

Making better decisions



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We make hundreds of decisions every day. Most are mundane and we make them with little thought; decisions like, “Which of the nine uniform shirts that I own am I going to wear today?” (Hopefully the clean one.) For the most part, these decisions have little lasting impact on our life or the lives of others. But there are other decisions we make that could have long-lasting consequences for us, for our families and for others around us. And if you are a human being, you can probably recall a few decisions that you wish you could take back. About the best any of us can hope for after making a bad decision is “lesson learned.” But there are some steps you can take to prevent making such decisions in the future.

1. Stop and think. One of the most important steps to making better decisions is the oldest advice in the world: Think ahead. To do so, you must first stop the momentum of events long enough to permit calm analysis. This requires some discipline, but it is a powerful restraint against poor choices.

Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying, “Count to ten when angry; count to a hundred when very angry,” a simple technique designed to prevent foolish and impulsive behavior. But we are just as apt to make foolish decisions when we are under the strain of powerful desires or fatigue, when we are in a hurry or under pressure, and when we are ignorant of important facts.

Just as we learned as children to look both ways before crossing the street, we can and should instill the habit of looking ahead before making decisions. Stopping to think prevents rash decisions, prepares us for more thoughtful judgment, and allows us to mobilize our discipline.

2. Clarify goals. Before choosing, clarify your short- and long-term goals. Determine which of your many wants and don’t-wants affected by the decision are the most important. The big danger is that decisions that fulfill immediate wants and needs can prevent the achievement of more important life goals.

3. Determine facts. Be sure you have adequate information to support an intelligent choice. You can’t make good decisions if you don’t know the facts. Just as important as what you know is what you don’t know. Assume nothing. Take time to ensure you have the information you need to make a good decision. Be prepared to get additional information and to verify assumptions and other uncertain information.

Once we begin to be more careful about facts, we often find that there are different versions of them and disagreements about their meaning. In these situations, part of making sound decisions involves making good judgments as to who and what to believe.

Here are some guidelines: Consider the reliability and

credibility of the people providing the facts. Remember that assumptions, gossip and hearsay are not the same as facts. Consider all perspectives, but be careful to think about whether the source of the information has values different from yours or has a personal interest that could affect perception of the facts. Seek out the opinions of people whose judgment and character you respect.

4. Develop options. Now that you know what you want to achieve and have made your best judgment as to the relevant facts, make a list of options, a set of actions you can take to accomplish your goals. If it’s an especially important decision, talk to someone you trust so you can broaden your perspective and think of new choices. If you can think of only one or two choices, you’re probably not thinking hard enough.

5. Consider consequences. Filter your choices through the character traits of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Will the action violate any of the core ethical principles? For instance, does it involve lying or breaking a promise; is it disrespectful to anyone; is it irresponsible, unfair or uncaring; does it involve breaking laws or rules? Eliminate unethical options. Identify the stakeholders and how the decision is likely to affect them. Consider your choices from the point of view of those who will be impacted. Identify whom the decision will help and hurt.

6. Choose. Make your decision. If the choice is not immediately clear, try talking to people whose judgment you respect. Seek out friends and mentors, but remember, once you’ve gathered opinions and advice, the ultimate responsibility is still yours.

What would the most ethical person you know do? Think of a person you know who has the strong character and good ethical judgment. Think of that person as your decision-making role model and try to behave the way he or she would in your situation.

Ask yourself, “What would I do if I was sure everyone would know?” If everyone found out about your decision, would you be proud and comfortable? Choices that only look good if no one knows are always bad choices. Good choices make us worthy of admiration and build good reputations. It’s been said that character is revealed by how we behave when we think no one is looking and strengthened when we act as if everyone is looking.

7. Monitor and modify. Since most hard decisions use imperfect information and “best effort” predictions, some of them will inevitably be wrong. Monitor the effects of your choices. If they are not producing the intended results or are causing unintended and undesirable results, re-assess the situation and make new decisions.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “The choices we have made in the past have determined who we are today.” We can’t change our past, but hopefully we can change our future by making better decisions.