for my breakfast? What shall I wear today? We ask ourselves questions all the time but we tend to maybe go to the easier answer to the question and make it an a or a b, a one or the other. And actually if we can keep it open and put options on the table that then makes it a much more richer answer and a richer decision or a problem that we've solved. I think questions are something that I think are a skill first of all but something that really helps in decision making as well.

Phil: We've got a nice list there then so we've got habits, biases and heuristics, the me versus us, Chimp Paradox and questioning. So what I'll do then is in a second I'll hand the floor over to you to think about which one of those you want to go and explore next?

Simon: So out of the list that you gave, generation difference, the habits, The Chimp Paradox, I think let's start with Chimp Paradox because how does that help individuals make better decisions? I think we'll go back to our conversation before we had the podcast, we have differing views in terms of the benefits of that. Or maybe not the benefit but in terms of how that information has been distilled into a piece of literature to be able to help other individuals. I think that for me the world of neuroscience and psychology they are such difficult and challenging spaces, some of the people who in these fields are geniuses and are super clever and the topics and research that is being generated and created is mind-blowing for lots of people. But I do think that it's information that does need to be distilled to help people make decisions on how they want to interact with their world, be that with their relationships, and that's relationships at work and at home, is that how they help them communicate better with individuals? Is that how they deal with their own decision making and what they do? I think that what it does really nicely is breaks down the brain into which bits are doing what? Now it is simplified and I think Steve Peters would say that it is super simplified, but what it does do is breaks into a manageable chunks because of the amount of information that people are consuming nowadays. I think to be able to turn that into something that allows me to go okay so if I am reacting in this way, because I think the one thing about making decision is, and I do this myself, and we've talked about it, you either react to something or you respond to something. You either react in its an immediate and sometimes it may be not the most perfect reaction to a stimuli, to the thing that you've just seen or that's happened to you. And that could be an email that comes into you're an inbox from your boss, 'I need to see you immediately,' and your reaction might be straightaway, what have I done? I've messed up again.

Phil: You didn't swear, I was expecting you to swear.

Simon: I nearly did but I caught it. But I've done it again, that catastrophising thing, I've made a real mess of this right now or that piece of work I thought it was good and I've passed it across. So what you're doing straightaway is you're reacting, your brain is reacting to this catastrophising, I'm going to be sacked or oh no what does this mean, I'm going to have to stay later today or these things start going through your head. And actually if we can put the handbrake on that which is the emotional brain, let's make it as simple as maybe Steve talked about it in terms of the chimp, this emotional part

of the brain is making that reaction and then making the decision of how you're moving forward with it. Whereas if we can maybe put the handbrake on it and think of it through a more logical and I know we said at the top of this programme, we're not logical and we're not rational, but we can be more logical and more rational if we try and use the right techniques and the responses. I think this react and respond, I think this book *The Chimp Paradox* does a really good job of helping people not just react and therefore react in a negative way to certain scenarios and settings, it helps them respond and therefore make the right decision to then continue down a path that is much more productive, much more effective and therefore give a much more successful outcome. Discuss [laughs].

Phil: I've been reflecting since our conversation because I came away thinking have I got my head up my own arse? From my recollection the key term that we disagreed on was that I was saying I don't think oversimplification is helpful, these processes and the interplay and interaction of these processes is really complex, and my concern is that it's a gross oversimplification of what is a really complicated thing and that's why I don't like it. I was about to put words in your mouth and I don't want to do that. My recollection of your response was, yeah, but Phil, some people need it to be really simple because if you can give it to people really simply, then they can take it and make sense of it and get onboard with it and make better decisions off the back of that, if I was to link it back to the podcast. I came away thinking have I just got my head up my own arse then? I can't think of any other words than having my head up my own arse. I think the place I landed is yes, I have a bit because I think about Kahneman and Tversky's stuff as well, the System one, System two.

I read stuff online sometimes where those two things are referred to as different processes in the brain and they're not those things, and both Kahneman and Tversky have openly said in the literature that they published that System one and System two are different processes, they're not different, you don't have a System one set of circuitry in your brain and then a System two set of circuitry in your brain. They're a metaphor to help people get their head around that there is a set of stuff that comes together to do shortcuts and there's a set of stuff that comes together to be more considered and more deliberate in the way that you go about making decisions. Sometimes you might use the wrong combination of stuff depending on the situation and depending on the context, if you're deciding whether you should have beer a or beer b, maybe the level of deliberation that you're having for that is less helpful than just going with what you know you like which is that one over there. Whereas if you're having to make a decision about whether or not to take a new job or to move house or to whatever that might be, then that might be a place for deliberation and purposeful in your thinking it might be useful in coming. I do still think there are better books out there than what Steve Peters did with *The Chimp Paradox* and at the same time I can get why it works for a lot of people, because it's easier to get your head around and you can do something with it quite quickly and easily. I get that.

Simon: I think just to jump in on that, just the simplifying a bit of information, quite complex information and research and making it accessible, is I think you've already said Kahneman and the Tversky stuff is not dissimilar in a way, it's a little bit more rigorous in terms of the book, but I think that breaking it down into one or two, there's a heck of a lot of stuff going on in System one, and there's a heck of a lot of stuff going on in System two as well at the same time. But I think what we need and it's why acronyms are made in leadership literature or in the world, so we can remember, and memory plays a big part in decision making as well because if it's a good memory, sometimes we

might go with that, if it's a bad memory we might go away from it and not make that decision and not try and tackle that thing that went wrong last time. But memory I think if we can make things simple and remember, so an acronym that helps you then use a process to be able to make a better decision is a simplification of just a bunch of words that are put together or a bunch of steps that are put together potentially. But if it helps you, and I think this is the whole point of what you and I do in our professions, we're trying to help people be better at what they do ultimately or produce better results than they are right now, whether that's on a one to one basis, an organisation, a cultural setting, whatever it may be. I think that how the individual can absorb that information, some people like to really get into the nuts and bolts. I've been asked a number of times on our programmes, why do I need to know about what's going on in the brain? What's the point? I've said well because actually some people do want to know the intricacies or the which part is doing what or the bits that are interacting with each other. Because it helps them then get to that position of okay, in this situation now I know this is what's happening, so it just gives me a little bit more of a flashlight, a little bit more of an understanding and an awareness.

For other people they don't want that detail, they just want to get an acronym or something a bit more simplified and they can use that and go and run with it straightaway as well. I think when we're talking about this simplification, I think it's horses for courses, individuals need different things. Because we know that the research is out there for all these different areas that we cover, there's some amazing stuff, but it's way too complicated for it to be transferred into the workplace. But I guess that's our job as well to try and make it as simple but as detailed and as effective as possible, to help people make better decisions, find the solutions to their own individual problems, be that interpersonal, be that financial, be that operational, whatever it is.

Also even the other books that Steve's done for kids, again it's oversimplified but it's helpful for kids nowadays especially from an emotional regulation point of view and understanding what's going on emotionally. That's something that I'm passionate about because it wasn't in the education system when you and I were growing up in terms of when you're talking about emotions and emotion regulation. But it is now slightly thanks to people like Steve Peters and that for me going back to the point of emotions at work, I think that's a brilliant thing that those sort of books at least help my kids to talk about how they're feeling, what they're doing, how it makes them be able to interact with people better and not bottle things up and be able to communicate. Whereas I think in our generation, no, not even close to anything like that.

Phil: Yeah, one of my self deprecating quips that I sometimes use when I'm speaking is I bet you never thought you'd see a man on stage talking about emotions, I bet you'd never see a 40 year old man on the stage talking about emotions. I bet you never thought you'd see a 40 year old middle aged middle class white man talking about emotions, because like you say it certainly wasn't as common as it is now to be okay to be talking about that sort of stuff.

Simon: Which I think links into the other point on the list which was about generational differences and I think that we're probably still seeing the uptake of individuals from a baby boomer level who wanted to go and learn about emotion intelligence and understand actually how does that improve decision making and then improve their performance going forward? There's still a hesitation I guess around that bracket in the population, I don't know whether you agree but I do believe that we now



know that the research is there, that EI is a key pointer to success in the workplace. But I still think that generationally and certainly from a male to female perspective it would be mostly a female audience talking about emotional intelligence and prepared to understand more about emotional intelligence than a male audience in my world. And it will probably be the 40 year below to down that would be attending as well in terms of an age group, but I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on that.

Phil: There are differences in expectation I think currently to what there have been in the past. I really struggle with generational generalisations, that's the bit I really struggle with, even though I make fun of myself using one earlier on. Because there are always those that don't break the mould and I think if you look at someone like me, like I'm 42 now, so I think depending on which model you work with I could either be a millennial or I could be whatever the one was before that. At the same time if you think about people wanting purpose and needing in their jobs, that's something for the last say ten years, Simon Sinek in particular popularised that particular model. He uses generational stuff within the work that he does, I disagree with him in a lot of ways because I work with a lot of people from many ages who want purpose and meaning in their work. It's not something that is due to the year that you're born in, it's to do with the changes in society have made it to that point. Coming back to what you were saying earlier on about the plethora of choices that are available. If you go back in time 40 years the number of careers or professions that you could join was limited in comparison to today. The number of professions or careers that you could have 40 years ago was very different to what you can have now, part of that is because of social mobility both in terms of class ability, I know there is more class ability I think than there was, but it's still not a massive thing. When I'm using the word social mobility I'm talking about the ability to move geographically, so whether that be within a country or internationally or whatever that might be.

So the options that you now have and what you can do in a career is so different to what they were back then. If you then have this choice, I know this is me doing gross oversimplification now, if you go from having five career options to having 50 career options, what might have made you decide which one of the five you chose, what the difference what makes you choose, which one of the 50 you choose? That's something I believe finding a purpose and meaning in your work is something that is available as an option for people now. Again not everybody, there are some people that don't have that option because of their societal status or because of their personal circumstances. They might only have a number of options for where they can go to choose a job. That's where I struggle with the generational generalisations, I think for me it's a combination of what's happening in society at a moment in time as in now, but also what has happened in society for those individuals during those formative years when their identities were formed. So that was a very long answer to your question, sorry.

Simon: No, but I think going on that point about purpose, purpose has been around forever. If you go back to my grandparents, the purpose doesn't necessarily have to be found in the work itself, the purpose is that I'm doing this to support my family, to be able to then go on to do greater things. My grandparents set up their own business, which was a fashion retail unit in a northern town 70 years ago, and they've both passed away now, but in terms of what they did, the purpose was my grandfather didn't find a purpose in ladies garments at all, but he saw the purpose in them having their own business allowed their kids to go to school and to do things. I think this purpose thing in

work, I think we've got to be careful to say that you're going to find purpose in everything that you do in a workplace setting, because that puts a lot of pressure on an organisation to say, so where is my purpose? I understand and I talk about it all the time in terms of purpose but I think people find purpose in their own meaning of purpose in what they do and how they relate that back to their own lives at the same point. I think, yes, generationally what they're saying now is that young people want to find purpose in what that organisation is doing in terms of corporate social responsibility. I don't agree, I think everybody feels that the planet doesn't want to die or the things that these organisations are doing are helping social groups and the planet, and everybody live longer and be healthier. I think that's happened forever. I agree with your point. The bit around emotional intelligence more that I still think there is a thing around men who think that we are rational and logical and we still make decisions that way. Also it's just not the done thing to talk about emotions necessarily and we'll do it in a jokey bantery way, but actually we're missing the point for me slightly in what emotional intelligence is. I've talked about that before, as soon as you say 'emotion' you've primed someone into thinking oh it's soft and fluffy.

Phil: Yeah, agree completely.

Simon: So it's how do we try and get that stigma away from it. The same with mental wellbeing and mental health and those sorts of things, we're becoming much more widespread and people are talking about it much more often, but again that's something that people still and men particularly are still struggling to say, yeah, I'm struggling with this right now.

Phil: I agree and that comes back to some of the societal expectations, is that different in the UK to how it is in other countries? Yes, I think so. There are different rules whether they be display rules or feeling rules. Display rules as in what you can show, who can show what emotions in what context? And then feeling rules, what emotions am I allowed to feel? At the risk of a shameless plug the second episode of this podcast was about emotional inauthenticity. I interviewed a detective inspector from Greater Manchester police and she talked at length about how the feeling rules that she experienced within the police is that you're not allowed to be scared. You are absolutely allowed to be angry but any fear that you experience has to be turned into something else, it's not allowed. So even if you feel it you've got to change it and turn it into something else. The challenge with that then is that shapes the decisions that we make because if we feel like we can't do something or that we have to do something, then that limits the decisions. That limits and choices of options that you've got available for what you could decide to do, if you're not allowed to show a particular emotion or you're not allowed to talk about a particular topic or whatever that is, then that limits your options in terms of the available decisions for you. That can have profound effects on both physical and mental health absolutely.

Simon: Definitely. But I think that we know though that it's hard to suppress that, I think if someone is scared or there is fear, I think to try and convert that into an anger or toward more positive, because anger is a positive emotion in terms of how it's seen in the brain. But I think what I'm trying to say is that actually we can't really suppress it, so other human beings will be able to detect if you are scared, it's really hard to turn round and say to yourself, don't look scared. We see it and we try and do it but I still think the human being is a very good BS detector as well. I think that we can tell if people are trying to suppress a certain emotion because we see that in the workplaces, don't look angry, don't



look frustrated. But actually we know that if a boss is frustrated and try not show it, you know, you can see it, you can feel it, you can feel it with your partner, you can feel it with your kids, you can see it all the time. I haven't listened to that episode so I will go back and listen to that one because that sounds fascinating actually.

Phil: Yeah, it is, I think it's our second most popular downloaded ever episode I think, which I guess you might expect because it was the second one that we've ever done, so therefore it's been out for one of the longest periods of time. But either way it's really good. Sarah Jane Lennie, she's wonderful, it's a really good episode.

Simon: I'll check that out definitely.

Phil: One of the other things that I'm conscious of then is that I think we've done a really good job of talking about how these different aspects or these different factors that affect decision making in the workplace, and some of the pitfalls that that can manifest in terms of as we've just talked about, the emotions you might be feeling might limit the amount of options that you feel you've got available, which then affects the decisions that you make. We've also talked about how things like your physiological state, so awake you are? How energised you are? What kind of things you're fuelling your body with? Some of those things then also will affect those decisions that you might make. What I'm wondering is should we shift it a little bit then to talk about well what can people do then? Either what can individuals do? What can leaders do? What can workplaces do to improve the quality of decision making in themselves, their teams or their organisations?

Simon: Yeah, I think earlier on this programme we talked about what we're here to do is help people be better and therefore to give them directions and solutions or ideas, I think is a good place to go. That's why I brought in the questions bit on that last item because I think the react to respond mechanism, the best way to do that is to ask a question. Is to be able to then turn whatever you're doing into a question. I see a question as it's almost like a flashlight. There's a brilliant book by Warren Berger, so The Beautiful Book of Questions I think is the title.

Phil: That sounds right up my street.

Simon: It is an awesome read, he's a journalist but he's done a lot of work, he calls himself a questionologist which is a brilliant title, so that's his new title a questionologist. But his book is focused around questions that help you make better decisions and relationships. But I think what he talks about this flashlight, that a question is a flashlight to put on a decision, so the decision is the dark room and the flashlight is the question. And the better the question, the wider the beam of the flashlight and therefore you are giving yourself more options to make therefore a better decision and shine it on that problem. I think that questions first and foremost are like listening, you talked about listening before, listening is actually a skill, people don't realise it's a skill and it's something that you can get better at and you can improve in. But questions are on the other side of it are another skill that I think would really help in people's decisions. Because with the question it then allows you to create the other alternatives, those options and takes it away from it's either a or it's b. And an open question particularly can go and open the mind to think actually, what am I missing here right now? One of the best things I asked myself whenever I'm about to make a decision or doing something that



I maybe should stop doing and make a decision to do something else is, what I'm doing right now helping? I know that's a kind of an open question but is what I'm doing right now helping either this situation, helping me? So as an example is me pouring another glass of wine is that helping me to then not either have a hangover the next day or is it me being able to be the best partner I can be? For me to keep my weight where I want to be. Is what I'm doing right now, is me engaging in a tit for tat email exchange with a colleague, is what I'm doing right now helping? And that then allows you to think about the next decision, the next step that you take in that process. And that's a very basic question but it's helped me a lot over the years.

It's those sorts of things that what matters most right now if we're in a team meeting, what matters most for us to achieve this and then we can start coming up with options. But the better that question is the more beautiful as Warren Berger says the question is, the more options we can generate and therefore create the better solution and make the better decision. Now that's all well and good if you've got lots and lots of time and you can spend the time to be able to think about those questions. Sometimes we've got to make these quick reactions and quick decisions, and those quick decisions don't need a lot of thinking power necessarily. But when you do need to have a complex situation that's maybe causing you more problems than it needs to, an open question I think is a massively powerful tool. But definitely check out that book, Warren Berger's book, it's great.

Phil: I'll make sure I put a link to it in the show notes as well.

Simon: Yeah, definitely. So what else can we do? I guess the one thing that is the key is creating alternatives. I think that people when we have a decision to make, do we actually follow a process? So is there a process that people follow when they're trying to make a decision, tackling a problem, sometimes they can be the same sort of thing? And I'm not sure whether people day in day out actually they tend to go with, and maybe a gut instinct is the right way to go or this feels right. And there's different research around actually is a gut instinct the right way to go or is it actually more of a process, methodical, logical steps that we should take. But I think that there are different ways of going about decision making but the first thing is to question the information that you're being given first of all, is to question the information that you've received, whether that's your own information or information that's been given to you by somebody else. And then once you've been able to analyse that information and data, where's come from and how's been analysed effectively? Then we start creating these options and almost it's framing the problem in a different way, and you've probably heard of this, but question storming, which about looking at the problem from different angles to make sure we're actually answering the question, we're actually answering the problem that we need to solve right now, rather than just going to that first immediate solution.

Because I think we're borne out of at times just we've got to action, action, action, doing something is better than not doing something at all or over deliberating or paralysis by analysis. Those sort of things. Paralysis by analysis is very common, it's almost procrastination isn't it in a way sometimes. You're overegging it, you're over understanding it, overfocusing it. And that's why certainly in organisations where prototyping, so go and do something, see how it works, come back let's get the feedback and see how that's improved the situation or move forward. Then prototype again, move a step forward, move in waves. But I think the only way you can do the prototyping is by assessing what the problem is and creating some sort of options and solutions, and alternatives. And those



alternatives need to come from a diverse group of people who have looked at it through different lens and through a different viewpoint. And therefore going back to that group thing, if we can get people even in that meeting who have got the opportunity to say what they feel, but if not, this is where networks come in really handy, if you've got a really good network and let's say you're an entrepreneur and you're on your own and you try and drive a product forward or you're an individual consultant. Who is that person that you can go and push your solutions to and get them to give you a really objective or at least challenging viewpoint that's different to your own? I don't think enough people, and whether that goes back to the fear of saying actually do you know what I don't like it because of this, this and this and therefore I've made a mistake and that's not great, you've made me look stupid and all that cycle again. But actually having a network of individuals and whether that's right at the top of your organisation, you have a senior team where you can go and ask for diverse opinions and challenge your thinking, I think is vitally important.

So I think first of all ask questions, that's one of my key things is create the alternative, frame the problem, make sure you're answering the problem that you need to answer, you're not just jumping straight into what we've already done before in the past and we're just continuing off previous information. Make sure you're asking other people, you're going and actually understanding and getting these alternative views and people who will challenge and push and question, and query your thought process to make sure that the decision is effective. And in terms of when we're looking at biases and assumptions, you could go through a whole stack of the biases that stand out, but the key ones for me are the overconfidence. So I've done this before a million times I'm so experienced, I'm 15 years, 20 years experienced, this is the answer straightaway. Certain circumstances that's great but in other circumstances actually there will be a nuance and particularly now in the new COVID-19 new normal world, things won't be the same as they were before and I'm not sure anybody can turn round and go I've been here, seen it and done it. There was just a very quick story about Matthew Broderick who was the Brigadier General for homeland security when the Katrina hit in New Orleans, and he was massive experience in natural disasters elsewhere but had never, as it turned out, never had experience in a civilisation, a town or a city that was under sea level, and therefore has always waited to hear what was happening in terms of the ground reports, the ground information. So his troops on the ground would then feed back information back them. But what they didn't realise and wasn't aware was that actually this was a completely different scenario because the New Orleans is sat on the sea level, whereas everywhere else he'd saved and helped was above sea level. And that just one little nuance was a big difference to actually why it wasn't a successful recovery operation as maybe some of the other places.

So it's relying on that overconfidence, that I've seen this, I've done it, I know it, don't worry about it, I've got this done, is actually a big pitfall. I think the confirmation bias as well is a big one, if we see something, see a bit of data that confirms our thoughts already then we'll go for it. If we go and speak to the people who love us and like us and they say whatever that we agree with or they agree with us, it gives us a stronger decision making thought to say, yeah, I'm doing the right thing. So confirmation, again that talks about going to speak to people who've got conflicting views to your own. I think on conflict I think that's one of the things that's important is that we need conflict in the world, we need conflict when we're in organisations, and I think we're going to get conflict wherever you go. But this cognitive conflict where people are sparking new ideas off each other and that they're changing their perspectives and changing the answer to the solution, I think is great. The other effect of conflict

where you're having personality clashes and you're having people who don't really get on with each other because of the relationships, leaders have got to balance the two. I've slightly gone off tangent there but I think conflict cognitively is what sparks great ideas in organisations, but we get mixed up sometimes in the cognitive conflict and this personality clash relationship conflict clash. I think we can separate the two actually if we're good at what we do in terms of getting the people in the room and giving them a bit of guidance of what we're looking for.

Other things like Halo and Horns, I was in recruitment for 15 years before I moved into business psychology and one of the things that I always advised and guided people when they were recruiting is that first 20, 30 seconds, that first answers the question people making a believe around that person's capability right from the word go. They've given an amazing answer which we felt was robust and clear, and particularly if you're interviewing on your own we can't listen to the answer, write the notes down and assess at the same point. It's the same whether you're recruiting or you're just sat with one of your team doing a review meeting, we can't assess them, review them and listen to them at the same time, we've got to do things systematically. Whatever they say, it's amazing or whether it's rubbish we can't take that as that's the whole impression of that human being, which I think we do a lot as well. That first impression is a big thing whether it's in a social setting or that person said something a bit weird and that's who they are, and that would cloud them in that viewpoint forever. Well that's not true necessarily. What else, Phil, what have I missed in terms of some of the other biases that we need to look out for?

Phil: So what I will do is I'll put in the show notes there's a really pretty and useful infographic about pulling together a lot of the heuristics and biases. I'll pull that together and I'll put that in the show notes as well. I agree with you in terms of questioning the information that you have. So one of my favourite questions which often I can get away with because either a) I'm a consultant or b) because I don't necessarily care that much if I offend people. So when someone, especially in an organisational setting, when somebody comes and presents information to me to say this is the problem, this is what's going on, this is what's going wrong, this is whatever. One of my favourite questions to ask in response is what verifiable evidence do we have that that's the case. So beyond your opinion which is brilliant, what verifiable evidence do we have that that is the case? Often I get, oh I don't know and then my response to that would be, well can we find some before we move forward with that as a solution? Before we move that as agreeing that's what the issue is, can we get verifiable evidence that that is the issue before we then move into finding the solution or whatever that might be? Or likewise when people come to us with a solution, I say what verifiable evidence do we have that that is the right solution? I don't know. Okay, well can we find some first then? What can we do just to verify that what you're saying is as accurate as it can be, so that we can establish whether that's the way to go from here? So just to try and challenge and validate what has been presented as fact because it may or may not be.

There was a really interesting discussion that happened on Twitter just this week, Ross Garner who works for Emerald Works whose Twitter handle is @rossgarnerew was talking about some of the COVID-19 graphs that come out from John Hopkins University. And one of the challenges that you have when you look at the graph is that they've squeezed their levels. So what look like equal steps in terms of volume numbers of cases, actually isn't. So you've got 100 is equally spaced with 1000 which is equally spaced with 10,000, which is equally spaced with 100,000. What might be 11,000 if say for



the UK, what might look as one number, he was looking at the US in particular, and the US looked quite close to everybody else. But that's only because they've collapsed the values on the y axis on the side. And if you interrogate the data more actually you'd see that there's a much broader range in the data if the increments at which the data was positioned were accurately spaced out. If that makes sense?

Simon: Yeah.

Phil: But if you just look at that at face value then you go oh okay without doing that interrogation or additional investigation, interrogation into the data. So one of the other things that I do a lot to try and improve decision making within organisations is to say what question have we tried to answer? If I'm working with a client and we have an agenda for a meeting I won't have agenda items, I will have questions that we're trying to answer. So we need to answer this question, this question, this question, this question, these are the questions that we need to answer in this meeting, are there any other questions that you think we need to answer? And that's an idea I stole from Nancy Klein, I think that people think better in response to questions than they do in response to agenda items or suppositions or whatever that might be. What else was I going to add? There was something else but I can't remember what it was and I didn't write it down, I'm regretting that now. So it was at an individual level is ask yourself as often as you can what am I feeling right now? So in the same way that you had your question of how is this helping me? Was that your question?

Simon: Yeah, is what I'm doing helping?

Phil: Is what I'm doing helping? One of my favourite questions to ask is what am I feeling? What am I feeling right now? Because I talked way, way back at the start of this episode about the refractory period, this filter that this thing only allows you to filter in information that supports the emotion you're experiencing. One really effective way to beat that or to overcome that refractory period or overcome that filter is to name the emotion, because if you can name the emotion then what you're doing is bringing that cognitive executive functioning in, because you're naming whatever the emotion is and then it increases the likelihood that you're going to be able to take in other data that challenges the emotion that you're experiencing. So if you are scared of something, what I'm feeling right now? I'm scared. Okay, what am I scared of or what I am scared about? What is it that's making me scared? Then that can help you come out of being in the midst of that emotionally charged episode and then if you can do that then you'll often have more decisions that are open to you or more options that are open to you, which means you can make more choices, which means you can make other decisions.

Simon: Definitely. I think this choices bit I think has been talked about a lot just in this current state in that you can choose how you respond to the media, you can choose how you respond. I think without that question and without a bit of process in it, you can't get to your choices. Without being in that more executive function about being able to think about the choice and what is the best option, rather than just a reaction. I still go back to this reacting to responding, I think if we can respond we can make better decision and we make better choices, rather than just reacting.

Phil: What individuals or teams will do is pull together a template of some key questions like, what instinctively what do I want to do? What would be a different choice from the norm? If I could choose



anything what would I choose? And it's back to your reframing the decision from earlier on, so you might have a set of four key questions that you might want to ask yourself or teams. Because part of what I do, I do a lot of behaviour analysis work, where I'm brought in to either watch videos or to be present in negotiations or interviews or other settings where what we're looking to establish is what's somebody actually saying? What's really going on here? My gut tells me stuff and then I acknowledge that and go thank you very much gut, that's really useful, that's a really useful data point, but that's a single data point I want to look at other data points now to try and overcome the confirmation bias that you talked about earlier on. My gut says this, all right thanks gut, that's really useful, let's see what else I can find that either supports or challenges what my gut says. So acknowledging the gut as a data point I think is important, so if your instincts are telling you do this then brilliant. And if you're in a life or death situation and you've got to make a decision at that moment then, yeah, go with your gut. But if you're not which is a lot of the time in the workplace we're not, acknowledge the gut decision and then think okay what else could I do though? If I had more time what would I do? If I had more flexibility what would I do? If I could start from scratch what would I do? There's a whole host of questions that you can ask yourself or your teams and I think they can be really useful ways of just reframing it, so that you don't get caught up in that initial mental shortcut bias to look for a particular solution.

Simon: Then what you're doing is actually saving yourself time in the long run because rather than just going straight to short cut and doing something that may work, but I think we know the facts and research out there, the decision, we're not particularly great at making decisions as human beings ultimately. Do you know we're not great at some of the things we do decide to go ahead with because we go for action rather than maybe reflection and understanding, and assessing, and then moving into then creating a plan of attack. I think because we go to move, move, move, we then have to go back and retrace our steps anyway. We have to go back and retracing those steps causes conflicts and relationship issues and challenging of ourselves. I think by doing it right first time, it's a phrase that's used quite a lot but I don't think you can do anything necessarily perfectly right first time, but at least really assessing things effectively first time around can then give you a really solid foundation to be able to make the best possible choice at that moment in time and that decision at that moment in time.

Phil: That sounds like a good place to put it altogether I think and to draw us to a close. We've referenced a whole host of books and stuff as we've been working our way through, so I've been keeping a note of those. If there is anything else in particular that you would recommend for people to read, Simon, can you just ping me over that in an email so that I can add it to our references for today?

Simon: I will do.

Phil: Are there any other myths or misconceptions around this area that we haven't explored that you think we need to put to bed before we close?

Simon: No, the key one the rational, logical creatures, that's the key one. The thing about these biases is it's very difficult for us to spot them in ourselves, we can't really see them ourselves when we're doing them so we've got to get other people to help us out with that. But we've got to be prepared to



be open so the rational logical creature I think is a big myth. I think that groups make better decisions, teams make better decisions, again I think is a bit of a myth. Because we think that when people come together they make the best decision, but actually we've already said it needs to be a diverse team with people who are prepared to challenge each other. Does a decision need to be quick or slow? It needs to be a fast decision, a gut decision and we need to go with the gut reaction? Again I think the jury's out really, I think there are certain situations where gut works but actually most of the time a thoughtful process is what's required. I think those for me are the three top myths but I'm sure there are lots of others out there that we haven't covered today.

Phil: Anyone that you would recommend for me to seek out to get as a guest on the podcast?

Simon: We've already talked about his book, but I think if you got Warren Berger on I think he would be a fantastic guest because I think a questionologist, I just don't think we ask great questions as enough within our life and they really do help us be better at what we do in any walk of life. I recommend Warren if you can get him on that would be brilliant.

Phil: Fabulous, wonderful, thank you, I will definitely do my best to do so. Is there anything else that you're thinking, feeling or want to say before I bring us together and close?

Simon: No, other than thank you very much for inviting me on, I've really enjoyed the conversation, I think we've gone off in different directions and I love that, and I think it's a really nice format, a really good format and I look forward to keeping in touch.

Phil: Oh, thank you very much and thank you very much for your time, really appreciate you coming on. One thing I forgot to do though was if people wanted to get hold of you where could they find you?

Simon: I am head of learning and development at Phoenix Leaders, so you can either go to www.phoenixleaders.co.uk or you can get me at s.ashton@phoenixleaders.co.uk. I am based in Central London so feel free to get in touch.

Phil: Fab, I'll put links to your website and I'll put your email in the show notes if that's okay as well?

Simon: Yeah, sounds good.

Phil: Wonderful. In that case then, Simon, thank you so much for your time, thank you very much for coming on the podcast, and yeah, like I said I look forward to keeping in touch.

Simon: Thank you.