

Apply Consequential Thinking to Improve Decision-making

By Granville D'Souza

The ability to apply consequential thinking allows people to assess their choices, anticipate how people will react, and follow their intentions. Consequential thinking is about imagining the upsides and downsides of our actions.

TWO critical factors influence how we come up with solutions to the problems encountered in life: confidence in our inherent abilities and the ability to overcome and deal with our emotions. Making good decisions requires critical thinking and emotional intelligence, which when combined together amounts to a very powerful approach of what is called consequential thinking.

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Consequential thinking is about imagining the upsides and downsides of our actions. One key mechanism for developing consequential thinking is imagining all the possible scenarios with "self-talk". Self-talking entails exploring multiple options and perspectives before arriving at a carefully considered decision. This kind of thought pattern is also called "thinking ahead".

Consequential thinking is about engaging in proactive behaviour: considering the outcomes of our thoughts, feelings, and actions before acting. This involves including our feelings and those of others, taking a pause, and acting intentionally. It allows us to make choices and decisions with the best possible outcomes and results.

One who is competent in consequential thinking looks before he leaps and thinks before taking impulsive actions. Consequential thinking involves analysing the outcomes of choices and understanding the interaction between cause and effect. Rather



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than acting irrationally, we are able to act intentionally—knowing the results of our actions and thus minimising remorse, anger, and frustration later. We employ both our thoughts and feelings to make optimal choices.

The advantage of applying consequential thinking is that you have the opportunity to weigh alternative choices or actions (a cost-benefit analysis). This can give you more control over the way you think, feel, and act.

Fundamentals of Consequential Thinking

A child incapable of higher-level consequential thinking is likely to seek instant gratification in all of his actions. After spotting a new toy on the store's rack, he is likely to stamp his feet and demand: "I want that and I want it now".

With emotional intelligence comes the ability to delay sensory gratification for something better: to swap tangible for intangible results. This kind of understanding springs from:

- **Self-awareness:** Understanding how we function,
- **Self-management:** Choosing our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and
- **Self-direction:** Using empathy and principled decision-making to increase wisdom and develop a more balanced worldview.

Often, we act just because it feels pleasant to do so, forgetting or disregarding the long-term consequences of our actions. A person with high emotional intelligence, however, will seek motivation and validation for an action from within.

Consequential thinking draws from our cognitive skills (inductive and deductive reasoning), as well as from our emotions. When we evaluate actions against the "what if" prism of judgment—which involves sorting, sifting, and identifying the most reasonable idea with maximum good for the greatest number of people—we widen our focus and access more options.

In many ways, consequential thinking involves sacrificing short-term desires for long-term results. For example, we can debate whether coming to work early every day would be worth the trouble: "If I come to the office an hour earlier every day, I can set an example for others to follow. If more people on my staff get things done, it will lighten my workload in the long run."

With consequential thinking, we can also evaluate the outcome of an action on ourselves and on others. Consequential thinking is a more organised way of information processing that takes place before you can reach a decision, tempering our judgment. Found to be extremely useful in the rehabilitation of young offenders and in anger management training programmes, consequential thinking encourages adolescents to come up with alternate solutions to a problem, thus helping them identify constructive ways of reacting to a situation.

Take the example of a student who is accidentally shoved while standing in line. He has the option of reacting to this situation in many ways:



The Mischel study using marshmallows can be used to forecast a child's behaviour in later life.

- He may decide to return the action in kind and hit the person who shoved him,
- He may warn the other person to be more careful,
- He may complain to an adult nearby,
- He may "blast" the other person for roughing him up, or
- He may brush aside the episode and smile at the other person, saying he understands that it was an accident.

Simply pausing and considering the consequences of our actions can allow us to get a better grip on strong emotions that threaten to hijack rational thought. In this way, we can avoid regrettable consequences later.

In the 1960s, Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel ran a study involving children of faculty, graduate students, and employees. Four-year-old children were taken to a room individually and told by researchers that they had a choice. Each kid was offered a plate of a single marshmallow treat. The kids could eat the marshmallow treat but could only have one. But if they were able to wait 10 minutes, during which time the researcher would leave the child alone, they could have two marshmallows.

It may not seem like a difficult decision for many, but for a four-year-old, it can border on a battle between restraint and impulse, Id and ego, desire and self-control, gratification and delay. The choice the child made, according to Stanford researchers, eventually became a reflection of character and psychological fortitude that the child would develop throughout life. As a psychological skill, resisting impulse is probably the most fundamental. It is often described as the root of all emotional

self-control since all emotions by their essence lead to the impulse to take action.

How did these children fare? To keep themselves from taking the marshmallow treat, some kids covered their eyes to defer temptation; some rested their hands on their arms, talked to themselves, sang songs and played games with their hands and feet. These preschoolers were able to resist and doubled their reward. The other kids, after being left to their own devices, grabbed the plate in front of them and devoured the single treat.

The difference in the lives of these two groups of kids was dramatic. Researchers tracked them into adulthood and found that the group which delayed gratification was more socially competent—able to cope with the frustrations of life. Under stress, they were less likely to fracture or fall to pieces. With self-reliance, they were able to pursue their goals in life.

In the group who took their marshmallow treats, the majority sported a more troubled profile. In adolescence, they would shy away from social contact, were stubborn and indecisive, and easily stymied by any setback they encountered. As adults, they were often immobilised by stress and prone to react to irritations with anger.

The study's lead scientist, Walter Mischel, described the "goal-directed self-imposed delay of gratification as a child" as a significant marker of emotional self-regulation and consequential thinking: the ability to say no in the service of a higher goal (whether working toward solving a math problem, keeping to a diet, building a business or making the world better).

This is the essence of what underscores emotional intelligence: first emotional literacy and self-awareness, and more importantly, harnessing our feelings in the service of performance and learning in our daily lives.

In developing consequential thinking, we also develop these important social and emotional qualities:

- **Humility:** Humble acknowledgement that we don't know everything and can learn from others,
- **Empathy:** Ability to put ourselves in other people's shoes,
- **Integrity:** Knowledge to do what needs to be done,
- **Perseverance:** Ability to soldier on despite setbacks and resistance, and
- **Creativity:** Thinking up new ways to do something and making it work.

Techniques to Improve Consequential Thinking

Consequential thinking functions as a kind of means-ends analysis, encouraging the weighing of the consequences of our actions before deciding which path would be the most suitable under given circumstances. This calls for a degree of interpersonal sensitivity and can be enhanced in several ways.

Tip 1: Weigh the advantages and disadvantages

Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of an action helps us frame the conflict and avoid the possible consequences of angry and aggressive responses in conflict-rousing situations on ourselves and the other people involved.

Tip 2: Practise if-then thinking

When you are debating how to respond to a situation, consider all the possible consequences. For example, "I know if I hit him, then I won't be allowed to attend the special event tomorrow." Identify internal and external triggers that lead to anger arousal through self-talk. The aim is to promote harmonious interpersonal relationships and to diffuse crisis situations more effectively.


Strengthen consequential thinking by coming up with a number of solutions to imaginary problems. For example, if your regular route to work were changed because of a detour, how would you plan an alternative route or assess mass-transit options? If your boss suddenly quits and leaves you all of his work, how would you strategise delegating projects to your staff? If you lost your speech notes for the conference, how would you cobble together an outline to guide you through the opening address?

Practise anticipating problems before they happen. For example, what would you do if your car broke down? Who would you call? Do you have those important numbers on your cell phone? Anticipation helps us demystify fear and anxiety by breaking down the situation into possible scenarios, removing the barriers that hold us back from trying new things or making difficult decisions.

Tip 3: Practise new and alternative behaviours

Try conciliatory actions in place of behaviours that trigger angry responses in other people. We may notice that sometimes a solution stares us straight in the face but we don't notice it. This is because thinking—any kind of thinking, creative, cognitive or consequential—is a habit of the mind. There is a learning curve. Consequential thinking is not something you are born with but a skill that we acquire over the years.

Always think of problems as having more than one solution. The more tools we have at our disposal and the more creative we are in considering them, the better we are at solving our problems and dealing with sensitive situations.

Admit you were wrong and move on. Bill Gates of Microsoft, once discounted the power of the Internet. He later saw his mistake and invested heavily in the new technology. Take your ego out of the equation and consider different options. 

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