

# DECISION MAKING FOR LIFE AND WORK

BY LETTIE BOGGS, CEO  
COLBI

We all make decisions every day. We decide what to wear, where we will go, how we will spend our time – it seems the decisions never cease. Most of us don't struggle with the everyday decisions. We know how long it takes to get ready and when we must wake up to be out the door on time. We have been doing it all our lives.

But some decisions are more important than others. Some require us to exercise good judgement or a bit of discretion. Some have big impact. They may involve a move or job change. Some decisions affect our wellbeing or that of those close to us. And sometimes they may even involve a moral issue or revealing wrongdoing.

The ability to make good decisions directly affects your quality of life and that of those close to you, as well as your work and your career. Decision making is something you can learn to do or to improve in your life.

Decision making is an essential job skill. On more than one occasion I have heard a school administrator say something like, "If I could only hire for good decision making ability." It is the decisions you make in the heat of the moment or in the midst of a crisis, when it is all on you, that may turn out to be the most important or most public ones.

On a Monday morning when I was working at a school district, we got a call that one of our Assistant Principals would not be in – because he was in jail. He had been arrested for drunk and disorderly conduct and obscene activity on a public pier. Well, there were a series of decisions and choices that led to that problem! And for him one problem led to another and then another, as you can imagine.

When I was Vice President at a university, the President once wisely advised me, "Remember, you are never not the Vice President." With the role came a link to the university that would not go away even when I was on vacation or on my own time. Even when just out with friends, it was appropriate to always conduct myself in a manner that would reflect well on the school.

It is much easier to do this if you aren't doing anything you would be ashamed of, if your life could be an open book. Some of you may be ok with that, others may say, "No way! What I do on my own time is my business." That is true, until it isn't. There are some decisions that affect multiple areas of your life.

Science tells us that a very specific part of the brain is involved in what we call long-term thinking. This is the type of thinking that considers implications and future outcomes of particular behaviors. This part of the brain is not fully developed in young men until about age 25. I think this is one reason that as we were raising our boys and at times wanted to say, "What were you thinking?!?!?" I realized there was probably very little thinking involved. And kids will do things in groups that they might never do on their own. This is why your parents worried so much about who your friends were. And you, as parents, do the same.

By the time you are employed you will be expected to exercise a socially acceptable level of good decision making in your life and in your work. And if you get good at it, you will be more employable and promotable.

## **THE VALUE OF HABITS AND PATTERNS**

One of the ways that we instill good decision making is to establish good habits and patterns in our life that serve to help us take better care of ourselves and to get through routine things without having to decide every little thing, every day.

For instance, if you have put an exercise regimen in your life, as it becomes routine it is just what you do, and life seems out of whack when you don't do it. Good eating habits, personal health and hygiene, and an adequate sleep routine all help to make you healthier, and your life just works better.

When things go wrong or we are under stress, we rely on routines to pace us through our life. It is the stress times when good patterns come to the rescue and see us through. Most moms have found that when they are tired, hungry, and under stress, they hear their mom's voice come out of their mouth! That is because she trained you on how to be a mom when she was being yours. Count your blessings if she was a good mom. But if she wasn't, that doesn't mean you can't replace that training with better habits and examples for your children. It is difficult, though, and you will need to be intentional. All of us should watch out when we are tired, hungry, and under stress. This is not when we are in our best decision-making mode!

If we have established negative or self-destructive patterns in our lives, they will sabotage us during times of stress. Negative patterns can be broken, though. They can be replaced with new, more beneficial habits and patterns. You have to want to change them, and most of us need positive support to do this.

Figure out who you want to be, and begin to make it happen.

## **THE PAUSE**

It can be a very good pattern to develop a times when you pause from your life and do an assess where you're at and how you're doing. Twice a year worked for me., Some people do this quarterly. It is good to take stock of where you are with respect to your life goals. What do you want to change or do differently? Are there any goals you want to achieve that just seem out of reach?

When you have big goals, there are usually multiple steps to achieving them. If you just have the big goal and never break it down into "the next thing I need to do" then you will probably just dream about it and never get there.

Think about what you would need to do to get a step closer to your goal. Then look at what you

need to do in the next year, the next three years, the next five years. By developing immediate and mid-range goals you can work toward your long-range goal in achievable increments.

For instance, if you wanted a certain job you would need to consider the requirements and skills to get that position. Let's say you needed a certain degree and a number of years of experience in a certain type of work.

Step one might be to get your transcripts in order and figure out what it would take to meet the educational requirements. Also, in the short-range steps would be to research viable school options that would fit your schedule while you work.

Then the next steps would include enrolling and attending school. You would also need to think about how you would pay for it, and what family arrangements might need to be made to enable you to do the work.

You would also have to get employed in the right field to get the right experience as an additional step.

Stopping the day to day to get alone and think it through allows you to consider how to get there and then to put together a plan. Having the pattern of doing a check-in with yourself several times a year allows you to assess how you are doing. You may need to get back on track, or as you go through the process, you may want to modify your goals a bit. It may also be helpful to have someone you share the goals with who can help you be accountable and stay on track.

Your timeline may have been too aggressive, or you may have had other pressures in life that didn't allow you to progress as you first thought you could. Rearrange your plans. Try again. They're yours. You can give yourself permission to change them.

It is typical for over half of college students to change their major before they finish their schooling. Why? Because as they are exposed to more and more information, they find there are other majors that they are more interested in or that they think are a better match for their temperament, personality, and energy levels. It is okay to change. That isn't failure. It's growth.

One very sad conversation I once had was with a friend who had spent a lot of years and a small fortune on a specialized medical degree only to find that he hated the work. He felt very trapped. He finally decided that he would change fields, but he would wait until his children were older and his family was in a different position before he would take on making the change. Just knowing he would eventually change gave him some peace to live in the current work and pay off his loans.

Many people change careers during their lifetime. They often take the body of knowledge and experience that they have and pivot to something related but different, a new challenge. This can be invigorating. It isn't necessary to feel that you are stuck and can never change. Stop and think about it. And set your calendar to follow up with yourself in 3 or 6 months to see how you are doing.

# TOOLS FOR DECISION MAKING

There are methods that may help you consider your situation and your options when making an important decision. Let's look at some of them.

## Pros & Cons

This is an exercise of listing the positives and negatives about various options. The list is able to help you clarify and see what the considerations really are.

You would create a +/- list for each of the options you are considering.

Good things about doing this...	Negative things about doing this...
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
	4.
	5.

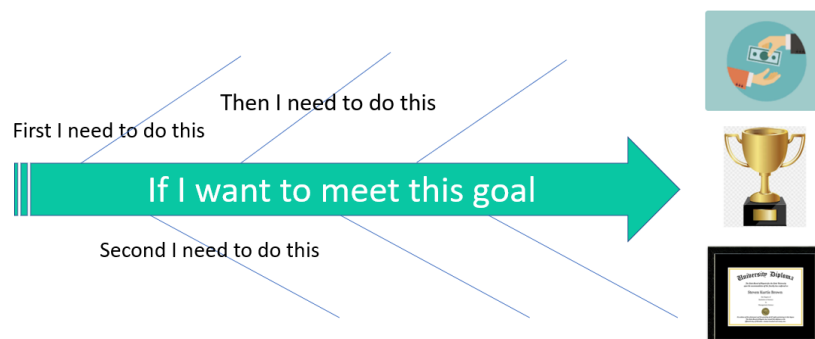
Not all of the +'s and -'s carry the same weight. For instance, if one of the negatives was that it was illegal, that should probably trump all other considerations. Your decision should probably be no, even if you had 15 positives!

The list is able to help you clarify and see what the considerations really are.

## Dependency Analysis

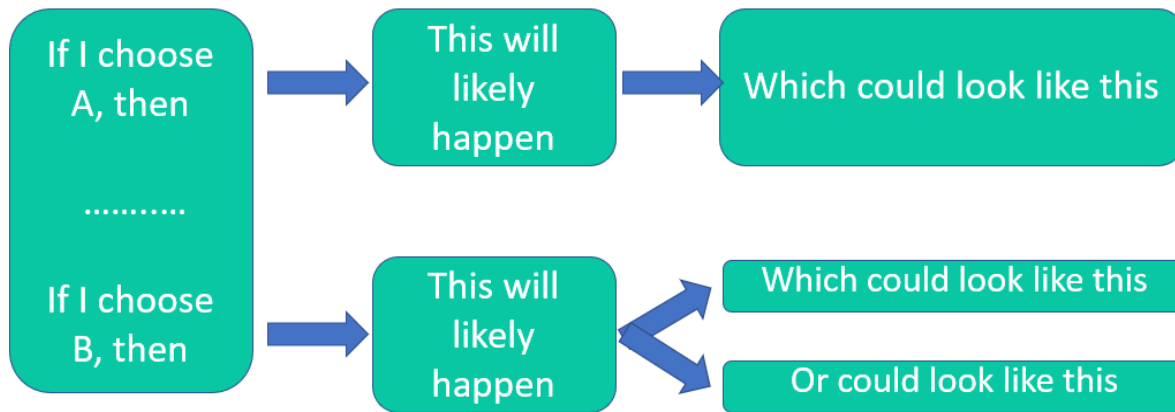
This tool provides a timeline of dependent events. When you can't do the second thing until the first thing is accomplished, this can help.

You are standing at the left end of the arrow. You put your goal at the right end. Then you fill in the steps to get to the goal that you came up with during your contemplation time. There can be two or three things listed on each step line, and you can add dates or durations of time between the steps.



## If...Then Analysis

This is a bit more involved, but can be very clarifying. Lay out your options. Then think about what will likely occur if you choose one option compared to another. Lastly, think about what each outcome would lead to. It is a lot like a Yes/No diagram to help you reach a conclusion.



It is just a tool to help you with your analysis, and the more you know as you move through your decision, the more likely you will need to update your possible outcomes.

Experienced decision makers do these types of analysis, but often in their head and sometimes even subconsciously. This is why experience makes people seem like they do things intuitively. It is much easier to determine what the outcomes might be if you have done something similar in the past. An experienced person may even have thought about things that occurred in their life and already determined how they would do them differently when the opportunities came again. Experience can be a great teacher if you make time for reflection every so often.

## **MAINTAIN THE MARGINS**



Imagine you are driving down the fast lane, perhaps going a bit faster than the limit, and suddenly the shoulder is gone and you are driving 18 inches from a concrete wall? You may mentally cope with that, until something goes wrong. Someone pulls in front of you going slower than you and you realize that you have no margin for error. There isn't room to slow down and there is no shoulder to pull into if you don't slow down before you get to that car.

We often live our lives filling up the margins, the way the highway department filled up that shoulder, and then don't have room for the unexpected. This is important to recognize as you set goals and decide what you will and won't include in your life.

You can use your calendar to help set a time margin in your life. Leave time between appointments to gather your thoughts and prepare for the next meeting, and then get there on time. Block off time for your own work so that you are prepared and able to accomplish your goals. Calendar time for yourself, including that important refecton time at several points in the year.

I remember one time when my husband was ill and couldn't work or help much. I worked two 30 hour a week jobs to make ends meet. And we had three growing boys to manage. It was tough, and I knew I didn't have any margin. Although I wouldn't have said it that way. When you are in those times, give yourself some grace. Let go of the unnecessary and do the important stuff. Figure out if there is a way to get yourself to a different place. I remember saying to myself, "This too shall pass." Sometimes that is the best you can do in the moment. But then over time, look for the opportunities to do life differently. I lost one of those two jobs so went looking for a new job. I found a new full-time opportunity that gave me better pay, better hours, and was close to home. And, I began my career in school business.

Grab a journal and spend some time thinking about your life and your goals. Use whatever tools might help you make those tough decisions.

Your adventure awaits you...