

The Deciding Factor

By Stuart White
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I am often asked for advice from clients on how employees can develop certain competencies. There is no easy answer because it very much depends on the area that requires development, some being harder to nurture than others. Take planning and organising, for example. You can be pretty lousy at marshalling yourself, others and your work and your desk can look like as messy as a Mr Price bargain bin, but with a few tips and techniques you can learn to organise yourself better – diaries, planners, to-do lists and, of course, the Microsoft office suite, are all tools designed to bring some semblance of order to what might otherwise be your chaotic life. Any fool can jot down an appointment time and presto – you know what you have to do tomorrow.

But then, there are those things which are just a little bit trickier to master and harder to develop and define – originality, creativity, analytical ability, charisma, decision-making... all these things are very difficult to learn if you haven't already got some natural ability in the area. This latter skill caused great debate in our office recently, whether you can make someone become decisive or rid someone of its antonym, indecisiveness? Or like the old joke, is it a case of 'I used to be indecisive but now I'm not so sure'?

I know for a fact that when I am decisive it's because I am sure. I know the answer so there is no hesitation. Do I turn left or right, want to go to movies tonight, employ someone, attend a particular social function, participate in a work project, etc? When I am clear, focused and know where I am going (whether that's driving to a destination or achieving a particular work objective), I am able to take decisions with ease.

When I don't have a picture of the end in mind, when the destination is not clear, or I am not focused, I become indecisive. And it's not only dependant on my physical or mental disorientation. It's also largely influenced by how confident I am feeling at that time. On days where I feel good about myself (and by implication believe in myself) I will make decisions at the drop of a hat as I will believe them to be right.

On those days when my self esteem is low I will avoid taking even the most basic of decisions because I don't feel brave enough or confident that the decision will be the right one. There are times when I am under so much pressure that I momentarily freeze due to the sheer volume and emotional weight of what I have to do, when I feel that I am almost unable to decide anything including the most basic one of where to start.

I work with many people who are indecisive and yet through their indecision they add great value to the organisation. The upside of their need for endless detail and continual calls for more information to facilitate the decision-making is that when it is actually made (albeit late) it will be a good one because every conceivable piece of information and consideration has been factored in.

But perhaps I am making too light of it? Indecision is something that can be hugely debilitating for certain people and in medical terminology refers to a condition that prevents sufferers from taking a full and active part in society or work. A 'sufferer' from indecision can often spend whole days in the house or garden, unable to decide which shop or store to visit or frequent. Simple choices that you and I take for granted become huge obstacles to overcome which result in paralysis. And the cause? Most sufferers are drawn into indecision due to worry, while some medical journals have suggested, the probability that indecision may be the consequence of a gene (the "wavering" gene) or even a virus transmitted by green or blue budgerigars or parrots.

So this is where the discussion was going and the conclusion that we came to was that you cannot simply label a weakness and develop it. The cause of it can be anything, but you really need to understand where it stems from. Clearly if the weakness is medical – you respond with drugs, if it is confidence then it's a dose of self esteem that's needed, and if it is lack of direction it's an actual or metaphorical road map that is in order. So it's no good simply identifying a weak competency area and throwing standard development activities at it. The sheep dip approach simply won't work here. What is needed is time with the employee to sit down and understand the behaviour and where it comes from in order to prescribe the best remedy. As to what that might be in any given instance – well, someone somewhere will have to make a decision.

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