

Developing a Decision-Making Framework for Leadership Teams

By

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Abstract

The inquiry presented here explored the following key research question: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? The organizational sponsor of this research was The Next Institute. This research inquiry was grounded in action research methodology and supported The Next Institute's core values of inquiry, story and client led design. Ten senior and experienced organizational leaders were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews based on the narrative inquiry research method. Six people representing an existing and intact leadership team participated in the group-based method or workshop. Key findings of this research inquiry include identification of five core aspects of decision-making: 1) Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions; 2) Brainstorming is essential; 3) Decisions require alignment to strategy and vision; 4) Systems Thinking supports risk assessment; and 5) Accountability strengthens commitment to action and results. This thesis adheres to Royal Roads University's *Research Ethics Policy*.

Keywords: Decision-Making, Leadership, Leadership Teams, Decision-Making Framework, Systems Thinking, Complexity

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to leaders who have the courage to make decisions, the knowledge to execute their decisions, and the wisdom to know when to make the decisions. It is also dedicated to my nieces and nephews; may you always value the opportunities for life-long learning.

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Executive Summary

The Next Institute (Next) is a management consulting firm that partners with clients to support organizational change through the design and development of preferred futures, ensuring alignment with the executive team and building leadership capacity to execute and drive strategy. In partnering with Next to conduct this inquiry, we set out to determine essential components of decision-making in leadership teams to build on the decision-making skills in our organization. Additionally, Next expressed an interest in developing a framework to assist leaders and senior leadership teams to move through a deliberate and thoughtful process to reach a sound decision, should the inquiry identify key components of decision-making. The inquiry focused on decision-making at the executive leadership level and in the area of complex decisions.

In order to frame the inquiry and conduct the research, I developed the following inquiry question and sub-questions. How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? I also employed the following sub-questions to further support the inquiry:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

The groundwork for this research is based on the literature reviewed on the topics of the complexity of executive decision-making, decision-making in teams, and framing decision-making. Snowden and Boone's (2007) Cynefin framework for sense-making provides an opportunity for leaders to contextualize their problem or decision and shift their perspective, while further providing guidance on response strategies. This inquiry focused on Snowden and Boone's (2007) reference to the complex domain within their framework and attempted to identify steps to take to collectively reach a decision when solving complex problems.

This was a qualitative study supported by action research and focused around human centered inquiry. I structured my approach to include an action research methodology, Human Inquiry, and selected methods that fit both the methodology and the engagement practices that best suited my partner and participants. These included Narrative Inquiry and Design Thinking. The participants included 16 individual senior leaders from private, public, and non-profit sectors, taking part in semi-structured interviews and a workshop.

The data collection generated themes related to bias, instinct, risk, data collection, barriers and fear, vision, and accountability which led to seven core findings which largely reflected the themes. Further analysis informed five conclusions:

1. Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge and mitigate these issues where possible.
2. Brainstorming is essential to decision making.
3. Decisions require alignment to vision and strategy.
4. Systems Thinking supports risk assessment throughout the organization.
5. Assigning accountability for the execution of a decision strengthens commitment to action and results.

Finally, I was able to summarize three recommendations for Next:

1. The Next Institute develop a decision-making framework grounded by research, and based on the key components and conclusions identified through this research inquiry.
2. A decision-making framework, developed by Next, should include the following key components: bias, brainstorming, systems perspective, risk, and accountability.
3. As Next incorporates the use of a decision-making framework with their client partners, they ensure the clients are aligning decisions and actions with the vision and strategy of the client organizations.

Decision-making requires leadership, and leaders are required to be decision-makers. By developing, implementing, and practicing a decision-making framework when faced with complex and intricate decisions, leaders can develop confidence in their ability to make sound decisions that benefit and improve the outcomes for the business, and supports the leaders and teams in the enterprise to reach their preferred future.

There is a broad spectrum of inquiry related to decision-making and this research project has only highlighted a small portion of the current research and practices.

Chapter One: Focus and Framing

Decision-making and the components that contribute to leadership team decisions form the basis for this research inquiry. Subsequent to identifying these components, I queried whether by identifying core components of decision-making, an actionable decision-making framework might emerge.

As a leader, manager, and senior team member, I have made critical decisions that impacted the future of organizations. Often, these decisions were made with less than adequate fragments of information, not the whole picture. I have experienced successful outcomes and the knowledge that I, and/or my team, made the right decision to support the organization. I have also known the crushing weight of a decision that went wrong and negatively impacted the organization I was asked to lead. At no point in my career had I experienced training or mentorship in the art of making a decision and had always proceeded based on my experience and situational knowledge, rather than with a predetermined process. It was while discussing leadership skills with my Royal Roads University (RRU) peers that I began to critically examine a leader's ability to make decisions that promote and elevate the values, vision, and strategic direction of the organization. It was with this in mind, that decision-making and the components within, began to emerge as the focus of this thesis.

My partner organization, The Next Institute (Next), has a core philosophy that outlines the many attributes of a great leader; critical among them is decision-making. Throughout discussions with RRU and Next colleagues, I came to understand that we place a lot of trust in our leaders to make decisions for our well-being and an organization's future, and yet leaders are often plagued by biases that effect their decision-making on a regular basis (Milkman, Chugh & Bazerman, 2010). Nevertheless, Kase (2010) argued that great leaders with the emotional

intelligence, vision, and experiences to inform their decisions have a positive impact on organizations. Personally, I have experienced the adverse effect of poor decision making when a person of influence succumbed to bias or placed their needs above the needs of the organization, throwing the entire enterprise into chaos. The negative impact on myself and my peers steered my attention towards the capacity of leadership teams when it comes to making critical business decisions: I directed the focus of this inquiry to a leader's and leadership team's capacity to make decisions that benefit the organization, and to determine whether there are common factors in decision-making that would support the development of a decision-making framework that could be used individually and in groups to amplify the organization's performance and strategic direction. The following inquiry questions drove the research methodology:

How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? I also employed the following sub-questions to further support the inquiry:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Significance of the Inquiry

I partnered with Next, a Canadian based management consulting firm to conduct this action research inquiry. Next supports organizational change by co-creating a preferred future with executive leaders, ensuring alignment with the executive team around that preferred future, and building leadership capacity to execute and drive strategy. The purpose of this work is to ensure

the organization is telling the best possible story both internally, to provoke meaningful change, and externally to convey the organization's relevance and value to its customers.

The Next Institute consults with organizations across North America in a broad range of sectors and industries including natural resources, manufacturing, service, and retail. The partners at Next expressed that, clients throughout the private sector demonstrate an inability to make sound decisions more often than not, resulting in disorder and inefficiency in their organizations. While exploring the initial impetus to research a decision-making framework, the principals at Next shared with me that they had observed this behavior over the course of a decade, leading them to conclude that leaders were making poor decisions because: a) they were afraid to make mistakes, b) they relied heavily on gut instinct, c) they failed to survey their environment, d) they had no clear process to reach a decision, and e) systems were rarely established by organizations to ensure the proper ownership and accountability for decisions Gilchrist, R (2018, March, personal communication)¹. Next queried whether a framework to assist leaders to move through a deliberate and thoughtful process to reach a sound decision could be developed based on the outcome of the inquiry. This conceptual framework, the focus of my inquiry, is intended to achieve an overall outcome, in this case a decision. Next's interest, combined with my experiences of the impact of poor decision-making and the difficulties I have had in motivating teams to collaborate on a decision, resulted in our choice to work together to identify core components of a decision-making framework.

The inquiry was intended to enhance the organization and the way Next makes critical business decisions as a team. Next is in a transition phase; with a shift in executive leadership,

¹ Permission from the original speakers received for all "Personal Communication.

shifting business environments, and the continually changing needs of its clients. As a result, developing a DMF would benefit Next by identifying strategic actions to grow and expand the company. A DMF may increase the capacity of the team to develop strategies and approaches to support the needs of clients presenting new challenges, and allow the team to continue to be responsive to long-term clients. If the founders of Next choose not to develop the recommendations of this inquiry, the downside would simply be missing out on the positive outcomes of using a DMF. A significant positive outcome will be the ability to meet new challenges through recognizing the context of a decision, and shifting behaviour and decisions to match the context. Snowden and Boone (2007) introduced a decision-making framework in the early 2000s, refining it to become the Cynefin framework. Cynefin, pronounced kun-nev-in, is a Welsh word referring to the variety of environmental and experiential factors that influence our behaviour and thoughts in ways we can't fully understand (Cognitive-Edge, n.d.). The Cynefin framework is intended to assist leaders to identify situational context to improve decision making and avoid creating problems by leaning too heavily on a preferred management style. As I have spent more time observing the current practices of the team at Next, I observed that the founders make organizational decisions using patterns of behaviour that have worked for them in some capacity over the years. However, they are not using a framework and occasionally miss opportunities to make stronger decisions that benefit their company. I believe there may be some benefit to structuring their critical decisions. However, I must also identify the risk associated with a DMF. It could be that a generic DMF may not fit the dynamic, networked, and highly responsive and versatile nature of the company. There may be times when quick decisions must be made and the use of a DMF could hinder or delay a response. It may be that a DMF fits only certain types of decisions and that the use of one in making some types of decisions may increase

the response time, limit individual and team creativity, or shift the relationship with the client who may have come to expect something different from Next.

Organizational Context and Systems Thinking

The Next Institute is a national leadership firm with four partners, including the two founding partners, and two senior staff. The firm is networked and includes six to eight additional contract consultants for various projects with companies ranging in size from 30 employees to over 10,000. Working largely in North America in an array of sectors, they have established a leadership philosophy based on more than a decade of experience and observation. Before partnering with Next to explore my thesis topic of inquiry, I felt it critically important to ensure that the values and the leadership philosophy of Next aligned with my own. After lengthy discussions, I found that we were in alignment at a core values and philosophy level. Included here with permission are the seven tenets of The Next Institute's Philosophy:

- We believe great leaders and great leadership can be learned and developed with intention, the proper tools, desire and solid feedback.
- We believe great leaders apply critical thinking, are natural change agents, and are fierce when naming a scenario. They are courageous in their conversations, make well informed decisions, and are quick to hold people and their teams accountable for their actions and results.
- We believe great leaders are hungry, of sound character, are trustworthy, integral and put the interests of their follows ahead of themselves.
- We believe great leaders are formidable story makers and terrific story tellers who can translate the complex and can naturally inspire.

- We believe great leaders are creative, analytical, courageous explorers who are hungry to make a difference. They are agile and are adept at navigating complexity.
- We believe leaders are connectors who attract the best and the brightest talent and naturally inspire them to be and do their best work.
- Great leaders do amazing work in the world leaving things usually much better than they found them (The Next Institute, 2008, Philosophy section).

There have been many attempts made to define leadership, and while I haven't found one definition that adequately encompasses all that leadership entails, I do subscribe to the philosophy of leadership that serves as these core value statements of Next. Additionally, I found the definition presented by Lebovitz-Richmond (2008) relevant to both Next and this inquiry: "At its core ... leadership can be defined very simply as accomplishing change through the efforts of others". This inquiry focused on identifying fundamental concepts in decision-making to support leaders through organizational change in increasingly complex business environments. The timing of this project aligns with a transition phase within Next where a founding partner is stepping back in preparation for future retirement and asking the other founding partner to step into leadership of the company. This shift in leadership created an opportunity for considered, creative, and fresh content development. Next had always prided itself on assisting companies as they transition from one level of success to the next, and now Next had the opportunity to focus that level of discipline inward to support its own transition. Internal growth and change, combined with the desire for new content creation in the form of client learning and experience materials, caused Next to recognize that their current set of tools lacked a focus on decision-making. Next has a deep understanding of existing decision-making models, and in fact have met

and worked with David J. Snowden in the early 2000s when the Cynefin framework was in development. Additionally, they reviewed the literature used in the inquiry and concluded that there was not an existing DMF that Next might adopt for use with their executive clients. Next responded to this gap by engaging in this inquiry to meet their needs and the needs of today's leaders by identifying a DMF that can be used to guide leadership teams as they address strategic decisions when presented with new opportunities and challenges.

In order to generate interest and support in organizational change, I included systems thinking in early discussions of the research with my team. Stroh (2015) proposed that the use of systems mapping and inquiry can lead to catalytic conversations which help participants "deepen awareness, cultivate acceptance, and develop new alternatives" (p. 129). Throughout the inquiry, catalytic conversations occurred at the partner, participant, and stakeholder levels generating diverse thinking on identifying decision-making components.

In arguing for the systems thinking approach, Stroh (2015) discussed the challenges a diverse set of stakeholders have in working toward alignment, even if they agree on their intentions. However, by engaging a broader group of unconnected parts, or organizations in this case, an opportunity is created for innovation and surfacing different ways of thinking (p. 92) about decision-making and providing critical input during the discovery phase. I engaged with 16 leaders from non-profit and private industry individually in a one-to-one setting and in a group workshop in order to diversifying the inputs to get a broad perspective on decision making in teams.

Much like Next's approach of working with successful companies to assist them in meeting their challenges and achieving further success, Stroh's Success Amplification theory also builds upon existing success by analyzing current success, identifying barriers to greater success, and

creating new opportunities for growth over time (Stroh, 2015 p. 170). There is much alignment between Next and Stroh's thinking. Systems thinking was identified throughout the data collection phase as a component of decision-making that is often neglected. It is only when subsequently reflecting on a decision that leaders are able to see the system more clearly and how their decision impacted other parts of the organization that they had not considered at the time of the decision. The inquiry exposed that a functioning DMF has components of systems thinking: articulating challenges, making informed choices, and questioning how a decision will impact on other parts of the organization or system. By incorporating a systems thinking approach as influenced by Stroh (2015), I originally gained support and engagement from my partner at Next to pursue the inquiry, and ultimately was encouraged to incorporate this way of thinking into a DMF that may emerge from the inquiry.

Thesis Overview

Chapter one included an overview of Next's current situation, the significance of the inquiry, and a discussion of how Stroh's theory could be applied within the research and the organizational context of decision making. The following chapters are arranged to include a literature review, methodology, inquiry findings and conclusions, and finally the inquiry implications. The literature review in chapter two examines the pertinent scholarly and professional discourse on decision-making and decision-making processes for leadership teams, and relates relevant ideas and concepts to the thesis inquiry. Chapter three explores the research methodology and data collection methods, namely one-one interviews and a workshop. I include the process for determining project participants, and how I conducted the study and analyzed data as well as steps taken to verify the data. The chapter concludes with a description of ethical implications as related to the inquiry. Chapter four includes the findings that resulted from the

analysis of the collected data and provides conclusions compared and contrasted to the literature. The chapter also identifies the scope and limitations of the study and lessons learned through the process of the research. In chapter five, I conclude the thesis with a final review of the key concepts and actionable recommendations for developing the change initiative. Finally, I identify the inquiry's link to broader societal trends and implications for future research.

Having provided a complete description of the research opportunity and the organizational context in which the project occurred I move to the second chapter to provide a critical analysis of the literature relevant to the inquiry.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Leaders are inundated with decisions throughout their career, from small daily decisions, to larger decisions that critically impact the future of the organization that may occur less frequently, but take place over a longer period of time. Important decisions often involve ambiguity due to a lack of information or opposing perspectives on the problems and available solutions. Leaders, and leadership teams, may be unprepared to tackle these critical decisions and if the decision-making is ineffective, it could have a negative result for the organization. Common throughout the research is an acknowledgement that leaders are operating in increasingly complex environments. This complexity may stem from several factors such as: multiple stakeholders or decision makers, facing new problems that have not previously been experienced, a lack of knowledge or information, conflicts in goals or beliefs, and insufficient measures of success; all of which creates a complex or difficult environment for making decisions. In order to be effective in these difficult situations, the research promoted a variety of decision-making tools and processes that focused on organizational objectives, resources, access to information, and shifting environments.

The groundwork for this research is based on the literature reviewed on the topics of the complexity of executive decision-making, decision-making in teams, and framing decision-making. Integrating academic research and commercial leadership writings on the topic of decision-making supported my main inquiry question: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? This chapter provides a broad overview of challenges, and identifies a variety of tools and processes that may support a decision-making framework.

Much like any discussion on the definition of leadership, defining decision-making or decision-making processes is difficult, as there are many perspectives and applications. Omar and Kleiner (1997) provided their definition of a decision as; "...a conscious selection from a course of actions of which there is more than one option" (p. 1). They stated that "A decision is a commitment to action and requires an accompanying commitment of resources and personal accountability" (p. 5). I considered from the outset that commitment to action and accountability is a step that is often missed in decision-making. Omar and Kleiner (1997) delineated problem solving versus decision-making; whereas problem solving requires that the root cause of a problem be found so that it can be resolved, the decision-making then follows in choosing a course of action to resolve the problem. They further expounded that in an organization, the nature of decisions differs depending on the leadership level in a hierarchal organization. While executives focus on decisions with broader and long-term impact, the operational leaders make decisions that have a more tangible and immediate impact. While both levels may experience similar obstacles: procrastination, fear, lack of information, and limited resources, as the executive level finds themselves making more complex decisions more often those obstacles are critical to overcome (Omar & Kleiner, 1997, p. 2). This is where this inquiry is focused: at the executive leadership level and in the area of complex decisions.

The Complexity of Executive Decision-Making

In choosing to focus on decision making in teams, I explored a range of decision-making models, frameworks, and tools. Several researchers have contributed to the study of decision-making in business, by individual leaders, and leadership teams. Many researchers proposed a range of dynamic models to enhance decision-making processes for executives and senior leaders. One such model that considers the variety of conditions existing for leaders in modern

enterprise is the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This model also serves to lay the groundwork for choosing a course of action through complex decision-making processes.

Snowden and Boone (2007) proposed complexity science as the foundation for the Cynefin framework and argued that if decision-makers are able to use existing knowledge to place a problem into an identifying context, they can use that new perspective to simplify the decision-making approach and strategy and guide the decision-maker to appropriate action. Throughout a leader's career, they come to rely on approaches that are familiar and have proven to work in particular circumstances, creating a broad reaction in the face of decision-making, rather than continually refining their response. Snowden and Boone (2007) argued that leaders need to avoid complacency and be prepared to consider the situational context of a decision, in order to respond.

The Cynefin framework presented five domains or contexts that help to sort out a response or action; Obvious, Complicated, Complex, Chaotic, and Disordered. Obvious and complicated decisions fall in the ordered side of the framework, while complex and chaotic fall in the unordered side, with disorder in the middle. Most senior leaders are equipped to respond to the ordered domain, obvious, and complicated, as they would have learned a set of tools for responding through training and experience. As for the unordered domain, the chaotic context requires leaders to act and respond quickly; it is a command-and-control situation. I focused my inquiry on the area of complexity for the following reasons: a) chaotic situations requiring command and control will not benefit from a DMF, and in fact, using one could hinder the response, and b) leaders making decisions in the ordered domain likely already have an ability to respond and tools to do so, and c) in the current economic landscape, business leaders are facing far more complex decisions. In order to move their organization forward, they may be required

to make shifts in their traditional approaches to leadership and decision-making. Snowden and Boone (2007) posited that leaders who “set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable ... will discern many opportunities for innovation, creativity, and new business models” (p. 77). Through the act of stepping back and observing emerging patterns or trends, the Cynefin framework is intended to empower an executive to view issues from new perspectives. These new perspectives, new knowledge, or ability to observe emerging trends may enhance the leader’s capacity to more fully understand and address issues and opportunities in real time. Furthermore, the Cynefin framework encourages a leader to use the ability to observe and collate multiple inputs in order to identify and consider the domain of the framework in which their decision resides and adjust their behaviour or response to fit.

Initially, I found the Cynefin framework useful in identifying where the majority of the decisions I was making fit into the framework. In doing so, I was able to further understand the context of these decisions and what may be an appropriate reaction when making such decisions. However, I also identified that as an Executive Director, most of my decisions resided in the complex domain of the Cynefin framework. While this helped me make sense of my workplace and the potential impact of my decisions, I was left asking myself what was next in the decision-making process. I sensed that the Cynefin framework did not go far enough to support a leader in actually making a complex decision. Therefore, in using the Cynefin framework as an initial reference for a DMF, I would like to determine what further steps may be necessary for a leadership team to make an organizational decision in the Complex domain. My initial assertion is that the Cynefin framework is a sense-making tool that supports identifying the starting point of decision-making, one-step in a DMF process. My inquiry may identify further components that will support an easily applicable DMF that deepens the process.



Figure 1. The Cynefin Framework. This figure illustrates the domains of sense-making.

Retrieved April 10, 2019, with permission from

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/15/Cynefin_as_of_1st_June_2014.png/240px-Cynefin_as_of_1st_June_2014.png

Following on Snowden and Boone's (2007) complexity science driving decision-making frameworks, Courtney, Lovallo, and Clarke, (2015) challenged the traditional process of decision-making based on complete data sets, a stable environment, and a trusted business model. They argued that in order to meet the demands of fast-changing industry, shifting business models and a range of unknowns, leaders must make decisions that incorporate decision analysis and qualitative scenario analysis. The model they proposed provided a simplified reality in order to get to the truth of decision-making. They argued that it is possible for leaders to "significantly improve their chances of success by making one straightforward ... change: expanding their tool kit of decisions support tools and understanding which tools work best for which situations" (p. 98). Much like Snowden and Boone (2007), they claimed that organizations rely too heavily on simple tools that assume access to complete or reliable information when

facing complex or complicated contexts. In their research, they observed leaders attempting to impose logic on decisions or using traditional decision support tools even when faced with a lack of information and complex situations. They proposed that good decisions are supported by analytic tools that match the strategic context and that there are three factors to consider when choosing a decision support: “How well you understand the variables that will determine success, how well you can predict the range of possible outcomes, and how centralized the relevant information is” (p. 101). This approach is similar to the Complex domain of the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) which calls the decision maker to “probe” and explore the variables, “sense” or predict possibilities of success, and then “respond” or act with intention based on the inquiry and knowledge received.

Similarly, Beshears and Gino (2015) focused on the human condition and response when facing complex decisions and presented a five-step approach focused on the context of a DMF by tweaking the situation to reduce cognitive biases and failure to act. They shared the views of behavioural decision researchers and psychologists who suggested that humans have two modes of processing information and making decisions. The first, System 1 thinking, is “automatic, instinctive, and emotional” (p. 108). It relies on mental shortcuts that generate intuitive answers to problems as they arrive. The second, System 2, is “slow, logical, and deliberate” (p. 108). These two modes have advantages and disadvantages, of course. We make System 1 decisions easily, using intuition and emotion which can serve as key inputs in the decision-making process, but left unchecked by analysis and deliberation can lead to poor judgements, impacting the long-term. Beshears and Gino (2015) pointed out that while System 2 thinking is required to balance our decision making, it takes a lot of cognitive energy and when this is depleted, “problems of bias and inadequate motivation may arise” (p. 108). To combat the issue of cognitive bias and

low motivation, they posited that rather than focusing on rewiring the human brain, the focus shift to examining the circumstances and situations in which people make decisions and make changes that enable people to make stronger decisions. This may include breaking down complex issues into manageable problems, looking at underlying or systemic causes to problems, and taking the time to reflect on and then design a solution to address the root cause. The steps they identified to overcome poor decision making were: a) understand, in this case, the common errors the team is making, b) define the problem, c) diagnose the underlying causes, d) design or adjust the situation to reduce impact of bias, and e) test the suggested solution prior to implementation. Here, I found the seeds for a decision-making framework; understand, define, diagnose, design, test. I would go on to test and refine this thinking throughout the inquiry.

Raney and Jacoby (2010) provided an additional piece that resonated with my research method which was a design thinking approach to decision-making. They were of the opinion that using a design approach would enhance decision-making for any business leader and their organization. “For designers, the process of building, prototyping, and trying things *is* the decision-making process” (Raney & Jacoby, 2010, p. 36). Designers iterate, test, learn, and adapt, letting best options emerge. They conduct large decisions through the testing of smaller trials. Designers are not necessarily looking for consensus; they demand collaboration, critique, and building. Raney and Jacoby (2010) acknowledged the complexity of leaders’ contexts and suggested that approaching decisions through design can produce breakthroughs. They included the following approaches to decide by design:

- Test your early scenarios quickly, with real users in their environment
- Challenge yourself to design a solution under extreme constraints

- Use concrete, provocative prototypes to uncover new learnings
- Strive to create two or three new options beyond those you considered previously
- Make sure you are eliminating options as you create them (p. 38)

They posited that this approach reduces cost, in both time and investment, increases collaboration, expands options and creativity, and results in informed, refined decisions. While they did not suggest removing linear analysis, they encouraged leaders to do a robust analysis of a situation that engages the team in the decision-making process through intentional or designed activities.

Overall, this literature called for leaders to be able to assess the environment they were operating in when a response or decision was required. As they each provided or suggested a framework for decision-making that was unique, but grounded on similar theories, it led me to understand that once I identified core components of a framework and proceeded to create a decision-making framework, it was unlikely to meet the needs of the leaders I work with in all situations. Therefore, a level of flexibility and adaptability was required.

Designing Decision-Making in Teams

Fraser (2010) posited that “a company’s decision-making dynamics are a critical dimension of both its adaptability to the present and its future success” (p. 80). Fraser provided a clear and direct view on decision-making in teams and argued that by developing this skill in teams, organizations will experience greater rewards stemming from “enhanced efficiency, employee empowerment and enterprise agility” (p. 83). Stemming from a design principles viewpoint, Fraser (2010) suggested that the components of business design that can impact the long-term strategy of the business include: understanding the human factors, prototyping and iterating

possibilities, and evolving strategic models. In order to embed these design concepts, Fraser (2010) offered six key actions: 1) Embrace user-inspired strategies, 2) Visualize solutions to decide what gets moved ahead, 3) Use a multiple-choice framework for decision-making, 4) Engage users in decision-making, 5) Nurture a culture of experimentation, and 6) Use informed intuition as a guide. She also argued that innovation and decision-making should be part of the culture and part of everyone's role, not held in the hands of a few. This, in my opinion, allows all team members to feel confident in sharing solutions to problems that may not be known at all levels, but that may be affecting the bottom line. The article spoke directly to my goal of supporting our client's decision-making to ensure continuous success and informed the data collection workshop.

Garven and Roberto (2001) argued that leaders are judged based on the quality of their decisions, yet most leaders do not know how to make decisions and have never considered a decision as a process of inquiry. They stated that many leaders treat decisions as a singular event requiring the leader to consider the problem, use gut, experience, and/or current information and then make a declaration, to which the organization responds. This approach fails to consider the context of the organization or broader environment, which impacts the success of the decision. Garven and Roberto (2001, p. 62) presented two methods for decision making; an advocacy approach that views decision-making as a contest with winners and losers, versus an inquiry approach based on collaborative problem solving and collective ownership. The advocacy approach suggested leaders hold fast to and promote their own position to the exclusion of opposing views and ideas. This results in an inability to recognize and address errors, negativity, exclusion, and lack of innovation. Their argument highlighted the value of an inquiry approach

which promotes constructive conflict, collaboration, creative thinking, and team support of decisions.

Garven and Roberto's (2001) viewpoint contributes to evolving a DMF and links to Kaner, Lind, Toldi, Fisk, and Berger (2014), who emphasized aligning multiple viewpoints and getting to a decision by bringing independent thinkers and strong-willed leaders together with a focus on engaged strategy development. Kaner et al. (2014) provided a thorough and well-researched basis for facilitating participatory decision-making, the grounding principles of which included a focus on group decision-making, while they recognize the model is an idealized reality and that the human factor creates various roadblocks, they provided actionable responses to obstacles. The basis of the model supposed that a team comes together to solve a difficult problem, and in the *Divergent Thinking* (Kaner et al., 2014) phase they would develop a diverse set of ideas from which the best thinking would emerge and be transformed into a proposed action. During the *Convergent Thinking* (Kaner et al., 2014) phase, that best thinking would be refined into a final decision that took into account all team members' thinking. To meet the realities that occur once the human element is brought to bear on a framework, Kaner et al. (p. 19) introduced the *Groan Zone*, the uncomfortable period where miscommunication and misunderstanding often occurs. They argued that groups that acknowledge and work through the *Groan Zone* will benefit from reaching a common decision that will lead to further innovative collaboration. Kaner et al. provided an opportunity for me to further consider constructive conflict and its role in a DMF. Additionally, Kaner et al. outlined a brief overview of applying design principles to a decision-making meeting, which proved useful in developing the data collection workshop.

Framing Decision-Making

Reflecting on my own reasons for exploring a DMF, I wanted to create a framework that removed bias and ego and put organizational success at the forefront. I came to view this as an idealistic point of view and settled on the notion of reducing bias as a realistic goal. In order to reduce bias, it would be important to acknowledge and account for biases that may be present or active within a leadership team as a first step to reducing or mitigating the impact of the bias. As I studied the Cynefin framework, I considered that instinct can play an important role in decision-making and came to understand that there may be a role for bias and gut instinct in the ordered domain as it requires the decision maker to quickly sense, categorize, and act. Sensing or acting on gut and previous knowledge, experience and instinct, can in fact lead to a right decision. However, as the inquiry focused on the complex context, I believed there ought to be an opportunity to refute or expose bias to ensure that the leadership team was exploring a range of options, allowing opportunities for innovation to emerge, and shift perspectives. Supporting this thought process, Buchanan and O'Connell (2006) argued that there is a place for gut or instinct in decision-making. In moments of crisis or chaos, there isn't time for processing probabilities and brainstorming solutions. In these times, we admire the courage of our leaders in making gut decisions to meet the demand of the situation. They cited that while executives use both intuitive and analytical skills, an overwhelming majority contribute their success to instinct. And while leaders will use all the information at hand to make a decision, they accept that gut instinct will contribute to the decision as well. While I, and most leaders would like to think we make decisions objectively, based on evidence, research indicated that this is unlikely to occur when considering the human element.

Furthermore, Heath and Heath (2013) relied on psychological research and argued that our decisions had been impacted by biases and irrationalities which resulted in destructive group

decisions and created anxiety. They outlined a series of factors in the decision-making process and presented a process to counteract bias and support generative decisions. First, they presented factors which can derail the decision-making process. They call these the “four villains of decision making” (p. 29). They then dedicated their attention and effort to a four-step decision-making process called “W R A P”.

According to Heath and Heath (2013) the four villains of decision-making are:

- *Narrow Framing*, they described this as “the tendency to define our choices too narrowly, to see them in binary terms” (p. 10). Instead of asking should I do this or that, Heath and Heath offered instead, is there a way I can do this and that? By this slight shift in framing, one can expand the field in question significantly, leaving space for a broader solution.
- *Confirmation Bias*, they suggested, is a major factor to be considered in decision-making. This is when we think or know what we think to be certain and look for any information or perspective that supports our view. This is extremely dangerous when looking at the proper information required to make a sound decision.
- The third Villain, *Short Term Emotion* can often hijack the ability to see clearly, squeezing out the capacity to bring an array of diverse perspectives into the decision-making process. This can leave us at risk in bringing logic versus emotion into the mix.
- Finally, *Overconfidence* can obfuscate a sound decision by thinking one knows way more about a scenario or situation than they do. This leads the team to believe that the decider has a more solid grasp on how the future may unfold.

These four villains of decision-making pose a threat that may inevitably distort the productive outcome of a decision. Following an outline of the “four villains of decision-making” (p. 29),

Heath and Heath offered a four-step process that can be used to make significant decisions that they weave into a clever acronym called “W R A P”. This can be used to make more effective decisions by making choices clearer and easier.

- *W – Widen your Options.* Instead of taking a narrow view on a decision, they suggested one must broaden the perspective by bringing more options into the mix. The idea being that the more options available, one option may emerge that was originally out of your scope that may be more substantial to the outcome rather than a binary, yes or no decision.
- *R – Reality Test your Assumptions.* This occurs by running experiments to see “what sticks”. Heath and Heath proposed setting a series of trials in order to see what decision may be the most viable. They called this “ooching” which is intended to make you more comfortable when making bigger decisions.
- *A – Attain Distance before Deciding.* Emotions play a large and often destructive factor in deciding. Allowing for greater distance between a snap decision, the emotion tends to dissipate giving way for more objectivity to permeate the decision. They offered considering how you would “feel” about your decision 10 minutes, 10 months or 10 years from now. This question is intended to add a layer of temporal perspective.
- *P – Prepare to be Wrong.* The future is not a single point that is predictable. Rather a series of “bookends” framing how both success and failure might be considered. When we prepare for the unforeseen, we build in a safety factor. By anticipating problems, Heath and Heath suggested we can be more prepared for them. When leaders and their teams consider the worst- and best-case scenarios, they can anticipate and prepare for

both success and adversity. In doing so Heath and Heath suggested that we are stacking the deck in favor of our decisions.

I observed that this formula may be useful for generic decisions we all make day to day, but may be overly simple for large scale, complex or intricate decisions that have significant consequences on the organization if they were to fail.

Milkman, Chugh, and Bazerman (2010) further confronted bias-based decision-making by offering strategies to address situations known to cause leaders to rely on bias. They expounded on the concept of “Type 1” and “Type 2” cognitive functioning. Type 1 cognitive functioning is our intuitive system that is “fast, automatic, effortless, implicit, and emotional”. Type 1 is often relied upon when we are confronted with a lack of information, time, and capacity, perhaps effective in the obvious or chaotic context, referring back to the Cynefin framework. They suggested that using linear models for decision-making will aid leaders in moving from Type 1 to Type 2 thinking. Type 2 cognitive functioning “refers to reasoning that is slower, conscious, effortful, explicit, and logical” (Milkman et al., 2010, p. 24) and is suited to complex situations. They suggested strategies for moving from Type 1 to Type 2, include using a linear approach, broadening perspectives, including others and considering opposite points of view, gathering information in the form of data or research, seeking a common principle, and considering multiple options simultaneously rather than rejecting them one by one. A commonality in the readings that was also identified in this article is the suggestion that changing the environment will improve the results of Type 1 thinking. A key task Milkman et al. (2010) discerned was to identify when leaders should move from intuitive, Type 1 thinking to deliberate Type 2 thinking in order to reduce biased decision-making on a broader level.

With so many options, formulas, and frameworks provided by researchers and business leaders alike, it is likely a confusing task for leaders to select one process from which to begin intentional decision-making. And yet, I merely scratched the surface of decision focused research.

In conclusion, this critical analysis of executive and team decision-making combined with a review of suggested formulas and processes to improve decision-making, aided the inquiry goal to define the components of a DMF. The literature provided substantive understanding and guided the research methods and data collection.

By defining the components of a DMF our team has the opportunity to become stronger collaborators, flexible and responsive business leaders, able to produce informed decisions that can be trusted by our peers: faculty and clients alike.

The research inquiry called us to consider how we want to engage as a team, how critical decisions are made, and what critical decisions should be made by the team. Where we were once isolated by our respective roles and dispersed locations, we became more collaborative in considering the future and how we approach changing environments. Using a decision-making framework contributes to ensuring everyone is included in the process and their best thinking is brought to the table to provide creative solutions to our company's more vexing problems.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Having established the Cynefin framework as a reference point, drawn from personal experience, interest of my partner organization, and prior research, in this section, I identify the methodology and structure of the research. I will provide rationale to support how the methods and inquiry approach suited both the research inquiry and Next. I will also share detail on the conduct of the study, the research participants, data collection methods, and how data were analyzed and validated. To close, I have included a discussion of ethical issues as related to the study.

In conducting this thesis, I explored the following inquiry question: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? I also employed the following sub-questions to further support the inquiry:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Methodology

I was confident that the research questions had a clear relationship to the goal of the study and that by conducting a qualitative study, these questions would not only support action research but would connect and be sensitive to the human centered inquiry. Therefore, the research has elements of first-, second-, and third-person inquiry, according to Torbert and Taylor (2007), that supports organizational change. Torbert and Taylor (2007) defined the three types of inquiry as follows;

- First person inquiry is based on one's own experience of the world, feeling, thought, and attention that can yield information through observation and support action inquiry by helping researchers increase their awareness of their own impact or alignment to the research.
- Second person inquiry refers to the quality of the discussion or inquiry between researcher and participant and is largely future based, as people come together to solve a problem. During the inquiry, this included clarifying the research problem, providing an example of complex decision, asking the research questions and reframing the purpose of the question or exercise as necessary.
- Finally, third person inquiry provides an organizational perspective that broadly links groups, leaders, or departments. In the case of this inquiry, it included Next, and the various participants in the methods as both representatives of their organization and, in the case of the workshop, a previously formed working group.

Storytelling is a core component of how Next works with our clients. A philosophy of Next is that people are storytellers by nature and the use of story is a key feature of successful leadership. Storytelling, or narrative research is a common practice at Next; therefore, I chose to align my research with a practice familiar to my sponsor. With this in mind, I structured my approach to include an action research methodology, Human Inquiry, and selected methods that fit both the methodology and the engagement practices that best suited my partner and participants.

In determining that the study would not be active over a complete cycle that would identify and evaluate organizational change, I also employed the action research engagement (ARE) model (Rowe, Graf, Agger-Gupta, Piggot-Irvine, & Harris, 2013) as a component of the overall

approach to the research study. The ARE model identified a change cycle as having five distinct stages of action: “focus and framing, stakeholder engaged inquiry methods, reflection on action, evaluation of action and engage forward, and recontextualize and reconstruct for organizational change” (p. 22). In the context of this research, the cycles proceeded as follows. Focus and framing allowed my sponsor and I to explore, discuss, and identify the opportunity to explore decision-making as a project inquiry. Stakeholder engagement, while limited due to the size of our organization, was explored internally and allowed us to identify external participants with experience that could support the generation of dialogue and data (Rowe et al., 2013). As the researcher, I conducted the reflection on action stage with support by my inquiry team. Stage four, evaluation of action and engage forward occurred when my sponsor and I came together to discuss and explore the relevant data in order to identify the components of a decision-making framework. Finally, the last stage that included preparing for organizational change will occur once I share my research findings for developing a decision-making framework with Next, in order that they might implement the recommendations (Rowe et. al., 2013). During this transition, I will work with the team at Next to support the development of a decision-making framework that can be used to support internal and client-based decisions.

Human inquiry. Human Inquiry (HI) is a methodology based on experience, engagement, respect for relationships, interest in feedback, reflection to inform changes to perspectives, and a commitment to new ways of knowing, as defined by Reason (1989). It is this very definition of HI that piqued my interest, as I could see the link to components of decision-making that I saw in the relevant literature on decision-making. The plurality of knowledge used in HI includes experiential, presentational, practical, and propositional; when used together this creates a broad and inclusive interpretation and generation of new knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2011, p.

214). By using HI as a guiding methodology, I was able to focus on the individual, their experience, and desire to develop creative solutions for their organizations to explore decision-making in a local context (p. 214).

A primary aspect of HI that appealed to me is the focus on discipline, self-reflection, and continuous review of, and adjustments to, the process. This approach allowed me to remain flexible and responsive to the needs of the participants, and was supportive of the use of various methods for participant engagement and data gathering.

To support the Human Inquiry methodology and the research inquiry question and sub-questions, I engaged a two-stage approach to method. I chose this approach to provide a balance in data collection to highlight the strengths or advantages of each method and to address the limitations inherent in each. For this inquiry project, I chose the participatory and qualitative methods of Narrative Inquiry and Design Thinking. My inquiry team supported me in developing the interviews, while I was the actual and singular interviewer. I conducted the interviews first, and then followed with a workshop. I share each method separately in the Data Collection Methods and Study Conduct sections below.

Data Collection Methods

This section provides an overview of literature related to the two data collection methods used in the research inquiry, Narrative Inquiry and Design Thinking. Each method is presented separately in the subsections that follow.

Narrative inquiry. The links between Human Inquiry (HI), Narrative Inquiry (NI), and the life story interviews conducted by Next align in such a way as to support stakeholder engagement and ongoing practical application of the research. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiack, and

Zibler (1998) defined narrative research as “any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials” through the use of story, such as those provided in an interview. Narrative Inquiry generates a new way of viewing an environment or organizational context (Pushor & Clandinin, 2009) which, when viewed through the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) may bridge the gap between a leader’s narrative and the act of decision-making by reconfiguring existing knowledge to create new knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). Through NI there exists a possibility for changes and shifts in behaviour and practice (Pushor & Clandinin, 2009, p. 6) and the opportunity to take an individual’s experience of the world and transform that into a better experience for themselves and their organization. Experience, knowledge, and a relationship with cause and effect are necessary to decision-making, and a broader frame of reference revealed through NI may help leaders in contexts where links to cause and effect are absent.

I engaged ten participants in semi-structured interviews, a qualitative method that combined open-ended questions in a conversational format (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). From an NI perspective I conducted these semi-structured interviews around questions that invited the participant to provide personal narratives of their lived experiences (Saldana & Omasta, 2018), in this case, around their history with decision-making.

Design Thinking. Design thinking represents my second method for data collection. Leadership teams face many factors in the process of decision-making and the contexts in which they are making those decisions are varied. Obvious, complicated, complex, and chaotic contexts require leaders to have the ability to identify the context and shift behaviour to suit the context (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This research project was intended to study how leaders are making decisions and to determine the key factors required in a decision-making process. To further the

study, and put the findings from the interview under further scrutiny, I orchestrated a workshop based on design thinking principles.

Design Thinking is a process for creative problem solving. Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO described design thinking as "...a human-centred approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success" (IDEO, 2015, para. 2). I considered design thinking as a strong fit with the team at Next and our style of collaborative inquiry, story sharing, and creative process to reach consensus. By designing a workshop for a small working group to move through the DMF we were able to gain insight, input, and feedback on themes and components of decision-making that had surfaced through the interviews. This incorporated the principles of design thinking by giving stakeholders the opportunity to "gather inspiration, generate ideas, make ideas tangible, and share the story" (IDEO, 2015, para. 5).

Incorporating these methods into my action-oriented thesis project allowed me, as researcher, to contribute to the process and to engage in collaborative dialogue to identify and explore aspects of decision-making in order to present a useable framework. Using Human Inquiry as a starting methodology and Narrative Inquiry and Design Thinking as the methods, I and the team at Next, experienced real time active learning and experimentation that aligned with the culture and values of Next. Narrative Inquiry provided the basis for engaging participants and myself as researcher in the telling, retelling, and sense-making of story, while developing the workshop through a Design Thinking lens encouraged the focus of the research to remain on human-centered innovation. These two methods tied together nicely by balancing reflection and action and supported the principles of Human Inquiry.

Project Participants

The following section provides information regarding the logic behind participant and inquiry team selection.

The selection of participants began as I determined the appropriate methods to support my inquiry question. In asking if interviews would benefit the inquiry, I determined that conducting interviews would be the best method to gain insight as the firsthand accounts of participants would certainly advance the inquiry. Initially, I intended to interview CEOs from the pool of clients at Next due to their leadership experience, skill, and history of making critical business decisions. However, because of their association with Next, they had to be excluded from the pool in order to pass ethical review. While this was disappointing to Next, as they trusted the skill and input of their clients, my partner and I were subsequently able to identify a sample of participants from different professions and sectors. Inclusion criteria for the participants in the interview method included Chief Executive Officers or Executive Directors with over five years of experience leading senior teams and who were willing to participate in the inquiry research. The exclusion criteria included leaders who had not reached the executive level or who had less than five years' experience as leaders of senior teams as well as those who chose not to participate in the inquiry. For the workshop method, I identified several possible leadership teams who might contribute valuable information; however, due to time constraints, I was successful in gaining access to one group who was willing to participate.

The action research inquiry team involved one individual from my Royal Roads University Masters of Arts Leadership cohort and a professor from another university who is part of my network. They were asked to participate based on my knowledge of their professionalism and academic rigour. Appendix F includes the inquiry team confidentiality agreements. The sponsor

for this research was Next Co-Founder, Ross Gilchrist. Mr. Gilchrist endorsed the project, identified and sent out invitations to interview participants, provided input on the workshop, and was regularly updated on the status of the research project. My academic supervisor guided me through the process, including submission of the proposal and ethical review and tracking timelines.

The project participants included 16 individual senior leaders representing 11 different organizations from private, public, and non-profit sectors. Their level of experience and diversity of background ensured the range of decision-making experiences added credibility to the research. One-on-one interviews with the participants provided data based on experience, while the workshop provided data based on real-time observation.

In order to implement the project recommendations regarding a DMF, my sponsor, an organizational stakeholder, and I will present the findings to the Co-Founder and as a team we will collectively determine whether to develop and incorporate a DMF suitable for use at Next.

Study Conduct

In this section I share the process for organizing and conducting the research inquiry following the ethics approval from Royal Roads University until conclusion of the data collection methods. Following ethics approval, I began to draft the specific interview questions, identify potential participants, and further explore the methods for the workshop.

For the semi-structured interviews, a list of twenty potential candidates was created by my sponsor and me, which we then edited, vetted, and discussed, creating a final participant list of 10. In this case, I employed purposive sampling (Saldana & Omasta, 2018) by deliberately selecting participants who may have provided insight into decision-making due to their level of experience. My sponsor and I both invited participants to be interviewed based on our

connection to the participant. Participants responded directly to me to confirm and schedule the interviews, which supported my sponsor during a time of high work demand, and allowed greater efficiency and response times. The information letter and questions were provided to each participant once an interview had been scheduled; these are located in Appendix B. For the workshop, I recruited members of a team independent from Next whom I knew through prior work experience and for whom I now volunteer. This team was very supportive of my work on decision-making and is interested in the results. In the end, 10 people engaged in the interview process and six people participated in the workshop. I ensured participants received a consent form prior to each activity. The consent forms can be found in Appendices C and E.

For the interview process I drafted the interview questions and shared them with my inquiry team for feedback, which was used to revise the questions. This helped to organize the interview in a way that the sub-questions would be addressed. I conducted a pilot interview with a colleague to determine flow and enhance the experience for the participant. This caused slight adjustments in the actual questions.

I conducted 10 one-on-one interviews over the phone in January and February 2019; each interview lasted on average one hour. Interviews were recorded manually by taking notes. Each participant was asked to prepare for the interview by reflecting on an example of when they and their leadership team had to make a critical internal or external decision that had an impact (positive or negative) on the organization. The interview then provided an opportunity for narrative or storytelling through the description of the example decision, the organization, and the team. The interview questions were used to extrapolate the steps taken to reach the decision, thus resulting in a semi-structured interview using narrative inquiry.

In order to help understand or evolve my sub-questions, I developed a set of questions to aid the narrative interviews. While interviews were initiated with the question “Tell me your story”, I led the participants through a series of questions during the semi-structured interview. These questions were developed with the support of my inquiry team and designed to support each of the three sub-questions. Following a practice interview with my sponsor, I made slight changes to how I conducted the formal interviews. This ensured that I reviewed the confidentiality, withdrawal process, and time commitment at the beginning of the conversation and I also added in a time check at two points throughout the process out of respect for the participants’ time.

The sub-questions, as listed above, were further supported by the following interview questions.

Sub-question 1: What key aspects of decision-making are critical to leaders? Supportive questions: How did you identify the problem requiring the decision? Did your team collectively make the decision? Did people defer to the most experienced person or were all opinions included? Did any particular team member’s bias or collective biases impact the decision? Did you collect data from a variety of options? Did the team assess risk? What role did gut instinct play in this decision? What components do you think are necessary to make decisions?

Sub-question 2: What factors block senior leaders from making decisions? Supportive questions: Can you identify barriers that may have impeded your ability to make this particular decision?

Sub-question 3: Will identifying key components of a decision-making framework support leadership teams in executing key decisions? Supportive questions: Do you and/or your team review, rate, or reflect on decisions once they are made? Do you have experience

using a decision-making framework? Would your team use a decision-making framework if one was presented to them?

Finally, I concluded the interview by asking if the subject could rate their career-based decision-making track record in percentages. While my inquiry team and I debated whether any participant would willingly admit to making bad decisions, I was confident that the question would generate reflection, both in the interview and beyond, and that subjects would answer the question as truthfully as was possible at the time. My goal was to determine if there was a correlation between those who used a decision-making framework and the success of their decisions. I was satisfied with the discussions that arose from this question and the insight it provided.

Following the interviews, I then reviewed all of the recorded data and reflected on responses. This resulted in the emergence of themes which began to inform the basis of components of a team decision-making framework and highlighted what to watch for in the workshop and to see if the themes presented themselves in a real time experience.

While I was not able to pilot test the workshop, due to time constraints, I followed the design thinking principles in structuring the process to ensure some rigour in the process as well as opportunity for creative problem solving. The workshop engaged six people on an actual team. They were asked to consider their strategic plan and choose an obstacle that they wanted to discuss as a group and that required a group decision in order to move forward. Participants identified, in advance, one issue to discuss. At the workshop, which took place on-site at the team's office and took a little over two hours, I led the group through a journey mapping exercise to further refine an issue they had identified required a critical decision. This issue was one related to a customer experience. Their goal was to identify where the customer experience was

failing and determine solutions. I provided the journey mapping process as an overview, and then observed the team for the two hours as we worked through a designed process using concepts identified by Fraser (2010) and Raney and Jacoby (2010) that included inclusion of all members of the group, constraints, end users engaged in decision, stretching to create new options, and using informed intuition.

While I did not reach data saturation (Saldana & Omasta, 2018) in the data collection methods, I did determine trends in the data that reinforce key points. I used the data gathered from the interview and workshop methods to inform the inquiry project findings and conclusions as outlined in the following chapter.

While study recommendations will be provided in chapter five, I reviewed the recommendations with my organizational partner and determined that Next has the capacity to implement the recommendations.

Data Analysis and Validity

This section reviews the processes used to analyze data collected from the two data collection methods and measures taken to ensure data validity. Ryan and Bernard (2003) outlined several techniques from various disciplines to draw on when identifying themes in qualitative research. Qualitative analysis of the literature and data revealed several themes, using the techniques mentioned by Ryan and Bernard (2003), including: word repetition, key words, metaphors and analogies, connectors or relationships, and “pawing” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, para. 43) a phrase referring to marking up the texts, both in the literature review and the data text, with different coloured pens to proofread and identify key phrases.

Beginning with the interviews, the interpretation of primary data collected from participants consisted of a multi-phase analysis. Firstly, interviews were conducted over the phone and

recorded through hand-written notes, with permission from the participants. In the second phase, these notes were further transcribed into digital format. Interviews were then printed and coded question by question where possible, following which the data was condensed into essential components requiring further analysis. In the fifth phase, emerging themes were extrapolated, and finally, themes were compared to the findings in literature.

Observations from the workshop were recorded by hand and then transcribed into digital format. By coding times of action, consideration, and the point at which a decision was made revealed an emergent process that could be linked back to the design principles outlined in the literature as well as Kaner et al's. (2014) model for participatory decision-making.

Researcher Bias & Validity

While research conducted by humans, with humans are all prone to bias, some studies may have a higher degree of bias than others. Bias, when a researcher forms a belief and uses participant responses to confirm that belief, was one of the risks presented when viewing the validity of this inquiry (Rowe & Agger-Gupta, 2008, p. 4). In order to minimize my own bias, I reevaluated my data on three separate occasions, and had my inquiry team review questions and data recordings as well as the themes I identified to confirm that we all saw the same themes emerge from the data. One weakness of this study is that I interviewed the leaders of teams who were involved in making the decision. I did not triangulate their comments with other members of the team. In future, I would have included the other members of the team in the interview process to validate that the experience of the decision-making was similar for participants in the process. Another weakness is in written transcribing and the risk that participant responses may not have been faithfully captured. I did not share my notes with participants to ensure their responses were accurately captured and upon reflection, I would recommend doing this.

Ethical Implications

The Tri-Council Policy Statement binds those researching in Canada (TCPS; Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR], Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014, p. 3). The TCPS2 stated the core principles of ethical research as: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 6).

Respect for Persons recognizes that all human life deserves respect and emphasizes autonomy and informed consent, indicating that participants must have the right to determine their involvement in the research without coercion, and be provided with detailed information about what their participation entails (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 6).

Concern for Welfare speaks to the quality of an individual's life experiences and requires researchers to minimize harm to a person's wellbeing (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 7). Informed consent documents must fully address any potential harm to the participant in clear language and participants have the right to withdraw from the research at any time (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 8).

Justice requires that participants be treated with equality and fairness by the researcher (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 8). Special considerations are given to any participants deemed vulnerable, such as children or marginalized groups (CIHR et al., 2014, p. 8).

Given that I did not engage any vulnerable populations and having identified that I held no actual power over participants, or undue influence, I considered the core principles equally. I selected external participants by identifying a potential list with my partner and then making a randomized selection. I provided participants with documentation explaining the study in detail, as well as an informed consent form indicating the right to withdraw (see Appendices C and E). I remained the sole researcher in the study, maintaining private and secure raw data in a private

office on a password protected computer. My partner did not and will not see any actual data, only the analysis in the form of study findings.

As for working within my company and with my colleagues, it was paramount that everyone's participation was voluntary. I was confident that all ethical implications had been considered, discussed, and appropriately addressed. I identified that I did not have power over any participants and the risk of harm in the scope of the study was not higher than the risk of harm participants face day to day in their working environment. Early in exploring this project, my partner and I identified that one of the founders of Next had power and influence over me. We agreed to remove and not include this owner in the participant engagement or data collection process. However, this owner was kept informed of how the project was proceeding concerning meeting deadlines and milestones. This owner will have access to the final report and may use it to support their work with clients in the future. I was aware of the possibility for researcher bias (Rowe & Agger-Gupta, 2008) as I have known the Next team for over a decade and, while I am new to the team, I am aware of the existing team dynamics. However, as the team works remotely and was separated by location and time zones, there was no overlap in research processes and business operations. The interview questions and workshop process were based on relevant literature and vetted by the inquiry team to ensure I did not seek to confirm what I suspected to be true or what I thought Next wanted as an outcome.

Having studied the TCPS2 and discussed ethical implications with my advisor and my sponsor, I am confident I have mitigated any significant issues and conducted the study within the scope of the TCPS2.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed the theoretical framing for the action research methodology and specific data collection methods, project participant selection and engagement, and shared the final inquiry conduct and data analysis. The chapter was concluded with a review of the ethical implications as they related to the study. The following chapter reviews the project findings and conclusions.

Chapter Four: Inquiry Project Findings and Conclusions

In this chapter, I provide an outline of the key findings, inquiry conclusions based upon method findings, and limitations of the research inquiry. I review and highlight key findings using data that resulted from the action research methods. I then summarize the themes of the findings while providing an analysis that compares and contrasts the inquiry conclusions to the literature reviewed in chapter two. I conclude the chapter by reviewing the limitations of this research inquiry. The research inquiry was informed by the inquiry question: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? The inquiry question was supported by the sub-questions:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Study Findings

As mentioned in chapter one, decision-making is at the core of a leader's ability and accountabilities. Decision-making is key to leadership in as much as leaders create and shape the preferred future of the organization and invite followers to realize that preferred future one decision at a time. My research project sought to identify the key components in a decision-making framework, with a focus on how leaders and leadership teams make decisions, centering on those decisions that are complex and critical to the organization, rather than day-to-day ordered decisions (Snowden & Boone, 2017). In order to identify these components, 10 one:one interviews were conducted in January and February, 2019, with the goal of having senior leaders reveal aspects of decision-making in their own careers. Interview participants consisted of Chief

Executive Officers and Executive Directors who had over five years' experience leading senior leadership teams. Many had decades of experience. Participants were leaders in private and non-profit sectors from across Canada. These participants were asked to reflect on decision-making by the leadership team through one example of a past decision that proved critical for their organization. These interviews highlighted seven key points in a decision-making process conducted by senior leadership teams ranging in size from three to six person teams. A decision-making workshop was conducted in February 2019 and engaged participants in a participatory decision-making process in order that I might identify the more critical steps in making a complex decision as a team. Following the workshop, I interviewed the participants of the workshop, using the same questions from the interview. The intention was to identify the core and necessary steps a leadership team must take when making a decision that had serious implications for the future of their organization.

The study findings that I present here are a result of the two research methods. First, the personal interviews of 10 participants generated the following themes; related to bias, instinct, risk, data collection, barriers and fear, vision, and reflection. These core themes emerged and became evident following careful analysis of the interview recordings. The first of these themes was that bias was inherent in all leadership team decision making. The second theme was that gut instinct plays a significant role in half of all decisions. Third, teams value risk assessment. Fourth, data informed by fact and research is critical. The fifth theme was that the decision should fit the vision and strategic goals of the organization. Sixth, leaders experience several barriers when making a decision. And seventh, leaders do not take the time to reflect on decisions and are not valuing reflection as a method of learning how to be better decision makers.

Second, the workshop, involving a further six people, included identifying a decision, working through the decision as a team, and reflecting, or answering questions about the process. This exercise served to refine the themes identified in the interviews. While the issue of bias, data collection, risk, and reflection were present, the process further refined these themes to: bias and instinct informing decision makers, the value of discovery and creating options, focus on strategic alignment, the value of determining risk, identifying barriers, and the value of reflection to increase accountability.

There are seven findings that serve to support these themes, which will be further discussed in the following section.

1. Bias plays a role in decision-making.
2. Gut instinct informs critical decisions.
3. Leaders value exploring options, collecting data and various inputs.
4. Goals must be aligned with vision and informed by systems thinking.
5. Leadership teams stated that they place a high degree of importance on assessing and mitigating risk, yet few engage in risk mitigation during the course of a decision.
6. Leadership teams are confronted with a variety of barriers when making critical decisions.
7. Accountability for the decision improves the success rate for implementation.

The themes and findings will be discussed in further detail in this chapter. The themes will be supported through evidence in the form of summary notes from the interviews and observations from the workshop. In order to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, all references to individuals have been removed. I chose to code individual responses, represented in direct quotes, to ensure anonymity. Participants were simply coded as P for participant and the numbers

1-16 assigned to represent individual participants. For example, the first interview I conducted was assigned the code P1 up to P10, and the workshop participants are P11-P16. The following findings informed the conclusions and recommendations made in chapter five.

Finding one: Bias plays a role in decision-making. To research sub-question one, “What key aspects of decision making are critical to leaders?”, each participant was asked to reflect on an example of when they and their leadership team had to make an internal or external decision that had an impact (positive or negative) on the organization. Using this example, question four of the interview asked “Did any particular team member’s bias or collective biases impact the decision?” The inquiry overwhelmingly indicated that bias played a role in all leadership teams’ decision making. Overall, bias was found to be present in all critical decisions. Biases were noted as being regional, based on experience, driven by roles, and fear. One executive stated “As a global company, regional bias played a role as leaders were inclined to favour a solution for their regional market, rather than one that would serve the company”, which led that company to create an oversight committee to address regional biases (P6). Another participant confirmed that leaders “...had a bias towards previously used models”, which slowed the introduction of new practices (P5). Only 20% of decision makers interviewed took action to mitigate the bias. This was done by reaching out to the specific roles or teams that would be affected by the decision and gaining first hand input and knowledge and then making adjustments at that stage of the decision.

During the workshop the biases presented themselves early in the process; they stemmed from fear, lack of knowledge, economic prejudice, and from the different levels of experience in each of the roles presented. This is similar to the biases identified in the interviews. One participant felt that there wasn’t a problem that required addressing; this required that the leader

review operational goals to identify the gap in achieving the goal and that once the problem was solved the team would start to see improvements. It took the group time to identify that the problem was not the responsibility of one team member, but of the team itself to resolve.

This issue of recognizing our donors is a problem for the organization as we need our donors to fund our programs. There are many ways to recognize donors, at many levels, so we need to find a solution that works for all of us. (P11)

Bias showed up in the form of confirmation bias, which as Heath and Heath (2013) stated is when decision makers look for evidence that confirms what they already know to be true, and then discount evidence that supports different conclusions. In one scenario that was shared, the CEO stated that bias showed up when the team determined they hadn't found what they were looking for internally, so they must need to look externally. In the end, this negatively impacted the decision and limited their exploration of options. "The team was searching for a way to grow faster and since they hadn't had that growth, they assumed it was missing from the leadership team. They went searching for an external hire and rushed into it, which negatively impacted the culture" (P1).

In addition to confirmation bias, we also had confidence bias. This is when a leader is so confident in their judgement that they have an inaccurate account of the success of their judgement and may become blind to input and feedback. This will come up when I discuss auditing or reflection on decisions later in this chapter.

Finding two: Gut instinct informs critical decisions. Supporting sub-question one, participants were asked: "What role did gut instinct play in this decision?" It was found that on average gut instinct played a role in half of the critical decisions being made, according to interview participants. In some cases, experience and knowledge informed the gut decision that

something had to be done and leaders then moved into the decision-making process. Not one of the participants said they would rely on gut decisions alone. Instead, they choose to seek out information when and where they can get it but occasionally found that they had to rely on instinct. One workshop participant indicated that “after working through the problem I understood the issue better, but I never had to implement this type of solution before, so my agreement with the team was partially based on a feeling that this was the right decision and that our team could make it work” (P13). I have stated that gut instinct informs critical decisions because 50% of participants indicated such. However, this would imply that the other 50% may be informed by experience. In fact, several participants indicated that their gut was largely informed by experience. “The original impetus to make the decision came from a gut feel that we had to do something different” (P7). Once the instinct had informed the leader to act, their final decision was informed by data and experience.

Participants made the point to emphasize that instinct is not enough when it comes to making complex decisions that impact the organization. These critical decisions should include data, perspectives, and exploration of options. Therefore, learning that half of leaders making decisions are making many of them based on instinct seems too high and may play a factor in poor or uninformed decision making.

Finding three: Leaders value exploring options, collecting data and various inputs.

Again, in support of sub-question one, participants were asked “Did you collect data or explore a variety of options?”. When approaching complex problems, leadership teams improve the decision-making process by making a conscious effort to explore broader perspectives, include others, value opposing points of view, and gather information in the form of data or research. This behaviour can help to shift the playing field and support decision-makers to consider

multiple options “As Executive Director, I collected and provided most of the information as it related to operations and financial implications. Other experts on the team provided external information to support the decision” (P2). All the participants in this inquiry spoke of the value of data, team input, research, and an exploration of options. “As specialists in this area, my team collected the data, gathering input from key people in the company, and then presented the collated data and recommendations to the CEO” (P5). Participants also stated that their leadership teams, when brought together to make a critical decision, all contributed to collectively making the decision.

This is where design principles can enter the decision-making framework as teams learn to explore options and generate ideas. While some teams may be motivated to take the first option that is presented and execute on it, the value comes in exploring the full range of available options. Exploring leads to refining. “Our team spent a lot of time in brainstorming, discussion options and looking at the budget implications of the options” (P7).

Ultimately, throughout the research inquiry, 80% of leadership teams took the time to collect data and explore options. Ten % relied primarily on instinct and 10% felt they had enough evidence for the decision at hand.

Finding four: Goals must be aligned with vision and informed by systems thinking. To support sub-question one, participants were asked “What components do you think are necessary to make decisions?” While the responses to this question also reinforced Finding three, as mentioned above with answers including “data, research, options”, the main theme that emerged from these questions were vision, systems thinking, and strategy.

Participants identified holding or having a vision for the organization as key to decision-making. As the decision example included one in a complex domain, that was critical to the

organization, aligning to vision played a significant role in their decision-making processes. One leader mentioned that in order to make their decision, the leadership team had to have a “clear vision of their preferred future so compelling that the team makes decisions that align to the vision” (P7). Others mentioned that the vision of the organization, coordinated with their master plan, ultimately informed their decision. “When making a decision you need to know if it lines up with the master plan and you need a clear vision of where you are going” (P3). Most of the decision examples shared had long term impact within the organization. These decisions were considered by the leadership teams through the lens of their vision first, and strategy second. In some cases, the decision shifted short term operational plans but remained in line with strategic plans.

In relation to systems thinking, leaders mentioned that it was important to understand their decision’s unintended impact or consequences and the implications of the decision once the decision is communicated. “You need to understand the implications of this decision beyond you. How does this impact staff and clients and have a broad perspective of the organization? Systems thinking will help with this” (P3). Half of the participants in this inquiry mentioned, or had an understanding of, the impact of decisions on the entire organization, and that it may be necessary to gather information from various parts of the system, in order to mitigate negative consequences, or as a part of risk mitigation.

You need quantitative data and you need to process it through what you know through experience, the decision has to fit your strategy, and you have to look at the law of unintended consequences. Sometimes things take longer, cost more, or don’t turn out how you thought they would. (P4)

Finding five: Leadership teams stated that they place a high degree of importance on assessing and mitigating risk, yet few engage in risk mitigation during the course of a decision. In order to address sub-question two: “What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?” I asked participants if their team assessed risk. All participants in this study stated or demonstrated that teams actively assessed risk. Some too much. Some not enough. One of the leaders stated

...our decision-making team assesses risk ad nauseum sometimes. We continually report on risk which you would think would provide an understanding or comfort with risk in this decision. However, we had to hire a consultant to help assess risk and, in the end, this helped to assure them of operational consistency. (P2)

Despite consistently stating that their company or team valued risk mitigation, only one organization had a risk mitigation strategy in place. “our company tries to ensure decision making is as rigorous as possible with metrics in place to track challenges (related to this decision)” (P5). Another hired a consultant to assess risk. Risk analysis is a proven way of identifying and assessing whether there are internal or external factors that could negatively impact the success of the decision. When teams engage in risk assessment, they are able to examine the potential risks the organization faces, whether those are resources, human, integrity, etc., and helps them decide whether to move forward with their decision. What must be stated is that participants emphasized that companies should have an understanding of their risk tolerance and a risk assessment process that is used similarly in each situation.

Finding Six: Leadership teams are confronted with a variety of barriers when making critical decisions. In additional support of sub-question two, participants were asked: “Can you identify barriers that may have impeded your ability to make that decision?” Lack of

understanding or limited knowledge of the problem, fear of failure, procrastination, false advocates or lack of support or lack of alignment, tight timelines, and a lack of resources to deploy in solving the problem are the more significant barriers mentioned by research participants. While the question only referred to barriers, participants made the point of listing constraints such as time and lack of resources. I included constraints in the reference to barriers. “In this case we had a few false advocates who feigned support and were not aligned. This began to undermine the process as they didn’t care if others didn’t support the decision” (P7). In the case of the workshop, that group was able to identify a number of constraints including, as one leader stated, “we just don’t have the resources to fully address this challenge. It would be great to do more but we need to make changes that make the best use of the limited resources we have and hope it helps” (P14).

Limited knowledge or lack of understanding as a barrier to making a decision requires that teams actively seek out the relevant information, or new data in the process of making a decision. While the study participants acknowledged that their teams sought out and explored data when in the process of their decision, we cannot assume that the teams had access to sufficient or quality information. While a team may have acquired what information was available to them at the time of the decision, they may want to acknowledge that new information may come forward at a later time. This would require the team to make a decision with the knowledge at hand, acknowledging the limitations and barriers of such a decision.

Participants emphasized that time is a factor in all decisions. The pressure to act quickly can cause leaders to act individually and rely on intuition rather than looking for objective options. While it may be necessary to create deadlines for a decision, it is important to give the decision

makers adequate time to move through a framework that includes considering options and testing them.

Participants also shared their fear of failure, or getting it wrong. Which they indicated held them back, as it is unlikely that there is one best solution to any problem. Teams facing this barrier may stay in the data gathering phase for too long and procrastinate to the point where they fail to make any decision. One participant revealed that they procrastinated on their significant decision out of fear (P4), while another participant mentioned that their team, who were risk averse, were “tough to move to the transition phase as many wanted to return to exploring options rather than make a decision” (P2).

While a nominal percentage mentioned false advocates or lack of support for the decision, as a barrier to its success, one executive used an alignment model to ensure his team was on board with a decision before proceeding with it. This internal alignment model was used to support the decision-making processes for this organization and the participating executive stated that gaining alignment or buy-in at different stages of the decision ensured that by the time the decision was implemented any opposition had been addressed.

Several participants shared that in their career they had come to observe that while there are many decisions to be made in a day, week, or month, there are only a handful of truly critical decisions in a year that can have significant impact on the organization. These participants warned that it is necessary for senior leaders to keep a lookout for these decisions and not to get bogged down in the day-to-day that can be easily responded to either by quicker decision making, or by others in the organization. As an interview participant stated

Early on in my career, a mentor told me to keep my eye on the one or two decisions a year that were really important and to keep the chatter down so I could appreciate when those

came up and to be ready to deal with them. This advice has helped me to be clear in my responsibilities. It also means that the decisions I make are very important in my role as leader. (P1)

One Executive Director shared an example of a time when the entire company seemed to have an input into what kind of dishes were to be purchased for the new kitchen. Yet, she was struggling to get the Executive Leadership Team to focus on recruitment and hiring of a senior position.

Overall, the research participants mentioned, and I concluded, that there are any number of barriers that present themselves when making a decision and it would be impossible to eliminate them. Therefore, it is necessary to address them.

Finding Seven: Accountability for the decision improves the success rate for implementation. In support of sub-question three, the interviews included the questions “Do you or your team, review, rate or reflect on decisions? Do you have experience using a decision-making framework?” And finally, “Would your team use a decision-making framework if one was presented to them?” The inquiry found that leadership teams fail to reflect on, track, audit, and learn from decisions, increasing the likelihood of making future mistakes based on past assumptions. Only 15% of the participants of this inquiry reported that they and their teams regularly reflect on their decisions. One participant mentioned “the management team meets monthly and reflects on the feedback model and also we do an annual review of good and bad decisions” (P3). The remaining 85% had not participated in a reflection process regarding decisions and some of them cited that they regret this and see it as a significant learning and an opportunity to address complexity. “We did not look back on this decision and I regret that. It

was a big miss. I have since learned that a decision should include reflection and analysis to shift behaviour. But my team had fatigue and it was tough to bring them back for reflection” (P7).

However, reflecting and following up may not be enough to drive greater accountability in decision making. Although all my research interviewees agreed unanimously on the need for accountability in decision making, there was a wide range of perspectives on what accountability looked like.

From the responses of the participants, the following summary indicates that decision-making frameworks may enhance the experience and quality of organizational decisions and improve accountability for execution.

- Senior leadership teams are not commonly using a decision-making framework.
- Teams do not spend time formally reviewing decisions.
- 70% of participants said they would use a decision-making framework if one was presented to them.
- Participants on average scored their decision-making ability at 65%.
- Participants felt that a DMF would help to flush out new ideas.
- 20% of teams have experience using a decision-making framework.
- 70% would use a decision-making framework if a simple framework was presented.

While 30% said maybe.

While in some cases decisions are tracked or recorded in team meetings, teams in general do not spend time formally reviewing or reflection on decisions.

One CEO stated that not reviewing the decisions was a big learning in his career and they now include reflection and analysis to address complexity and to support future decisions.

Study Conclusions

This section includes conclusions that came from an exploration of the literature review in relation to the inquiry findings. The conclusions align with the inquiry questions by suggesting components of a DMF that support leadership in making business decisions. The conclusions are as follows:

1. Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge and mitigate these issues where possible.
2. Brainstorming is essential to decision-making.
3. Decisions require alignment to vision and strategy.
4. Systems Thinking supports risk assessment throughout the organization.
5. Assigning accountability for the execution of a decision strengthens commitment to action and results.

Conclusion 1: Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge and mitigate these issues where possible. Human bias is a significant factor to recognize and consider in complex or intricate decisions. Identifying bias begins with the awareness that one may bring a preferred perspective that may be in opposition to the group or the purpose of the decision, as opposed to starting at a point of openness or indifference and considering the data as it is presented. Referring back to the literature presented in chapter two, Beshears and Gino (2015) explained that System 1 thinking is essentially bias, “automatic, instinctive, and emotional” (2015, p. 108), quickly seeking an intuitive solution. System 2 type thinking begins to mitigate bias by slowing down the decision-making and taking a logical approach to a deliberate consideration of options and

analysis of facts. System 2 balances System 1; however, it can lead to further cognitive bias if the group energy is depleted through over-analysis. Thus, their system included steps to break down decision-making into steps that reduce bias, and lead teams to stronger decision making. This is corroborated by Buchanan and O'Connell (2006) "...intellect informs both intuition and analysis, and research shows that people's instincts are often quite good", while Senge (1990) concluded "People with high levels of personal mastery ... cannot afford to choose between reason and intuition, or head and heart, any more than they would choose to walk with one leg or see with one eye".

Stroh (2015) proposed that "getting the whole system in the room and creating catalytic conversations across diverse stakeholders inevitably surfaces and prompts different ways of thinking about the issue and the opportunities" (p. 156). This will aid teams in accepting alternative points of view and releasing attachment to inherent beliefs. The recommendations in chapter five will include a reflection on shifting decision-making teams' context to reduce the level of bias in the decision.

There are several limitations in organizations that can impact the decision whether a team is using a DMF or not. Time, motivation, and energy to execute are critical factors that leadership teams may identify as being in limited supply. Considering the complexity of the environment confronted by leaders, it is not surprising that decision-making is a challenge in and of itself. Opposition or lack of support throughout the system may also derail a decision. One participant mentioned the negative role of false advocates, those who feign support but leave the process with little interest in witnessing the success of the decision. Add to this the concept that organizational life is not always linear. Even when a team takes the time to generate new ideas, weighs all the options, and works with the data they have at hand, once the decision is made new

factors may present themselves. Given just these few constraints, I can understand why so many decisions either do not get made at all or result in poor outcomes.

Conclusion 2: Brainstorming is essential to decision-making. Poor group decisions can often be attributed to the failure to question assumptions, to test a plan of action, or to seek creative solutions. Consensus too soon can lead to group think, a phrase coined by Irving Janis in 1972 to describe a group engaging in behaviour that promotes unanimity over opposition and exploration of alternative courses of action (Bucanan & O’Connelly, 2006). To mitigate this, the decision-making team should be dynamic, trust each other, and be encouraged to generate ideas and new ways of approaching the problem (2006).

The more options available to a decision-maker, the greater the possibility for a thoughtful solution and well considered outcome. By expanding the data and possibility set, teams can expand the ideation of a variety of options which will serve to promote effective decision-making. The ideation process is a compelling tool to engage multiple decision makers as it may serve to assist them in letting go of ownership of their first idea, and when the team all contributes to ideas that form the final decision, they will be more supportive of the execution stage.

Heath and Heath (2013) promoted consensus in the form of bargaining to develop ideas. Bargaining speeds up implementation. The initial time invested, that may appear as slowing down the process, actually accelerates time to implementation when all parties are in agreement with the decision through bargaining compromise and consensus.

Ideation may serve to mitigate “gut feel” or instinct in decision-making by forcing the decision makers to become more thoughtful about a decision when participating in the ideation process. When debating a decision, one may move in defense of their idea, becoming rigid and

inflexible. However, when opposition and the voices of the opponents are considered and heard, and everyone feels that their idea has been fairly considered, people tend to move in alignment to the idea that best suits the problem or organization as a whole.

Conversely, when teams explore multiple alternatives, they may be less invested in any one option and are then able to shift positions to adjacent perspectives as they learn more. Simple questions to ask are, “Is there a better way? What else could we do?” (Heath & Heath, p. 37). An additional question they presented to broaden the options is “What else could we do with the same time and resources?” (p. 45). This is a strong starting question to a brainstorming session.

Conclusion 3: Decisions require alignment to vision and strategy. As mentioned throughout this thesis, leaders are operating in complex environments and making more frequent intertwined decisions, that at the leadership level have greater impact on the long-term viability of the company (Omar & Kleiner, 1997). Their organizations may present complexity involving diversity of skill sets, backgrounds, experience, multiple goals, and a wide range in perspective, departmental purpose, and inherent conflict. By focusing on vision and strategy, a leader should seek common ground for alignment to emerge.

Alignment is an essential component to sound decision making. When deciding, there is a time for discovery, exploration, and debate in service to clarifying the best possible way forward, and a decision. This process can be linear or asymmetrical; either way, the end goal of the iteration process for decision should be alignment. As one participant mentioned, decisions usually work better when people agree.

In an organizational context a complex decision should be in service to the core purpose, values, or vision of the organization. If not, the group may want to consider retracing aspects of

the decision-making framework, reviewing the strategy, and determining if they can come to a decision that aligns the organization around the strategy and vision.

Conclusion 4: Systems Thinking supports risk assessment throughout the organization.

Looking at a decision through a full systems lens emerged as a key component for the decision makers I interviewed. As leaders and leadership teams find themselves making decisions in increasingly complex situations, the ability to determine risk is becoming increasingly complex as well. Most humans are inherently risk averse. By stepping back from the situation and viewing the whole, decision makers are able to look at a decision through a system thinking approach. By identifying or at least observing the connections and relationships of an issue, risks relative to a situation may become more apparent, providing a map of the system that requires navigation. When this is the case, risk mitigation becomes a feature of decision-making.

By using a system thinking approach to consider a wider range of implications throughout the organization, leaders can begin to identify other areas of the organization where a deeper attention to cause and effect may be important to consider. As participants stated, exploring impacts of a decision at various levels of the organization helped to inform courses of action, allowed them to reduce or address risk and prepare for decision outcomes. As we learned from Stroh (2015), systems thinking and mapping can stimulate inquiry and discussion among a decision-making team and help to broaden their thinking, develop new ideas, and generate acceptance of the decision.

By actively engaging other parts of the system in the DMF, leaders may increase innovation, surface diverse ideas and gain critical input into the execution phase. This approach may also provide an opportunity to reduce leadership bias by diversifying the input.

Conclusion 5: Assigning accountability for the execution of a decision strengthens commitment to action and results. In order to reinforce the decision and convey the importance of the decision on the organizational strategy, Stroh (2015) argued that it is necessary to assess the supportive framework required to achieve the goal of the decision (goals, metrics, authority, budget, etc.) (p. 158). This strengthens team accountability for the decision, to ensure that there is a process for executing, so that the decision moves forward and is not stalled at some point in the system. Accountability calls for a leader to be answerable for managing new organizational decisions or initiatives in compliance with their policies and procedures and alignment with their strategic objectives. Klatt, Murphy, and Irvine (1998) stated that “the principles of accountability... bring structure, focus, and clarity to human endeavours in organizations” (p. 2). When the decision is clear, and when the key stakeholders are aligned around that decision, the odds of successfully executing the decision are enhanced (Next, 2018, personal communication). It may be useful for teams to discuss how accountability is defined or what it looks like for their team. Perhaps, teams would benefit from an accountability chart or agreement to support the implementation phase of a decision. Klatt, et al. (1998) presented accountability agreements for individuals or teams to determine their contribution to the organization, while Stroh (2015) suggested decision and accountability charting to bring focus to the implementation phase (p. 159). Accountability is an inherent aspect of a decision and should therefore be identified as part of the DMF, including when teams reflect on decisions and apply learning forward.

Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry

There were several limitations inherent in this inquiry. The first is that the nature of the action-oriented research was limited by the selection of one methodology and two methods. While this project could be made broader and deeper, my limited research experience, combined

with the time constraints of completing the project, required that I limit the size of the participant group to 16 people. Perhaps this was not enough of a sample size to provide adequate evidence to reach significant conclusions. The methods used to collect data were limited to two; perhaps more data collection would have diversified the findings or reinforced the conclusion.

Given that I was looking at senior leadership teams implied that these leaders had experience, or years on the job. I limited the choice of leaders to those who were experienced and have been successful in leading teams and organizations but in doing so excluded those emerging leaders who may confront new challenges and greater complexity and as a result the inquiry has not provided the fresh perspectives new leaders may have shared.

While I engaged Human Inquiry as my methodology, the engagement of leaders from across North America and the nature of the interviews resulted in them being conducted over the phone. In the cases where I interviewed strangers, it would have been beneficial to meet them in person, or at the very least, on video, rather than relying on phone calls which limited the human interaction. Further, recording and transcription may have produced a more accurate and independently verifiable record.

Chapter Summary

In summary, the key findings of this inquiry were:

1. Bias plays a role in decision-making.
2. Gut instinct informs critical decisions.
3. Leaders value exploring options, collecting data and various inputs.
4. Goals must be aligned with vision and informed by systems thinking.
5. Leadership teams stated that they place a high degree of importance on assessing and mitigating risk, yet few engage in risk mitigation during the course of a decision.

6. Leadership teams are confronted with a variety of barriers when making critical decisions.
7. Accountability for the decision improves the success rate for implementation.

These findings led to the following conclusions;

1. Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge and mitigate these issues where possible.
2. Brainstorming is essential to decision-making.
3. Decisions require alignment to vision and strategy.
4. Systems Thinking supports risk assessment throughout the organization.
5. Assigning accountability for the execution of a decision strengthens commitment to action and results.

While leadership teams are currently conducting decision-making without a guiding process, a more formal and structured approach to decision-making would be beneficial. The inquiry results would indicate that there is an opportunity for Next to develop a decision-making framework, using the inquiry's conclusions as a guide, to support internal critical decisions for their use and for use with their clients. Specific inclusions might include identification of the issue, shifting the environment to address biases, ideation through broad perspective thinking, alignment to vision and strategy, risk assessment, and assigning accountability for execution. Additionally, leadership teams can improve their decision-making by incorporating a framework for decision-making and integrating design principles into their decision process.

The following chapter includes recommendations that result from the inquiry's findings and conclusions and includes a brief overview of the implications for The Next Institute as well as thoughts on areas for future research projects.

Chapter Five: Inquiry Implications

The final chapter of this inquiry unifies the research literature, findings, and conclusions in order to provide recommendations for Next's consideration as they focus on developing a decision-making framework during a time of transition. Additionally, it provides a brief assessment of organizational implications should Next decide to implement or not to implement the following recommendations. Finally, implications for future inquiry are provided.

The inquiry question that formed the basis of this research was: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? The inquiry question was supported by the sub-questions:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Study Recommendations

Key leaders at Next identified a widespread need for better decision making in their respective client organizations and in the field of leadership in general. They were interested in the components that make up a sound and sustainable decision. Based on both my inquiry and my research, I am confident in presenting my findings to Next. I believe that I have identified and unearthed a strong pattern and would present bias acknowledgement, engaged brainstorming, team alignment, risk mitigation, and accountability as five critical components to be considered when making any decision.

It was the opinion of most of my interviewees that a Decision-making Framework would be beneficial in guiding leaders and decision makers when faced with a significant decision. The

fact that Next is desirous of developing a well informed and researched framework along with the capacity of the Next team as content creators makes the research offered in this paper as an elegant fit, informing what Next is aspiring to create. My recommendations to the team at Next would be as follows:

1. The Next Institute develops a decision-making framework grounded by research, and based on the key components and conclusions identified through this research inquiry.
2. A decision-making framework, developed by Next, should include the following components: bias, brainstorming, systems perspective, risk, and accountability.
3. As Next incorporates the use of the decision-making framework with their client partners, they should ensure the clients are aligning decisions and actions with the vision and strategy of the client organizations.

Recommendation One. *The Next Institute should develop a decision-making framework grounded by research, and based on the key components and conclusions identified through this research inquiry.*

After years of experience and research, the design team at Next believed that making thoughtful, well informed decisions was not the norm in organization life. It was felt that executive teams struggled with making effective decisions when the consequences were significant, and proposed that there must be a better way.

Next maintained that the design and development of a viable decision-making framework to be used as a template for executive teams to develop the rigour and discipline to enhance their decision-makers ability, both individually and collectively, would increase and enhance their capacity to lead.

Stemming from the Cynefin framework presented by Snowden and Boone (2007) and reviewed in chapter two, a framework can prove useful in aiding decision-makers to appropriate action. The Cynefin framework (2007) for sense-making encourages leaders to step back and identify the context of their situation. This will then allow them to adjust their behaviour and that of their team to match the domain of the decision. If the decision to be made is in the ordered domain, teams can proceed with their current or known process for decision making. Once that decision shifts to the unordered domain, patterns of behaviour also require a shift. The research presented in the inquiry identifies components of a DMF that will aid leaders in addressing complexity in the unordered domain.

In order to successfully apply the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) a leader or a leadership team would have to spend a significant amount of time and energy learning the basic elements of the framework itself and then further explore the behaviour associated with each domain. While I agree with and have benefitted from learning the concept of the Cynefin framework, had I not been introduced to it through my academic work, I don't believe it would have been made known to me in my professional leadership activities. Therefore, I suggest a simpler, more approachable, and ordered DMF would provide support and structure for a common leadership team.

Over time, leaders are judged on their effectiveness and success based on the quality and outcomes of their decisions. The outcomes of great decisions are the legacy a leader leaves behind. Whether leaving the organization in a more solid financial standing, selecting quality talent to drive the organization's agenda or making a strategic decision that ensures a relevant and viable future for the organization, leaders must be right more than they are wrong when making decisions. When leaders are thoughtful, disciplined, and inclusive the quality of

decisions has a wide reaching and enduring effect on the enterprise. A solid decision-making framework that develops sound decisions will ensure success for leaders and the people they serve.

When leaders come together to make significant or complex decisions that are important to the strategic intent and direction of the organization, three factors should be considered: 1) decisions must be based on data and fact and informed by diverse perspectives and support; to do otherwise may undermine the organization as a whole, 2) the process or framework for arriving at a sound decision in a complex scenario should be used consistently, and finally, 3) a decision-making framework will serve as a guideline for leaders to initially follow to enhance their skill and capacity to make sound decisions. When individual leaders and teams make decisions together, business outcomes such as production, momentum, and delivery are accelerated. Next, and the leadership teams they serve can engage with the DMF to build sound decisions that ensure relevance, viability, and sustainability.

Recommendation Two. *A decision-making framework, developed by Next, should include the following components: bias, brainstorming, systems perspective, risk, and accountability.*

While the components of a DMF could be addressed in any order a team chooses. I proposed a sequential approach that allows each component represent a step in the process to build off of the information of the previous step. Having listed five components in the recommendation, I propose using them in that order. Therefore, the initial step in a DMF should include an acknowledgement of the biases existing among the individual leaders at the metaphorical table. Whether they be anchoring, confirmation, blind spot, confidence, or any of the numerous biases individuals and groups commonly operate with, by addressing the collective biases at each

decision-making meeting, teams can reduce the negative impact bias may have on their decision and the organization as a whole.

One current activity that Next recommends and typically incorporates with their client groups, is an assessment of the individuals in the team. Whether this be a leadership or communication style test, a thinking profile, or character trait assessment, these tools can aid a team in identifying what inherent biases they collectively present at the outset of a decision-making process. It also allows the team to identify areas in which they may be lacking and then add members with diverse perspectives to the team, or seek out opposing points of view for the organization or outside sources.

While some decisions may require a primarily objective stance, leaders may be unable to detach themselves from the human element of decision-making. Therefore, mitigation becomes key in addressing bias. Rather than striving to eliminate bias, teams would benefit from acknowledging it, and attempting to limit its influence. Milkman et al. (2010) argued that leadership teams actively determine when to move from intuitive thinking to thinking that is more reasoned, logical, and thoughtful, in order to reduce bias-based decision making, which is best suited to complex situations. This provides a more integrated perspective and aids the second component of the DMF, brainstorming.

Brainstorming is a key aspect of a design thinking approach to decision-making. Raney and Jacoby (2010) suggested that using a design approach would enhance decision-making for organizations. "For designers, the process of building, prototyping, and trying things *is* the decision-making process" (Raney & Jacoby, 2010, p. 36). Their design approach to brainstorming would have leadership teams incorporate several steps into decision-making. The activities they outlined that can best enhance decision-making, in my opinion, include

challenging the team to design solutions under extreme constraints such as time, money, or people, using prototypes to uncover new learnings where appropriate, ensuring the team develops two or three completely new options, and eliminating options as they are created.

Raney and Jacoby (2010) posited that this approach reduces time and resource drain, promotes collaboration, supports creativity and diversifies choice, and results in sophisticated decisions. In this framework, leaders are urged to engage the team in the decision-making process through intentional or designed activities that encourage participation, evaluation, and development. Teams are advised to watch out for behaviour that builds early consensus and avoids opposition as this may limit the exploration of alternative courses of action (Bucanan & O'Connelly, 2006). To mitigate this, leaders might consider building decision-making teams that are dynamic, can engage in healthy debate, and are motivated by generating ideas and new ways of approaching the problem (pp.36-37).

By expanding the data and possibility set teams can expand the ideation of a variety of options which will serve to promote effective decision-making. The ideation process is a compelling tool to engage multiple decision makers in creating a variety of options that have the potential to lead to a successful decision or outcome.

Ideation may further reduce biased decision-making by inviting decision makers to become more thoughtful about the options and outcomes. The question posed by Heath and Heath (2013) "What else could we do with the same time and resources?" creates a strong starting question to a brainstorming session and broadens the options.

Systems thinking emerged as an important aspect of a DMF and getting to alignment. Stroh (2015) affirmed that challenges are inherent in building alignment in a team or organization as a way to generate interest and support in organizational change and proposed using systems

thinking to engage stakeholders in discussions that build understanding, generate thinking based on data, and identify options. I suggest that one way to surface systems thinking is to ensure that representation from potentially impacted groups or departments is provided, either in person, or in the form of data presentation, during the decision-making process. From my perspective, the leader of the team is responsible for ensuring the broad group has had a form of input and diverse perspectives are heard. The inclusion of perspectives further increases the opportunity for innovation and acceptance and consensus begin to form in those whose voices are included.

I would suggest that the systems thinking phase of a DMF will lead teams to reduce the number of options available as they eliminate those that may not serve the organization as a whole. Once the options are reduced to a manageable number, the team can then move to risk mitigation, another key factor of a DMF that emerged from the engagement methods with all participants. At this point, with options further narrowed after a consideration of risk, the team then commits to an option resulting in a decision.

And finally, accountability is required in a DMF to ensure that members of the team, and their teams are aware of who holds responsibility for execution, reporting, dissemination and communication, and overall accountability for the decision itself. I recommend that the decision-making team take the time to make considered choices when assigning accountability to ensure those responsible can meet the timelines and expectations in rolling out the decision. While risk assessment is important in all organizations, projects, and decisions, it is important to balance risk mitigation so that teams do not get consumed or bogged down in the risk assessment phase. Risk mitigation, while critical, may be used to stall a decision, in which case the risk to the organization or team may increase through delay, missed opportunities, low morale in employees, or failure to deliver on client expectations. I recommend that leadership teams

develop a risk assessment process that supports their team to address the risk associated with their decision and their ability or willingness to assume the risk associated with the decision.

Recommendation Three. *As Next incorporates the use of the decision-making framework with their client partners, they should ensure the clients are aligning decisions and actions with the vision and strategy of the client organizations.*

Alignment is vital to the long-term success of a decision and is a process that can be tedious and cumbersome as it requires a high degree of engagement and discussion. Participants indicated that when team members are aligned to a decision, they become more vested in the outcome. They believe it, acting, speaking, and behaving as if they truly own the decision. Recalling the literature reviewed in chapter two, I refer to Garven and Roberto's (2001) argument for an inquiry approach promoting constructive conflict, collaboration, creative thinking, and team support of decisions. From observing and listening to my research participants, I learned that when teams work through positive conflict, generate new ideas, and narrow down decisions together, they become more aligned and supportive of each other and the decision itself. Kaner et al. (2014), described this as a three-stage process that included *Divergent Thinking*, the *Groan Zone*, followed by *Convergent Thinking*. The stages described by Kaner et al. (2014) promoted problem solving that included an ideation phase, conflict phase, and finally, the refinement phase that includes everyone's best thinking. Kaner et al. (2014) argued that once a team is able to move through these phases, their alignment to the decision is strengthened and the team members develop greater confidence in the decision thus enabling stronger execution.

There are two perspectives on alignment. The first perspective is internal to the decision-making group. The greater the alignment between the decision makers, the greater the chances

for the decision to succeed. The second perspective on alignment is external. The decision itself must be in alignment with the overall vision and strategic direction of an organization.

Alignment is often relative to the cohesion of the decision-making group; greater cohesion among the deciders can most often equate to stronger trust within the group. When trust is high and a repetitive process exists, in this case a DMF, the time required to engage in dialogue or intentional process to gain alignment is minimized. Trust plays a significant role in elevating the comfort among the decision-making group by spreading the perceived risk and accountability. When the decision-making group is new to each other, or trust is low, the team requires longer time in dialogue to explore the intricacies of the decision. Both the literature and the data generated suggested that the investment of this time to gain clarity and alignment is essential, and well worth it. In other words, when trust is high and the process for making decisions becomes routine, deciders can accelerate the speed of the decision and the process of aligning becomes less onerous.

Most organizations have a vision and strategy. Important decisions that are essential to advancing the vision and strategy of the organization should drive the organization closer to what it is attempting to achieve. Kaner et al. (2014) emphasized aligning the various perspectives of the group through a focus on strategy execution to reach a decision. Participants also stated that in order to make critical decisions, the executive team required a clear vision of their preferred future while others stated that an alignment of vision and strategy informed their decision. I am not suggesting that a single decision, once made, will achieve the vision and strategy; however, a series of incremental decisions, viewed through the preferred future, can foster greater alignment and bring the organization closer to achieving its goals.

Organizational Implications

The impetus for this inquiry stemmed from conversations with my colleagues at Next that focused on the struggles our client leaders were facing in leading their organizations in an increasingly complex world. Collectively, we observed that leaders were repeatedly making poor decisions that had negative results and outcomes for themselves, their leadership teams, and their organizations. Next had concluded that these poor decisions were a result of fear, reliance on instinct, ignorance of the context, lack of accountability, and no clear or repeatable process to reach a decision. We were questioning what it would take to support our team, and our client's teams to make well-considered decisions that were supported and executed throughout the organization. This provided the stimulus for the inquiry into the key components of a DMF.

Having concluded the research, I now must use the findings and conclusions and determine an approach for using this new knowledge within the organizational context of Next. Following, I share the opportunities for implementation of the recommendations resulting from the inquiry. I am confident that the decision-makers and leaders at Next will implement these recommendations given their desire to improve their own internal processes and share that with their client leaders.

To initiate the implementation process I will share the findings with Next's founding partners, which includes my inquiry sponsor. This sharing will take place in two parts. First, they each will have the opportunity to read the full thesis, having shared an interest in doing so. Second, I will then discuss the recommendations in person, while including an executive summary of the thesis, and a draft proposal for a decision-making framework. Should the partnership group accept the recommendations, we will then work together to design a meeting

in which the remaining members of the team are brought together to review the recommendations and determine steps to incorporate the recommendations into the organization.

The executive summary, and possibly the draft decision-making framework, will be shared with the participants in the inquiry. They were each curious and interested in the results as they held strong opinions about the importance of decision-making and considered the possibility of a DMF in strengthening their own teams.

As I step into a leadership role with Next, it is my responsibility to continue to encourage the team to practice using a DMF when facing difficult or complex decisions. Given my involvement with the research and interest in developing my own leadership capacity, I will continue to expand my knowledge in the area of decision-making and seek to continually enhance our capabilities.

As a result of engaging in this inquiry, I have expanded on my initial thinking on the value and importance of decision-making skill. I have come to learn that while many DMFs have been explored and researched, it is possible for Next to develop one that fits our organizational context and may be suited to supporting our clients as they make decisions in an increasingly complex world. The inquiry has served to highlight and reinforce the importance of systems thinking and thinking broadly about problems and the impact of the solution. Not only am I hopeful that Next will benefit from developing a DMF for our internal use, but I am hopeful that through this new knowledge I can contribute qualified and thoughtful opinion and ideas to support the growth of our business and leadership skills.

Implications for Future Inquiry

This inquiry explored how the essential elements of decision-making might be distilled and structured into a framework to support critical decisions required of a leader and their team. The inquiry findings and conclusions led to the following three recommendations:

1. The Next Institute develops a decision-making framework grounded by research, and based on the key components and conclusions identified through this research inquiry.
2. A decision-making framework, developed by Next, should include the following components: bias, brainstorming, systems perspective, risk, and accountability.
3. As Next incorporates the use of the decision-making framework with their client partners, they should ensure the clients are aligning decisions and actions with the vision and strategy of the client organizations.

While this inquiry focused on identifying components of a DMF to support complex decisions at the executive level, there is an opportunity for further exploration of a DMF at this and other levels of the organization. Research is required in how teams may overcome bias, a reliance on gut instinct and the many constraints faced by leadership teams. I would also suggest further research into how design principles can be used to refine DMFs.

Following the research, I continue to believe that the Cynefin framework (Snowden & Boone, 2007) can be a starting point or basis for a DMF as it supports the decision maker in determining the context of their decision, which subsequently points the decision maker in a direction suitable to the type of decision. The Cynefin framework (2007) is a sense-making tool but it is not a complete DMF, rather it is a step in the process; the starting point for a conversation to help a leader determine the type of decision. I would recommend that researchers consider the Cynefin framework (2007) when conducting an inquiry into decision-making and

use the Complex domain as a launch point to further investigate what criteria are required to support leaders making complex decisions in an ever increasingly complex world.

Data collected from participants in the inquiry suggested that leaders and executive teams place a high value on risk mitigation. I also heard that some teams spend an inordinate amount of time in the risk evaluation stage which limits their ability to move to execution. Future research may consider the impact of risk assessment cycle time on the efficiency of teams and the effectiveness of their decisions.

There is a broad spectrum of inquiry related to decision-making and this research project has only highlighted a small portion of the current research and practices.

Thesis Summary

In the introduction of this thesis, I presented my inquiry question: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? Which was supported by three sub-questions:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Chapters one and two provided an introduction to the significance of the inquiry, outlined the organizational context and systems analysis for the research inquiry, included an overview of the literature which provided a rationale for the topics included, and compared, contrasted, and synthesized the material that identified, defined, and framed key concepts of the inquiry. The key topics referenced in the literature included the complexity of executive decision-making, designing decision-making in teams, and framing decision-making. Chapter three followed with

an outline of theoretical framing of the methodological approach and the research methods used, how the research inquiry was conducted, and provided a review of the ethical implications of the inquiry. Chapter four provided the research inquiry findings and conclusions, which reflected back the literature and key concepts. The inquiry findings included:

1. Bias plays a role in decision-making.
2. Gut instinct informs critical decisions.
3. Leaders value exploring options, collecting data and various inputs.
4. Goals must be aligned with vision and informed by systems thinking.
5. Leadership teams stated that they place a high degree of importance on assessing and mitigating risk, yet few engage in risk mitigation during the course of a decision.
6. Leadership teams are confronted with a variety of barriers when making critical decisions.
7. Accountability for the decision improves the success rate for implementation.

Based on the findings and a further review of the literature, I stated the following inquiry conclusions:

1. Bias and barriers are faced in all decisions. Leaders are encouraged to acknowledge and mitigate these issues where possible.
2. Brainstorming is essential to decision making.
3. Decisions require alignment to vision and strategy.
4. Systems Thinking supports risk assessment throughout the organization.
5. Assigning accountability for the execution of a decision strengthens commitment to action and results.

Finally, in chapter five, the current chapter, I presented the three research inquiry recommendations for The Next Institute, supported by literature: develop a DMF based on the research inquiry, include the five core components identified in the inquiry, and ensure Next uses the DMF with clients while mindful of organizational strategy and vision. I reviewed implications to future inquiry, offering recommendations for future researchers, and shared my thoughts on how a DMF might benefit my organization and corporate life on a broader scale.

Decision-making requires leadership, and leaders are required to be decision-makers. By developing, implementing, and practicing a decision-making framework when confronted with complex and intricate decisions, leaders can develop confidence in their ability to make sound decisions that benefit and improve the outcomes for the business, and support them in reaching their preferred future.

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Appendices

Appendix A

E-MAIL INVITATION - INTERVIEWS

Dear [**Prospective Participant**],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. This project has been approved by Ross Gilchrist of The Next Institute.

The purpose of my research project is to determine the essential elements of a decision-making framework. The objective is to determine core aspects or steps involved in leadership team decision-making and to identify aspects or elements in a decision-making framework. The main inquiry question is: The main inquiry question is: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes?

The Next Institute is acting as my sponsor organization and supports the research methods used in this study. Please note, as a share-holder in The Next Institute this research may benefit the internal operations of the organization and therefore may improve business operations and outcomes.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because I recognize you as a senior leader with years of experience leading teams and making decisions to support business outcomes.

This phase of my research project will consist of an interview and is estimated to last one hour. Interviews will be conducted over the phone in November and December, 2018.

The attached Information Letter contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time **prior to February 28, 2019** without prejudice.

Please feel free to contact me should you have additional questions regarding the project.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at:

Name: Patricia Glenn

Email: xxxxx

Telephone: xxx.xxx.xxxx

Sincerely,
Patricia

Appendix B

P RESEARCH INFORMATION LETTER

Decision Making Framework Study

My name is Patricia Glenn and this research project is part of the requirement for a Masters of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University. My credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by contacting Dr. Catherine Etmanski, Director, School of Leadership Studies: XXX or XXX

Purpose of the study and sponsoring organization

The purpose of my research project is to determine the critical components of a decision-making process. The objective is to determine core aspects or steps involved in leadership team decision-making and to identify steps in a decision-making framework.

The main inquiry question is: How might The Next Institute identify essential components of a decisions-making framework (DMF) that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes? I also employed the following sub-questions to further support the inquiry:

1. What are the key aspects of decision-making that are important for leaders?
2. What factors block senior leaders from making decisions?
3. How will identifying key components of a DMF contribute to the success of a leader?

Your participation and how information will be collected

The research will consist of interviews with The Next Institute and 10 professionals in senior leadership positions. Interviews will last approximately one hour. While the interviews will follow a narrative inquiry approach in which we will simply discuss participants experiences with decision-making, some of the questions may include:

1. What do you think of when you think of your own decision-making process?
2. Tell me why you think decision-making is important to your leadership.
3. Can you share a time when you or your team struggled to make a critical decision? What barriers do you feel impeded your ability to make that decision?
4. How does your leadership team currently make decisions?
5. What elements do you think are necessary to make decisions?

Following the interviews, I will engage participants in a design thinking workshop. This workshop will take data collected from the interviews and create engaged activities to identify the top five critical components of a decision-making process. The workshop will occur in two phases and each is anticipated to last two hours.

Benefits and risks to participation

It is my intention that your engagement in this study will not create any undue risk or harm. My hope is that you find the experience a benefit in that you have the opportunity to participate, inform, and learn about decision-making processes in a way that you can bring the experience back to your team and create a strong decision-making process in your organization.

You can choose to participate in this study, and you can choose to withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality, security of data, and retention period

I will work to protect your privacy throughout this study. All information I collect will be maintained in confidence with hard copies (e.g., consent forms) stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. Electronic data (such as transcripts or audio files) will be stored on a password protected computer on my home computer. Information will be recorded in hand-written format or audio recorded and, where appropriate, summarized, in an anonymous format, in the body of the final report. At no time will any specific comments be attributed to any individual unless specific agreement has been obtained beforehand. All documentation will be kept strictly confidential. Raw data will be destroyed upon completion of the project in January, 2019. If any individual chooses to withdraw from the study at any time now data will be retained and it will be destroyed within four weeks. For the design-thinking workshop, it is not possible to keep identities of participants from the researcher, facilitator, or other participants. I will ask participants to respect the confidential nature of the research by not sharing names or identifying comments outside of the group.

Sharing results

In addition to submitting my final report to Royal Roads University in partial fulfillment for a Masters of Arts in leadership, I will also be sharing my research findings with The Next Institute all research participants and the thesis will be available on public record.

Procedure for withdrawing from the study

Participants may withdraw from the study at any time by emailing or phoning Patricia Glenn prior to January 31, 2019. Participant data will be deleted from the study and destroyed should they withdraw. Information collected from participants in the workshop will not be removed or destroyed as it was collected in a group format and it may not be possible to identify individual comments. Any withdrawal requested after January 31, 2019 will not be honoured as the data will have already been analyzed. However, individual comments may be removed.

You are not required to participate in this research project. By replying directly to the e-mail request for participation you indicate that you have read and understand the information above and give your free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Please keep a copy of this information letter for your records.

Appendix C

Consent Form for Interviews

By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study. Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project and that the data collected may be used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, newsletters, etc.).

I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the interview and/or workshop be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed

I consent to the material I have contributed to and/or generated through my participation in the interview be used in this study

I commit to respect the confidential nature of the interview by not sharing identifying information about and/or with the other participants

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

E-MAIL INVITATION - WORKSHOP

Dear [**Prospective Participant**],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership, at Royal Roads University. This project has been approved by Ross Gilchrist of The Next Institute.

The purpose of my research project is to determine the essential elements of a decision-making framework. The objective is to determine core aspects or steps involved in leadership team decision-making and to identify aspects or elements in a decision-making framework. The main inquiry question is: How might The Next Institute identify essential elements of a decision-making framework that will be used to support our leadership team in making effective business decisions that enhance business outcomes?

The Next Institute is acting as my sponsor organization and supports the research methods used in this study. Please note, as a share-holder in The Next Institute this research may benefit the internal operations of the organization and therefore may improve business operations and outcomes.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because I recognize you as a senior leader with years of experience leading teams and making decisions to support business outcomes.

This phase of my research project will consist of one workshop estimated to last two hours. The workshops will take place in Calgary, Alberta in December, 2018.

The attached Information Letter contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time **prior to February 28, 2019** without prejudice.

Please feel free to contact me should you have additional questions regarding the project.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please contact me at:

Name: Patricia Glenn

Email: xxxxx

Telephone: xxx.xxx.xxxx

Sincerely,

Patricia

Appendix E

Consent Form for Workshop

By signing this form, you agree that you are over the age of 19 and have read the information letter for this study. Your signature states that you are giving your voluntary and informed consent to participate in this project and that the data collected may be used in the final report and any other knowledge outputs (articles, conference presentations, newsletters, etc.).

I consent to quotations and excerpts expressed by me through the workshop be included in this study, provided that my identity is not disclosed

I consent to the material I have contributed to and/or generated through my participation in the workshop be used in this study

I commit to respect the confidential nature of the interview by not sharing identifying information about and/or with the other participants

Name: (Please Print): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F

Inquiry Team Member Letter of Agreement

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership Degree at Royal Roads University, *Patricia Glenn* (the Student) will be conducting an inquiry study at *The Next Institute to Identify essential elements of a decision-making framework*. The Student's credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Catherine Etmanski, Director, School of Leadership.

Inquiry Team Member Role Description

As a volunteer Inquiry Team Member assisting the Student with this project, your role may include one or more of the following: providing advice on the relevance and wording of questions and letters of invitation, reviewing analysis of data, and/or reviewing associated knowledge products to assist the Student and *The Next Institute's* change process. In the course of this activity, you may be privy to confidential inquiry data.

Confidentiality of Inquiry Data

In compliance with the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy, under which this inquiry project is being conducted, all personal identifiers and any other confidential information generated or accessed by the inquiry team advisor will only be used in the performance of the functions of this project, and must not be disclosed to anyone other than persons authorized to receive it, both during the inquiry period and beyond it. Recorded information in all formats is covered by this agreement. Personal identifiers include participant names, contact information, personally identifying turns of phrase or comments, and any other personally identifying information.

Personal information will be collected, recorded, corrected, accessed, altered, used, disclosed, retained, secured and destroyed as directed by the Student, under direction of the Royal Roads Academic Supervisor.

Inquiry Team Members who are uncertain whether any information they may wish to share about the project they are working on is personal or confidential will verify this with Patricia Glenn, the Student.

Statement of Informed Consent:

I have read and understand this agreement.

Name (Please Print)

Signature

Date