

CHAPTER 7

From Chaos to Clarity: Mapping Personality for Tough Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Tough decisions usually arrive with a great deal of stress, with conflicting values and with too many competing opinions, and it is tempting to blame the problem itself, the information available or the people involved. More often, the difficulty lies in our internal state: our personality, habits, emotions and characteristic reactions. This article discusses personality mapping, a practical means of turning chaos into clarity when a great deal is at stake. Drawing on recent studies, it examines how personality traits, emotions and habits shift under high stress, how people make difficult decisions either emotionally or rationally, and how particular traits are associated with particular decision styles and preferences. The article concludes with a brief, usable framework that helps a reader notice how internal patterns show up in real decisions and adjust them, so that decisions are made deliberately rather than reactively.

Keywords: Personality mapping; Decision-making; Emotional regulation; Big Five; Managerial judgement.

1.0 Introduction

Speaking honestly from my own experience, some of the hardest decisions I have made were difficult not because I lacked knowledge but because of the way I reacted. Under stress I became impatient, focused excessively on detail and grew so anxious that I sometimes postponed the decision altogether. I moved from “I can decide” to “I cannot think straight.” This is what I understand by cognitive and emotional chaos.

There are many modern decision frameworks: pros-and-cons lists, expected values, decision trees and the rest. All of them assume a calm and rational frame of mind. Psychology tells us, however, that we are rarely calm and composed; we assess risk, allow emotion to take over and choose ways of reassuring ourselves or of avoiding the problem according to our personality traits.

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The encouraging point is that these dynamics are reasonably predictable, follow recognisable patterns and can to some extent be controlled, and this is precisely where personality mapping helps. The sections that follow describe what personality mapping actually is, why it matters in the light of recent research on stress and emotional regulation, and which short, practical routines can convert chaos into clarity.

2.0 Concept Explanation

2.1 What Is Personality Mapping?

In simple terms, personality mapping is the practice of noticing the stable traits that shape a decision, observing how those traits change under stress, and converting that knowledge into concrete decision rules.

It may be thought of as a user manual for oneself. It records the usual settings, such as risk appetite, attention to detail and emotional reactivity; the characteristic response to stress; and the strategies that can be relied upon to produce better decisions, such as seeking out a devil's advocate or running time-boxed experiments. Mapping is not a matter of labelling oneself good or bad; it simply makes visible what is normally hidden, so that it can be worked on.

Two ideas drawn from recent studies proved especially helpful. The first is that personality is both trait and state: traits are relatively stable, while states shift from day to day with stress and context (Ringwald et al., 2024). The second is that the strategies people choose in order to regulate their emotions depend on the intensity of the feeling, on the context and on individual differences, and that these choices strongly shape the outcome of a decision (Matthews et al., 2021; Kozubal et al., 2023).

Taken together, these ideas give a clear picture of how awareness of one's traits, combined with consistent emotional management, leads to more effective decisions.

3.0 Relevant Details

3.1 How personality shapes tough decisions

Traits shape decisions: Speaking generally, several standard personality effects are well established.

- High conscientiousness: thorough and methodical decision-makers. Their attention to detail is an asset, but they run the risk of over-analysis.
- High neuroticism: stronger negative emotional reactions, a greater likelihood of indecision, and a tendency to avoid or postpone difficult problems.

- High openness: comfort with ambiguity and novelty, and a readiness to accept new solutions even when these are imperfect. Such people sometimes overlook practical constraints on implementation.
- Extraversion and agreeableness: these traits influence whether a person seeks input from others or defers to them, and they therefore shape the way group decisions are made.

Large samples confirm that these relationships exist, and personality differences help explain why people make different choices and adopt different decision patterns. More neurotic individuals, for example, often prefer non-vigilant decision styles. If you know yourself to be highly conscientious, you can set time limits and define a standard that is good enough, so as to avoid analysing endlessly. If you are high in neuroticism, you can build in a cooling-off routine, such as taking a break or discussing the matter with a colleague, before committing to a decision.

Personality states change under stress, and this matters: It is important to recognise that you are not the same person under pressure that you are in calm moments (Ringwald et al., 2024). Using daily diary methods, that study found that all of the Big Five states shift during stressful periods: people become more tense, less open and less patient, depending on how controllable and how severe the stressor is. Mapping must therefore include state signals, that is, simple cues indicating that we are not in our normal state, such as reduced patience, repetitive negative thoughts, physical tension, hasty judgements or social withdrawal. A short checklist of such signals is useful. When two or more are present, the task changes from deciding now to diagnosing and stabilising: apply a thirty-minute grounding routine, seek fresh input and test a low-cost experiment first.

Better emotional management leads to better decisions: The way a leader regulates emotion during a difficult period changes the decisions taken and, with them, the outcome. A systematic review of 219 studies identified the many factors that influence a person's choice of emotional regulation strategy (Matthews et al., 2021), while a further study found that people experiencing more intense emotion ruminate more and reappraise less, which reduces both the clarity and the rationality of their decisions (Kozubal et al., 2023). This matters because rumination is associated with poor decisions, indecision and bias, whereas reappraisal and acceptance support clear and rational thinking. Personality mapping should therefore record how a person regulates emotion and which strategies he or she adopts under pressure. The practical response is to prepare these strategies in advance: when feelings run high, breathe slowly, reappraise the situation, select a strategy that is likely to work and act on it quickly rather than continuing to ruminate.

Risk preferences and beliefs are linked to personality: Several studies and datasets show that risk tolerance and beliefs are structured by personality traits. In investment decisions, for example, lower equity allocations are correlated with higher neuroticism and

lower openness (Jiang et al., 2024). When taking a decision that involves calculated risk, therefore, first determine whether your personality inclines you towards boldness or towards caution, and then check whether that inclination fits the facts and the goal in front of you. A useful practice is to combine a personality check, asking whether you are biased towards safety or towards novelty, with a neutral calibration of the risk itself, and to test the resulting strategy before implementing it, remaining alert to new information as it emerges.

Social and demographic context interacts with personality: Personality alone does not determine decision style; decision style is personality combined with context. Research shows that women and men, and people of different social positions, display different decision patterns, and that age is associated with differences in vigilance and procrastination (Urieta et al., 2021). Leaders should therefore encourage their teams to treat personality mapping as contextual. A personality profile is helpful, but who is chosen to decide, and the situation in which they must decide, matter just as much. For group decisions, it is worth mapping both the individual decision-maker and the overall mix of the team.

3.2 A brief personality mapping guide

Drawing on the studies discussed above, the following compact guide can be applied by anyone in a few minutes before any difficult decision.

1. List the decision and its risks. Write it as a sentence: decide this rather than that, and the consequences will be one thing or the other. This practice prevents vague decisions.
2. Identify the active traits. Consider which of the Big Five traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) is most active at present; there may be more than one. You might, for example, be high in conscientiousness and moderate in neuroticism. This matters because traits shape decision patterns.
3. Check your state. Rate yourself from 0 to 3 on sleep, appetite, tension and rumination, and add the scores. If the total exceeds four, move to the stabilisation step. Research shows how markedly personality states change under stress (Ringwald et al., 2024).
4. Regulate your emotions. Decide in advance what you will do if emotion becomes overwhelming. Take a short break, or postpone the decision by a day or two if the matter is not time-critical. Research shows that the intensity of an emotion predicts whether a person ruminates or reappraises, and it is almost always better to avoid rumination.
5. Set a decision rule that suits your personality: time-boxed analysis for conscientious types, small and reversible experiments for those high in openness, and a structured checklist for those high in neuroticism. Add a check with a colleague, or a frequency test, as a further safeguard.

6. Test before deciding. If an experiment is possible, run it; if not, apply the rule and proceed. Self-knowledge combined with a clear structure is what prevents chaos.

4.0 Conclusion

Difficult decisions do not become easier simply because more data or more knowledge is available. They become easier when you understand how you process that data. Personality mapping is not therapy and not a label; it is a decision tool. Recent research supports two elements of the approach: that personality traits and states must both be understood if we are to know how a person responds to stress and makes decisions, and that emotional regulation is the link between personality and decision quality (Ringwald et al., 2024; Kozubal et al., 2023; Matthews et al., 2021). From these studies I have learned to treat my own personality as a design constraint that only I can manage. When I am clear about my tendencies and behaviour, and have practices in place to stabilise and regulate my emotions, I move from panic to a repeatable method for making better and clearer decisions. The goal is clarity, not the illusion of perfect certainty.

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