What Do You Think I Should Do? (Part 3 of 3)

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2011, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Saturday, February 19, 2011

A client was recently quite distraught over a decision he had to make. He came to me asking, "What should I do?" If you've read the first two articles on this topic, you know that I courteously agreed to help him, but I didn't answer his question directly. (If you've not read those first two articles, they're available on "Dennis' blog" on my website; or contact me and I'll provide a copy.)

Back to my client; he was extremely distressed. Several potential action steps offered an immediate easing of his pain, but he knew the probability was great that any of them could ultimately result in disaster. I helped him think of some other options, but he kept pressing for my recommendation.

I suggested only two things. First, don't make the decision emotionally. This situation called for solid, information-based, cause and effect logic, not some "it just felt right" whim.

Second, I strongly suggested that he choose the option that he concluded had the greatest probability of a long-term outcome that would serve him and his organization well. I gave him tons of compassion, because each of the possibilities that looked like they would provide a good outcome in the long run extended his pain in the short run.

"Self-control" is the ability in the moment to manage one's desires, emotions, and behaviors in order to obtain a preferred reward later. Perhaps the best known research on self-control was conducted in the late 1960's and early 1970's by Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel. You may have heard of the "marshmallow experiment" that involved over 600 pre-school children.

Dr. Mischel offered a marshmallow to a 4-year old child to eat as soon as he left the room. He also promised the child a second marshmallow if he or she waited to eat it until Dr. Mischel returned.

About a third of the children ate the sweet immediately. About a third waited for Dr. Mischel's return and excitedly claimed their second marshmallow. The rest of the children tried to wait, but the temptation was too great, and they ate the marshmallow before Dr. Mischel came back into the room.

Fourteen years later, when the students were finishing high school, Dr. Mischel began to confirm a correlation between the test results and success in life. The children who immediately ate the marshmallow grew into students who lacked self-esteem and had difficulties relating with others, at home and in school.

The children whose self-control at the age of four permitted them waiting for the second marshmallow became teenagers who were more socially competent, self-assertive, and academically successful.

Dr. Mischel and his colleagues have continued to track these individuals while seeking more sophisticated approaches to studying self-control. Psychologists for decades have focused on raw intelligence as the most important variable when it comes to predicting success in life. Dr. Mischel, however, in an interview for the May, 2009 edition of "New Yorker" magazine, said, "Intelligence is largely at the mercy of self-control; even the smartest kids still need to do their homework."

Dr. Mischel went on to say, "What we're measuring is much more important than will power or self-control. We can't control the world, but we can control how we think about it."

Leaders seem to understand this inherently. Although we cannot control the world, we can control the choices we make. Yet leaders are sometimes baffled when employees make poor choices, at work or in their private lives. The seductive power of immediate gratification is overwhelming for all of us at times!

If a friend, relative, or a direct report comes to you with the "What should I do?" question, offer to help generate options. Together, then, thoroughly evaluate all the possibilities. Emphasize the importance of the long-term outcome as you imagine what could happen with each action. Not only will you help the individual make a good decision, you'll help him or her become a better decision maker!

****

Dennis Hooper helps leaders enhance their skills--and those of their direct reports. E-mail Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com or call him at 478-988-0237. Dennis' website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com.