

Are You Taking Your “Freedom to Choose” for Granted?

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I work with leaders to raise their awareness of what they do and why they do it. Most leaders are busy, so decisions are made habitually, with the controlling factors functioning automatically, just below the surface. We interact with others in repetitive ways that we think are working for us, but sometimes those behaviors don't bring to us the long-term outcomes we desire.

Any time we face a situation, we have a variety of potential responses. Often, however, we choose the first option that comes to mind. However, many people are so focused on quickly handling the existing situation that they don't think about the long-term effects of their choices.

For example, consider the large debt that some individuals have accumulated over multiple decisions to purchase items on credit. The intent was never to amass large liabilities, yet the sum is based on lots of individual decisions.

I'm preparing materials for a new leadership team this week. I've been pondering the kinds of decisions they typically face. Many of their choices feel very routine, and most of their responses are pretty automatic. If I were to challenge some of their decisions, many of the individuals would explain to me why it is "right" to do what they've chosen.

Yet every organization claims to want to improve. Can you see the difficulty here? Improvement does not happen without change. And change involves making decisions that are not routine. So, how does a given leader interrupt existing patterns?

That's where "awareness" comes in. In the remainder of this column, I'll offer some stimulants to help you consider other alternatives.

Is collaboration a choice? We humans tend to want independence, which sometimes leads to resistance. I see lack of intentional cooperation as a characteristic in many organizations.

Is delegation a choice? Many leaders admit to being poor delegators. "They provide incomplete or unclear expectations!" is a complaint I hear frequently about bosses. Some leaders acknowledge that they'd rather do it themselves; it takes too much time to train someone else, and besides, "If I do it myself, I'll know it will be done right!"

Is informing your organization a choice? It's amazing how many leaders are surprised that the workers in their organizations would like to know, "How are we doing?" And it's amazing how many leaders don't track the results of the organization's efforts, and if they do, are not willing to share that information.

Is failing to make a decision a choice? Sometimes we put off making a decision, believing that there will be no repercussions for delay.

Is giving feedback a choice? Failing to tell someone what effect his or her behavior has on you is withholding information that could make that person a better contributor in the future.

Is forgiveness a choice? So much pain dwells in the individual who chooses to hold a grudge that you might expect forgiveness to be a common choice. Unfortunately, too many people have not given "forgiveness" serious consideration.

Is building future leaders a choice? Of course it is, but it's usually an option that organizations have not even considered. The focus in many organizations is improving the functional and technical skills required to provide superior products or services to paying customers. Yet the skills necessary to lead people to work together to overcome obstacles and seek continuous improvement are rarely intentionally enhanced.

I bet you could add two or three choices that might seem obvious if people would only consider them. Do yourself and your colleagues a favor and be sensitive for a few days to possibilities that you don't typically consider. If you have an addition to add to the examples above, I'd be delighted to hear from you!

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