

# Spiral of Inquiry and Decision Maker Moves: *A Rigorous Blend*

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# Doing the hard work of improvement— with heads and hearts

## One size cannot fit all.

Education is a complex enterprise. You can't just turn to the back of the book for answers when you have a problem. Context matters. Learners have different needs; schools have different cultures; educators have different skills. Your context, in all its messy reality, is where you will find and test the solutions that make a real difference.

Does that mean you are on your own to figure things out? Thankfully, no. Research on school improvement points to **collaborative inquiry** as the surest way to explore complex problems and make lasting improvements.<sup>1</sup> The **Spiral of Inquiry** offers a field-tested approach to collaborative inquiry. It helps educators, working in teams, to get curious about what is going on for their students and to investigate what will improve student outcomes.

The growing field of decision science can help educators use their heads and hearts to navigate complexity and make better decisions.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on decision science, the **Decision Maker Moves** offer a process for collaborative decision making.

This paper explores how you can use the Spiral of Inquiry and the Decision Maker Moves in combination to get the most out of your efforts to improve student learning.

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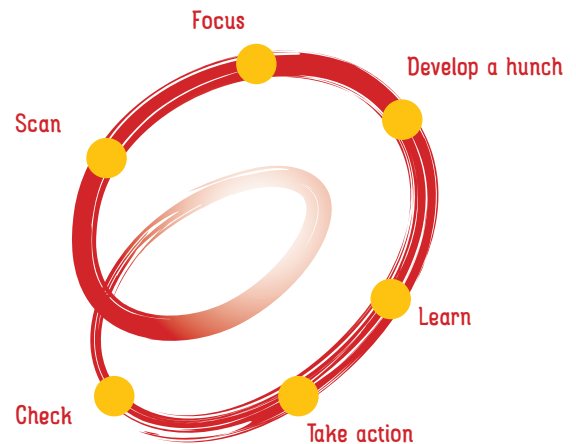
1 Earl and Katz (2002); Timperely (2007); Dumont, Istance, Benavides (2010); Timperely, Kaser, Halbert (2014); Donohoo and Velasco (2016); Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018); Timperley (2020).

2 Kahneman (2015); Gregory et al. (2012).

The **Spiral of Inquiry** is a student-focused, iterative, evidence-based model of collaborative inquiry, aimed at changing outcomes for learners in important areas. There are six phases:

- Scan
- Focus
- Develop a hunch
- Engage in new professional learning
- Take action
- Check for impact

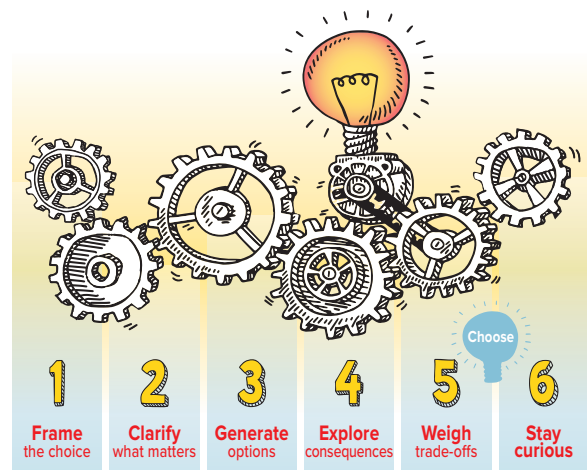
*The Spiral Playbook* (2017) describes the process. Learn more at [www.noii.ca/spiral-of-inquiry](http://www.noii.ca/spiral-of-inquiry)



The **Decision Maker Moves** help collaborators to arrive at the best possible decisions for their specific context. There are six moves:

- 1 Frame the choice
- 2 Clarify what matters
- 3 Generate options
- 4 Explore consequences
- 5 Weigh trade-offs
- 6 Stay curious

*The Decision Playbook* (2019) describes the process. Learn more at [deltalearns.ca/decisions/the-decision-playbook](http://deltalearns.ca/decisions/the-decision-playbook)



# Why we need the Spiral of Inquiry and the Decision Maker Moves together

While the Spiral of Inquiry aims to be “focused and deep rather than scattered and shallow,”<sup>3</sup> the temptation can be strong to leap to action. The Decision Maker Moves slow the urge to leap and keep teams on a journey worthy of the time and effort. *The Decision Playbook* explains the need to slow down:

*As humans, we all use two systems of thinking. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman calls them System 1 and System 2. **System 1 is our fast thinking** system. Automatic, intuitive, and effortless, it produces impressions. It drives our gut reactions. **System 2 is slow thinking**. It’s what we do when we use our heads—for example, to develop a plan, calculate something, or weigh pros and cons before choosing. Deliberate and effortful, it produces judgments.*<sup>4</sup>

In accessing our slower thinking, we are better able to be intentional, clear, and effective as we navigate a collaborative inquiry.

The Decision Maker Moves help us avoid the traps of fast thinking. Imagine, for a moment, that an inquiry team meets to wade through evidence of student learning. At this meeting someone pulls out the attendance records and observes that many of the non-attenders are also the ones getting low marks in class. Exhilarated by a possible path forward, the team anchors on that observation and too quickly the inquiry focuses on getting certain students to class. One team member shares how she knows of one school where all the teachers greet their students with special handshakes. The team forges ahead, deciding they need to start greeting students at each classroom door while the Principal and Vice Principal prowl the perimeter to catch anyone from skipping out.

Had the team used the Decision Maker Moves before sifting through evidence, they would have been prompted to involve multiple perspectives and could then have included district experts, outside experts, and perhaps students at the meeting. Slow thinking would have helped them avoid the assumptions and biases (confirmation bias, anchoring, and short cuts) that often result from fast thinking.

In *Leading Professional Learning* (2020), authors Timperley, Ell, le Fevre, and Twyford emphasize that collaborative inquiry involves these complex challenges:

- developing coherence and a sustained focus
- creating a learning culture
- working with the emotional impact of change
- using evidence and evaluative thinking
- addressing equity, bias, and beliefs

The authors suggest tools for navigating this complexity, such as reflection questions to check bias and a matrix for evaluating evidence. The tools they provide are designed to slow thinking down.

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<sup>3</sup> Kaser and Halbert (2017), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Failing, Gregory, Long, Moore (2019), 10.

## Some truths

### We are not enough by ourselves.

Both the Spiral of Inquiry and the Decision Maker Moves are designed for teams. Why teams? Individually, we cannot possibly store enough information and be skilled enough to know all the answers. The leadership work of caring for and educating all kids is complex. We need access to everyone’s creativity and knowledge. Teams have more resources and resilience than individuals.<sup>5</sup>

It’s true that working in teams makes for complex dynamics. This additional complexity might tempt us to move through the Spiral of Inquiry at a surface level. The Decision Maker Moves help us avoid this temptation by making space for the meaningful and productive conversations that characterize true collaboration.

### Avoiding hard conversations makes everything harder.

Group harmony feels easier than conflict. However, this type of harmony often means avoiding the deep work of change, improvement, and learning. In the end, avoiding hard things makes everything harder. This doesn’t feel true in the moment because hard things feel hard!

Establishing a neutral third point<sup>6</sup> is a helpful strategy for working together when there is a potential for vulnerability or conflict. A **neutral third point** is a process, artifact, or source of information that the group can focus their thinking around in order to depersonalize the interaction. Everyone in a team can be “on the same side” if they are discussing a point outside themselves. The Decision Maker Moves offer that neutral third point while moving through a Spiral of Inquiry. The moves enable the team to examine bias and other dynamics as a matter of process, without seeming confrontational. The moves increase the sense of safety necessary for a productive discussion because they require the team to engage in learning together rather than debating one another.

*While there are many success factors in collaborative decision making, one critical element is learning together. Remember the traps of cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias? You can’t assume you can just do your own research, bring information to others, and expect to change minds. People need to commit to learning together through joint fact-finding and logical reasoning. The good news is, people do learn. And as they learn together through reasoned dialogue, they open their minds and activate their empathy as well. It is in that space that they find creative solutions.<sup>7</sup>*

The Decision Maker Moves can help teams to build relationships that strengthen collaborative inquiry and inspire a sense of **collective efficacy**—the shared belief that the team can make a difference. Collective efficacy is an antidote to the burnout and stress that can otherwise plague good people working in complex systems.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Harris and Jones (2018).

6 Garmston and Zimmerman (2013).

7 Failing, Gregory, Long, Moore (2019), 52.

8 Donohoo and Velasco (2016). Jenni Donohoo writes about collective efficacy in a Canadian context, which is helpful for Canadian educators.

These are warning signs that the desire for group harmony might be getting in the way of collective efficacy:

- preserving relationships by protecting staff from tough decisions and tough stories
- deflecting initiatives that require tough conversations for fear of “rocking the boat”
- explaining how your team “isn’t there yet,” that you’re working on building trust right now or you have a lot of behaviours at your school that have to be addressed before you can talk about how you teach math
- reinforcing messages from team members who often remark that kids are so different these days and wish they could go back to the good ol’ days when everything felt easier

It’s by working *through* hard conversations, not by avoiding them, that teams build strong relationships and confidence in their capacity to solve problems.

## The synergy of the Spiral of Inquiry and Decision Maker Moves

While collaborative inquiry and collaborative decision making can each work on their own, using them together can magnify the impact. Some key decisions in a Spiral of Inquiry will warrant all six Decision Maker Moves. Others might benefit from a lighter touch—a few moves or a specific tool, such as a consequence table—to clarify the choice and move forward.

A **consequence table** reveals the anatomy of a decision in its simplest form. The following consequence tables illustrate some decisions a team might make in each phase of the spiral. These are examples, not prescriptions. Use them for inspiration—adapting some, omitting others, and creating new ones to suit your needs.

# Examples

## A consequence table explained

Decision: How will we organize our professional learning?					
Values	Options				
	Use District goals	Support Professional Learning committee direction	Vote according to teacher interest	Use the Spiral	Let it emerge
Student at center	✓	?	XX	✓✓	?
Relevant	✓	?	?	✓✓	?
Impactful	✓				?
Collaborative	XX	✓✓	XX	✓✓	-
Sustained	✓✓	X	X	✓✓	X
Learning	✓✓	?	?	✓✓	?

**Consequences**

**Decision (top row).** Start by naming the decision. This is the first Decision Maker Move. In *The Decision Playbook*, it's called "framing the choice." In the example above, we have framed the decision around how we will focus this year's learning. It is important to get the framing right, so please refer to *The Decision Playbook* for details. The way we frame the decision assumes certain factors. In the example, these factors are that we will be learning and that we have the authority to organize our own learning.

**Values (left column).** List the values or objectives that really matter to you. This is the second Decision Maker Move. In *The Decision Playbook*, it's called "clarifying what matters." The values or objectives in question are not the personal values of each member of the team; they are contextual values, relevant to this particular decision. The context necessarily includes the core values of an organization. For example, teachers in a school might place a higher value on compliance than on learning, but if student learning is a core value for the district, it must be considered a value when making a decision where learning is a factor.

**Options (as many column headers as you need).** "Generating options" is the third Decision Maker Move in *The Decision Playbook*. This is where you brainstorm imaginatively, tapping into creativity and lots of people. In the example, we have identified five ways we could organize our learning to achieve our values or objectives. It is important to spend some time generating options so you aren't restricted to your initial ideas.

**Consequences (interior cells).** "Exploring consequences" is the fourth Decision Maker Move in *The Decision Playbook*. Here is where you score or note the consequences of each option on each value. You can use a rating scale of any sort. Go to [deltalearns.ca/decisions/classroom-tools](http://deltalearns.ca/decisions/classroom-tools) to learn about and download Guts vs Heads, a deck of cards you can use to build a table just like the one above. Guts vs Heads uses a thumbs-up/thumbs-down sort of scale.



Once the table is complete, you have a record of the first four moves in one collaborative decision. Refer to *The Decision Playbook* for the remaining moves: (5) weighing trade-offs then choosing; and (6) staying curious.

Each phase in a Spiral of Inquiry might involve several decisions. Not every decision will require a consequence table. Your team can decide how and when to use the Decision Maker Moves to spiral deeper.

**A note about the following examples:**

*Remember, these consequence tables are meant to provoke your thinking, not restrain it. The values and options noted here are merely approximations of what some groups might consider. Please consider your own context in novel ways.*

## Scan

Scanning is all about uncovering the reality of the learning landscape. It is about getting authentically grounded in the students' experience. The decisions that must be made in this phase are particularly important to the integrity of the rest of the Spiral. Here are some decisions that would typically be made during this phase.

<b>Decision:</b> Who do we scan?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	All students	A grade level	Specific students	Parents	Teachers
Students at the center					
Equity					
Authenticity					
Multiple perspectives					
Dignity					

<b>Decision:</b> Where do we focus our scan?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Connection	OECD Principles	Academic achievement	Wellness	Indigenous Ways of Knowing
Researched					
Impactful					
Appreciative					
Specific					

<b>Decision:</b> How should we scan?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Survey	Interview	Story	Street Level	Gather artifacts of learning
All voices					
Safe					
Relationships					
Dig deep					
Variety					
Efficient					

## Focus

Focusing is about choosing an area where you know you can make a difference if you zoom in. This phase is all about making decisions. Here are a few that a team might need to make as they move through this phase.

<b>Decision:</b> Who should help us review evidence and choose a focus?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	All school staff	District staff	School based team	Parents	Students
Equity					
Multiple perspectives					
Openness					
Curiosity					
Safety					

<b>Decision:</b> What should we focus on?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Health and Wellness	Assessment Practice	Designing for deep learning	Math	Inclusive practices
Potential for impact on student learning					
Sustainable over time					
Alignment					
Strength Based					
Equity					

<b>Decision:</b> When do we have this discussion?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Lunch and Learn	After school	Staff meeting	Before school	Dinner meeting
Collaborative					
Engagement					
Multiple voices					
Accessible timeframe					
Comfortable					
Fun					

## Develop a hunch

Your hunches must be within your scope of influence and have the potential to make a significant improvement to student learning. This is one of the most vulnerable-making parts of the Spiral because it requires a candid and careful look at your own practice to see what you might need to learn and change. Using a framework like the Decision Maker Moves can create space for this conversation.

<b>Decision:</b> What can we influence?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Screen time	Home atmosphere	Learner wellness	Lesson design	School culture
Impactful to learning					
Relevant					
Something we can learn about					

<b>Decision:</b> What will significantly improve student success?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Screen time	Home atmosphere	Learner wellness	Lesson design	School culture
Research based					
Reliable research					
Relevant to scan					

<b>Decision:</b> How will we know the assumption in our hunch is accurate?			
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>		
	Ask students for feedback on hunch	Frequent check ins with evidence as we go	Ask an expert
Authenticity			
Accuracy			
Evidence based			
Aligns with scan			

## Engage in new professional learning

Many teams rush through (or skip) the new learning phase of the Spiral. Beware: it is a trap of fast thinking to shortcut this phase and jump to action. There are so many products, programs, and gurus in the world vying for your attention with promises to validate your hunch if only you do this one thing. Slow down! Take time to consider how you will make the space for new learning, bearing in mind that learning takes patience and time.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Education and First Nations Education Steering Committee (2008).

<b>Decision:</b> When will we learn?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Staff Meetings	Lunch and Learns	Professional Learning Days	Retreat	Conference
Not rushed					
Fully present					
Not stressed					
Together					

<b>Decision:</b> What do we need to learn?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options*</b>				
Aligned					
Focused					
Manageable					
Evidence Based					
Specific					

\* Options cannot be generated in this example given the generic context.

<b>Decision:</b> How will we learn?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Book club	Speakers	District staff	Other schools	Research/ readings
Relevant					
Evidence-Based					
Accessible					
Together					
Frequently					
Momentum					

## Take action

Your learning may lead to action. Moving through iterative cycles of action and checking (to ensure you are making progress) is a responsive and thoughtful way to engage in this phase. You can visualize it as the loop in the Spiral image (on page 4). Here are some decisions you may want to make in this phase.

<b>Decision:</b> How do we know we are on the right track?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Weekly check-ins	Monthly check ins	Sharing circle	Shared reporting out	Ongoing display of progress
Aligned					
Responsive					
Accurate					
Authentic					

<b>Decision:</b> How will we communicate our actions to stakeholders?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Newsletter	Celebration of teacher learning	Celebration of student learning	Parent Teacher interviews	Online
Honest					
Appreciative					
Personal but safe					
Safe					
Learning focused					

<b>Decision:</b> What evidence should we gather?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Student Survey	Teacher Survey	Anecdotal	Benchmarks	Street Level Data <sup>10</sup>
Variety					
Relevant					
Student at center					
Observable					
Learning					

<sup>10</sup> *Street Level Data* is a term that comes from the work of Shane Safir, author of *The Listening Leader* (2017). She uses it to describe the type of fine grain evidence that helps get us closer to the contextual understandings of a situation—evidence such as interview transcripts, running records, and observation.

## Check for impact

In this phase, consider where you began and determine how far you have come. The big decision here is to continue the current Spiral or move to a new focus.

<b>Decision:</b> How do we check our impact?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Survey	Look at student work	Exam scores	Attendance records	Interviews
Safe					
Authentic					
All perspectives					
Efficient					
Accurate					

<b>Decision:</b> What do we do now?				
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>			
	Move on to another Spiral	Go deeper in this Spiral	Start over – try another approach	Focus in on a few students
Variety				
Relevant				
Student at center				
Observable				
Learning				

<b>Decision:</b> How will we recognize and share our learning?					
<b>Values</b>	<b>Options</b>				
	Science Fair Style / Open house	With student presentations	Staff meeting	Staff Party	Show and tell tour of classrooms
Celebrate successes					
Celebrate failures					
Public					
Fun					
Visible					
Honest					

# Conclusion

Margaret Wheatley reminds us that, “so much is possible if we consciously and wisely choose how best to step forward.”<sup>11</sup>

Together, the Spiral of Inquiry and the Decision Maker Moves guide us consciously and wisely to achieve quality and equity for *all* in our education systems—ensuring that every student crosses the stage with curiosity, dignity, purpose, and options.

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11 Wheatley (2017).



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