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Going for the Go Point

By Michael Useem

As a professor and director of the leadership center at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, I have spent more than a decade studying and interacting with influential men and women at the center of events, and I have become convinced that one of the most unexplored and underdeveloped aspects of leadership is the art and science of decision-making: *art* because decision-making depends upon hunches and intuition; *science* because it also needs to be disciplined and analytical.

We all want to make the best possible decisions, for ourselves and on behalf of others. That is obvious. Good decisions increase our assets, boost our careers, burnish our reputations. In sports, natural talent can carry a quarterback to the National Football League, but good decision making—when to pass and when to pull the ball down and run for the sidelines—determines who starts and who watches from the bench. In a corporate setting, the ability to make clear, crisp, timely decisions can label us a go-to person, the individual that others rely upon to start a program or introduce a product.

Though no one wants to make bad decisions, plenty of us do, every day, in sometimes spectacular ways. We introduce an Edsel; we take the wrong job or hire an incompetent person for a critical post. Unforced errors spoil tennis victories and shared dreams; smart plays win games and build futures. The question is: how best to prevent the unforced errors and take the right shots.

In my own classroom, I directly witness the tangible difference between good and bad decisions when I ask MBA students and mid-career managers to divide into teams, then build an airline through a computer simulation based on the real experience of a 1980's start-up phenom, People Express. The simulated experience requires participants to make just a handful of decisions—how many aircraft to acquire, what price to charge, how many

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employees to hire—over nine years, yet the cumulative effect of those few decisions is vast. When teams make too many poor decisions, they find themselves face to face with an abrupt collapse, much as the real People Express experienced. When their decisions are made well, they can build an airline worth hundreds of million of dollars. The best teams have managed to create an enterprise with a market value well over a billion dollars. Since the sole difference between prosperity and insolvency was decision quality, the results of good choices—and bad ones—become starkly evident.

Deciding for More Than Ourselves

For most of us, the decision-making equipment is generally pretty sound, at least in broad terms. We do not follow the lead lemming over a cliff. We cannot be fooled into thinking that a 99-cent lure is a meal. Nor do we try to catch car fenders with our teeth, although it was not a dog who launched New Coke.

Where decisions are concerned, though, there are a few built-in bugs—design flaws of the mind—that can have big consequences. People are clinically over-optimistic, for instance, assigning zero probability to events that are merely unlikely, such as a massive iceberg in the path of a really big ship, or the rupturing of a levee in the aftermath of a Category Four hurricane. We see “patterns” in the random movements of stocks the way our ancestors saw bears and hunters in the scatter-plot of the night sky. We make choices that justify our past choices and then look for data to support them. Not only do we make these errors, we make them reliably. But that is the good news. Predictable errors are preventable errors.

Of particular concern are *decisions that have consequences for others*, those moments when an individual with responsibility faces a discrete, tangible, and realistic opportunity to commit enterprise resources to one course or another on behalf of collective objectives, or alternatively to make no commitment at all, a “non-decision” that is also a choice whether consciously recognized or not. These are the moments when the stakes are highest and when it is most critical to reach the right decisions.

How you jump at that moment can make a vast difference, not only for yourself but also for all around you.

Going for the Go Point

Ultimately, every decision comes down to a *go point*—that decisive moment when the essential information has been gathered, the pros and cons are weighed, and the time has come to get off the fence. The “go point” is not always a matter of getting to “yes.” If the managers at Morton Thiokol had gotten to *no* back in 1986 when they debated whether the O-rings in their booster rockets would work in cold weather, a New Hampshire school teacher and six fellow astronauts on *Challenger* would have most likely launched on a later, warmer mission date. Rather, the go point is that instant when the choice gets made, whether no or yes, and the commitment moves from consideration to action. How you jump at that moment can make a vast difference, not only for yourself but also for all around you.

People “make their own history,” Karl Marx famously observed, yet “they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” True enough. Every decision arguably is to a greater or lesser degree a product of our history, of the culture we exist in, and of other circumstances not wholly of our making. Within those constraints, though, go points present us with the opportunity to shape our own destiny, sometimes dramatically so. In Robert Frost’s well known verse, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.”

At times, our go points can even constitute points of divergence that change the fate of institutions and nations. Would Orlando be anything like it is today without DisneyWorld? What if Al Gore had won in Florida? Or imagine what America and Russia and the planet itself might be like today if Nikita Khrushchev had chosen not to turn back Soviet ships at the height of the Cuban missile crisis.

No wonder authors as divergent as Philip Roth (*The Plot Against America*), Robert Harris (*Fatherland*), and Harry Turtledove (*The Guns of the South*) have found the alternative history such an appealing fiction form. All those what-if's—if Robert E. Lee had won at Gettysburg, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had kept the U.S. neutral in World War II, Lee Harvey Oswald had never pulled the trigger, the 9/11 attackers had been stopped by airport security—remind us how vital reaching the right decision can be, especially when it carries consequences for others.

Urgent Decisions

All decisions entail reaching a go point, but getting there depends upon the nature of the terrain. As with orienteering, the beginning of go-point wisdom is recognizing where you are. Like any continuum, the decision terrain has virtually endless gradations, but many decisions bunch into two big clusters, each imposing a distinct set of demands. The first cluster includes decisions imposed by deadlines not of one's own choosing; the second, decisions without clear deadlines at all.

Many decisions must be taken *now*. When there is no choice but to make a choice, the ticking of the clock concentrates the mind and forces resolution. Imagine that you're facing tennis pro Andy Roddick as he is delivering his serve at better than 150 miles an hour. The ball crosses the net as fast as an Indy racer but is small enough to fit into an Indy tailpipe. But speed is only one factor. Which part of the court is the ball heading toward? And which way is it spinning? Will it bounce high or low, kick left or right? Think of anything else as you are waiting to receive it, let yourself be distracted by the slightest stray thought, and you will never see the ball skid by.

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Bond traders face a similar go point measured in just seconds. Delay an extra tick to make the call, and the price of a bond is out of reach. Jump too soon and you miss a market rally. One bond trader that I interviewed instructed her family never to phone during trading hours since she was incapable of focusing on anything but the tiny, fleeting spreads on the screen in front of her.

Now imagine that you are responsible for a whole floor of bond traders, any of whom can make or lose you millions with a click of the mouse. Orchestrated well, their instant decisions are the stuff of a great quarter; led poorly, their actions can become a company disaster.

Investment banker Rick Rieder arrives at his mid-town Manhattan office by 7 am most days, responsible for fixed-income trading at Lehman Brothers. There, he oversees a vast trading operation, with more than 150 traders betting billions on bond movements every day. So extreme is his day's concentration that on his evening commute home Rieder used to sometimes find himself flummoxed by thruway tollbooths. After twelve hours of total absorption in rapid-fire decision making with fortunes on the table, Rieder had trouble mustering himself to dig out the few coins needed for passage. EZPass, he said, saved the day.

Or try imagining yourself working in a business that supports millisecond-decisions. Created by a consortium of a dozen premier banks, EBS provides more than 2,000 foreign-exchange and precious-metal traders in 40 countries with the technology to trade \$110 billion in foreign currencies every day. The statistics are startling: More than half of the 50,000 daily transactions—averaging \$2 million per trade but some reaching \$100 million—are completed in less than half a second, 95 percent within one second. The typical trade, in fact, requires just 485 milliseconds to complete. In a small fraction of the trades, a black box makes the decision automatically, without human intervention, but most deals still remain the province of people who are having to place huge bets in seconds or less. A big day for a single trader can occasionally entail total deal-making of more than \$5 billion. To service this world of near-instant human decision making, EBS reports a completed transaction to its customers—say, the price of swapping a big batch of dollars for Euros—within 170 milliseconds. In response to one bank's request, the company is working to shave another 20 milliseconds from even that wafer-thin time slice.

These urgent, flick-of-a-switch decisions—the first big cluster—are time-driven, recurrent, and unrelenting. They require an ability to live by the clock, execute rapidly, and remain steadfast under intense stress.

Deliberative Calls

At the other end of the spectrum are decisions with ambiguous deadlines, or even none at all: to alter a career plan, say, or launch a new product, or transform a policy. The go-point cannot be deferred forever, but it can be reached today or put off until tomorrow or put on ice for weeks, even months or years. One rising manager told me that he knew another division at his company was being woefully under-led and was certain he could do a better job. Getting the job, though, meant he had to not only evict a longtime colleague but also master an unfamiliar market. With no cut-off date looming and with hard work and unpleasant confrontations blocking his path, the manager needed six months to finally reach the go-point on this career change.

Absent natural triggers, the situation we are hoping to resolve festers around us until something—often unpleasant—finally forces us to action.

On the surface, these slow-to-emerge decisions seem like the easier ones to make. The results can be just as consequential as clock-driven choices, but there is no heat of the moment to force the action. Instead, time exists to study all the angles, hear from all the stakeholders. As we have all experienced, though, the luxury of consideration also can turn into a trap. Absent natural triggers, the situation we are hoping to resolve festers around us until something—often unpleasant—finally forces us to action.

L. Paul Bremer III, the U.S. administrator in Iraq, faced just such a situation in the spring of 2003 following the ouster of Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. Bremer's ultimate goal was the creation of a constitution that would lead to democratic self-rule for the Iraqi people, but for months upon months, the Iraqi Governing Council found itself unable to agree even on a procedure for drafting the new constitution. Given the turbulent and oft-violent aftermath of Saddam's removal, the lack of agreement came as no surprise, but without a document to build a new government on, there was no way to move toward self-rule. Finally, Bremer created an artificial go-point. On November 15, 2003, he declared that the U.S. would transfer sovereignty to Iraq seven and a half months later, on June 30, 2004. By implication, the quarrelling factions would have to reconcile their differences by then and get on with the task of writing the constitution and deciding how to govern.

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Learning by Witnessing

How does anyone master the art and science of good and timely decisions? One fruitful path is to study the standard pitfalls of decision making—what two researchers have aptly termed “decision traps.” A mound of research, for example, tells us that sunk costs should not stand in the way of clear-headed thinking about the future. Studying the classic tools of good-decision making—what other researchers have termed “smart choices”—is a fertile companion path. Again, numerous studies show that quality information is vital to good

judgment when reaching a go point. Less obviously, research also shows that intuition informed by past experience—basically, educated guesses—can be an equally reliable guide for action, especially when the pressure is on.

A second learning path is to make decisions and then unflinchingly reflect upon them. This method is used to great advantage by the U.S. Marine Corps in preparing its next generation of leadership. During months of intense training in the vast Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, future officers are asked to make hundreds of decisions and then to dissect, parse, and inspect them in after-action reviews. If too many choices are disastrously made, the candidates are washed out. For those that survive, this relentless preparation in making, reviewing, and learning from their decisions prepares officers for the awesome responsibility of leading others into combat.

A third course is to witness or review what others have done in reaching their decisions and then extract what is most useful from them. Why, for example, did Robert E. Lee decide on the eve of July 3, 1863, to order what became known as “Pickett’s Charge”—a desperate race across an open field with Union muskets and cannons blazing from behind a stone wall? Only Lee himself, of course, could have said for sure, but by dissecting his choice, we see the stakes of decision making in profound relief at one of the great turning points of American history.

All three methods have validity. Yet the hundreds of MBA courses that I have taught and the management programs on leadership and decision making I have led have convinced me that one of the most powerful and enduring way to learn decision making is to study what others have done—on location whenever and wherever possible, walking the very decision terrain that others have walked before us—and then to take lessons from that experience for oneself.

I have accompanied groups into the Himalayas as we have tried to understand the choices that led to great conquests and great suffering in the desperately thin air above 20,000 feet. We have studied such moments in management programs that I have undertaken in Argentina and Chile and Brazil, in China, India, and Japan. And in the company of executives from companies such as AstraZeneca, General Mills, and Merrill Lynch, I have walked the very ground Pickett's men charged across, probing how such a consummate field general as Lee could have made such a disastrous call. Along with professionals from a host of U.S. agencies, I have also walked Ground Zero and Mission Control. And always I have found that this hands-on learning drives home the lessons of decision-making most effectively and best arms participants with the necessary principles and tools for making their own decisions.

Experience Counts

Today, Tom Boatner is responsible for sending thousands of firefighters across the U.S. to attack forest and grassland fires, but virtually every choice he makes in the swirl of combating one of nature's most unpredictable and dangerous phenomena traces back to a time more than a quarter century earlier when a raging fire threatened an Alaskan farming community.

“I was filled with adrenalin. I wanted to grab my Pulaski and haul-ass to the nearest smoke and start to cut a line and fight the fire,”



It was June 1977 when Boatner jumped down from the back of a truck, not far from three fast-moving forest fires in an area bordering Delta Junction, a remote hamlet in the shadow of the Alaska Range. The fires had erupted when violent winds from the range swept across slash-pile fires set by local residents, scattering burning embers into nearby forests.

Called in to stop the fires' spread, Boatner and his dozen fellow firefighters arrived near 5 pm with their trademark axe, the Pulaski, at the ready. “We were all incredibly excited and wound up because it was the first fire of the year, and we heard the wind was blowing hard and the fires were really moving,” Boatner told me as he reconstructed events. A darkened sky swirled with dust, smoke, and cinders as the firefighters clambered out of their trucks in the middle of a recently cleared field. Some residents were rushing off in broken-down pickups; others dashed over to help.

“I was filled with adrenalin. I wanted to grab my Pulaski and haul-ass to the nearest smoke and start to cut a line and fight the fire,” Boatner said. Still a college student, just 20 years old, he had worked one prior summer as a firefighter, but he was about to meet a seasoned fire-hand who would change forever his decision-making matrix for evaluating and fighting a wildland blaze.



The fire supervisor was Robert Burritt, all of 29 years old himself but already a veteran of the business. His steady demeanor, Boatner remembers of first seeing him, stood in complete contrast to the eager but inexperienced firefighters rushing around him—and the fires surging around them. “He was very quiet and he was very calm, and he was looking around and he wasn’t saying much,” Boatner recalled. “I just wanted to scream at him and say, ‘Come on, let’s go, we gotta do something!’”

Burritt was witness to the same frenzied scene. He could sense the anxiety flowing around him, but he carried a decision template that pointed to a vastly different response. Rather rush to attack the blaze, the supervisor meticulously extracted the data he felt he needed from the crew and residents, and then methodically planned how best to suppress the blaze.

“Bill,” he instructed one crew leader, “you take your crew to that spiral over there on the hilltop, anchor in, and have your crew start flanking. Scout the fire and call me in fifteen minutes with an update on what’s happening and what we need to catch the fire.” And then to another, “Joe, you take your crew to that fire on the bottom of this field and do the same thing.” And to a third, “Fred, you go tie-in with that [bull]dozer and that volunteer fire department and see where they’re at on that third fire.” After several further instructions to still other crews, Burritt finally gave the nod: “OK, go to work and call me when you have better information!”

Burritt had taken barely fifteen minutes to steady the team, appraise the fire, and plan the attack. By doing so, Boatner remembers, he “had turned this totally chaotic, frenzied group into a very calm, deliberate group of people who all knew the same information about what was going on, what the plan was for everybody, and what their own part was in the plan.” Backed by a good strategy and Burritt’s continued steady guidance, Boatner and his fellow firefighters aggressively fought the blazes through the night and well into the next day. Just twenty-four hours after arriving, they had reduced the inferno to smoldering ash.

For Tom Boatner, it proved an indelible incident. Nearly two decades later, in June 1996, he was back in Alaska, now responsible for operations on what became known as the Miller's Reach Fire, an enormous blaze requiring the deployment of more than 1,500 firefighters and nearly two dozen helicopters and air tankers. During his first hours on the ground, Boatner concluded that it was the most hazardous assignment that he had ever received; the potential for fatalities had never been greater. But harking back to Burritt's behavior years earlier, he remembered, "I needed to transmit to all of the people engaged in the firefight how critical it was to be calm and to be confident and to be very deliberate in what we were doing. It was an incredibly dangerous situation we were in. If we weren't totally on top of our game, people would die."¹

... the image of Robert Burritt coolly making decisions on a hot Alaskan field was never far from Boatner's mind when he faced his own go point.

By the time this fire was brought under control two weeks later, it had destroyed more than 37,000 acres and 350 homes. But thanks to Tom Boatner's go-point methods that had first been shaped by Robert Burritt all those years earlier, his firefighters did stay on top of their game, evacuating more than 3,000 residents with no fatalities or even serious injuries and finally suppressing one of the worst blazes in Alaskan history.

During nearly 30 years of public service, Tom Boatner has led crews into well over 250 wildland fires of virtually every possible description. And during them all, the image of Robert Burritt coolly making decisions on a hot Alaskan field was never far from Boatner's mind when he faced his own go point.

There is a world of education to be had in walking with Tom Boatner over the terrains where he has battled blazes—an education in how decision making can be both urgent *and* deliberative, and one that extends far beyond the rarified work of firefighters. When possible, it is invaluable to put oneself through direct engagement or others' graphic accounts where the action is—where the decisions are taken—and allow one to see events unfold through the eyes of the participants.

Decision Templates: Principles and Tools You Can Use

Robert Burritt arrived on the battlefield with a well-developed decision template, a set of personal concepts for making consequential decisions. That template is what Tom Boatner glimpsed momentarily that first time in Alaska and then embraced forever. Boatner saw Burritt calmly assaying the pandemonium around him and conveying that the plan of attack should come from deliberate decisions, not a flick-of-the-switch, and he made it a life principle.

By looking closely at decisions being made under sometimes extraordinary conditions and by digging out the principles, good and bad, that emerge from such tangible experience, we can begin to build our own decision templates for guiding our own go points.

But a truly useful decision template also needs to reflect the history and culture and predilections of its bearer.

One size does not fit all, anymore in templates than it does in suits or shoes. To be truly useful, a decision template should be generic enough to apply to many situations, yet specific enough to provide real guidance with real-life choices. More than a step-by-step guide to action, the template provides a set of prompts, reminders of what to keep in mind when facing a range of consequential decisions. But a truly useful decision template also needs to reflect the history and culture and predilections of its bearer.

To be most informative and to take root at the deepest level, decision templates need to be accompanied by two special features. First, each of template principles should be rooted in tangible experience, for that often serves as the most enduring and powerful trigger. Years later, Tom Boatner still anchors his own calmness and his determination to rush to judgment in the image of the motionless Robert Burritt among the enveloping chaos. My own experience with hands-on learning as well as volumes of research confirm that principles like these are best retained and recalled when discovered during moments of intense emotion and acute stress. Embedded in experience, they remain unforgettable.

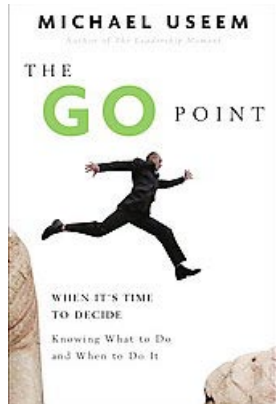
Second, each of the decision principles should also be accompanied by decision tools, those tactical steps that transform ideas into action. Tom Boatner recognized that the *principle* of staying cool and analytic required translation into what he did on the ground. And here he came to appreciate that an unruffled demeanor at a crisis moment calmed others in ways that words could not, a *tool* that helped him convert his mental concept into his actual behavior.

These decision principles and tools, I am convinced, are essential vehicles for translating ideas into action, one of the most challenging features of human behavior, especially in making decisions with consequences for others. Too often, we understand and voice high-minded management concepts such as thinking strategically, then forget to do so when faced with a tangible decision.

Organizational researchers Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton have termed this disconnect between concept and behavior the “knowing–doing gap.” They write that company managers “say so many smart things about how to achieve performance, work so hard, yet are trapped in firms that do so many things they know will undermine performance.” People recurrently “knew what to do, but didn’t do,” and the gap between knowing and doing, they conclude, is “one of the most important and vexing barriers to organizational performance.” I believe that the same barrier applies to reaching a go–point, but I also believe that it can be overcome with an experience–based decision template.

Endnotes

1 Boatner, interview, 2005.



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