

Self-Leadership Challenge #10: Tough Decision-Making Made Easy

As a senior manager or executive, you're constantly faced with difficult decisions. Most of the time, you can make those decisions based on experience, financial analysis of the situation, input from colleagues or your boss, or even perhaps pure instinct. But once in a while—and this happens to us all as leaders—you're faced with a truly gut-wrenching decision that simply has to be made, and there doesn't seem to be any "right" or "obvious" choice anywhere you look.

One of my [executive coaching clients](#) is a perfect example of this. Harry was a senior leader at an international pharmaceutical company. He was usually exhausted, working most of his waking hours. By the time Harry came to me, he was burnt out and ready to give up his career to go live on a beach in Belize. (Well, not literally, but I suspect he could have easily been talked into it...) Through feedback, we uncovered that one of Harry's big issues was decision-making—not in any particular area, but the physical and mental stress of making regular tough choices in any area.

"What does it feel like when you have to make a decision?" I asked him.

"Painful!" Harry replied.

"Painful," I said slowly. "So, tell me, Harry, how did you decide to marry your wife?"

"That decision? Well, that one was easy," he replied. "I just knew it was the right thing to do."

"So, making *that* decision wasn't painful?" I asked.

"Not at all!" he said, chuckling.

"When you bought the house you live in now, how did you make that decision?"

"Again, that was fairly simple," he said. "My wife and I just walked in, and I just felt it was the right house for us."

"And, again, was that decision painful?" I asked.

"No," Harry replied.

"Got it," I said. "So, it seems not all decisions are painful then—just some. What's the difference between the less painful decisions you've made—the ones we just talked about that seemed so easy for you—and the 'painful' decisions that you mentioned earlier?"

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This started an interesting conversation that peeled back the layers around Harry’s decision-making process at work. Through the discussion, he revealed that almost everyone he worked with was either a doctor or a scientist—a fairly “left-brained” set of professionals. Based on his experience, those individuals typically felt more comfortable basing their decisions on facts, figures, numbers, charts, and graphs. Harry’s colleagues were naturally strong at analytical and linear thinking, and they relied on that for making decisions.

Therefore, for Harry to justify his decisions to those scientists at work, he had to go through a long and complicated analytical process. This involved explaining to his colleagues how he had done the analysis, reviewing numbers, and holding lengthy discussions with them that centered on the data.

Why was this so exhausting for Harry? Because his natural decision-making style was *intuitive*. If he listened to his gut, he could make decisions reasonably quickly because he just *knew* what the right choice would be. But that wasn’t happening at work because the professionals he worked with could only be influenced via numbers, facts, and figures. Instead of their guts, his coworkers were using their *heads*.

So, when Harry had to make tough calls, he was subconsciously trying to move into his colleagues’ “head space.” He attempted to mirror the decision-making process of those he worked with, but that wasn’t at all natural for Harry. And that’s why he was struggling so much to make decisions—why they were so “painful” for him.

“Great self-awareness, Harry!” I acknowledged. “How will you use this insight to ensure that your decision-making process becomes less painful, quicker, and easier in the future?”

Harry stated that he would first listen to his gut when he had to make a decision, honoring his natural decision-making mode. He would make up his mind based on what his gut told him was the right answer. Then—and only then—would he pull together whatever data he needed to support that initial “gut” decision. Within a matter of days of implementing this system, Harry was making decisions faster, easier, and with much less stress. His confidence grew, and the length of his workdays shrunk, leading Harry to feel all-around happier.

An important takeaway from Harry’s story is that [self-leadership](#) is founded on a solid sense of knowing yourself. What works for you may not work for others, and vice versa.

Your “Motivational Balance Sheet”

Here’s a potential way to help you with decision-making. The “Motivational Balance Sheet” that allows you to look at the pros and cons of a situation and assess various possibilities by putting non-numerical choices into numerical terms. It sort of “levels the playing field” regardless of your industry, your background, or the way you view the world.

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Here’s how it works: Let’s say you’re considering taking a different position within a new company. Write down all the key reasons (a) why you would take the job, and (b) why you would *not* want to take the job.

Now, rate each of those reasons in terms of how important they are to you. Use a scale from 1 to 10, with “10” being very important to you, and “1” being not important at all. Then, simply add up your scores and see which list gets the highest number. Here’s an example:

Motivational Balance Sheet—Accepting a Different Position in a New Company

Reasons to Accept	Importance Rating	Reasons <i>Not</i> to Accept	Importance Rating
I will make more money.	10	I will have to work longer hours.	9
I will experience exciting challenges.	8	There will be a learning curve, and I’ll have to prove myself.	5
I will be more likely to reach my full potential.	10	It makes me nervous to make a change.	7
It would be good for my resume/CV.	8	I may end up with less time to spend with family.	10
Positive Total:	36	Negative Total:	31

In this case, the positives outscore the negatives, which might help you make the final decision.

Think of a tough choice you’re facing right now, and use the Motivational Balance Sheet to help you make the decision.

For more strategies to help you make tough decisions more easily, check out my book, [Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success.](#)

BRENDA BENCE

**BUILDING SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP BRANDS
FOR COMPANIES AND EXECUTIVES**

Brenda S. Bence is an internationally-recognized branding expert, Certified Executive Coach, Certified Speaking Professional, and the author of several award-winning books, including *Would YOU Want to Work for YOU™?*, *Master the Brand Called YOU™*, and *Smarter Branding Without Breaking the Bank*.



In one of her recently released books, *Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.

After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent the bulk of her career as an executive in *Fortune* 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, Brand Development Associates International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, personal and corporate brand and leadership development. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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