

It's Your Choice--What Will You Do?

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You make dozens, maybe hundreds, of choices every day. Many are rather insignificant: "Shall I wear the blue shirt or the pinstripe?"

Occasionally, however, you face a tough one: "Do I accept the transfer that could lead to that big promotion, or should I stay here so that our daughter can graduate from school with her friends?"

Since my role in life is helping leaders strengthen their decision-making processes, I've studied how we humans make choices. Today's article is the first of three looking at different types of choices:

- "What meaning do I make of the situation I'm now facing?"
- "Where will I focus my time and energy?"
- "What action will I take in response to the situation I'm now facing?"

I've decided to start this week with the last of these three. (See how pervasive choices are!)

We always have multiple options when facing a decision. I learned this early in my career when a plant manager asked me what I recommended for addressing an unsatisfactory condition. I quickly and authoritatively gave my answer.

He asked a surprising follow-up question: "As you considered the other options available to you, what caused you to reject them in favor of this one?"

Did he truly believe I had given it that much thought? Or did he sense that I had merely responded with my only idea? Or maybe he was trying to teach me something about making decisions?

He was patient with me. Folks in his position deal with poorly considered proposals all the time. He merely asked me to think about some other possibilities overnight, and if I still thought my initial idea was best, to let him know tomorrow. Once I allowed myself to think more extensively, I came up with several attractive alternatives! Did he know I would? I've wondered ever since!

So, if you are facing a major situation, stretch yourself to consider at least five different options. Once you get into the habit, you'll think about multiple options on even your minor decisions.

I've noticed that some people are very good option-generators, while others tend to make decisions abruptly and easily. Pay attention over the next few days to which you do best.

If you make quick decisions, you may not understand or appreciate the creative tenacity of an option-generator. Be grateful if one is on your team. Welcome his or her resourceful collaboration.

If you tend instead to be an option-generator, pair up with someone comfortable making decisions. If that's not possible, maybe the following paragraphs will help you make your choices.

If you've not done so, consider and write down what's important to you. That is, define what you value. We all have values, but many people are not able to express them. Consider exploring what's important to you with both your family and your work team. Organizations that have taken the time to articulate their values can use them as powerful guidance when making decisions.

A large proportion of our decisions are based on personal preference. That is, our values dictate many of our choices. Frequently, we make these decisions quickly, without serious deliberation.

Our more important decisions, however, are usually based on what outcome is most likely. I encourage you to think about what you want, especially in the long term, before you make your decision. Then consider which option has the highest probability of generating that result.

Every decision you make is a function of the meaning you attribute to the situation and the time and energy with which you focus on it. I'll provide perspective on these topics in the next two weeks.

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