

Six steps to making difficult decisions

Decisions that could have a long-lasting effect on your life, those nearest to you or your organisation often cause anxiety and sleeplessness but such decision making should not keep you hostage, says Dr Salome van Coller-Peter, executive coach and programme head of the MPhil in Management Coaching programme at the University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB).



Dr Salome van Coller-Peter

Several factors influence our decisions that may make it feel like an almost impossible task. "Past experiences, fear of making a mistake, your age and financial position, your personal beliefs as well as who your decision will affect are all significant factors. They are the reason you spend considerable mental energy and time weighing up the various options, scenarios and outcomes. This can leave you exhausted, confused and even unable to make that all-important decision."

By adapting certain strategies of logical thought and combining these with your intuition, which is much more powerful than you think, you can significantly ease the transition to action.

Six steps

1. She advises to start by viewing the decision as part of your life as a whole. "It is very important not to view your decision in isolation and getting caught up in the moment. Take a step back and see how this decision will impact your or your organisation's current situation and long-term goals so as to come to a basic understanding of not only how this decision will affect the current issue you are dealing with but the future."
2. The second factor to consider is your values. "Values are those things that you deem important in the way you live and work. Life will be much simpler when you acknowledge your values when you plan and make decisions. They determine your priorities, give you peace, reinforce who you are and measure whether your life is turning out the way you want it to."

However, she says it is important not to try to live someone else's life and follow his or her way of thinking. "Make sure you include your intuition or inner-voice in your decision-making and you will be far happier with the outcome than when you rely only on logical thought which is often influenced more by the world around you than you realise."

3. The third step is using what she calls the 'decision matrix analysis'. This involves identifying all the important aspects of the decision and then evaluating each on merit. Suppose you want to buy a new house, which will satisfy the needs of all the members of your family in terms of space and location while also being affordable. With several such houses available, the question is which one to choose. The approach would then be to create a document with in the first column the properties available and in the second, the criteria they have to conform to. Give scores of from 1-3, with 1 being the least suitable and 3 the most suitable to your needs. Then multiply the score with the relative importance of each factor and arrive at a total for each option. The house that scores the highest will, in all probability, be the best choice in terms of your needs.
4. The fourth step is gaining knowledge, by researching how other people have dealt with and had been affected by a similar situation. "It is sometimes comforting to know that someone else also arrived at the same crossroads as you have and to see how they have responded to the situation.

"However, it's important to remember that although the problem might seem similar, circumstances vary greatly from one person to the next and that what worked for one does not necessarily work for the next person. So rather see it as an information-gathering exercise where you gain knowledge, understanding and insight which you can then interpret to fit your unique situation, values and situation."

5. Now you have the opportunity to make a list of your options and then to discuss these with your partner, family or those in your life or organisation that will be affected by the decision. "Their suggestions might offer some clear insight as well as alternatives that you might not have considered."
6. Once you have included the feedback and suggestions, evaluate each option and take the all-important final step: make a decision - and stick to it.

"After making a decision many people experience a variety of reactions. These can range from relief and excitement to regret and disappointment. The key is to understand these emotions as they will either be a major barrier or catalyst when next you're faced with a difficult decision," concludes van Coller-Peter.

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