

# **Making Creative Decisions after 50**

## **Introduction - Making Creative Decisions after 50**

Are you stuck in first gear about what to do next in your life? Struggling to figure out what you really want to do with the next phase? Dissatisfied with the advice to “find your passion” and unable to find the kind of help with these decisions that you would like? You are not alone!

When my co-author Judy DeBrandt and I set out to find help for making a couple of major life decisions at age 62, we were surprised at what we found. Despite a ton of books on life after 50, most of the information seemed to gloss over the challenges of making decisions at this point in life. Some books were filled with positive, inspirational stories but little practical information. Others prescribed solutions with limited guidance – to ‘get out of your comfort zone’ or ‘let go.’ Those that did provide more specific direction tended to recommend a particular path, often around ‘finding your passion,’ but nothing about how to make the decision and how to choose among the many options that might exist.

We decided to do more research on this issue. So we read, reflected, talked about our own experiences, and interviewed over sixty American men and women in the mid-years of their lives. Interview participants came from a wide network of friends and colleagues as well as others interested in the challenges of making decisions after 50. Most of those who took part in the research were in their sixties, although the participants ranged in ages from 48 to 72, with many different personal characteristics and a wide range of experience. Some people were married or in committed relationships; some have gone through divorce; several were widowed. All were educated with a variety of different undergraduate and graduate degrees or professional certificates. More than half were working, some part-time; several were students; some were fully retired. They lived throughout the United States.

Many had landed in a new stage with a new focus, but a number were still searching for answers. Some were ecstatic; some were wary; some were thriving; some were still struggling with decisions on the other side of 50. For some, their decisions felt natural and effortless, even exciting. But others have continued to experience inertia, find themselves ‘stuck in first gear,’ and feel “rudderless.” As one participant put it, “For years it has felt like I’m on an island surrounded by a large moat and have not been able to find a bridge, or tools to make a boat or find a way to connect with the mainland.”

Through this research, we learned that most of us are used to making decisions. After all, we have made many decisions, often major ones, throughout our lives. We’ve had to face many tough decisions about careers, marriage, illness, children and parents. However, as we read and talked with people, we came to realize that bringing the approach that worked earlier in life to decisions and choices after 50 can get us into trouble. Without understanding why decision-making after 50 is different, it is difficult to change direction and find and use the right tools to figure out what to do next and how to deal with all the choices for the years ahead.

It turns out that Swiss psychologist Carl Jung was right when he said that we cannot live the afternoon of life using the same program that worked in the morning. If you are finding, like many others, that you are stuck in first gear and can’t figure out how to shift into second or third gear, or maybe even how to get started, we have several lessons and recommendations from

our study. These recommendations can help you make more creative decisions on the other side of 50. There are also exercises for you to further explore those recommendations and ideas. So jump in, have fun and let us hear about your experiences with the following readings, the questions, and the exercises!

## **Chapter 1: Lifeline Exercise**

While making decisions after 50 may feel familiar, there are several reasons why it's different. Values, goals, priorities, circumstances, needs and wants all change, as do interests, demands on time, and attitudes toward risk. Levels of experience, knowledge, self confidence and self-awareness are different as well. And you too, as the one who has to make the decision, have changed, although you may not have taken the time to ponder and analyze those changes.

Before thinking about making decisions after 50, it's important to stop and recognize personal changes. If you don't take the time to reflect, you may find yourself in a cycle, repeating patterns of the past. If midlife is the time to be in a new place, then making new decisions requires taking time to reexamine and adjust the process. If you don't spend time reflecting and challenging your typical way of responding to requests for your time, you may find yourself without any thoughtful answers to them. You may just go along to get along, letting someone else determine your future for the next few years. You may fall in with colleagues to pursue activities that may not actually bring the type of fulfillment you are personally seeking. You may find it difficult to break out of old habits and even though you may want more, you may be challenged to figure out what "more" is.

While there may be an unsettling feeling that the old goals don't work any more and that the priorities and values have changed, finding new goals and new direction can be daunting. It's very difficult to break out of old patterns as the years go by, especially because of all the stuff you've accumulated over time and because of some deeply ingrained assumptions.

### **Lifeline Exercise – Here's an exercise to help you get started on that reflection.**

Draw a timeline of the decisions in your life with major forks in the road and major events on a lifeline graph. (You can use the attached diagram – [Lifeline Exercise chart and example](#) -- to help with this process.)

On the diagram, place a dot at your age for each major decision or branching point in your life. Rate the event by the way you feel about it turned out for you, on a scale of plus or minus 100. Connect the dots to create your lifeline. Draw a vertical line for your present age, and project your lifeline into the future. Number the major events and provide an explanation in the table below the chart. (From James E. Birren and Kathryn N. Cochran, *Telling the Stories of Life through Guided Autobiography Groups*.)

## **Chapter 2: Mental Models**

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.”

-- John Maynard Keynes

In our research we found that one of the biggest obstacles to making creative decisions after 50 is indeed that accumulated baggage and those ingrained assumptions of the past that continue to operate, despite being outmoded. These notions about the world and yourself, which we call “mental models,” can get in the way of your ability to make creative decisions after 50.

### ***Explaining Mental Models***

Mental models come in many variations and with different names: mental maps, blinders, frames, or paradigms. According to learning expert Peter Senge, they are the images, assumptions, and stories that you carry around in your head about yourself, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world. These mental models are your internal, often unconscious, pictures of the world. Even though they are often invisible, they determine how and what you see, and they shape your actions, responses, beliefs, and values, and thus your decisions.

Mental models are formed by prior knowledge, personal and professional experience, upbringing, and education. They can be affected by stereotypes, personal biases, and ingrained habits, as well as power and ego issues.

The word ‘retirement’ is a very good example of a “mental model.” For some, retirement is seen as a well-deserved end of career, an entitlement, a well-earned rest. For others it suggests something worse than the comfort of a rocking chair. It sounds like a retreat, a hiding away, a hardly deserved punishment for all those years of endeavor. ‘Senior citizen’ is another example of a mental model. In some cultures, seniors are seen as sages, and, in others, they are a burden on society.

### ***Advantages and Disadvantages of Mental Models***

Mental models can be very useful. You need them to function and to filter through the avalanche of information you receive. They help you gather, process, interpret, and organize information and understand new, complicated situations. They help explain how the world operates. They even help you get to work each day (same route, same possible ways to avoid traffic jams, alternate roads to avoid unexpected delays). As beliefs about yourself and your abilities, they help you become successful. They provide ‘rules of the game.’ They give structure to your life. They guide behavior as values and deeply-held beliefs, and they keep you safe when they are used as personal ‘standard operating procedures.’

Mental models bring purpose, a set of expectations about yourself, and an identity, whether attorney, teacher, judge, grandparent, artist, Wall Street banker, coach, or writer. Mental models call up pictures of expected behavior, responsibilities, privileges, status, entitlements, relationships, and intellectual companionship that are assumed to come with the job.

While mental models have many benefits, they also have their drawbacks. Mental models often bring with them blinders and inflexible views about the world. After 50, mental models can be particularly troublesome because they are often deeply embedded through years of reinforcement. If they have become fixed, rigid, or outmoded, they can affect your ability to see options clearly, expand your thinking beyond limited options, and make robust choices. Because they are now so ingrained, they can act like panes of tinted glass or the mirrors in the fun house at the carnival to warp your view of reality. You have lived with them for so long that you may no longer recognize the distortion they can cause.

For example, your mental model of yourself may be indelibly linked with your job or the company where you worked. Mental models defined by work can be a major barrier after 50. When you move into another phase in life, you lose that identity, not just the title and status, but a sense of yourself. You may have become what you do and are now addicted to the adrenaline that comes with the rush of 'busyness', with being productive. When that career disappears, you may struggle with a loss of identity. When you are stripped of these external symbols – whether voluntarily or not, you may no longer see yourself in the same way. Changes in jobs require you to shift the way you think about yourself. Changes in marital status will do the same.

After 50 (and of course even before 50!) mental models can thus limit your view of the range of alternative solutions to a new challenge. They can undermine your ability to change even when you have made a decision. You can fail to see new routes because you assume that the formula of success that has worked in the past will continue to work for all time. Mental models about life as it should be or a sense of family responsibility and security can keep you from taking a new job. New ideas may fail to gain traction because they conflict with deeply held internal images of the world and your value in it. These entrenched images can limit you to familiar ways of thinking and acting.

A new position at work, for example, after a merger can be seen as a 'step down' after years of status rather than an opportunity to expand your skill set or to develop new connections. Your mental model of "board member," "consultant," or "grandparent" can distort your ability to see that role as desirable. You may reject those new roles without examining your assumptions to see if they are indeed valid.

Redefining mental models can be challenging. Decisions to change roles and choose something unfamiliar may cause struggles with previously held ways of looking at yourself. Moving into a new location requires you to take more initiative than if you stay in a familiar place because you have to find new friends, doctors, a church, and favorite stores. Or you may have to learn a new set of acronyms and jargon with a new job or find a new route to work. It is difficult to be a novice again after years of being viewed as an expert. You may even have to struggle to change the perceptions others have of you as you assume your new role.

For some, changing or shedding these outdated mental models is not hard. The loss of identify as a corporate officer and workaholic may not be a problem and may even be welcome. However, for many a change in mental model can be painful, even scary. You may feel as if you are losing a piece of yourself as well as your community, especially when a new mental model involves a change in family relationships or is forced on you or a new one does not quickly appear. Such a change can cause a reordering of priorities and a different approach to life to overcome the sense of loss. One study participant explained:

I tried to pick up pieces of the past and cobble them together as something new that contained the old. But no aspect of that life can be recaptured because I am not the

person I was. It is as if a play were stopped and another actor took my part on the stage. The setting is the same, the lines may even be the same but I am not me.

It is also hard to change mental models partly because it means giving up a sense of mastery. Psychologist Edgar Schein, in a March 2002 Harvard Business Review interview, reinforced this difficulty:

Learning anxiety comes from being afraid to try something new for fear that it will be too difficult, that we will look stupid in the attempt, or that we will have to part from old habits that have worked for us in the past. Learning something new can cast us as the deviant in the groups we belong to. It can threaten our self-esteem and, in extreme cases, even our identity.

### ***Changing Mental Models***

Because mental models can filter out certain data and can cause you to rely on decision making rules that are no longer appropriate, you need to develop the ability to recognize, challenge, and break through these limitations. There are several ways to do this. They include observing and acknowledging existing mental models, reframing old ones that need adjustment, exploring new alternatives, and ultimately replacing outworn mental models that no longer work.

The first step then in changing mental models is awareness. You can surface your mental model by asking questions to uncover assumptions and values that are at the root of your behavior, experience, perceptions, and beliefs:

- \* · Why am I seeing the situation the way I am?
- \* · What assumptions am I making?
- \* · What are my beliefs about this situation?
- \* · What other factors could explain what happened?

Once you have asked the questions to surface your mental models, you then need to put them in perspective through feedback from others. Discovery of mental models is not always something to be done alone. You need to balance internal conversations with discussions with respected colleagues and friends or with results of personal inventories and assessments.

Before moving on to the next chapters where you will find help to reframe mental models, you might want to check out your timeline and see if any mental models were operating at key decision points?

Reflection questions:

- \* What do you think about this discussion on mental models?
- \* Are there any that you have been living with that you would write down for further examination?
- \* Are there any that you need to eliminate from your life in order to move on?

### **Chapter 3: New Tools for Dealing with Decisions after 50**

“The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

- Marcel Proust

Once uncovered, mental models often need to be reframed or even replaced. Because mental models can interfere with creative decision making after 50, you need different tools from those that have worked for you before. New tools can help you reexamine and reframe mental models, see choices from different angles, identify issues that are holding you back, and take risks to get out of your comfort zone.

Our interviews and research identified three approaches that can help you reframe mental models and enhance your decision-making after 50. They are 1) Tapping your creative talents; 2) Using a creative problem solving approach for making decisions; and 3) Finding a decision-making pattern that works for you. In this chapter, you will read about your creative talents. Following chapters will address the second and third approaches.

#### ***Tapping your Creative Talents***

A crucial set of tools for shifting your thinking patterns and moving past old mental models is actually found within, through getting in touch with your own creativity. By identifying, exploring and further developing your creative talents, you will find the power, courage, and self-esteem to handle ambiguity and confusion as you reframe and replace old mental models and to address the challenges and obstacles that midlife throws your way as you take on new directions.

The creativity we're talking about is more than artistic endeavors and “thinking out of the box,” producing original works of art, or coming up with revolutionary new inventions. Instead, this creativity is the innate ability that everyone possesses to produce different and valuable results and solutions. It is not isolated to certain individuals, such as Michelangelo or Einstein. Instead, the creative talents we are talking about are found within each of us -- although they come in many different forms.

The range of creative talents is endless and they can be found in many fields. Creativity can be expressed by selling a product or idea, fashioning an inspirational message, or inventing a rewarding life in the midst of wanted or unwanted changes, illness or loss. Creativity comes as new ways to parent a difficult child, whip up a recipe, envision a jewelry design, or sketch a blueprint for a garden or a deck. Creative talents are needed to manage multiple tasks at home, figure out how to survive on less income, and to adjust to being single or newly married, dealing with unexpected injuries, or moving to a new location. The business world has thrived on creativity not only through entrepreneurs but also through application of new ways to grow a business, do a deal, find funding, make a presentation, search a database, organize work, help customers, resolve conflict, or sell a product.

Your creativity may come out in the use of skillful ways to get around obstacles, using whatever is on hand to resolve a crisis quickly or improvise a response. You might be creative in the way you conduct research and build on the work of others to find a different solution for an old problem. You may access a sixth sense to brainstorm a myriad of possibilities resulting in crazy,

ingenious off-the-wall ideas. You may get inspired by visions – futuristic or prophetic - that come to you out of the blue. You may be creative in the way you strategize to get things done, introduce new ideas, or work with a team to draw on their energies to build a safe place for testing new behaviors. You may be creative in finding ways you can enjoy your family yet at the same time learn to be a jazz pianist.

Your creative talents can serve as very useful and invaluable tools for making better midlife decisions. They can help you address problems differently, uncover new options after 50, figure out how to downsize in order to afford going back to school, or to start a new business despite the lack of experience.

Midlife is the time to tap into and expand your creative talents and use them to make creative decisions. In the process of creative exploration, you can use different connections, find unusual solutions, and make new discoveries that would never have occurred to you without taking the time to draw on your talents. There are a variety of ways to figure out your own creative talents.

One resource is the book *Breakthrough Creativity: Achieving Top Performance Using the Eight Creative Talents* (<http://breakthroughcreativity.com/book.html>) which provides an in-depth descriptions of eight different creative talents. There are also brief descriptions available (<http://breakthroughcreativity.com/8talents.html>) You can ask others for their perceptions about your best, most creative moments to see if any themes emerge.

Reflection questions:

- \* What do you think about this discussion about your creative talents?
- \* Are there any insights that you would like to explore further?

## **Chapter 4 Additional Support for Your Creative Talents**

After you identify your creative talents, the next step for you to take is to consider the environment that brings out your creative best. You may feel more comfortable with an unstructured day or, on the other hand, you may prefer a disciplined schedule. You might prefer a particular atmosphere, perhaps with candles or music, to optimize your creativity. You may need a totally organized office or a special room or chair. You may need people and noise around you, or you may prefer to be alone.

To be most creative, you need to find time to rejuvenate, play, rest, relax, incubate ideas, and celebrate accomplishments. Exercise - swimming, gardening, taking walks - and eating and sleeping well contribute not only to a longer life but to a more creative one as well. Chronic illness, depression, poor nutrition, or fatigue can all limit your ability to be creative. Figuring out how to deal with stress and to stay healthy, both emotionally and physically, will allow your creativity to flourish.

In addition to the right conditions, the right attitude about learning, particularly learning from mistakes, is also critical to bringing out your creative best. Mistakes are a necessary byproduct of venturing into the new. Being creative involves learning from these mistakes, experimenting, and refining your thinking to find an answer that better meets the situation. Examining, understanding and altering your attitude toward risk and making mistakes can open up new and creative opportunities to learn.

To be comfortable taking these risks and making mistakes, you may need to deal with messages of the past. A chaotic childhood may have led you to seek stability and to structure a lifestyle where change and taking risks are not acceptable. In the past you may have only been rewarded for 'coloring within the lines.' You may have given up on your particular creative gifts because they were not appreciated in your family, in school, or at work where other behavior received greater rewards. Since your decisions may not always work right the first time, you will want to get past these messages that keep you from exploring something new.

Ego issues and personal fears can also interfere with the exercise of your creative talents. Creative endeavors may have no place in your life if they conflict with a strong need to control. Some of the biggest obstacles to creativity can be unconscious and unnecessary personal limitations. One successful business owner admitted,

I would say that if anything were ever an obstacle for my creativity, the biggest obstacle would be myself. It's all where I set my boundaries and where I put my walls, and if I refuse to move them, then I've become the problem, as opposed to the solution.

With the right attitude you can overcome these personal blocks. One way is to find friends who will challenge you to think differently. Another way is to recognize and talk back to that meddlesome inner critic. You need to surface your emotional barriers and identify those that are preventing you from trying new approaches. At the same time you need to be patient with yourself as you learn to make changes and accept some of the imperfect outcomes that inevitably happen.

To allow your creativity to flourish, you may need to let go of old habits and to stop treasuring well-worn and comfortable beliefs when they are no longer useful. You may need to take the time to clean house, literally and figuratively, mentally and physically, to let go of old memories and expectations that are holding you back, to make psychological room for new ventures and activities. Midlife can be a time to let go of unnecessary possessions, an outgrown career, and unsatisfactory relationships. By freeing yourself up, you can move on and open up space for more creative decision-making.

Tapping your creative talents supports unusual choices after 50. It fosters the development of new attitudes and the breaking of old mindsets. It allows you to think more expansively. It can result in a new direction or at least a new interest in life.

The work to define and develop your creative talents leads not only to more creative choices, but it also builds confidence enabling you to handle the challenges life throws your way. Your creativity gives you a deeper level of resilience to cope with constant change. Developing creativity strengthens your capacity to be more open, flexible, and buoyant; to bend and bounce back; and to adapt. You develop a positive attitude where you can deal with any of life's uncertainties and complexities as you change, grow, and age. Seeing yourself as creative is vital for making decisions for a healthy and productive life in the years ahead.

Before moving on, take some time to complete the following exercise, to help you approach creativity with discipline until it becomes a habit:

1. What are your favorite, most creativity-inducing preferences regarding the following:
  - a. Place – inside, outside, other
  - b. Activity – quiet, sports, walking, other
  - c. Sensors – music, candles, pictures, objects
  - d. Time of day
2. What is the process you use to ignite creative ideas?
3. Are there any catalysts that start creative thinking, such as writing, drawing, listening, meditating.
4. How do you capture your new ideas?

## **Chapter 5: Creative Problem Solving after 50**

Once you have identified your creative talents and the conditions where they thrive, you can then use them to redefine decisions, address the challenges, generate more options, and help outgrow outworn mental models. You may also benefit from a creative problem solving process as you do so. Here are some steps you can follow.

### ***Step #1: Define the Challenge Creatively***

In making decisions in the past, you may have, consciously or not, limited your ability to find new solutions. Why? The reason is often because you did not define the challenge broadly enough. Past decisions may have been limited to 'it's either this option or that one' or 'it's a true or false choice' or a 'right or wrong' one. In your hurry to make the decision, you may have been quick to jump to conclusions. You may have become so locked into your judgments that you did not take the time to explore all options or you refused to see anything that did not fit with preconceived notions. These narrow criteria may have limited your ability to draw on your creativity. Midlife is the time to think expansively about choices and to explore more options. But, it is not always easy to do. For example, if you believe the only alternative in the face of a merger, downsizing, or request for early retirement is to leave, you may be stuck. When you think 'how can I make this change work for me?' rather than 'there is no way I am going to do that,' you can change your attitude and start to think creatively.

To ensure you are looking at situations expansively and differently, you want to take time to gather the facts and look at the situation from a variety of perspectives, those that stretch boundaries and escape the trap of conventional thinking of your prevailing mental models. You also need to reassess your assumptions. In the face of a downsizing, you may realize you no longer really want a full-time job or that you can offer your services as a consultant. You can then take the corporate decision to downsize as an opportunity to meet your own needs.

As you reframe the problem, it is important to watch out for any outworn mental models that may get in your way. Mental models that were successful in the past and once proven ways to

solve problems do not always continue to work. You can get too close to a problem, and your prior experience can prevent you from seeing new facts and developments. Your own established rules can limit your perception of possible options and can insulate you from new information and narrow your perceptions. If you see nonprofit work as “charity work,” for example, or believe you will do no more than lick envelopes, you are limiting your options unnecessarily.

### ***Step #2: Ask Creative Questions***

The way you ask questions is fundamental to how you perceive, think, feel, and make decisions. The differences in attitude underneath questions like ‘What’s wrong?’ vs. ‘What could work?’ or ‘Why bother?’ vs. ‘What’s possible?’ are profound and can lead you down very different paths. Your internal questions need to shift as well from ‘Why did I do such a stupid thing?’ to ‘What can I learn from this situation?’

Therefore, another step you can take to help creative decision-making after 50 is to ask more creative questions. Probing questions challenge negative thinking patterns. You can open up your possibilities with creative questions, such as: ‘What is the ideal situation?’ ‘Are there new criteria to consider?’ ‘Are there different ways to make it happen?’ With a more positive outlook generated by more creative questions, you can see decisions with fresh eyes, broaden their scope, set your curiosity and creativity in motion, and be inspired with new possibilities.

Opening up new choices for yourself requires asking new questions. These new questions need to be bold in order to widen the perception of the possible. Here are some positive questions to use when facing particular midlife challenges.

- \* What am I trying to achieve?
- \* How does this decision fit into the larger scheme of things?
- \* How can I see the decision or the problem differently?
- \* How would (fill in the blank with a hero, heroine, role model, cartoon character) see this challenge?
- \* What would I like to see happen?
- \* What does the ideal result or choice look like?
- \* What possibilities do I see coming out of this?
- \* What alternatives and options exist?
- \* What can be done to make what I am trying to do work?
- \* What choices do I want to consider?
- \* How can I prepare for the worst that could happen?

### ***Step #3: Generate Creative Alternatives***

After you have broadly defined a decision and let go of unneeded baggage or outworn mental models, it is time in the creative decision-making process to generate multiple options. Friends and colleagues with totally different perspectives on life can enrich your perspectives. Creative tools include such techniques as brainstorming, writing out options and answers to the creative questions and then building on them through journaling, using graphic techniques like mindmapping, or kinesthetic tools that use your whole body and the five senses, like sensation can be very helpful. (For more information on these techniques, you might check out the books and techniques by Michael Michalko at <http://www.creativethinkingwith.com/Michael-Michalko-Creative-Thinking-Techniques.html> or the website of the Creative Thinking Association: <http://www.creativethinkingassoc.com/store/> )

These techniques and other tools can twist paradigms, stretch the imagination, generate unexpected insights, gather different information, and eliminate the blinders of outdated mental models. By stretching your horizons, these tools can help you stay open to new input. They provide time and space for playfulness and good humor where you can be inventive and nonlinear, a time to try unusual combinations and different ways to tinker with ideas.

After 50, you may not only need new tools but also new sources of inspiration. Ideas may come from new activities, such as taking a trip on a train with a notebook and pen, new forms of exercise like jogging or tai chi, or physical chores such as working on the deck, gardening, mowing the lawn, or doing odd jobs around the house. Revisiting your childhood to search for the magic that inspired your youth can also lead to new insight. Did you enjoy writing stories? Were books sacred? Did you like going to museums or playing the piano? Going back to those special childhood moments can rekindle neglected or forgotten interests.

Ideas can also come from a logical extension of ongoing activities, by building on current interests. As you browse the newspaper, scan TV programs, or wander through shops, you can find themes that capture your attention and interests. Art, photography, dance and music classes might surface unknown outlets for your creativity as well as new perspectives in your decision-making process. Other sources of inspiration can be taking a long bath, going for a walk, and visiting museums or botanical gardens.

Another technique for generating new insights is to schedule down time to “incubate,” or process and reflect on new ideas and allow for time away from the problem. Such incubation can facilitate the work of your memory and your unconscious. Accessing the unconscious uncovers new ideas and imaginative and innovative solutions. Techniques such as meditation, relaxation, prayer, dreamwork, visualization, artwork, and movement can activate the unconscious for inspiration and guidance.

#### ***Step #4: Creatively Select the Best Solution and Direction***

After generating options, whatever the source of the inspiration, the next step is to select the best solutions. Our research identified three possible ways for creatively selecting a creative solution: 1) trying a style different from ones you have used in the past; 2) finding a solution that integrates seemingly conflicting objectives, and 3) using experimentation to explore the solution in small steps.

- 1) *Style:* In making selections among options, you may be used to evaluating possible ideas against your goals and objectives in a methodical way. Your style, on the other hand, may be to wait until the idea feels right and be more spontaneous. You may want to consider that midlife should be the time when you change your decision-making style. If in the past you have always moved quickly to resolution, now might be a good time to resist the temptation to leap to the first solution and instead wait until you have explored ideas or revisit the criteria that you are using before you land on a solution. Or, conversely, if you have always been extremely methodical in your approach to decision-making, now may be the time to be more spontaneous.
- 2) *Integration:* As you start to narrow down alternatives, it's important to see them as broadly as possible. Often decisions appear to require compromise because of conflicting options. Yet, in actuality the most creative solution is often one that comes from integrating opposing needs and ideas. If you have generated multiple options, you

might be able to find a 'both/and' outcome that reconciles differences, instead of making a 'black/white' 'either/or' choice. An integrated solution does not determine which piece of the pie is yours; it creates a larger pie with all the necessary ingredients. For example, a commuter marriage may be a creative solution to the dilemma of balancing job opportunities with a change in locations. A part-time job may provide the financing that allows pursuit of a new hobby or interest. A weekly date may resolve the need for togetherness in a marriage if midlife avocations lead each partner in different directions.

- 3) *Experimentation*: Another creative approach to selecting the best solution is to try one or more on for size. Experimentation can be a way to minimize second-guessing, avoid possible loss of security, and limit analysis paralysis when you are trying something new. You can try out a new role gradually, perhaps through volunteering. You can develop a new idea in stages or build in options in case the original plan doesn't work. You can try out new ideas while employed or at least get training in some areas of interest. You must be willing to adjust your dreams, to adapt, and to recognize that you don't have to have all the answers before you get started.

### Reflection Questions

- \* What tools have you used in the past to generate more creative options?
- \* Are there any techniques that you have followed that have helped in your decision-making process after 50?
- \* Have you ever tried to change your decision-making style?
- \* Have you tried to find an integrated solution (vs. a compromise that doesn't satisfy anyone)?
- \* Have you tried experimenting with a new direction? If so, what was the outcome of any of these endeavors?]

### Chapter 6 Decision-Making Patterns after 50

By the time you reach age 50, you have developed values, made many decisions, experienced the good and the bad, and have created many of the chapters of your life history. Your decision-making at this point often reflects this history and follows a pattern which may or may not have used your creative talents or resulted in the most creative choice. One of the exciting discoveries in our research was that there were actually four patterns for making midlife decisions, not just one. They are: the Adaptor, the Analyzer, the Improviser, and the Seeker. While each of these patterns has commonalities, there are differences because of individual attitudes toward risk and toward the pace of change, approach to decision making and creativity, as you will see below.

Before you move to identify your pattern, it is important to understand that there is no one right pattern that makes the best, most creative choice. They all can. And no one pattern leads to a pre-ordained outcome. Some of those who followed the Adaptor pattern are fully retired, while others are in second careers. Those who followed the Seeker pattern include a woman who adopted children in her late forties and a man who has finally entered Divinity School after having this dream for many years. You will see a range of outcomes, reinforcing the concept that there is no one right way to make decisions after 50 and no one right decision either!

One more word of caution: While the diagram below is divided with hard lines, not all individuals fall neatly into a quadrant. As you look at these characteristics, you should not try a force fit but rather identify one or two areas that you feel most comfortably define your pattern. The intent is not to box you in but rather to help you see yourself through a pattern or patterns that fit you. These patterns can serve to guide your midlife decision making. Because patterns are often dynamic and fluid, you may experience more than one and can learn from them all.

<p><b>Adaptor</b> – consistent in approach; readily takes small steps; choices tend to be incremental.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* An external catalyst may drive the decision, such as a layoff, or turning 65</li> <li>* Uses a methodical approach to decision-making</li> <li>* Tends to be risk averse</li> <li>* Creativity comes from building on the work of others or what has been done in the past</li> <li>* 6 months – 2 year time frame</li> </ul>	<p><b>Improviser</b> -- free-flowing; moves readily through choices; and thrives on new adventures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* An internal catalyst or motivation drives the decision, such as wanting more fun or escaping boredom</li> <li>* Is spontaneous and opportunistic in decision-making</li> <li>* Risk tolerant, quick to take risks</li> <li>* Creativity: Reacts to the five senses, tends to be skillful and instinctual</li> <li>* 6 months – lifetime time frame</li> </ul>
<p><b>Analyzer</b> - thoughtful; takes time to explore and move to conclusions; may ultimately take greater leaps.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* An external catalyst may drive the decision, such as a layoff, turning 65</li> <li>* Uses a methodical approach to decision-making</li> <li>* Willing to take moderate risk</li> <li>* Creativity comes through thinking differently about the world and developing blueprints for the future</li> <li>* 2 – 3 year time frame</li> </ul>	<p><b>Seeker</b> - often driven by a life-long quest, to find a passion, and purpose.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* An internal catalyst or motivation such as a life-long dream drives the decision</li> <li>* Use an evolutionary approach to decision-making</li> <li>* Not driven by security, driven by finding meaning</li> <li>* Creativity comes through focusing on others and on a concern for the underlying values of life</li> <li>* 2 – 20 year time frame</li> </ul>

***Here are some brief stories about each of the patterns.***

**The Adaptor Pattern:** Helen’s and Glenn’s decision-making process follows the Adaptor Pattern. In each case their decisions were caused by an external event, a request for early retirement and reaching their organization’s mandatory retirement age of 65. Their mental models of themselves have gone through incremental changes over time. They have been somewhat risk averse and thoughtful in their approach to midlife decision-making, taking one small step at a time. Their risks have been calculated. They have been quite methodical and have carefully researched their options among their choices for a next set of activities, relying on their creativity to build on familiar skills and activities and what has been done before. Helen has taken several concrete steps to identify her skills, take courses, do research, and gradually move from full-time corporate employment to part-time independent consulting. Glenn did much the same, moving from full time investment banking through personal and financial counseling to part-time trust fund management.

**The Analyzer Pattern.** Tim and Sheryl are examples of those living the Analyzer pattern. In dealing with midlife decisions, both have chosen to be more analytical, weighing pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages over a considerable period of months, even years. They have struggled with replacing their mental models of themselves, being well attached to their prior identities and self-images. Their catalysts for decisions have tended to be externally caused (from scheduled retirement or unexpected layoff). Through their thoughtful, intellectual probing, they have come to find new focus. They are open to new directions but tend to take careful steps before relinquishing the past and don't take major leaps in risk. Their creativity comes out in the ways they organize and strategize how to move forward. Those who follow the Analyzer pattern usually need time to make decisions. They may eventually end up in an unexpected direction but not without doing research and making conscious shifts of their mental models. In the process, they may have to figure out how to balance personal and professional choices.

**The Improviser Pattern:** Karen and Sam both follow the Improviser Pattern. Their need to make decisions after 50 was internally driven, coming from a desire to try something new and stave off boredom. Both had changed careers frequently, shifting in one case from social work to religion, to coaching, and writing, and in the other through many different entrepreneurial ventures. Their timeframes have tended to be shorter term since they tend to live in the present and are not too concerned about the future or the consequences of their decisions. They make decisions rather quickly and instinctively, and then try out new directions, recognizing that they will need to adapt and adjust as they move forward. They have taken many risks in the process, but are fine with that because they prefer a life of constant change and exploration. Midlife decisions tend to be seen as just another transition or adventure in their lives. Their creativity comes out in their instinctive and skillful responsiveness to the many opportunities that come their way. Their mental models of themselves are constantly evolving and changing, like a kaleidoscope with endless variations on a theme. Said another participant reflecting the Improviser pattern:

I love change. My favorite metaphor for life is in terms of chapters. Chapters must end for the story to move ahead. I would be bored to death if I thought I'd be stuck in the same scenario for the next 30 years. I'd like to do two or three complete novels in that time! Other than my sons, nothing is more important to me right now than moving on and continuing to grow.

**The Seeker Pattern.** Wendy and Henry have chosen a different path. They have followed the "Seeker" pattern, which has resulted for them in a new mental model of themselves, one that is radically different from their former ones. One other participant who seems to be following the Seeker pattern talked about a "major overhaul, from the inside out, which is resulting in a complete change in outer circumstances." Wendy moved from being a successful stockbroker to mother and secondary school teacher late in life. Henry changed from technology manager in a university to minister in a mainstream Protestant denomination. In both cases, the decision was caused by an internal catalyst for change, to pursue a lifelong passion and dream that took years to be realized. The decisions resulted in the need to take considerable risk. They each gave up a financially secure position to find more meaning in life. Their creativity has come out through finding ways to work with and care for others and through an appreciation for deeper personal values.

Decisions after 50 can take you in many directions: next door, down the street, or across the globe. The many different stories indeed provide the insight that your current quest can lead you in different directions -- to a satisfying and inspiring new stage of life, to increased satisfaction with your present life, or to a gradual move in a planned direction.

Certainly, each decision after 50 about what to do next is unique. Your needs and circumstances will determine the context for your decisions. However, recognition and use of these patterns can help you understand individual differences in the decision-making process after 50. By reviewing these differentiators, you can learn more about your decision-making approach and perhaps see the value of trying a new pattern on for fun.

**Reflection questions:**

- \* Were you able to identify a pattern that reflected your approach to making decisions after 50?
- \* Did you find the information useful? Why or why not?]

## **Conclusion**

The insights we gained from our research were very helpful to us and to others with whom we have shared this information. We hope this information has also helped you understand why decisions after 50 differ from those at earlier stages of your life. You now understand that midlife is the time to explore new mental models, exploit your creative talents, experiment with new tools, and exercise alternate patterns of decision making.

We would appreciate any feedback you have on this material!