



The Seven-Step Path to Better Decisions

1. STOP AND THINK

One of the most important steps to better decisions is the oldest advice in the world: think ahead. To do so it's necessary to first stop the momentum of events long enough to permit calm analysis. This may require discipline, but it is a powerful tonic against poor choices.

The well-worn formula to count to 10 when angry and to a hundred when very angry is 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 teach our children to look both ways before they cross the street, we can and should instill the habit of looking ahead before they make any decision.

Stopping to think provides several benefits. It prevents rash decisions. It prepares us for more thoughtful discernment. And it can allow us to mobilize our discipline.

2. CLARIFY GOALS

Before you choose, clarify your short- and long-term aims. 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 our 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.

To determine the facts, first resolve what you know and, then, what you need to know. 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.
- Consider the basis of the supposed facts. If the person giving you the information says he or she personally heard or saw something, evaluate that person in terms of honesty, accuracy and memory.
- Remember that assumptions, gossip and hearsay are not the same as facts.
- Consider all perspectives, but be careful to consider whether the source of the information has values different than yours or has a personal interest that could affect perception of the facts.

- Where possible seek out the opinions of people whose judgment and character you respect, but be careful to distinguish the well-grounded opinions of well-informed people from casual speculation, conjecture and guesswork.
- Finally, evaluate the information you have in terms of completeness and reliability so you have a sense of the certainty and fallibility of your decisions.

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

Two techniques help reveal the potential consequences.

- "Pillar-ize" your options. Filter your choices through each of the Six Pillars of Character: 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 the major stakeholders. Identify whom the decision will help and hurt.

6. CHOOSE

It's time to make your decision. If the choice is not immediately clear, see if any of the following strategies help:

- Talk 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 the person you know or know of (in real life or fiction) who has the strongest character and best ethical judgment. Then ask yourself: what would that person do in your situation? Think of that person as your decision-making role model and try to behave the way he or she would. Many Christians wear a small bracelet with the letters WWJD standing for the question "What would Jesus do?" Whether you are Christian or not, the idea of referencing a role model can be a useful one. You could translate the question into: "What would God want me to do?" "What would Buddha or Mother Teresa do?" "What would Gandhi do?" "What would the most virtuous person in the world do?"
- What would you do if you were 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.
- Golden Rule: do unto to others as you would have them do unto you. The Golden Rule is one of the oldest and best guides to ethical decision-making. If we treat people the way we want to be treated we are likely to live up to the Six Pillars of Character. We don't want to be lied to or have promises broken, so we should be honest and keep our promises to others. We want others to treat us with respect, so we should treat others respectfully.

7. MONITOR AND MODIFY

Since most hard decisions use imperfect information and "best effort" predictions, some of them will inevitably be wrong. Ethical decision-makers monitor the effects of their choices. If they are not producing the intended results or are causing additional unintended and undesirable results, they re-assess the situation and make new decisions.

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