

Strategies for Making Tough Decisions

There are times we arrive at a fork in the road without our GPS. We are left to the mercy of our instincts, or to unfamiliar methods that can help us navigate through unknown terrain. Here are a handful that are time-tested and often on target, at least for some decision-makers and some business situations, at least some of the time.

Declare Victory

There's something to be said for declaring victory and moving on. Whether it is in regards to a public policy or a business decision, a communications strategy or a plan implementation, one approach is to keep at it, relentlessly and endlessly, until every ounce is squeezed out of defeat and victory is unassailably yours. Often, however, that comes at a cost. It may be too much time consumed or money spent, too much attention diverted or collegiality destroyed. A better option may be taking a healthy slice of achievement and defining it as success, even if it is short of 100% perfect, and going on to what's next – and being content (perhaps even pleased) with what was accomplished.

Best Left Unsent

You're not at all happy with a decision made or action taken by a client or collaborator. And you're going to let them know, in no uncertain terms, precisely how displeased you are. Or maybe you shouldn't. Here's one way to find out. First, separate your decision to spell it out from your decision to send. Make it a two-step process. Next, write it out (or type it out). Do so with every ounce of passion you have. Let it all pour out. See the sparks fly from your fingertips.

Then take a step (or two or three) back, and read it as dispassionately as possible, taking deep breathes along the way. Now it's time to decide whether or not to send. You'd be surprised how often the exercise of putting your dismay into words is sufficient to let the moment pass and prevent unnecessary damage from being done. You have, as mom used to say, gotten it out of your system. Crumpling up the page (or hitting "Delete") becomes a thoughtful act, a reasoned and intentional conclusion.

Search for Silver Linings

It's not exactly turning the other cheek, but it's close. If a degree of harm befalls your business due to a professional associate or business client, determine to the best of your ability whether the motivation was intentional or inadvertent. Then, and only then, act accordingly. If it is unclear or unknowable, explore if there might be a silver lining - even amidst an undesirable outcome. Often, there is - or can be. Next, decide whether you will seize on it or ignore it. There's likely a rationale to go either way. One path, however, is more likely to slam the door shut, the other more likely to preserve possibilities. Looking forward rather than looking backward may guide you in reaching a decision on whether or not to let it go.

Supply Closet Roulette

Surprisingly, the answer to virtually any business dilemma may just be sitting in your cleaning supply cabinet. Take your cue from the labels on the household products filling the shelf. They'll tell you what to do. Shout. Resolve. Kaboom. Talk about a range of options; the product names suggest any number of tactics. Pledge. S.O.S. Finish. Survey the labels as you ruminate on a course of action. Yes, it is somewhat short of scientific. But no one needs to know just how unconventional your approach really was. Anyway, the label was probably only reinforcing a step you were already prepared to take.

One last alternative. If you are still uncertain or unconvinced, and none of these approaches work for you, rest assured that the answer is always just a coin flip away.