

The Secret to Making Good Decisions

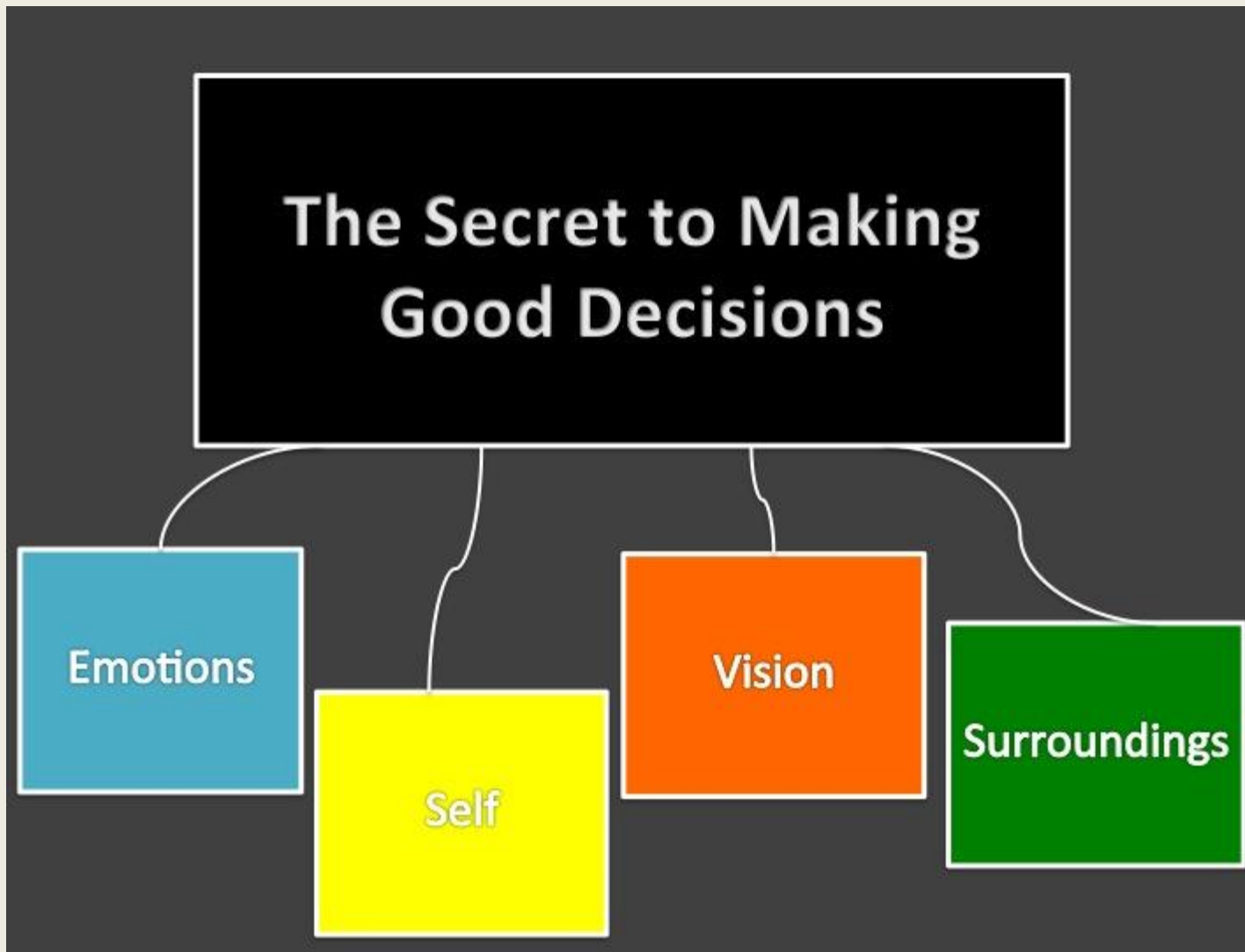
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On the way to a successful career, decisions have to be made, some of which will prove critical. One good decision can have positive repercussions for years, but so can one bad decision. Where decision-making is studied - mostly at business schools and departments of government - there's a kind of pseudo-science that has developed, in which the human element (subjectivity) is reduced as much as possible so that the rational element (objectivity) can dominate.

This tactic ignores the fact that all decisions are human - there's no machine to make them for us - and history tells us that the greatest decision always involved a combination of human genius, passion, determination, and foibles. Emotions flared, for good and ill. In fact, when you read history, you become more and more fascinated by the human drama that unfolds - you might even say that history is nothing but drama.

But what does this mean for you and the decisions you must make? It means that if you want to make good decisions, you must plunge in and make them with full awareness of the human situation. If instead you try to reduce every big decision to a dry, rational computation, you will shut out the very things that go into a good decision.

So, what makes a good decision good? There are four human elements.



Emotions - Your choice must fit in with your most positive emotions and avoid negative ones.

Self - Your decision must match who you are as a person.

Vision - Your decision must accord with your long-term goals.

Surroundings - Your decision must be compatible with the situation you find yourself in.

These are the ingredients present in great leaders, and it's ironic that they are almost completely ignored when case studies focus so much on risk versus reward, flow charts, statistical trends, market movement, etc. Those ingredients can - and probably should - be calculated by a computer. The human element generally enters the picture when a business school or government class studies the hugely bad decision made, for example, in the run-up to the Great Recession. Then it becomes glaringly apparent that greed, rivalry, stubbornness, denial, pride, and a wholesale lack of awareness were crucial.

The obvious lesson is to welcome the human element - it can't be eliminated anyway, not in the real world. If you embrace your human side with total awareness, your decisions will always turn out to be win-win. Either you will make the right decision, or if something goes wrong, you will learn from your mistakes and march forward to make better decisions in the future. This is the attitude that all highly successful people adopt.

The four human elements require you to be self-aware, alert, and flexible.

Emotions: Good decisions feel optimistic. They aren't based on fear, rivalry, anger, and greed. They express expanded emotions while bad decisions express contracted emotions. When the situation is rife with tension, decision-making become clouded. Even so, it's the person who can feel his (or her) way forward without panic, who can stay centered emotionally, who will inevitably find the best solution.

Self: Success depends much more on who you are than what you do. If you keep building a self, moving steadily toward maturity, self-confidence, self-reliance, and knowing your own truth, you will make better and better decisions. Self isn't ego. It is the calm, secure core of who you are. Ego is the drive to satisfy the demands of "I, me, and mine." We all have egos, but highly successful people have learned to act from their true selves.

Vision: Every person experiences a host of shifting emotions, thoughts, and desires. They form the daily jumble that occupies our minds, and quite a lot of the time they dominate our daily actions. Vision turns the jumble into a coherent perspective, turning chaos into order. "I know who I am" goes with "I know where I'm going." Vision is the captain of the ship of life. Here you collect your sense of morality and duty. You know what you're passionate about. You follow your highest aspirations. When successful people have survived immense crisis and challenge, what got them through was their vision.

Surroundings: All decisions are made in a context. You can't reduce decisions to a formula that fits every circumstance. Most people try to do just that, however. They are always fighters or always compromisers. They always embrace risk or always avoid it. Like the proverbial stopped clock that is right two times a day, if you follow a fixed formula in your decision-making, you won't meet with failure, but you won't be flexible, dynamic, and adaptable either. Good decisions require you to assess the situation you find yourself in. This is one area where rationality actually gives you an advantage as you gather information, study the variables that must be considered, and perform in-depth analysis. Yet even here, the best decisions are made by someone who can feel his way along, not by someone who relies totally on data.

In a word, if you commit yourself as completely as possible to making your decisions human, in the best sense of the word, you will be using the secret ingredient that too many others have ignored - it's their loss and your great gain.

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