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It's Your Choice: Decision Making and Goal Setting

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Real-life problems, be they personal or business, are often easier to solve if you have a good understanding of your goals and values in life. This publication will help you outline your goals and learn to make choices that best fit these goals.

Americans are of more than one mind about a great many things. There are those who like football and those who do not. There are devotees of classical music and those who prefer country and western. Certain folks get thrilled about stamp collecting; others are bored. "Different strokes for different folks," we say. That's why paint companies make many shades of paint. About most things you will get a great variety of answers, depending upon which person you question.

But most of us can agree on one thing: there is too little time and too much to be done. Practically everyone feels overloaded, rushed, cramped for time and therefore forced to live in a way they regard as less than ideal. And most would also agree there isn't much we can do about it. To live today, they would say, is to be out of space, out of breath, out of time and out of options.

Undeniably, these conditions are descriptive of the lives of vast numbers, but it only takes a single exception to disprove a rule. Some people are terribly stressed and pressured. At the same time, there are people with homes, jobs and families who manage on 24 hours day to live lives of contentment and meaning. This proves that life in the 21st Century does not have to

be the kind of rat race we so commonly make of it.

Some people have learned how to manage their time, money, energy and talent so they can spend it for the things they believe to be important. They don't find themselves hassled and frustrated most of the time. Instead, they feel fulfilled and content. Their resources are being directed toward those things they value most, and they have reason to feel good about life.

How to avoid the rat race of life

Establish your personal priorities, and "deal off the top of the deck" to provide time for those things that come first. We have to work, we have to have some sleep, and we have to devote a certain amount of time to self-care. In developing a time budget, these are the kinds of things that for most of us occupy an irreducible number of hours per week.

It is in the second and third level of time priorities that trouble often arises. After having taken care of the basics, we aren't able to make good decisions about what properly comes next. Of course, nothing properly comes next except what one chooses to place next. The choice is truly yours. However, if the choices you have made do not make you feel happy or fulfilled,

but instead leave you feeling all mixed up, miserable and stressed out, it seems obvious they were not the right choices for you at that time in your life.

Determine what is important, as opposed to what is merely urgent. Some things have all kinds of lights, bells and sirens which grab our attention and just will not permit us to ignore them. Other things may not be creating any ruckus or making any demands upon us, but may be much more worthy of the investment of some of our time.

It is necessary to get a little philosophical and consider the seemingly trite and yet highly important notion that saying yes and saying no are, in a sense, one and the same thing. That is, in order to say yes to one thing, we have to say no to certain other things. Conversely, by saying no to certain suggestions, we are able to say yes to other things.

There are limits as to how much time, energy, money and moral support we have available to give. We must carefully guard against the tendency to spend all that we have on second-rate issues, with nothing left for more important things that may come along.

Life demands that we make some commitments, and good people certainly should be involved in worthy causes. But we want to

be sure we are involved in things which matter deeply to us, and that we have not said yes to some lesser concerns, leaving us unable to say yes to another thing that we value a great deal.

What is it we wish to accomplish in our life? What values do we wish our life to stand for? What are the major goals or objectives we have for the immediate future, and what are our long-range objectives? Once these are known, it is then possible to determine whether a certain action makes sense, or whether that action creates cognitive dissonance by working against that which we believe. Steps taken in the direction of our goal create harmony, while steps taken away from our goal create dissonance. (Cognitive dissonance is what we feel when we are doing or saying something we know to be wrong, or when our actions do not agree with our beliefs.)

Goal-setting comes into play in the very first step of decision-making. The first step is to state your goal in clear, specific, unambiguous terms so there can be no mistake regarding your intentions. What is the most important thing in your life? Having made such a decision, one can then formulate a goal that is supportive of that dominant value. If the most important thing in my life was my car, it would then make sense for me to have as a goal a program of refurbishing it and dressing it up in various ways. It would make no sense for me to determine my car was my chief value and then set a number of different goals, none of which had anything to do with the car.

But often people claim something as their most important value—their family or home—yet they form no goals nor do they take any actions that would lend credence to the idea that they value that thing. All their energies are devoted to fishing or golf or to various other hobbies, activities or pursuits which bear no relationship at all to their stated major values. Such persons have never sat down for a decision-making ses-

sion with themselves, and they do not know what their real values are. They *think* their family is their dominant value, but it really isn't, or they would behave differently than they do.

It is possible for us to fool ourselves and others. But our true values, sooner or later, can be understood if we observe and evaluate our actions. Our actions will almost always be in the direction of our beliefs and true values. When there is disagreement between our words and our actions, believe the actions and discount the words.

The Decision-Making Process—The “Solve” Approach

This is a five-step problem-solving approach applicable to a large majority of real-life situations—both personal and business. The outline is based on the use of the acronym S-O-L-V-E, as follows:

S = State the problem in precise language

O = Outline your usual response

L = List your alternatives and their consequences

V = Vitalize the concept by

a) selecting an alternative

b) formulating a plan of action

c) implementing the plan

E = Evaluate the success of your choice. If this choice has not produced satisfactory results, go back to step 4 (V, part a) and select a different alternative.

State the problem in precise language

Before we can state the problem, we must determine what the problem really is, and be reasonably sure we are not merely stating what we believe it to be. There are times when it is not possible to tell whether we have hit upon the true cause or are merely acting upon our beliefs or feelings. In those cases we have to go ahead and act as though we really know. If the chosen solution doesn't work, it could be because we had not chosen the true cause of the problem, or because we had the true cause but

the wrong solution. There is an incapable amount of trial-and-error that has to go on, because life does not always lend itself to crystal clear choices.

With machines it is usually possible to get results in a matter of minutes that tell us if we have made a proper choice. In real life, it sometimes takes months or even years before we can get enough feedback to be sure we made the right choice. Therefore it becomes even more important for us to study things carefully, to improve the chances of our making the right choice.

After we have determined what the problem is, we still have to put it into words so it can be clearly understood, such as, “The reason our relationship is not working satisfactorily is because I am a poor listener,” or “Our marriage is in trouble because you and I have never reached an understanding in terms of our marriage role expectations.” Stating the problem tells you pretty clearly what the needed plan of action (a later step in this process) will have to be.

Outline your usual response

There is a good chance you have encountered your current problem at some other time in your life. It may be that you already have a response prepared. However, the fact that you are once again having this same problem should be sufficient evidence to indicate that your usual response has not been effective in solving the problem. If your usual response when you and your spouse have had disagreements has been to shout and throw things, the fact you are once again having the same problem indicates the previous solution has not worked for a long-term cure, and something else will have to be tried.

If Johnny continues to get bad grades in school, despite your offer to pay him a hundred dollars for every A on his next report card, it may be that motivation or desire for better grades is not the problem. Maybe he can't see, or maybe he can't read, or maybe it is something

else entirely. If you still have the problem, it is obvious your previous solution was ineffective.

List your Alternatives and their Consequences

Sometimes we simply do not see that we have alternatives. People make the statement, “I had no other choice” or “You leave me with no other choice than to...” To truly have no other choice happens very rarely in life. Practically always we do have at least one other choice and sometimes dozens of other choices as to how we can deal with a certain situation.

Often we are unable to see our other options. No one person is likely to see all possible angles. Try having a group of people brainstorm the issue with you. Remember to rule out from your brainstorming list the options you have previously tried and found ineffective.

List all the possible alternatives, then look carefully at each of these alternatives and ask yourself what the probable results or effects would be if you were to select that alternative and act upon it. There will always be some consequences which we cannot foretell, but we must at least be prepared to deal with the known and predictable results of taking a certain action.

When you can see the full range of probable consequences, you will be in a better position to know which option you would want to choose—one that has consequences you can live with. One way to kill the weeds

in your lawn is to treat the entire area with a soil sterilizing agent, but the consequence of that is that every living thing in your yard, including the weeds, will be killed. If that is a consequence you are not prepared to live with, you will have to battle the weeds on a different level, choosing some other solution to your problem.

Vitalize the Concept by

a) Selecting an Alternative

With the full list of possible courses of action laid before you, along with the probable or most predictable consequences of each one, it becomes simpler to determine which alternative to choose. Give it the old college try, knowing that, if this particular choice proves not to be the best, there are a number of other things you can try.

b) Formulating a Plan of Action

Now your task is to develop a plan of action based upon the choice you have just made. This plan of action need not be worked out down to the finest details, but it needs to have a strong outline of what to do first, and what next, and what to do in the third place. The nature of certain objectives may be that they will naturally run their course and come to fruition in three definite phases. Other choices will require a series of 5 or 6 or more steps to carry them through to a point of completion. As a part of the preliminary planning, you will have determined the length of your trial period, or how long you are going to keep on following your

plan before you stop to see if it is producing the results you had expected.

c) Implementing the Plan

Having chosen what to do and having developed a plan by which your decision can be implemented, you now have to put the plan into motion, making every effort to see if it will produce the results you have foretold. First you plan your work, then you work your plan.

Evaluate the Success of Your Choice

When your trial period comes to an end, whether it be 30, 60 or 90 days, you then must ask “to what degree did this choice lead toward a satisfactory solution?” You will need to have firmly in mind some criteria for judging success so you can make a fair evaluation of each solution you try. There may not be any solution which will give you 100 percent of what you want, so it may be necessary to decide what kind of results are “close enough.”

Remember, to be fair you have to measure each different solution you try by the same yardstick. If you feel dissatisfied by the results of the first alternative you put to the test, by all means don’t hesitate to set it aside and select another alternative for a trial. The law of averages clearly indicates that we should not expect to find the right choice on the first trial when there may be a dozen or so alternative solutions.

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