

Breaking the Logjam

Deciding When You Can't Decide

I thought about waiting to write this until April Fools' Day and calling it, "Taking the Risk Out of Decision Making". If decisions weren't risky anyone could make them. Even not deciding puts us at risk of delaying or not getting the benefits of the decision.

A five hundred (or 5,000) word article isn't going to relieve you of every decision making stress. But here are a few tips that might help you find a path forward:



1. **Picture the future under having made the decision each way.** Imagine yourself a few years out having lived each choice. Assume it lived up to its best expectations. Now do the same for the other choices. Then repeat the process envisioning the worst case outcome from each. This exercise may help you recognize that the upsides are similar but the downsides are much different or vice versa.
2. **Identify the specific course you'll take to get to where you'll make your decision.** Don't settle for "I want more input first". Be specific that you will make your choice as soon as you get input from George and Michelle, and you'll ask to have that by tomorrow. If you need specific information, identify exactly what it is, how you plan to get it, and by when. If the information you want is not reasonably attainable, get over it. Flip a coin if you have to, but don't wait if you don't know what you're waiting for. Any decision really is often better than no decision.
3. **Trust your gut.** Despite the objectivity called for in point 2, instinct has its place. Our culture likes to objectify and systematize everything, and we should do that whenever possible. But experience creates pathways through our brains that we can't always clearly identify and articulate. There's a reason for the stereotype that links wisdom with age and experience. But we have to learn the difference between mining our wisdom and drowning in emotional fears, stubbornness, ego, and a desire to stay within our comfort zone. Trust your gut to make a decision, but be careful about using your gut as an excuse to procrastinate.
4. **Know the impact of not making a decision.** When does the decision actually need to be made? Consider tangible impacts of delay like missed opportunities, but also intangibles like your own reputation as a decision maker and other team members' anxieties about the uncertainty. Productivity suffers when people feel insecure.
5. **Be aware of the state of your own being.** Are you tired, stressed, not at your best? If that's your constant state then you have issues to address beyond this decision. But if a good night's sleep or a workout would refresh you and the decision can wait, let it.
6. **Expect to make some mistakes.** If you never err, you're not pushing yourself to the edges of your potential. It's OK – you're more resilient than you think. Take risks, make mistakes, learn and grow. That's how you learn not to make mistakes.

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