

NICK TASLER

DECISION PULSE



HOW TO SUCCEED IN THE
AGE OF UNCERT

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DECISIONS TIE **POTENTIAL TO PERFORMANCE**

INDECISION IS RAMPANT IN TODAY'S ORGANIZATIONS

SOLUTION: TRAIN PEOPLE TO BECOME DECIDERS

INTRODUCTION

THE GRAY KILLER

Our story begins not among the carefully manicured confines of a corporate campus, but on the high seas at the height of the Age of Exploration.

It is June 1773. A stalwart 45-year-old Brit paces the deck of the *HMS Resolution*, a 110-foot Royal Navy sloop sailing the South Pacific between modern-day New Zealand and Tahiti.

Meet Captain James Cook. In five short years, Cook has become one of England's greatest sailors and most competent leaders, as well as one of history's most lauded explorers. By skillfully negotiating the icebergs of the South Pole months earlier, Cook finally convinced the world that a Great Southern Continent did not exist. Even more impressive, he kept his crew in line despite what must have been a very unpopular decision at the time: taking a hard left at idyllic Polynesia and heading for the frigid and female-free region at the bottom of our planet.

Famously even-tempered, Captain Cook is deeply concerned at the moment. Aboard his companion ship, the *HMS Adventure*, two dozen sailors moan in agony below deck. Dark blotches cover their skin. Their gums won't stop bleeding. Sailors watch in horror as long-healed wounds reopen. In modern parlance, the whole scene is a great big floating WTF.

This is not the first time Cook has faced serious trouble. Take the time he inadvertently discovered the Great Barrier Reef—or more accurately, the reef discovered him. Long story short:

- 1 Ship traveling solo makes an unexpected stop on a giant hunk of underwater coral that rips a hole in ship's hull.
- 2 If the ship goes under, dozens of sailors will have to dog-paddle through some of the most shark-infested waters in the world.

- 3 Those who make it to shore will find hostile natives, surprisingly nimble salt-water crocodiles and a veritable *Who's Who* of the world's deadliest snakes and spiders.

All of that, however, wasn't nearly enough to throw Captain Cook off his game. He remained calm throughout the ordeal, making one quick decision after another while directing his crew to repair the ship and free it from the reef in the nick of time. He also made an important mental note: *Next time you plan to circumnavigate the globe, dummy, bring a backup ship.*

So in floats the *HMS Adventure* with its rapidly sickening crew—the unknowing control group for one of the most decisive experiments in 18th century medicine.

SAUERKRAUT AND SALVATION

Life was no picnic for those who chose a career in 18th century seafaring. Cannibals, cannonballs, drowning, starvation and sharks were all part of the job. None of these, however, brought on the sheer terror of the greatest single threat to every sailor's life: scurvy.

They called scurvy the “gray killer,” and it had taken the lives of sailors since the ancient Greeks explored the Mediterranean. During the Age of Exploration, however, from the 15th to the 19th centuries, the gray killer went on a ghastly rampage. In 1763, the British Annual Register tallied up the casualties from its Seven Years' War with France. Of the 184,899 men who served on warships, one out of 150 died in battle. Two out of three died from scurvy.

Back to Captain Cook. Now halfway through his second voyage around the world, Cook and his crew on the *HMS Resolution* are completely free of scurvy—yet the Gray Killer is picking off his sister ship's sailors one by one.

By sailing two identical ships at the exact same time in the exact same waters with randomly selected crew members from the same

British ports, Cook had unintentionally set up a brilliantly controlled experiment in how to defeat scurvy.

The only difference between the two ships was the preferred method of scurvy prevention. At the time, it was known that fresh fruits and vegetables were the best remedy for scurvy. Nobody—including Cook—knew why. Of course, the supply of fresh fruit on your average 18th century vessel was nonexistent. So what to use instead?

Cook had a hunch. Based on his experience and accounts from others, he put the crew of the *HMS Resolution* on a strict diet of sauerkraut and spruce beer—no exceptions. This barely edible concoction worked wonders, because it is loaded with vitamin C, also known as ascorbic (Latin for “anti-scurvy”) acid, the nutrient required to prevent and reverse scurvy.

Tobias Furneaux, the man Cook selected to command the *HMS Adventure*, didn't share Cook's zeal for sauerkraut and spruce beer. Instead, he chose to ignore Cook's recommendations. To Furneaux, leadership was all about maneuvering the sails, reading the stars and preventing mutiny, not worrying about his crew's diet. He was dead wrong, and his crew paid the price.

Where in the world am I going with this, you ask?

How does the Gray Killer connect to you and me and how to succeed in a time of great uncertainty?

Stick with me. It all makes sense.

TODAY'S GLARING DEFICIENCY

I'm starting with a tale about scurvy because the Gray Killer is a perfect metaphor for the deficiency currently plaguing modern America: a lack of directed action, a.k.a. indecision.

Indecision is lethal to success. Indecision threatens entire organizations, kills off the careers of emerging leaders and eager employees. Much like scurvy in the Age of Exploration, indecision is simply accepted as an unavoidable hazard. The cost of doing business, you might say.

In many ways, indecision is scarier than scurvy because it is invisible. No bleeding gums, no oozing sores. Just a slow, quiet fade from promise to chronic disappointment, unrelenting anxiety and finally failure.

Think about it. Can you recall a company or a co-worker that failed due to indecision? Neither can I. Yet there are dozens of examples of those who failed by making a string of bad decisions.

We all possess a deep and universal fear of making bad choices. Bad decisions lead to bad consequences, and nobody wants that. Unfortunately, our perspective on the relative risk of bad decisions versus *no decisions at all* is completely out of whack.

If you're like me, you can easily recall regrettable choices from your past. It's painful to revisit these bad decisions. But it's much more difficult to recall problems we could have solved—and the success we might have achieved—if we had made quicker, more confident decisions instead of waffling, procrastinating and second-guessing.

In truth, chronic indecision is far more damaging than any single bad decision, and it happens far more frequently. Doesn't it seem logical that we should devote more attention toward making better (even if not *perfect*) decisions instead of avoiding making decisions at all?

Here's the good news: indecision is beatable, and this book will show you how to do it.

YOUR TIME TO DECIDE

In the following pages, I will demonstrate how indecision hinders success and fosters failure—killing innovation, corroding morale, trapping teams, shattering dreams and destroying careers.

We will hear from some of the world's leading social scientists, and see true-life examples from managers in the trenches. We'll discuss why some smart young leaders can't get their careers started, and why talented, experienced, well-liked leaders can't escape middle management.



Most frightening of all, we'll see how and why indecision is becoming an epidemic at a time when we desperately need our best and brightest to take decisive, directed action every day.

Fortunately, our story doesn't end there. Just like scurvy, indecision has a very simple cure that has been hiding in plain sight for ages until now (spoiler alert: it's not sauerkraut).

The cure starts with a special breed of people known as Deciders.

They come from all walks of life, from roofers and students to entrepreneurs and executives. Deciders understand the critical importance of directed action. They take it every day, like a vitamin supplement for the soul, and they become successful as a result.

Before we meet the Deciders, we'll examine why decision-making is so important, how it connects potential and performance, and why poor decision-makers can't succeed no matter what.

In Part 2, we'll break down the act of deciding itself, looking at its mechanics to understand why making good decisions is so challenging.

In Part 3, we'll walk through Seven Essential Decisions you need to make to become a Decider, change your life, and start on a path to greater success.

Make the first critical decision by choosing to read on now.



DECISION PULSE

PART ONE

FOUR QUALITIES ALL DECISIVE PEOPLE SHARE

WHY IT IS CRITICAL TO BELIEVE YOUR DECISIONS MATTER

HOW TO BREAK THROUGH THE GRAY CEILING

THE LAWS OF LUCK

BRIDGING POTENTIAL AND PERFORMANCE



MOTIVATED AND CONFIDENT: few would argue that these are universally positive qualities. Take them to an extreme, however, and you quickly get pushy and cocky. (You'll also get uninvited from a lot of parties.)

The other end of the spectrum is just as bad. Err in that direction and you get **LIFELESS** and **MEEK**. In a word: indecisive. Unfortunately, indecision is far more common than pushiness or cockiness in today's world of uncertainty, yet it can be just as isolating for those who exhibit it.

Across all kinds of jobs and industries, there is a certain type of person who sees far more career success than others. This person makes decisions.

Decisions are the practical application of the theoretical concepts of motivation and confidence. Put another way: all talented, competent people have a high potential for success. But potential doesn't mean anything. Potential becomes results only through decisions. These decisions can be about anything. How to spend time, lead projects, assemble a team, improve an organization, live a life.

When decisive people face the myriad options we all confront every day, they don't hesitate. They make a calculated choice and stick with it. Then it's on to the next decision.

So where do these motivated, confident, decisive people come from?

They come from a relatively small group of people who think they can *make things happen*. These people believe their life and career is in their hands, more or less. They are in control, and their actions reflect this conviction.

There is a second, much larger group of people who think *things happen to them*. They adopt what I call a "Forrest Gump" approach to life—floating along like a feather in the wind, waiting to be taken to the next destination, hoping they don't get plastered to a windshield.

More organizations are (and should be) intentionally seeking out employees from the first group, people with a *high core self-evaluation*. This quality is defined by researchers as a person's "fundamental bottom-line evaluation of his or her abilities." To earn a high core self-evaluation diagnosis, individuals must demonstrate four qualities:

SELF-EFFICACY. This is the psychological term for the belief that we can effect change in our lives. It's more than a positive attitude, although the two concepts are closely related. If you have high self-efficacy, you believe you can change a situation through your actions. It's the opposite of shrugging your shoulders and saying "There's nothing I can do about it." People with high self-efficacy are far more successful in virtually every sphere of life, including work.

2 CONTROL. Do you take control of your work, or does it control you? Are you a driver or a passenger? If something goes wrong, do you take responsibility or blame external circumstances? People who exhibit control tend to be highly self-disciplined and understand that there is only one person who determines whether you do something: you.

3 CONFIDENCE. Remember, confidence is faith in your abilities—not narcissism. There is a critical difference. Do you pitch in when teammates need help or bad-mouth co-workers you see as threats? Are you receptive to feedback, or do you get defensive about any critique? In both cases, confident people always choose the former.

4 EMOTIONAL STABILITY. People who aren't easily discouraged are less likely to succumb to stress and burnout. Because they persevere, they end up solving many more problems than those who give up at the first sign of distress, relishing the chance to say, "See, I knew it wouldn't work!"

The performance gap between people who possess these four traits—those who have a high core self-evaluation—and those who don't is staggering. And it's getting bigger by the day.

THE X FACTOR

Timothy Judge is a renowned industrial psychologist from the University of Notre Dame, and a man for whom I had the honor of stapling papers and entering data as research assistant in my undergraduate days.

In a recent study, Judge tracked the progress of more than 12,000 people from their teenage years to middle age. Some got A's on everything, scored high on standardized tests and came from gene pools rife with physicians, engineers and brainiacs. Others came from modest backgrounds and tended to fall smack in the middle of the bell curve (or worse) for just about everything.

To everyone's astonishment, genes, grades and test scores had very little bearing on the ultimate career success of these 12,000 individuals.

Can you guess what did? That's right, their core self-evaluation score.

Those with mediocre SATs and average grades but high core self-evaluations ending up earning incomes 30 to 60 percent higher than those with good grades and promising genes but dreary views of their own abilities. Those with the advantages of intelligence and pedigree as well as superior motivation and confidence did even better, earning 50 to 150 percent more income than their similarly blessed peers, regardless of profession or industry.

We all know these types of people. They have an air about them when they enter a room. Everything in their lives tends to fall into place. When they take charge, good things happen.

You may be wondering how a person with a high core self-evaluation is different from someone with an oversized ego. The difference is perseverance.

When the going gets tough, those who are simply egotistical give up very easily. They feel entitled to success, so when obstacles crop up they tend to assume the world is "cheating." They take their ball and go home.

Those with high core self-evaluations, on the other hand, thrive during times of challenge. They are more resilient when they encounter obstacles. Their bubbles do not burst the moment the world stops cooperating with their plans. They also do not use a down economy as an excuse to give up. Instead, they hunt longer and harder for jobs. They are less willing to settle, more willing to wait for the right opportunity.

In another study, Judge and his colleagues showed overwhelmingly that employees who believe they control their lives simply perform better at everything. They sell more. They provide better service. They adjust better to new assignments. They also tend to like their jobs more.

The "X factor" of this spectacularly successful group is not so much what they believe, however, but what this belief makes them do. And what they do is make decisions. They believe their decisions can shape events for the better, so they don't hesitate to make them.

Since their formative years, these people have demonstrated a pattern of decisive action and favorable outcomes. This tends to cause others to rally behind them and their decisions, creating a powerful and positive feedback loop.

This is precisely what separates those who are merely *competent* from those who are *competent leaders*. They join this elite group by successfully bridging the gap between potential and performance; by becoming adept decision-makers.

Now, before you assume that there is no hope for those of us who struggle with indecision, let me emphasize that anyone can learn to be a decider. It's not too late for you to convert potential into performance. And it is certainly not too late to learn how to make sound, confident decisions, regardless of your age or situation or personal history.

There is one caveat: It takes hard work. Some people have a genetic leg up when it comes to core self-evaluations. That does not, however, preclude anyone from behaving more decisively. To get there, you just have to find a way to overcome the elusive barrier of indecision that keeps so many people down, prevents so many of us from succeeding. But it's worth it.

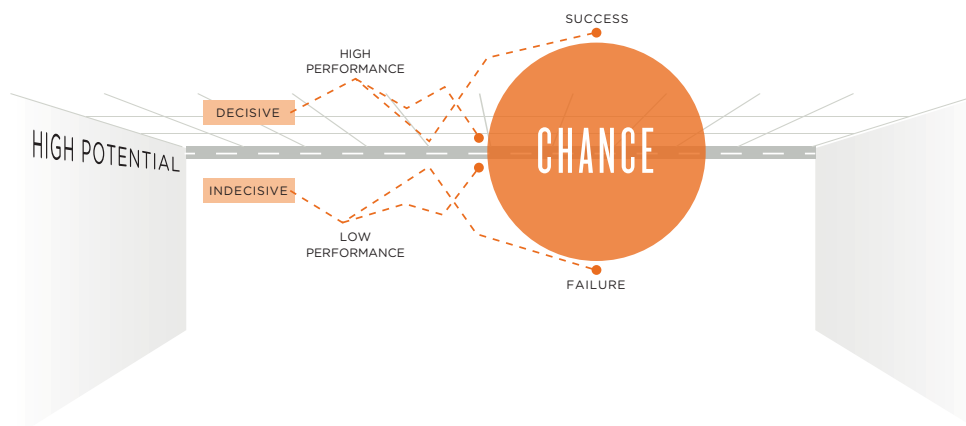
BREAKING THROUGH THE GRAY CEILING

Like the Gray Killer, indecision is deadly if we don't confront it. Where indecision does the most damage is preventing high-potential people from turning that potential into performance.

There are plenty of people out there who are competent, knowledgeable and play well with others. However, they vary widely in decisiveness. Some think their decisions matter and make them frequently. Others live in fear of making the wrong choice. And this, as they say, makes all the difference.

It's a concept I call the *Gray Ceiling*.

Pay close attention to the unseemly gray bar running horizontally across the graphic above. That's the Gray Ceiling, and you should avoid it at all costs.



For high-potential people plagued by indecision, the Gray Ceiling is made of concrete and full of asbestos. (I know that's impossible, but bear with me.) Many men and women who seem to have all the requisite skills for success but are missing that certain something (any ideas what that might be?) get trapped below the Gray Ceiling.

Here's the big idea: If you have high potential but are a poor decision-maker, your odds of success become much lower. As you can see, even among those who are indecisive, the high performers have a better shot at success than low performers, which stands to reason.

Indecision automatically puts you on the wrong side of the ceiling. Even with high potential and great performance, someone who is chronically indecisive will almost never rise above average. By the same token, decisive people give themselves a better shot at success from the get-go, even if they perform poorly later on.

The way the Gray Ceiling works is almost like a standardized test with weighted questions. On many of these tests (such as the GMAT), missing the first few questions triggers the test to give you easier ones, effectively capping your final score. The first question you answer about your career is "Am I decisive?" Get it wrong and you put yourself on a track that tops out at mediocre.

In summary: If you're decisive and high-performing (and we've already seen a link between those two), you will have the best chance of

success. If you're indecisive and low-performing, you're most likely going to fail. Everyone in the middle has to work around the Gray Ceiling.

Let's consider a quick example of how this plays out in real life:

Tracy is a senior marketing communications specialist for a high-technology manufacturing company. She has been with the company for more than a decade, and has a deep understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, strategic goals, customers and the competition. She also seems to generate stronger creative ideas than her boss, the director of marketing.

Unfortunately, Tracy is plagued by indecision. She second-guesses herself continuously. Recently, she could not decide which creative direction to pursue for a product launch, even though all three ideas she developed were strong. She got feedback from peers. She hemmed and hawed. She talked herself in circles.

Deadlines loomed for the tradeshow at which the new product would be launched. The booth graphics had to be prepared. Video loops and presentation decks had to be produced. But her vendors couldn't move forward without her say-so. In the end, she punted and let her boss choose the direction.

However, because she had waited so long, there was no breathing room in the schedule. Small obstacles—a missing file, a photo that had to be replaced—became huge ones. Tracy's team was in scramble mode, and it showed. The launch did not go well, and Tracy took the blame.

Tracy had everything she needed to succeed. She had more than enough great ideas and a team in place to execute them. What she lacked was the ability to make a decision. The results are both predictable and discouraging: Tracy reinforces the view among her peers and supervisors that she is not a strong leader, and she reinforces her own low opinion of herself, which will hinder her decision-making ability even more in the future.

If this scenario sounds familiar, don't despair. Because there is one critical difference between the Gray Killer and the Gray Ceiling. Death

is difficult to reverse without a time machine. But the cycle of indecisiveness can be broken if you have the right plan and a little momentum.

THE LAWS OF LUCK

Before I get into the mechanics of indecision and how to become a better decision-maker, I want to pause briefly to talk about luck.

Luck always plays a role in our successes and failures. (Note that I've been saying "chance" and "odds" of success.) Call it whatever you like: fate, karma, providence, the breaks. There is only so much in life that we can control. You can build the biggest and bestest boat in the world, but if you don't see the iceberg, your ship is going down, Leo DiCaprio, Kate Winslet and all.

So, while none of us can guarantee a specific successful outcome, all of us can control how we perform. And making decisions is the most important part of performance.

I bring this up because misunderstanding the role of luck causes a great deal of confusion and frustration among the chronically indecisive. Indecisive people are very afraid of luck. They fear that all of their good work will be for naught if one tiny thing outside of their control goes wrong. They are so afraid of luck, in fact, that they want to rule it out. They think that if they just get a little more information, they will be able to choose a path that will be 100% successful, regardless of luck or fate or what-have-you.

This is, of course, impossible.

Luck (both good and bad) is part of life. We can't get rid of it, or write it off or pretend it doesn't exist. What we can do is acknowledge it and build it into our plans. Here are three quick "laws of luck" to help you do that:

GOLDWYN'S LAW: "THE HARDER I WORK, THE LUCKIER I GET."

Famous for one-liners and ethically questionable behavior, movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn (of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer fame) absolutely

nails it here. Performing well does not eliminate the role of luck, but it does leave less up to chance. Working hard means everything you think it means: diligence, preparation, productivity, perseverance, engagement. All of these increase your odds of success. The converse is also true. Low performance—sloppy work, apathy, laziness—raises the risk of failure by leaving more up to chance. In the Gray Ceiling diagram again, this is why the amount of chance gets smaller at the top and bottom of the triangle.

2 JOB'S LAW: "SO THE LORD BLESSED THE LATTER END OF JOB MORE THAN THE BEGINNING."

The Book of Job tells the story of a man who does everything right and still has everything taken away. However, he remains faithful and in the end his life turns out much better. Job's Law is simply a reminder that the gods of chance are going to test you from time to time. You may get a beat-down of biblical proportions, even if (especially if) you do everything right. In any given situation, then, high performers can fail due to chance. (Again, the converse is true: even a blind chicken finds a kernel of corn now and then, as the saying goes.) In the long run, however, high performers always fare better. Don't let one bad outing throw you off your game.

3 PASTEUR'S LAW: "CHANCE FAVORS THE PREPARED MIND." Louis Pasteur, the famous French scientist, asserted that his most important breakthroughs often came from a completely unexpected place. If you know what you're looking for, you will be more likely to see it wherever it happens to pop up. If you are engaged with your work, you will be more likely to recognize the opportunities luck throws your way. (And if you're playing Farmville all the time, you will miss out.) Conversely, people who are deeply engaged with their work are better able to predict how fate might potentially screw up their success. As a result, when this happens, they have a solution ready and can apply it very quickly.

DECISION PULSE

PART TWO

NEGATIVE ILLUSIONS & IRRATIONAL FRAILTY

TOO MUCH INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS PARALYSIS

AN ABUNDANCE OF CHOICES

THE MECHANICS OF INDECISION



When I speak to corporate groups about indecision, one of the questions I get most frequently is this: has it always been this bad? The short answer is no. Although indecision has always been with us, it has previously been more of an irritant. Today it is a plague, especially in the corporate world. Three converging factors are responsible.

1. IRRATIONAL FRAILTY

In the mid-90s, former Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan popularized the term “irrational exuberance,” which describes the heights of speculative intensity reached when investors collectively believe they can’t lose. Greenspan was referring to a phenomenon psychologists call “positive illusion”—an unrealistic, self-serving belief.

Nearly all people have healthy, positive illusions. Most people (up to 90% in some cases) think they are smarter, better looking and nicer than the average person. For the most part, this is a good thing. Positive illusions allow a kid to believe she can ride a bike before she can reach the pedals. Positive illusions help us grow and adapt. Researchers like social psychologist Shelley Taylor at UCLA have confirmed that mild self-aggrandizement fosters higher creativity and productivity, and can help us remain persistent when presented with challenges.

Now, if all of us have these positive illusions, why don't we all have a high core self-evaluation? Why are we so indecisive? As with all psychological phenomena, the reality is complex.

One reason is frequency. You might have positive illusions 90% of the time, while someone else has them 20% of the time. That 70% gap makes an enormous difference. Another reason is that positive illusions are fleeting. They don't stick, especially when we hit a bad patch. Prolonged periods of problems, uncertainty and anxiety—such as the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, for example—cause the pendulum to swing the other way.

Here's the curious part. When our positive illusions crumble away, we are not left with reality. Instead, our "reality check" bounces and we create *negative illusions*. Instead of acknowledging that we have *less control* than we once thought, we act as if we have *no control*. Instead of recognizing that our best efforts might not solve every problem, we think our best efforts will never solve any problem.

Harvard psychologist Francesca Gino confirmed this in a very interesting study. The classic example of the illusion of control comes from rolling dice. We tend to think we have a better chance of rolling a specific number when we are doing the rolling. In reality, this doesn't matter. The odds of hitting a hard eight are the same regardless of whose hand makes the toss.

What Gino's work found is that illusions of control have the same effect when the outcome is not randomly determined. She had test subjects perform a task in which their actions affected the outcome, but

took away all common illusions of control—those "red herrings" that simply make us feel like we are in control—and subjects felt powerless even though they clearly were not.

It's a classic case of overcorrection. Lacking positive illusions, we create negative ones. The result of persistent negative illusions is *irrational frailty*—a belief that we can't win, no matter what. And if you can't win, why play? Why make decisions at all?

It's a recipe for chronic indecision.

Incidentally, this is one reason why recessions are so difficult to reverse. Uncertainty about the future kills productivity because employees and managers are constantly fretting about what terrible thing might happen next instead of confidently implementing plans of action.

Right now, irrational frailty is all the rage. We've endured a tough decade and our collective national outlook—although improving—is still not what you'd call rosy. This is sapping our ability to make the bold, confident decisions required to bring us out of the wilderness.

2. INFORMATION OVERLOAD

It seems like a cliché to point this out—especially if you're reading this in e-book format—but we live in a time of unprecedented information access.

We are producing more content than ever, and we can access that content pretty much anytime we want, anywhere we want, in whatever format we want. We have smartphones and social media and Wi-Fi and the entire throbbing, self-replicating macro-organism that is the Internet.

A generation ago, our entire information infrastructure consisted of three TV channels, the radio dial, the local newspaper, a rotary-dial telephone and maybe a gossipy neighbor.

The positive consequences of this are mind-blowing. We're living in a time of phenomenal innovation and change. But the downside is *analysis paralysis*. With too much information instantly available, the risk of overthinking every decision is severe.

It is never clear when we have enough information to make a good choice. Because if you want more information, it's there for the taking. (It's like one of those midnight cruise ship buffets.) And when you're finished with that heaping helping, there's more where that came from. (Egg rolls? I love egg rolls!) In fact, while you were reading that online magazine article, 500 more new sources of information just popped up. (Ice cream sundae bar!)

Long story short: if you never stop thinking, you'll never act. The decision never gets made.

3. TOO MANY CHOICES

It's hard enough to stop gathering data and make a decision if you're trying to decide between two clear-cut choices. So what happens when you have tens or hundreds or even thousands of choices to consider? A similar state of paralysis overtakes us. How can we make an informed decision if we don't even know what all of our options are?

This is freedom of choice at its most extreme — and its most detrimental. An abundance of choices is only helpful if you already know what you want. In these rare instances, more choices improve the odds of finding what you need.

Take online shopping, for example. If you know exactly what you want, you can find it pretty easily—even though you're searching among literally millions of stores. But if you don't have a clue what you need? Now you're drowning in a sea of search results.

When decisions are complex and we are not sure which path is correct, too many choices simply increase our burden. We feel the need to think through every single potential scenario—or combination of scenarios—which takes time and energy. Weighed down already by the sheer amount of available information (see number 2 above), we are increasingly incapable of ruling out various options. Why? Well, ruling out an option is the same as making a decision.

If we do ever manage to make a choice, having too many choices

decreases our satisfaction. Because if the outcome is anything less than perfect (and chances are it will be), we tell ourselves we must have made the wrong choice. We're almost automatically regretful. As you can imagine, this makes it all the more difficult to make a choice the next time around.

This is depressing stuff, isn't it? Welcome to the Age of Indecision.

As I mentioned previously, however, every bad decision-making habit you have (or your employees have) is 100% reversible. So stay with me. Now that we have defined, diagnosed and dismantled the problem, we're ready to talk about the solution.

DECISION PULSE

PART THREE

DECIDE TO BE A DECIDER

CHOOSE A DIRECTION

MASTER THE ART OF DECIDING

D.E.A.L. WITH YOUR LIFE & WORK

DETERMINE YOUR CAREER'S DECISION PULSE

DETERMINE YOUR TEAM'S DECISION PULSE

DON'T STAGNATE—GENERATE

SEVEN ESSENTIAL DECISIONS



In 2006, during one of the bloodiest years of the Iraq War, George W. Bush made a famous proclamation about his role as President of the United States. Say it with me now:

“I’M THE DECIDER.”

Years later, the context of the remark (he was defending the performance of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld) is much less important than its ultimate truth: the person who makes the decision is responsible for the outcome. For better or worse, the decider takes the credit or the blame.

This reality encapsulates why so many people put off making decisions. It's scary. Make the wrong call and you'll be in trouble. Or your reputation will be ruined. Or you'll be living in a van down by the river. Insert your own worst-case-scenario here.

This is exactly the wrong way to think about decision-making.

In this section, I'll show you why you should want to be a Decider. This word is so important I've initial-capped it throughout this book. (If you have issues with the word "Decider," my apologies. It's shorter and more active than "decision-maker," so I'm deciding to stick with it.)

Which brings us to the first of Seven Essential Decisions.

ESSENTIAL DECISION I: DECIDE TO BECOME A DECIDER

A Decider is someone who takes *directed action* every day. A Decider is motivated to make confident decisions on a regular basis, without being rash or impulsive. A Decider gets things done. A Decider succeeds.

Where do Deciders come from?

To answer that, we need to go back 40,000 years, when humans left Africa and took their first steps toward civilization. Scientists recently discovered that a genetic mutation linked to impulsive behavior spurred this journey, and the mutation is still found in 25% of people.

While impulsive people gave us our first push, they would have died out in short order without help from their risk-averse counterparts. It turns out that while the impulsive lead in *innovation*, the less impulsive are better able to ensure *lasting success*.

These two types of Deciders still exist today. Global research in genetics, ecology and psychology confirms it. I call them **Potential Seekers** and **Risk Managers**. (Take the quiz in the sidebar to see which type you are.)

Potential Seekers are smitten with the upside, and they tend to be more impulsive. Risk Managers are more concerned with avoiding the downside, and tend to be less impulsive.

WHAT'S YOUR IMPULSE FACTOR? TAKE THIS SHORT QUIZ TO FIND OUT:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. I DO MY BEST WORK WHEN:
A) I HAVE TO DECIDE QUICKLY
B) I HAVE PLENTY OF TIME TO MAKE UP MY MIND | 5. IN CASUAL CONVERSATION, I TEND TO:
A) SAY EXACTLY WHAT'S ON MY MIND
B) CHOOSE MY WORDS CAREFULLY |
| 2. IN A GAME OF CHANCE, I WOULD PREFER:
A) 50% ODDS OF WINNING \$2,000
B) 100% ODDS OF WINNING \$1,000 | 6. WHEN I SEE SOMETHING I REALLY WANT, I TEND TO:
A) GO FOR IT
B) THINK ABOUT THE RISKS |
| 3. BEFORE MAKING ANY DECISION, I TEND TO:
A) DECIDE EVEN IF I DON'T HAVE ALL THE FACTS
B) THOROUGHLY ANALYZE ALL MY OPTIONS | 7. WHEN IT COMES TO NEW OPPORTUNITIES, I TEND TO:
A) ACT ON THEM MORE QUICKLY THAN MOST PEOPLE
B) HANG BACK, WAIT AND SEE |
| 4. WHEN OFFERED A NEW EXPERIENCE, I TEND TO:
A) JUMP RIGHT IN AND TRY IT FIRST
B) WEIGH THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES | 8. WHEN I MAKE IMPORTANT DECISIONS:
A) I TRUST MY GUT
B) I LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE |

If most of your answers are "a," you are likely a **POTENTIAL SEEKER**. You understand risk, but it's not nearly as important as the reward. If most of your answers were "b," you are probably a **RISK MANAGER**. (Most people are.) You will almost always choose the bird in the hand.

WHAT'S YOUR IMPULSE FACTOR?

This aspect of decision-making is your **Impulse Factor** (I wrote a whole book¹ on this very subject), and it is determined by two qualities: speed (how quickly you make decisions) and risk (how likely you are to make risky choices).

Potential Seekers decide more quickly and tolerate more risk, while Risk Managers decide more slowly and tolerate less risk. You may fall somewhere in between, of course. If so, which end of the spectrum is closer?

Potential Seekers and Risk Managers have very different attitudes and expectations about making decisions. For example:

- Risk Managers are three times more likely to consider risks before deciding.
- 75% of Potential Seekers say they like to be the first to try something new.
- 50% of Potential Seekers say they make their best decisions under time pressure; only 10% of Risk Managers feel the same way.
- More than 50% of Potential Seekers are uncomfortable making group decisions.

Neither style is better or worse. Both can be Deciders.

Let's say you're considering a career change. You're leaving a comfortable job for a new career that might not work out. On the other hand, it might be your dream job—the one that makes everything else in your life fall into place.

When decision time comes, a Risk Manager might choose to avoid the risk, reject the new job offer and keep an eye open for a safer opportunity. A Potential Seeker might accept the risk, take the new job and see what happens.

Each one made a decision. Each one took directed action.

1. *The Impulse Factor: An Innovative Approach to Better Decision Making*, 2009

Many people mistakenly equate action with risk-taking. But a decisive “no” counts just as much as a decisive “yes.” They are both directed actions! Don't let risk aversion prevent you from deciding. When you delay decision, you run an even greater risk: letting others decide for you.

Instead, start with your Impulse Factor. Think of it as a GPS unit, one that shows your exact mental or emotional location—your point of origin, so to speak—when you start down an important decision path.

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

Adopting a Decider's mindset takes some preparation. To help you in this effort, it's important to debunk some myths that chronically indecisive people cling to in moments of panic and doubt.

THE FEATHER IN THE WIND MYTH. “I HAVE NO CONTROL. I SHOULD ACCEPT MY FATE.”

This myth blows, to put it mildly. Research proves that if you *believe* you exert control over your life—and act accordingly—you will succeed. Do you actually have any control, in the navel-gazing, time-is-an-illusion, what-if-the-entire-universe-is-actually-an-electron-in-some-other-atom kind of way? I have no idea. It's above my pay grade, and it's beside the point. Belief is what matters here.

2 THE EVERYDAY APOCALYPSE MYTH. “IF I DON'T PICK THE BEST OPTION, MY WORLD WILL COLLAPSE.”

Um, no. Trust me, I've made plenty of poor decisions, and I'm still here. The purpose of a decision is simple. It gets you to the next decision. The technical term for this is “progress.” You can't treat every decision like Sophie's Choice. You'll drive yourself crazy.

3 THE FAILING TO FAIL MYTH. “IF I NEVER FAIL, I WILL SUCCEED.”

Sportscasters commonly refer to this as “playing not to lose,” and it often results in a loss. This is because *not failing* is a very different animal than *success*. You've known this since grade school. What is a failing grade? An F, of course. But would you call a D+ success?

Underlying this myth is a mistaken belief that we can't be held accountable for decisions we don't make. So, logically, if we don't make any decisions, we can't fail. And if we don't fail, we'll succeed. Right? Wrong. This myth causes hesitation, inaction and disappointment. It is a one-way ticket to mediocrity.

4 THE I'M-NOT-IMPULSIVE MYTH. "I'M NOT INDECISIVE. I'M JUST NOT IMPULSIVE."

Being impulsive is not nearly the same as being decisive. Impulsive people act without direction. They make decisions irrationally, without consideration, without thinking. Decisive people take action with a well-defined direction. People who fall prey to the I'm-not-impulsive myth often insist they want to "get it right the first time." It's a terrific sentiment that is totally unrealistic. If you're doing something new, you're not going to get it right the first time. (Even Beethoven had to take that first piano lesson.) "Getting it right the first time" is a crutch. Toss it aside.

5 THE NOSTRADAMUS MYTH. "IF I HAD MORE INFORMATION, I COULD MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE."

This relates to information overload. Remember, you can't predict the future. It doesn't matter how rich or granular your data is, or how well you analyze it. Gathering more information might make you feel better, but it will never guarantee success. Every decision is an experiment.

6 THE SNOWFLAKE MYTH. "EVERY DECISION IS UNIQUE. I'LL NEVER GET ANOTHER SHOT AT THIS."

Okay, this one is very occasionally true, with respect to major life events such as marriage and children and purchasing patio furniture. But for many daily decisions, it is not. We make many decisions repeatedly, day and day out. Most days you can find me working at a coffee shop. Every day, I order the same thing: a small black coffee. It took me a long time to realize this decision was not a very

exciting one. I used to gaze at the menu, analyzing prices and health factors, trying to make the right choice. Every. Single. Time. I was wasting my energy remaking the same decision hundreds of times. Recognizing repeat decisions is critical.

7 THE RIGHT VS. WRONG MYTH. "THE TOUGHEST DECISION IS ONE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG."

Definitely not true. Harvard Business School ethics professor Joseph Badaracco says that the most difficult decisions we make are not between right and wrong, but between right and right. Choosing between a good thing and a bad thing is easy, even if we choose the bad thing. (You know you want that second slice of cake.) But we stumble when we have to choose among three or four options that each seem right for different reasons, each with its own risks and rewards. For example, a new ad campaign will attract new customers. But cutting the marketing budget will strengthen the bottom line. Neither decision is wrong. But which one is more right?

8 THE OUTCOME MYTH. "MY DECISION TURNED OUT POORLY, THEREFORE IT WAS A BAD DECISION."

Or, along the same lines, "That was a brilliant decision. Look how well it turned out!" This myth is the single greatest obstacle to becoming a Decider, because it takes the focus away from what you can control (decisions) and puts it on something you can't (outcomes). Experts in every field emphasize the former, while amateurs emphasize the latter. For example, professional golfers frequently change how they play for the sake of long-term improvement, even if they know it will cause short-term decrease in performance. Amateur golfers never do this. Rather, they clutch to the same unsightly swing mechanics and idiotic club choices by recalling that one time they birdied the par-five 17th. Conveniently, they totally forget about all the balls they put deep into the woods forever on the same hole.

WHAT DOES A DECIDER LOOK LIKE?

My wife and I both run. But only one of us is a runner.

Running is something I enjoy doing when the weather is nice and I feel like getting some fresh air and clearing my head.

For my wife, it doesn't matter if it's a sunny day with a light breeze or ten degrees below zero. She runs. No matter what.

See the difference?

Running is something I do if conditions are favorable. If it's hard or inconvenient, I don't do it. Raining? Windy? Count me out. For my wife, running is much more than something she likes to do. It's part of who she is. It's her identity. She is a runner, through and through.

The farthest I've ever run is eight miles, and somebody was chasing me most of the way. My wife ran the Boston Marathon. Now do you see the difference?

Incorporating a goal into your identity increases your chances of achieving it. In 2006, researchers Linda Houser-Marko and Kenneth Sheldon at the University of Missouri found that transforming a desired behavior into a statement of identity had a profound impact on the likelihood of success. In the study, two groups of first-year students made lists of personal goals. One group turned the goals into "I am a..." statements. (For example, "I want to get good grades" became "I am a good-grade getter.") Three and a half years later, it turned out that these students were not only much more likely to remember their original goals, they were more likely to have achieved them.

Here's why. A typical goal describes a future situation: 15 pounds lighter by summer, a couple of zeroes richer by next year. When you experience obstacles (midnight snacking, or being passed up for a promotion), dismissing a far-off-in-the-distance goal is really easy. "After all," you might say, "it's already July and I've only lost two pounds. I've failed." In other words, circumstances changed, so meeting the goal was not meant to be.

Outside events, however, rarely change *who you are at your core*. If

the goal is part of your identity, it becomes much more difficult to jettison, no matter what happens. If you believe "I am a healthy eater," then you're a healthy eater, period. When something truly defines you, you find a different way to express that identity when you encounter adversity.

Non-integrated goals also take on a strange kind of authority. They feel like orders from somebody else. Many of us don't like doing what others tell us to do. "Because I said so" has never been a legitimate motivator. Just ask Frankie, my two-year-old.

This is true even when that "somebody else" is our own conscience. A study conducted by Katherine Milkman at Penn's Wharton School of Business confirmed this by tracking the habits of thousands of people who rent DVDs online. They frequently filled their queues with critically acclaimed films, documentaries and classics. These DVDs were not returned for months. During that time, the same renters ordered, watched and returned a slew of romantic comedies, action movies and blockbusters.

We know what we *should* do. But it's more fun to do what we *want*. Want wins a lot. Integrating your goal into your identity gives you ammo against want.

THE DECIDER'S CREDO

I'm going to bet you have made a few decisions in your life. You've taken directed action. I'll also wager you will take directed action again, even if you don't read one more word in this book.

Most people are capable of being decisive. But there is an enormous difference between someone who acts decisively on occasion and someone who is a Decider. The difference is results.

Example: Me, the guy who likes to run and once ran eight miles. My wife, the runner who does it every single day and has finished multiple marathons.

So: You could read this e-book and set a goal to become more decisive. And it would almost certainly help you act more decisively than

THE DECIDER'S CREDO

I AM A DECIDER. I start each day with one critical mission: to take decisive, directed action. I define my direction and I act decisively in that direction every day.

I AM A DECIDER. I charge into the unknown hundreds of times every day. I do not fear taking action, even when I have incomplete information. I always exercise good judgment, but I never let fear of the unknown paralyze me.

I AM A DECIDER. I understand that indecision is toxic. I understand that the purpose of a decision is not to hunt down the perfect option, but to get to the next step.

I AM A DECIDER. I accept that I will make mistakes. I accept that I will fail. And I accept that if I never make mistakes or fail, I will never truly succeed.

I AM A DECIDER. I can't control or predict the future. Even so, my decisions count. My decisions influence reality. Decisive action is my greatest asset.

I AM A DECIDER. I am decisive because people depend on me. I am decisive because I want to make my life matter. I am decisive because I want to do something meaningful.

I AM A DECIDER.

you do today. But is that enough? Will you be satisfied with eight miles, so to speak?

To become a Decider, you'll need the Decider's credo. Print it out. Tape it to your bathroom mirror. Keep it on your desk. Commit it to memory.

If you decide to be a person who takes decisive, directed action every day, being decisive ceases to be an external goal. It ceases to be something you have to remind yourself to do. Being decisive becomes as natural as breathing.

And of course, "I want to make better decisions" becomes "I am a Decider."

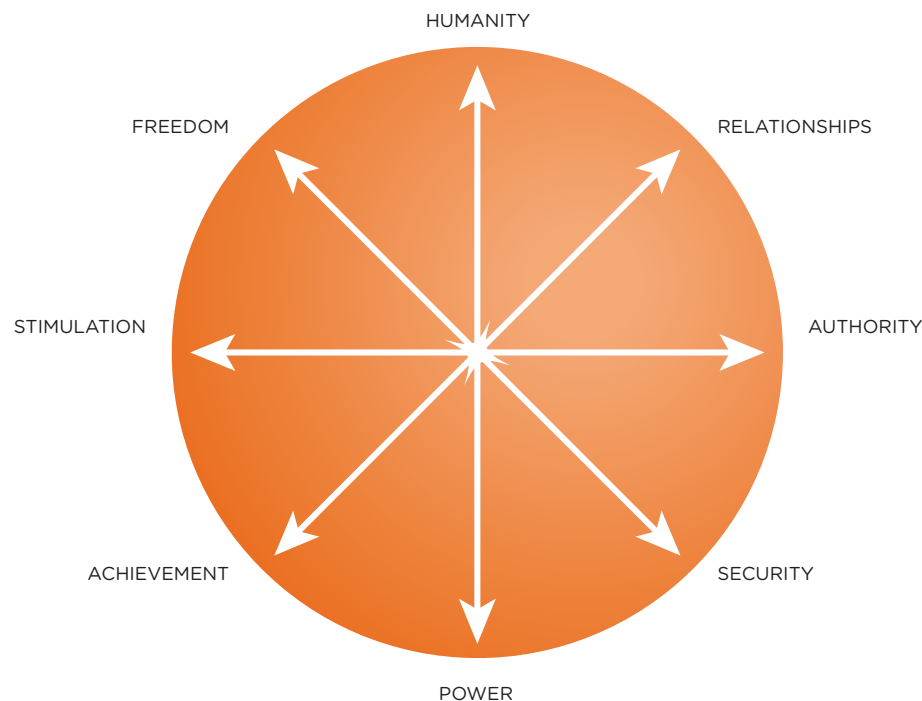
ESSENTIAL DECISION 2: CHOOSE A DIRECTION

Now it's time to put your thoughts into action. But action by itself is not decisive. As you recall, action without direction is impulsive. Decisiveness combines *action* with *direction*.

Over the past few decades cross-cultural researchers like Shalom Schwartz and Daniel Cable have extensively studied what drives us as humans. What do we think is important?

According to the research, there are **eight universal directions** that apply to everyone around the world, whether you are a stock trader in the U.S. or a farmer in South Africa, an auto mechanic in China or a visual artist in Brazil. If you're like 99.99% of people on the planet, you'll agree that at least six (and as many as eight) of these directions are important to you. They are:

- **HUMANITY.** Making the world a better place.
- **RELATIONSHIPS.** Developing deep, close bonds with family and friends.
- **AUTHORITY.** Having self-discipline and bringing pride to your family.
- **SECURITY.** Keeping the people you care about safe, happy and healthy.



Notice that each direction is paired with another that could be considered its opposite.

- ➔ **POWER.** Gaining recognition and respect for your accomplishments.
- ➔ **ACHIEVEMENT.** Making progress on personal goals.
- ➔ **STIMULATION.** Having fun and keeping life interesting.
- ➔ **FREEDOM.** Staying independent and open to opportunity.

Each direction is as valid and valuable as any other. And that's the problem. Eight directions is seven too many if you're trying to get somewhere.

Let's say you're trying to decide if you should stay late at the office and finish an important project or attend a charity event with some friends. Staying late will help you meet your career goals (Achievement). Attending the event will strengthen your connections with friends

(Relationships). Staying late could help you acquire more influence at work (Power). Attending the event will help make the world a better place (Humanity).

When faced with this kind of decision-making problem, we often compromise. We let incidental triggers decide for us. In the previous example, let's say you had coffee with a friend from church earlier in the day. That may prompt you to pick Humanity as your direction. Or maybe you saw a documentary about Andrew Carnegie, which prompts you to choose Power as your direction.

This is called *priming*, and it happens all the time. On the surface, it's not an issue. All eight directions are good, so picking any one of them is not going to hurt you.

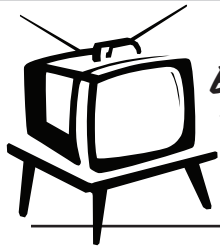
What is a problem, however, is when an unconscious pattern of momentary priming compromises your performance and sense of fulfillment. Letting priming alone guide our choices makes us feel like we are drifting or chasing our tails.

This isn't a new dilemma. *If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. No one can serve two masters.* Sound familiar?

The solution is your **Decision Pulse**. Your Decision Pulse is your personal number one priority, the single direction you place above all others.

When you identify your life's Decision Pulse, making big life decisions becomes easier. Complex decisions clarify themselves. The right choice becomes apparent much more readily. And when all your decisions move you in the same direction, you build momentum. Progress is inevitable.

Many people spend their entire lives without knowing which way they want to go. Without a unifying direction, they hop from job to job, company to company, city to city, relationship to relationship, without zeroing in on anything that feels right or meaningful or true. If your life feels like this, finding your life's Decision Pulse can help you break the cycle.



BRIEF COMMERCIAL INTERRUPTION

YOU CAN FIND YOUR LIFE'S DECISION PULSE
FOR FREE AT WWW.DECISIONPULSE.COM.
NOW BACK TO OUR STORY!



Does choosing one direction mean you write off the other seven? Absolutely not. What a Decision Pulse does is help you avoid *repeatedly sacrificing your most important direction* over the long haul.

If your Impulse Factor is like an emotional GPS unit, your life's Decision Pulse is like a compass. It tells you what direction you're heading. It will help you recognize when you're veering off course, away from the direction you most want to pursue.

My life's Decision Pulse is Freedom. In my early twenties, freedom took me to San Diego, where I lived by the beach with friends and took up surfing. Eventually, I met the woman who became my wife. Today, she and I live in Minneapolis with our two sons.

True, freedom looks a bit different for me now as a family man in Minneapolis than it did in as a beach-bum bachelor in San Diego, but it's still my life's Decision Pulse. By entering into a lifelong relationship, I gave up certain freedoms to gain others. I now have a partner with whom I share household duties. That gives me more free time. I have a partner who brings in a second income. That gave me the freedom to start my own business.

Every step of the way, my Decision Pulse helped me figure out how to make decisions that kept me on track. It helped me choose which jobs to take, and which to decline. It helped me be smart and selective about opportunities in business, relationships and life in general.

TAKE YOUR PULSE

HERE ARE SOME DETAILED EXAMPLES OF THE EIGHT UNIVERSAL DIRECTIONS. USE THESE TO THINK THROUGH EACH ONE, AND SEE IF ONE RESONATES WITH YOU MORE STRONGLY THAN ANY OF THE OTHERS.



IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...

AUTHORITY

THEN YOUR **BEST**
DECISIONS...

REFLECT SELF-DISCIPLINE
AND BRING PRIDE TO YOUR
TEAM, ORGANIZATION
OR FAMILY.

AND YOU **FIND YOURSELF**
SAYING...

"MY TEAM RESPECTS AUTHORITY.
IN ORDER TO KEEP THE TEAM
FUNCTIONING PROPERLY, PEOPLE
NEED TO EXERCISE SELF-DISCIPLINE
AND RESPECT THE CHAIN OF
COMMAND."

"I SEND MY CHILDREN TO PRIVATE
SCHOOL. I DON'T LIKE THE EXPENSE,
BUT I WANT MY KIDS TO HAVE THE
STRUCTURE A PRIVATE SCHOOL
PROVIDES."

"I DECLINED A JOB OFFER BECAUSE
THE PEOPLE WERE TOO IRREVERENT.
EVEN THOUGH IT WAS THE KIND OF
WORK I WAS LOOKING FOR, I KNEW
THE PEOPLE WOULD ANNOY ME
SOONER OR LATER."

AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

GEORGE PATTON

COLIN POWELL

QUEEN ELIZABETH

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...
THEN YOUR BEST
DECISIONS...
AND YOU FIND YOURSELF
SAYING...
AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

SECURITY

PROVIDE SAFETY AND
COMFORT FOR YOURSELF
AND THOSE YOU CARE
ABOUT.

"THE KEY PLAYERS ON MY TEAM HAVE
BEEN THE SAME FOR YEARS. WHEN I
GOT PROMOTED, I BROUGHT THEM
WITH ME. I KNEW I COULD COUNT ON
THEM."

WARREN BUFFETT

FRANKLIN D.
ROOSEVELT

WYATT EARP

"I SEND MY KIDS TO THE SCHOOL
NEAREST OUR HOME. IT HAS A
DECENT REPUTATION AND I KNOW MY
CHILDREN WILL BE SAFE WALKING
THERE EVERY DAY."

"I TOOK A NEW JOB BECAUSE MY
LAST ONE WAS TOO UNPREDICTABLE.
NOW I'M MUCH MORE SECURE. THE
HOURS AND EXPECTATIONS ARE
MORE STABLE."

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...
THEN YOUR BEST
DECISIONS...
AND YOU FIND YOURSELF
SAYING...
AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

HUMANITY

HELP YOU CONTRIBUTE TO
SOCIETY AND MAKE THE
WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

"EVERYONE ON MY TEAM IS COMMITTED
TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY. IF THEY
DON'T HAVE A STRONG MORAL
COMPASS, THEY AREN'T GOING
TO FIT."

MOTHER THERESA

MOHANDAS GANDHI

MARGARET MEAD

"I SEND MY KIDS TO A PUBLIC SCHOOL.
I WANT THEM TO BE EXPOSED TO
MANY CULTURES, AND I WANT TO
HELP MAINTAIN THE QUALITY OF
OUR LOCAL SCHOOLS."

"I TOOK MY CURRENT JOB BECAUSE
THE COMPANY HAS A STRONG
REPUTATION FOR SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY. I KNOW THAT
MY WORK MAKES THE WORLD
A BETTER PLACE."

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...

THEN YOUR **BEST**
DECISIONS...

AND YOU **FIND YOURSELF**
SAYING...

AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

RELATIONSHIPS

DEVELOP STRONG, CLOSE
RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE
PEOPLE AROUND YOU.

"MY TEAM IS COHESIVE. I GET TO
KNOW EACH PERSON PERSONALLY
AND PROFESSIONALLY. WE FUNCTION
MORE LIKE A FAMILY THAN A WORK
GROUP."

"I SEND MY KIDS TO THE SAME
SCHOOL MY FRIENDS' KIDS GO
TO. OUR FRIENDS REALLY LIKE
THE SCHOOL, AND IT GIVES US
A CHANCE TO STRENGTHEN OUR
RELATIONSHIP."

"I WAS GOING TO QUIT, BUT THEN THE
COMPANY STARTED A MENTORSHIP
PROGRAM. I GOT TO KNOW THE
PEOPLE I WORK WITH MUCH BETTER.
AND I STAYED."

KATHARINE GRAHAM

BILL CLINTON

PAUL REVERE

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...

THEN YOUR **BEST**
DECISIONS...

AND YOU **FIND YOURSELF**
SAYING...

AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

ACHIEVEMENT

PUSH YOU TOWARD
IMPORTANT, LONG-TERM
GOALS FOR YOUR LIFE
AND CAREER.

"I ASSIGN CLEAR, MEASURABLE
OBJECTIVES. TO STAY MOTIVATED,
WE HAVE TO TRACK OUR PROGRESS.
IT CAN BE DIFFICULT, BUT IT ALWAYS
PAYS OFF IN THE END."

"MY KIDS GO TO THE BEST SCHOOL
IN THE AREA. WE DECIDED TO LIVE
HERE BECAUSE OF THE EDUCATIONAL
EXPERIENCE AND THE GROWTH
OPPORTUNITIES THE SCHOOL
PROVIDES."

"I TOOK THIS JOB BECAUSE THE
COMPENSATION WAS TOO GOOD TO
PASS UP. IT WAS A GOOD CAREER
MOVE, WITH MANY OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ADVANCEMENT."

MICHAEL PHELPS

JOHN GRISHAM

HILLARY CLINTON

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...
THEN YOUR BEST
DECISIONS...
AND YOU FIND YOURSELF
SAYING...
AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

POWER

BRING YOU GREATER
INFLUENCE, ACCESS AND
SOCIAL STANDING.

"I THRIVE WHEN MY GROUP LOOKS
TO ME FOR GUIDANCE. I DO MY BEST
WORK AND PROVIDE THE MOST
VALUE WHEN I CAN EXERCISE THAT
KIND OF INFLUENCE."
"I SEND MY KIDS TO ONE OF THE
MOST PRESTIGIOUS PRIVATE SCHOOLS
IN THE CITY. THE MOST POWERFUL
POLITICIANS AND EXECUTIVES SEND
THEIR KIDS THERE TOO."
"MY JOB HAS UNLIMITED OPPORTUNITY
FOR ADVANCEMENT. THIS COMPANY
IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST NAMES IN
THE INDUSTRY, AND IT COMMANDS
A LOT OF RESPECT."

RONALD REAGAN
THEODORE
ROOSEVELT
OPRAH WINFREY

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...
THEN YOUR BEST
DECISIONS...
AND YOU FIND YOURSELF
SAYING...
AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

STIMULATION

MAXIMIZE FUN AND
ADVENTURE AND KEEP LIFE
LIVELY AND INTERESTING.

"I LIKE TO GIVE MY TEAM EXCITING
WORK. IT MIGHT BE A PROJECT
THAT ISN'T WELL-DEFINED, OR
ONE OTHER TEAMS BELIEVE IS TOO
RISKY. IT KEEPS OUR WORK
LIVELY."
"I SEND MY KIDS TO GERMAN
IMMERSION SCHOOL. I THOUGHT
IT WOULD BE COOL FOR MY KIDS
TO HAVE A DIFFERENT EXPERIENCE
THAN I DID."
"I RECENTLY CHANGED JOBS
AGAIN. THE LAST ONE WAS
EXCITING FOR A WHILE, BUT IT
BECAME TOO ROUTINE. I NEEDED
A BIGGER, BOLDER CHALLENGE."

ANGELINA JOLIE
MICK JAGGER
RICHARD BRANSON

AND YOU MIGHT
IDENTIFY WITH...

BRENDA BARNES

HENRY DAVID
THOREAU

JACK KEROUAC

AND YOU FIND YOURSELF
SAYING...

"I GIVE MY TEAM TOTAL AUTONOMY.
NOBODY LIKES TO BE MICROMANAGED,
AND HAND-HOLDING EATS UP TOO
MUCH OF MY FREE TIME AND
CREATIVE ENERGY."

"I HOME-SCHOOLED MY KIDS FOR
A YEAR WHILE WE TRAVELED AS
A FAMILY. SOME OF MY FRIENDS
THOUGHT I WAS CRAZY, BUT IT
WAS INCREDIBLY LIBERATING."

"I'M AN ENTREPRENEUR AT HEART.
IN MY JOB, I'M FREE TO DO WHAT
I WANT, WHEN I WANT. I DON'T KNOW
WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS, AND
THAT'S ALL PART OF THE FUN."

THEN YOUR BEST
DECISIONS...

REMAIN INDEPENDENT
AND PURSUE NEW
OPPORTUNITIES AS
THEY ARISE.

IF YOUR LIFE'S
DECISION PULSE IS...

FREEDOM

Most important, it helped me recognize when my decisions were leading me away from what I really wanted (Freedom) and showed me how to correct my course.

As you think about your Decision Pulse, remember what it is: a standard operating principle that guides your decisions. As a supreme value, a Decision Pulse is also:

- ➔ **PERSONAL.** It reflects what matters most to you, and you are the ultimate authority on this. Two people with same Decision Pulse may lead very different lives. Both will feel they are headed in the right direction, and both will be 100% correct.
- ➔ **VITAL.** Your Decision Pulse is something you can't live without. The other seven directions may be important to you at times. But without your life's Decision Pulse, your satisfaction, fulfillment and energy will drain away rapidly.
- ➔ **FUNDAMENTAL.** It's the foundation upon which all of your decisions and values rest. Your life's Decision Pulse needs to be strong and steady. You will spend the majority of your time, resources and effort building and reinforcing this foundation.
- ➔ **MOTIVATIONAL.** Your life's Decision Pulse is what drives you to earn money, status or other rewards. For this to work, the reward must stay connected to the reason for wanting it. If your Decision Pulse is Security, no amount of money should motivate you to take a risky, unstable job.

It also helps to clarify what a Decision Pulse is not:

- ➔ **A PERSONALITY TRAIT.** There is not one type of Security person or Power person or Achievement person. It doesn't have anything to do with how smart or talented or strategic or funny or athletic or outgoing you are. It has to do with your values. Values are something you choose.

- **A SKILL OR ABILITY.** Your life's Decision Pulse is not an activity you can be good or bad at doing, like playing golf or shooting hoops. The skill you want to improve is making decisions. Your life's Decision Pulse is a tool to help you do this in a personally fulfilling way.
- **A GOAL.** A goal is a destination. It represents a place we want to reach at some point in the future. Your Decision Pulse is the direction you're moving right now, in the present. You have to be moving in the right direction to reach your goal.

Finding your life's Decision Pulse is, naturally, a very personal process. Your top priority might leap out at you, or it may take some time to reveal itself. Once you find it, however, you will see every decision in a new light.

ESSENTIAL DECISION 3: MASTER THE ART OF DECIDING

Back to our travel analogy: Now that you have a GPS device (Impulse Factor) and a compass (Decision Pulse), you need a map for your journey. This map shows you the lay of the land, so to speak. It helps you see how different directions lead to various destinations.

What is the map? It's a three-step decision-making process.

Three steps. That's it. Put it together with your GPS and compass, and you're well on your way to becoming a Decider—and making good decisions.

But let's back up for just a second to ask: What characterizes a good decision?

This is the most important question I'll answer. As we've seen, fear of making bad decisions is what prevents many of us from leading productive, fulfilling lives. It's what keeps us trapped under the Gray Ceiling.

Good decisions are easy to recognize because they share three traits. A good decision is:

- **RELIABLE.** Good decisions tend to be consistent over time. If you find yourself making wildly different choices depending on where you are, what day it is, or the company you keep, that's a sign you're ignoring your life's Decision Pulse. Or, maybe you haven't found the right one.
- **RATIONAL.** Your gut is an essential part of the decision-making process, but your brain is even more important. You should be able to draw a clear, logical line between the decision you're making and the direction you want to go.
- **REGRET-FREE.** You can't be afraid of making a mistake. You also can't shy away from them. It's critical to learn from every mistake and store that knowledge for the next decision. But don't waste a single minute berating yourself if the result you get isn't the one you wanted.

I know I keep harping on this, but please note: "right" is not one of the three R's. If you are focused on always making the right decision, you'll never decide anything. You'll get trapped in a death-spiral of endless deliberation and second-guessing.

I also said nobody can predict the future, but I'll make one exception here: I guarantee with 100% accuracy that some of the decisions you make will turn out great, and some will not. This fact should not have any bearing on *how you decide*.

To make sure your decisions are good—reliable, rational and regret-free—you need to follow a three-step process. This is your map.

1. CHECK YOUR PULSE.

2. CONSULT THE ANTI-YOU.

3. JUST **DECIDE**.

CHECK YOUR PULSE

This means exactly what you think it does: keeping your life's Decision Pulse top of mind. Your Decision Pulse is something you should refer to every time you make a life decision. It's easy. You simply remind yourself of the direction you have chosen.

Tell yourself: "I am a Decider, and my life's Decision Pulse is Relationships."

Reorienting yourself in this way helps you narrow options down to a few top contenders. If you've already narrowed down your options, checking your Decision Pulse might make one choice stand out. If you're struggling with a bunch of seemingly bad options, checking your Decision Pulse might bring another possibility to light.

Pulse checked? Okay. Onward.

CONSULT THE ANTI-YOU

No, you don't have to turn into George Costanza and starting doing the opposite of every instinct you possess. Consulting the anti-you is a framing technique designed to help you make decisions that are not tainted by unhealthy emotions, biases or hidden assumptions.

You've heard the old expression: when all you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. Consulting the anti-you helps avoid this common pitfall.

Quick story: Within three months of moving to Minneapolis, my wife and I had our first child, who slept about 27 minutes a night. We bought our first home, which was empty because we had sold all our furniture in San Diego. And I signed my first book deal, which meant I had to learn how to write a book in six months. We ate, slept and breathed stress. Well, not so much slept.

How did I respond to this situation? I did what all good consumers do. I went shopping. And not just for a new pair of shoes, either. I bought a thirty-one-foot RV. The ol' tenement on wheels.

This was (obviously) a terrible decision. I did not know how to drive an RV. There was no place to park it in our neighborhood. We had

no plans to take a road trip. So why did I make it? I checked my Decision Pulse. An RV would bring me the freedom of the open road! Yes!

Um, no. Here's the thing: I was emotionally overloaded and not thinking clearly. I really should have consulted my anti-me. (In this case, anyone with a brain.) But I didn't. I just went for it. (Did I mention I'm a Potential Seeker?) And I paid the price as a result.

When talking to your anti-you, focus on *how the person frames the decision*, not the choice they recommend. If your anti-you sees the problem as a screw, rather than the nail you believe it to be. They will likely see other risks that you hadn't thought of. It might also reveal novel solutions that you hadn't considered. That doesn't mean that they know better than you, only that they have different vantage point than you.

For example, in a meeting with my company's Board of Advisors—most of whom have far more years of experience and all of whom have different experiences—the board recommended that I replace some of my senior staff with more junior people who could grow with the company. Ultimately, I decided against their recommendation. But it did heighten my awareness to the issue they raised—namely, that the company was too top-heavy. As a result, I had some frank conversations with my upper level people and together we reorganized their job roles and responsibilities. While I still didn't make the exact decision that my Anti-Me's were suggesting, it did clarify my objectives and allowed me to make a good decision.

Ideally, your anti-you should have a different perspective on decision-making. If you are a Potential Seeker, talk to a Risk Manager. If your Decision Pulse is Humanity, seek advice and insight from someone whose Decision Pulse is Power.

Seek advice from people in unrelated fields. They may see the problem from a new angle, free of the assumptions you can't avoid. Of course, you can also talk to friends and family.

The anti-you can also be an imaginary friend. Yes, really.

When I am struggling with a business decision (yes, even Deciders struggle with decisions), it often helps me to recast the problem in terms of a fictional client's business instead of my own. Then I ask

myself what advice I would give to this made-up client, and my decision becomes crystal clear.

You can also imagine an anti-you with the opposite Impulse Factor. Potential Seekers, ask your anti-you if you are deciding too quickly, or if you're taking on too much risk. Risk Managers, ask if you are dragging your feet, or not putting enough on the line.

Caution: Consulting the Anti-You does not mean letting someone else make the decision for you. There is never an excuse for failing to take ownership of the final decision.

JUST DECIDE!

All right, all right, all right. You've deliberated long enough. It's time to decide.

Here's the good news: you've already done the hard part. You've identified your Impulse Factor and your life's Decision Pulse. You have thoughtfully considered your options. You've consulted your anti-you. You've done your homework.

Now it's time to pull the trigger.

That's it. You're a Decider. So you decide.

It's really not more complicated than this. Were you hoping it would be?

To review:

1. CHECK YOUR PULSE.
2. CONSULT THE ANTI-YOU.
3. JUST **DECIDE**.

ESSENTIAL DECISION 4: D.E.A.L. WITH YOUR LIFE AND WORK

Nobody becomes a Decider overnight. It takes time to acclimate to this new way of thinking and acting. It may feel strange at first. You may feel

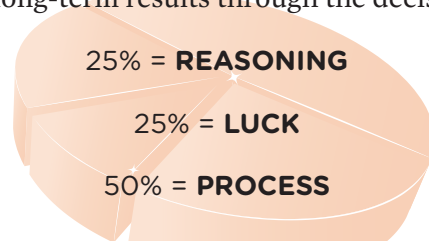
a surge of power or a swirl of vertigo. You may experience stress, euphoria, anxiety, pride, or a big mix of everything.

Trust me, it gets easier. (I speak from experience. I was not always a Decider.) Because when you become a Decider, you start creating a positive feedback loop. You make more decisions. Others start noticing your decisive demeanor. You start making progress. Others start noticing you get results. You gain confidence. You make more decisions.

Once you become a Decider, however, there are some strategies you will need to employ so that you do not drive yourself insane. (Again, I speak from experience.)

- ➔ **DON'T SWEAT EVERYTHING.** Some decisions are trivial. You don't need to get out your GPS, compass and map to make it to the end of the driveway. Other decisions are matters of preference. If the quality of experience is purely subjective—the art you enjoy, the friends you keep, what you do with your leisure time—don't apply the whole process. Just trust your gut. It's the fastest, easiest, most logical choice.
- ➔ **OUTSOURCE WHEN APPROPRIATE.** Even if we're talking about non-trivial, non-personal decisions, you can't decide everything. And you shouldn't. There is a word for someone who does this: dictator. Delegation is critical. Some decisions are better left to those more qualified to make them, more interested in the specifics, or more vested in the results. Your business partner, your colleague, your spouse. Other decisions can be relegated to second-order status. You only need to make these decisions once, and never again. Recall my “small black coffee” epiphany or the decision to put on a seatbelt when you get into a car.
- ➔ **IMPROVE YOUR ODDS.** Remember, nobody can guarantee a particular outcome. This is especially true when the factors that influence our decisions are constantly changing. While you

can't guarantee success, you can improve your odds of success over time. Here is the rough breakdown of how much we can influence long-term results through the decisions we make:



Reasoning is the application of logic. This helps us eliminate obviously bad options. But smarts aren't everything. In a complex world, basic human reasoning alone only gets you so far.

Luck is what it is, as they say. You can be the best Decider of all time, and you're still going to come up short one time out of four. You should find this humbling, and encouraging. It removes the pressure to be perfect.

I want to spend some time with the remaining 50%, the process. This is bigger than our three-step process for making individual decisions. Instead, it has four steps (and a handy, easy-to-remember acronym) for integrating decision-making into your life and work, as well as improving your decision-making abilities—thus improving your chances of success.

The name of the process is **D.E.A.L.**:

DECIDE. MAKE A DECISION.

EXECUTE. DO WHAT YOU DECIDED.

ADAPT. MAKE ADJUSTMENTS.

LEARN. ANALYZE THE OUTCOME.

Let's dig in a bit more.

DECIDE. This means you follow the three-step process—pulse check, anti-you, just decide—and make that decision. We've spent the whole book working on this one step. Now what?

EXECUTE. Put the decision into action. I should add that someone who makes decisions but doesn't act on them will be trapped under the gray ceiling, elbow-to-elbow with those who can't decide at all. For simple matters, this means you go ahead and order the club sandwich, or put the movie in the DVD player, or stay late and finish the project.

But what if you decide to do something in the future? How can you make sure it gets done?

There is a surprisingly effective approach proven to increase follow-through rates by 200% to 300%. According to more than two decades of evidence amassed by NYU psychologist Peter Gollwitzer, this "if-then" technique takes advantage of subtle differences in wording. Instead of saying "I will try to spend more time on strategic planning," you say "**IF** I am still at work after my status meeting, **THEN** I will spend 30 minutes on strategic planning."

This technique creates "instant habits," automatic reminders to act in specific situations. When your brain recognizes you are sitting in your office after that status meeting, it cues you to work on strategic planning. It feels inevitable. And it works.

Finally, what if you decide to do something complex? Something with multiple interrelated steps?

You'll need to put together a mini-execution plan. Gollwitzer recommends jotting down five actions that are essential to executing your decision successfully. Then you figure out when, where and how to complete each one. If you decided to create a new workflow process, your mini-execution plan might look like this:

Adding the specifics is key. It turns a to-do list into a plan. Without these, your brain has to remain on constant alert for an opportunity to perform one of the tasks. It's like an annoying scavenger hunt. You have a list of items and no idea where or when you'll stumble onto them. Clarifying logistics lets you forget about each task until the time comes to complete it.

Personally, a method that works really well is using an online calendar (cough-Google-cough). I plug each task into my schedule, and

when the time comes to complete the next step, the calendar sends me an email reminder and a pop-up message on my phone. By automating this process, I can keep my mind clear until the task is in front of me. Of all the time-saving and stress-reducing habits I’ve adopted, this one has delivered the best results, hands-down.

There are two big advantages to a mini-plan. Writing down the steps allows you to think through implementation and uncover possible obstacles ahead of time. Creating a plan also inspires *positive illusions*. (Remember these? I knew you would. You’re much smarter than average.) According to studies conducted by Gollwitzer and fellow

Sometimes you’ll stick with the plan, other times you’ll need to regroup, reconfigure or retreat. What this step helps avoid is a stubborn insistence that your first decision must be carried through, no matter what. That’s just another kind of indecision—a refusal to make a second decision once you’ve gone ahead with the first.

LEARN. Just as a decision is meaningless without execution, action is meaningless if you don’t learn from your experience. Once the results are known, you have to do the hard work of analysis, keeping an eye out for lessons that can be applied more broadly. Or, more to the point: Learn for next time. Don’t yearn for last time.

Depending on the situation, you may need to examine key metrics, check your stock price, survey your users, customers or clients, or meet with your internal team. Hard numbers are helpful, of course, as are historical comparisons. What happened last time? What did we expect to happen? How can we account for the difference? How can we do better next time?

This is essentially a way to make sure you keep on making good decisions. As we’ve seen, people often have plenty of data at hand yet fail to use it. They get stuck repeating the same mistakes—especially if the mistake is not acting decisively enough.

A word of warning to relatively new Deciders: beware the fallacy of coincidental correlation. Just because one event follows another, it doesn’t mean the first event *caused* the second. Fear of making bad decisions often pollutes assessment of results, to the point where you become all too willing to find fault, take blame and point out errors—even if they aren’t really there.

ESSENTIAL DECISION 5:
DETERMINE YOUR CAREER’S DECISION PULSE

By this point, you may be asking yourself how your life’s Decision Pulse is going to help you on the job. For example, if your Decision Pulse is Power, should you boss everyone around? If your Decision Pulse is

WHAT	WHEN	WHERE	HOW
1. OUTLINE THE PROCESS	TUESDAY MORNING	COFFEE SHOP	NOTEPAD
2. ASK ANITA FOR HELP DIGITIZING PROCESS FLOW	AFTER LUNCH WEDNESDAY	OFFICE	EMAIL
3. REVISE PROCESS WITH ANITA	THURSDAY AT 3:30	CONFERENCE ROOM	ANITA'S LAPTOP
4. REVIEW PROCESS WITH TEAM	MONDAY STATUS MEETING	IN MY OFFICE	VIA SKYPE
5. CHECK TEAM'S PROGRESS	ONE WEEK AFTER IMPLEMENTATION	IN MY OFFICE	EMAIL

psychologist Shelley Taylor, making decisions relieves anxiety because the decision is no long weighing on your mind. Deciding reduces uncertainty, and articulating exactly how the decision will come to pass creates an even greater sense of control over the unknown.

ADAPT. Mike Tyson once said, “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Too true, Iron Mike, too true. Let’s say you decided and executed your decision. Everything’s going great. Then, pow! Fate throws a right cross that knocks you for a loop. Happens all the time. That’s why it’s critical to adapt. You pause, take stock of what’s happening, figure out what changed, and determine how those changes affect your original decision. (Think of it as a halftime adjustment.)

Freedom, should you wear shorts every day and set your own schedule?

Perhaps not.

Remember, your life's Decision Pulse is about just that: your life. It should help guide your decisions so that your *entire life* is moving in the right direction.

For most people, a life can't move in the right direction without taking their career into consideration. When you spend at least half of your waking hours either doing or thinking about doing your job, it's virtually impossible to properly direct your life without properly directing your career. Whether your ultimate goal is a larger paycheck, a bigger promotion, more responsibility, exciting assignments, free time, better job security or more meaningful work, career excellence is critical. It's difficult to envision a Decider who is genuinely following his or her Decision Pulse but has a so-so, who-cares, punch-the-clock job.

A successful career (however you define success) starts with your **career's Decision Pulse**. This is a different animal than your personal direction. It's the one thing that makes you uniquely valuable to your company, or your nonprofit, or your school, or whatever organization you happen to belong to.

To find out what makes you uniquely valuable, you need to first become *acceptional*. (Yes, I made that word up. I cut my teeth as a management consultant and making up words is akin to breathing for a management consultant. It's my cross to bear.) To be acceptional means you **accept** the qualities that make you **exceptional**. Remember, not just good—exceptional.

How do you become acceptional? Follow these four commandments:

1. KNOW THY CUSTOMER.

If you own a business that sells products or services to consumers, then those consumers are your customers. In the corporate world, however, your boss is your customer. Because your boss is the one “buying” what you're producing—using the currencies of salary, vacation

and positive performance reviews. As you think about what makes you uniquely valuable, you have to adopt your customer's mindset. How well you meet their needs determines your success.

Here's a good example: Karl is a Decider who became vice president for a major health insurer at the ripe old age of 28, avoiding the traditional career path and bypassing a thicket of bureaucracy. According to Karl, the key to his success was recognizing early on that his customer was not the person who purchased his company's products. His customer was his manager.

I realize this sounds like the kind of politicking management consultants have denounced for years, but it's not nearly as Machiavellian as it sounds. To become more valuable to your manager, you have to understand the big picture and the details, see what needs to be done, and do it with efficiency and creativity. In a well-run organization, this should help meet the objectives of your whole team and not just advance your career. If it doesn't, the problem is bigger than you. Either way, you'll be better off viewing your job this way.

2. KNOW THYSELF.

Becoming acceptional is counter-intuitive. It means embracing the qualities that make you stand out, instead of striving to become better at qualities that nearly everyone has.

If you're the youngest person in your department, for example, don't pretend you're not. Make your youth your calling card with fresh thinking and new ideas. If you go the other way and try to tout your experience, the best you can hope for is catching the middle of the pack.

To think acceptionally, you need to acknowledge that you can't be exceptional at everything. Nobody can. However: Anyone can be exceptional at one thing.

To find your career's Decision Pulse, you need to wrap your brain around the fact that success comes from doing one thing exceptionally—not a bunch of things just okay. Your career's Decision Pulse should be a quality, skill or experience your customers believe is valuable.

Duh, right?

But it's not so simple as naming all of the things you're good at. If you've spent more than 10 minutes working in a corporation lately, you have likely endured a personality assessment designed to identify your strengths. It's a great place to start, as long as you remember your customer's perspective. You could be the world's best underwater basket-weaver. But if you sell financial plans for a living, your basket-weaving strength is not very valuable to your customers—and it can't be your career's Decision Pulse.

Maybe you're extroverted. That's great, me too. Together we could talk the ears off an elephant. But will that really make you an exceptional insurance salesperson? Or does that just make you someone who is likely to pick a career in sales because flapping your gums comes naturally to you just like it does to 90% of all other sales people?

You must go deeper than a personality assessment. What is truly unique and valuable about you?

3. KNOW THY PEERS.

Compare yourself to others, but resist the urge to conform. Your career's Decision Pulse must necessarily be something your peers can't offer. You might be a great trainer, but if you work in a department full of great trainers, expertise in this area will not help you stand out.

Instead, become the "resident expert" in a narrower niche. If you are a talented trainer, zero in on e-learning, group facilitation or curriculum design. When this need arises, everyone on your team (especially your boss) should immediately look to you for advice. Again: being good isn't enough. You have to be exceptional.

You'll also need to look at your peers to identify common capabilities. Maybe you're a good team player. Outstanding! But here's the question you have to ask yourself: If your department held a "team player" championships, would you be the odds-on favorite to win the gold? If not, then being a team player can't be your career's Decision Pulse. It won't help you stand out.

Think about your favorite restaurant. The food tastes good, right? But that's true of everyone's favorite restaurant. Good-tasting food is simply table stakes. This is why restaurants tend to focus on excellence within a particular cuisine or food (best roast beef sandwich in the Tri-State Area!), or service, or price, or some other quality that other restaurants can't match so easily.

4. KNOW THE REASON FOR THE REWARD.

Your career is a vehicle for moving your life in the right direction. If you're on the wrong road, it doesn't matter whether you're behind the wheel of a purring Porsche or an asthmatic Pinto, you're not going to reach your destination. On the other hand, if you are on the right road, a high-performance vehicle will help you reach your destination faster, safer and more comfortably.

In other words, your life's Decision Pulse and your career's Decision Pulse should reinforce one another.

Your life's Decision Pulse should guide you to the right line of work, and your career's Decision Pulse should guide you to high performance, excellence and success. What you do with this success should support your life's Decision Pulse.

Maybe a successful career will bring you more money so that you can donate to humanitarian causes (Humanity). Maybe a successful career will create opportunities for more exciting experiences (Stimulation). Maybe it will allow you to build a larger nest egg (Security) or travel the world at a moment's notice (Freedom).

Whatever the relationship between life and work happens to be, you need to clearly establish in your own mind how your career's Decision Pulse connects to your life's Decision Pulse.

For example, my wife's life Decision Pulse is Relationships. She began college with the intention of becoming a lawyer, but quickly realized that law wasn't the right direction for her. Instead she decided to pursue her Bachelor's of Science degree in Nursing. She has been a critical care nurse ever since.

Valuing Relationships certainly doesn't hurt her performance as a nurse. But it doesn't exactly make her stand out among other nurses. Basing her day-to-day job decisions on Relationships isn't enough to insure that she keeps getting the rewards she wants most—challenging care assignments to patients who have undergone complex cardiac procedures. (That's right: I pound a keyboard while she literally brings people back to life. Guess who has more interesting stories at dinner time?) She has amassed numerous, non-required cardiac certifications. Early in her career, she sought out inner city hospitals with challenging cardiac patients so she could gain experience faster.

I would describe her career's Decision Pulse as “a cardiac care expert,” although she would never call herself “the expert.” Because she possesses this unique expertise, she receives the assignments she wants more often than not. She also has more options regarding when, where and how often she works, which allows her to devote even more energy to building Relationships with friends and family outside of work.

This is how your life's Decision Pulse and your career's Decision Pulse don't just peacefully co-exist, but actually align with one another.

Once you've had time to consider the four commandments, try to finish this statement:

“I AM INVALUABLE TO MY ORGANIZATION BECAUSE I...”

Examples:

“...am the go-to person for software interface design.”

“...am the sole marketing expert in a team full of accountants.”

“...have the tightest connections to our most important clients.”

“...generate and execute the most new ideas.”

“...am the person who makes sure we meet our deadlines.”

“...keep the team happy and connected.”



Every time you make career-related decisions—which projects to accept, which books to read, which people to meet, which associations to join, which classes to take—ask yourself:

- WHICH CHOICE ALIGNS WITH MY CAREER'S DECISION PULSE?
- WHICH CHOICE WILL HELP ME DELIVER VALUE TO MY CUSTOMER?
- WHICH CHOICE WILL HELP ME STAND OUT?

If possible, ask your manager to review your progress with respect to your career's Decision Pulse. Better yet, see if you can incorporate it into your performance review.

ESSENTIAL DECISION 6: DETERMINE YOUR TEAM'S DECISION PULSE

If you're like most people, your job involves being a member of a team. You might call it a work group or a department. If you are a freelancer, your team may change from project to project. If you are the leader of a company, your team might be the entire organization. For our purposes here, “team” refers to “the people you work with every day.”

Just like you and your career, every team has a Decision Pulse. In the team's case, the pulse is the one thing that makes a team exceptional; the skill or quality or capability that allows the team to deliver value to the larger organization.

Identifying a team's Decision Pulse is vital for everyone, but especially for managers. Your success as a manager almost always depends on the success of your team. And one of the most difficult aspects of managing people is preparing them to make good decisions—about priorities, customers, costs, strategy—hundreds of times every day. Even if you wanted to, you couldn't possibly make all of these decisions for them. Teams need that same guiding principle to help them make good choices in a highly competitive and fast-moving world.



In *Built from Scratch*, co-founder of the Home Depot Bernie Marcus tells a story that illustrates how a team's Decision Pulse is supposed to work.

In the story, a wiseacre in his golfing foursome tells him: "Your company is going to go out of business because your people are so stupid." Marcus didn't get angry. Instead he asked: "Tell me, how are we so stupid?" The man explained how he had visited his local Home Depot to buy a new kitchen faucet with a budget of \$200. The employee who helped him listened to his problem, then explained how he could fix his old faucet with a new part that only cost \$1.50.

Marcus asked who the employee was, but the man refused to answer, thinking the employee would be fired. On the contrary! Marcus explained he wanted to give the employee a raise. That's because the Home Depot team's Decision Pulse is "whatever it takes to serve the customer." The employee had correctly chosen to honor the statement rather than make a \$200 sale.

When they opened their first stores, Marcus literally chased down customers in the parking lot if they left without buying something. If his store didn't have what they needed, Marcus drove to a competing store, bought the item and personally delivered it to the customer's house.

Flash forward to April 19, 1995. Less than 45 minutes after the Oklahoma City bombing, Home Depot District Manager Rich Lloyd notified his stores to send their entire inventory of garbage cans, shovels, trash bags and other clean-up items to the site of the bombing. He didn't ask his superiors for permission. He knew what to do because of the team's Decision Pulse.

Whatever it takes!

Let me be clear: I'm not saying the Home Depot is run by good Samaritans. I'm sure they're great people, but "whatever it takes" is a strategically brilliant statement, one that perfectly captures the power of a well-defined team Decision Pulse.

The Home Depot was founded—and continues to operate on—a strategy of unchallenged market dominance. To make its low-margin

business profitable, the Home Depot has to move enormous volumes of merchandise. They can't afford an average-sized customer base. They can't afford one-time customers. Every single employee—from the teenage cashier to the CEO—must flawlessly execute "whatever it takes to serve the customer" every minute of every day. Every decision they make must align with this statement.

For other teams, the Decision Pulse looks very different.

Under CEO Herb Kelleher, the team Decision Pulse at Southwest Airlines is "**The** low fare airline." In other words, Southwest wants to serve customers well, but not if it means incurring costs that would raise fares.

Or take Nike. Under the leadership of CEO Mike Parker, the Nike team's Decision Pulse seems to be something like "Optimize athletic performance." In a recent *Fast Company* article, Kobe Bryant describes meeting Parker. During their first discussion, Parker whipped out a notebook to sketch shoe designs. Bryant knew at that moment that Parker does not "do things for innovation's sake... He truly wants to optimize my performance."

But what does that really mean? Doesn't every shoe company make a similar claim? Well, sure. But a team's Decision Pulse is not about marketing or branding. It's a guiding force for *internal decisions* that the customer will probably never know about.

When Parker became CEO, he reorganized Nike by sport instead of by product. If you think about the Nike team's Decision Pulse, Parker's decision makes sense. To optimize athletic performance, product designers need to focus. They need a deep understanding of each sport's particular nuances, because a great basketball shoe will be much different than a football shoe. The playing surface and the conditions are much different. The "basketball department" would be much better at picking up on these subtle differences than the more generic "shoe department."

Knowing that the Nike team's Decision Pulse is "optimize athletic performance" not only helps Parker make smart strategic choices. It

helps middle managers and individual contributors make decisions about who to hire (designers and engineers first, marketers second) and how to allocate budgets (R&D first, marketing second). It even helps merchandisers decide how to position the products (as performance-enhancing equipment, not as cool new styles). This makes everyone's job less stressful, because they can be sure they are doing the right thing.

Imagine that. Everybody in the entire company making smart strategic decisions, every single day. Isn't that the essence of good leadership?

Identifying your team's Decision Pulse is similar to identifying your career's Decision Pulse. The four commandments are the same, although they play out a bit differently in a team context.

1. KNOW THY CUSTOMER.

For most teams, the customer is the person in charge of allocating the team's budget. (It's that other golden rule: "He who has the gold make the rules.") This is who you need to impress. Your team must deliver exceptional value to this person.

Recently, I helped the Human Resources department of a medical device company figure out their team's Decision Pulse. We established that their customers are not the employees (whom they served directly) but the C-level executives who determined their annual budget. This didn't change what HR did. They still worked hard to develop great leaders, foster talent and handle payroll efficiently. What changed was how they prioritized their day-to-day work.

2. KNOW THYSELF.

It's time to get acceptional again. That means accepting and embracing the qualities that make your team exceptional, instead of striving to improve the skills every team possesses. Remember, your team can't be exceptional at everything. But you can be exceptional at one thing. To get appropriate resources and recognition, your team must excel at something unique and valuable.

For instance, what made the HR department mentioned before uniquely valuable was their ability get people ready to fill leadership positions. A different HR team, however, might excel at minimizing personnel costs. Another might have some of the most innovative compensation and benefits systems. The point is to identify what *your* team does that makes you uniquely valuable.

3. KNOW THY PEERS.

Take a look at the other teams in your organization. What does each do well? What niche remains unfulfilled? How can your team become the go-to experts in a skill, activity or assignment?

A few months ago, I worked with a talented group of young professionals who started a special work group within their company dedicated to addressing problems that were well outside the scope of their actual jobs. Identifying their customers was easy: the senior leaders who green-lighted the group. Next we had to figure out what made the team unique.

We quickly learned there were a handful of other groups taking on a similar challenge. The most notable was a team of executives. This told us that product knowledge, customer relationships, authority, experience and the cross-functional composition of the team could not be this team's Decision Pulse. None of these qualities would ever make them exceptional when compared to the team of executives.

What did make the team exceptional was their youth. They were able to operate at a significantly lower cost, potentially saving the company a great deal of money compared to Team Executive. Plus, they brought a fresh perspective to familiar problems, increasing the odds of generating truly new ideas.

4. KNOW THE REASON FOR THE REWARD.

To motivate a team, managers must clearly state the team's Decision Pulse. Next, you have to help your team connect the dots. By this I mean enabling every team member to examine how the team's decisions

affect the individual's career, and how the individual's career should align with his or her Life's Decision Pulse. My rule of thumb is:

LIFE DECISION PULSE > CAREER DECISION PULSE > TEAM DECISION PULSE

In other words, your life's Decision Pulse trumps career, and your career's Decision Pulse trumps team.

Technically speaking, it is every employee's responsibility to figure this out. It's the manager's responsibility to provide the rewards. However, the underlying motive of every reward is team motivation. And if team members don't fully understand how their day-to-day decisions affect the team, and how this work affects the path of their career, and how their career puts them on a path to success and personal fulfillment... then every reward is essentially wasted. You're throwing money (or vacation days, or flex hours, or other benefits) away.

Ask every team member to choose a Life's Decision Pulse, and figure out how a successful career will align with that goal. They don't have to share their answers. What's important is that they understand how rewards at work generate rewards in life.

ESSENTIAL DECISION 7: DON'T STAGNATE—GENERATE

We're almost done. But this last lesson is just as important as the first.

I hate to be the one to tell you this, but someday you will die. Now, what are you going to do about it?

That is the basic question posed by social psychologist Erik Erikson half a century ago. "Generativity" refers to the activities an individual undertakes to make a genuine and lasting contribution to the world—something that will outlive the individual and benefit future generations.

According to Erikson, all humans experience eight "psycho-social" stages of development. The seventh is a critical decision point. Will we stagnate or generate? Erikson believed virtually all adults yearn to do

something that is bigger and more lasting than our own personal needs. We want to make an impact that outlasts our physical selves. We want to create a legacy.

I bring this up for two reasons, both of which are critical for your newfound life as a Decider.

1. TAKE YOUR POWER SERIOUSLY.

"With great power comes great responsibility." You may recognize this line from the movie *Spider-Man*. It actually comes from Voltaire, the 18th century French philosopher. No matter. Wisdom is wisdom.

Becoming a Decider will bring you power in the purest sense of the word. Your decisions will make things happen. You will shape events that affect a great number of people. It is my hope that you take this power seriously and use it for good.

(I can hear you laughing. That's okay. Just remember these words when you realize later on that I wasn't kidding!)

2. STAY OUT OF HOOVER'S HELL.

Late one evening in 1928, beleaguered President Herbert Hoover slumped into the easy chair of his friend, journalist Arthur Bullard. As they talked, Bullard mentioned that a friend of his was leaving the next day on a months-long botany expedition. Hoover asked, "Does he have to make decisions on such a trip? If not, I'd like to go along. I'm tired of making decisions—one after another all day long. My view of Heaven is of a place where no one ever has to make a decision."

Being a Decider is hard. It takes work. And it can be downright exhausting.

Every now and then, you will need to rejuvenate yourself. You will need to find a deeper source of motivation than the demands of a particular day on the calendar. You will need to tap into a source of inspiration that is less concerned with the cosmic blink of an eye that is our own lifetime, and more concerned with what endures.

You will need to make a conscious decision to generate. The alternative is stagnation, and it's the quickest route I know of back to Square One.

In my own life, I cultivate generativity three ways. My company funds microloans to small business owners in developing countries. I raise my kids. I do volunteer work at my church. These three outlets keep me moving toward freedom while also producing a legacy that will hopefully outlive me.

Maybe your generative activity is teaching kids how to read. Or making customers happy with the services you provide. Or volunteering at a food shelf or homeless shelter. Or working for a political party. Or raising a family.

Whatever your generative activity is, make sure it resonates with you. Someday, you'll need it to remind yourself that although you are a Decider, you are not the center of the universe.

IT'S UP TO YOU

Let's circle back to Captain Cook for a minute and wrap this up. You've got important decisions to make, don't you?

Recall Captain Cook, high seas adventurer, server of sauerkraut, conqueror of scurvy. I use his story to illustrate the importance of decisive, directed action because it's deceptively simple.

He dealt with a horrible, extensive and debilitating problem everyone knew existed and nobody had a clue how to solve. Some had ideas, guesses, theories. Only Captain Cook made the decision to act. He decided to try something new. He made up his mind. He went for it.

Today, the horrible, extensive and debilitating problem is indecision. We're chronically decision-deficient. Only the Deciders will solve the problem.

Here's why. Doing something is always better than doing nothing. Over time, Deciders win.

That's what it boils down to. Deciders win. Remember:

- ➔ **DECIDE TO BE A DECIDER.** Get out from under the gray ceiling.

- ➔ **CHOOSE A DIRECTION.** Know where you're headed.
- ➔ **MASTER THE ART OF DECIDING.** Work the three steps.
- ➔ **D.E.A.L. WITH YOUR LIFE AND WORK.** Act, adjust, learn as you go.
- ➔ **DETERMINE YOUR CAREER'S DECISION PULSE.** Become acceptional.
- ➔ **DETERMINE YOUR TEAM'S DECISION PULSE.** Help your team stand out.
- ➔ **DON'T STAGNATE—GENERATE.** Keep your eye on building something that lasts.

That's the end of my story. But it's only the beginning of yours.