

AN OXYMORON?

by Claudette (Boyd) Coombs

We are bombarded daily by conflicts, choices and sometimes overwhelming decisions. Making the best choice in any situation isn't always easy because each decision can have its own set of criteria. Is it the most convenient? morally the right thing? the least disruptive? the most helpful? realistic and manageable? and the list continues. Some decisions are much more difficult to make than others, require greater investigation, and have more serious consequences. Given the time and skills we can improve our decision-making efficiency whatever the dilemma, the surrounding atmosphere and resources, or the magnitude of the consequences.

We may anxiously procrastinate giving the final word for reasons such as: confusing what we feel and what we know or believe; frequent demands; fear of failure or causing harm; lack of clearly defined absolutes or an understanding of what is "best"; ever changing rules; uncertainty of the outcome; and the negative potential.

Where Do I Begin?

When we consider a process framework for decision making, our turmoil can be significantly reduced. However, our attitude is key in determining the amount of distress we experience as a result of the decision-making process. We are often helpless to control many of the situations in which we find ourselves having to make difficult decisions, and the consequences may be undesirable no matter what steps we take. By the time we enter the process these are the fixed components. Consider the equation: SITUATION + REACTION = CONSEQUENCES. The situation requires an action or choice. The choice brings with it a set of consequences. Like a flow chart, one follows the other but there are different pathways available. Our role is to find the path that is best suited to our current need and will lead to the optimum consequences. When making complex or difficult decisions, take the time (even a few minutes helps) to work through the following steps.

Steps to Making the "Right" Decision for Me

1. Clearly define the issue. Don't confuse it with a variety of other issues, or bring unnecessary complications into the picture.
2. Identify your most important criteria in making the final decision. It could be financial, emotional, time, convenience or something unique to you.
3. List all the options that you and your family or friends can imagine. Give this whatever time you have. You might be surprised at the ideas you can generate.
4. Explore each option. What are its costs and consequences? Can you live with them?
5. Limit your list. Select the top suggestions or eliminate those with costs or consequences which you cannot accept.
6. Use your selection criteria to make the final decision. Announce it. Take action.
7. As soon as it is appropriate, review your decision. Did it work out? Can it be modified and improved? How? Now you're in the loop return to step # 1 and continue.

With hindsight, if the decision was the best for you congratulations! If not, allow yourself to move on. You did everything within reason to make the "best" choice.

Points to Remember

- Separate emotions and intellect. Feelings often cloud rational decisions and facts alone can present a "heartless" choice. Take both into consideration.
- Use creativity (not limited to your own) to develop a list of possible reactions to the situation.
- Accept that we made the best decision we were able to (given our knowledge, resources, support) at the time.

- Acknowledge that "I am not perfect". We all know that but where do we actually allow ourselves to make mistakes?
- Hold no regrets. Asking "what if?" tends to bring mistrust of our own judgement and leads to futile blame.
- Avoid stalling your decision-making process by pre-judging your ability to make "good" decisions.
- Life goes on. Accept that as a fact! You can rest assured that there will quickly be new opportunities to make decisions and there will be ways to minimize damage from old decisions. It is not helpful to remain stuck on past choices.

Our internal conflict with decision making can result from our need to make sense of the world, or to expect that if we make the right decisions then bad things won't happen to us. Unfortunately, there are times when both of those premises are impossible. We know that life is not, and will not be, that simple, no matter how much we wish it to be. Instead, we must function in the environment in which we live and use the resources available to us to make our own sense of our world.

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