



The 4 R's of making good decisions

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In many ways, decision-making is the quintessential job of a leader. It is also the biggest driver of performance in business and in life. Researchers estimate we make nearly 35,000 decisions each day. Therefore, it's critical that leaders embrace a decision-making process that reliably results in wise decisions.

The need for moral and emotional intelligence

While logic plays a role in making good decisions, optimal decision-making goes beyond logic. It requires moral and emotional intelligence. Through our work advising hundreds of leaders, we have found that the ones who consistently make good decisions use their moral and emotional competence to:

Increase self-awareness of what they were experiencing (thoughts, feelings and actions) when faced with a challenging situation.

Shift decision-making drivers from outside stimuli, such as fear-producing circumstances, to internal stimuli, such as principles and values.

Adopt the most realistically positive and productive perspective about the situation at hand.

These principles form the basis of The 4 R's, a model for decision-making that helps people reliably activate their moral and emotional competencies to make effective, values-based decisions.

The 4 R's make all the difference in good decisions

Every positive decision a leader makes includes four steps:

Recognize what you and others are experiencing.

Reflect on the big picture, principles and values.

Reframe your thinking as needed.

Respond by deciding to do something — or not.

One of the most powerful features of The 4 R's process is that it interrupts your brain's default responses to external situations. Think of this effect as hitting the pause button on your brain's automatic program for decision-making. You may not always be able to prevent your brain from kicking up an emotional storm in the face of a significant leadership challenge. But you can, by practicing The 4 R's, keep your emotions from hijacking your rational thinking. And, thanks to the brain's plasticity, when you hit the play button again, whatever you did during the pause begins to develop new mental pathways that improve your response the next time you make a decision.

Recognize

Recognizing depends mainly on self-awareness, the emotional competence that research shows has the largest positive impact on leadership performance. Recognizing includes:

Recognizing what's happening to you.

Recognizing what's happening to those around you.

Recognizing what is stimulating you and those around you.

Recognizing is the critical first step in which you can survey your own experiential triangle of thoughts, feelings and actions, and as needed, gather information about the experiential triangles of those you want to influence, such as your teams or families. By consistently practicing recognition, you will transform yourself from a reflexive responder to a reflective recognizer.

Reflect

The second R, reflecting, is the process of focusing on what matters most to you. The primary purpose of reflecting is to shift the things that influence your decisions and actions from external to internal stimuli. External stimuli might include a wide range of frightening or upsetting situations, such as needing to lay off a group of employees, discovering that your teenager is a drug abuser or being reprimanded for a personal ethical lapse. Internal stimuli come from within you. The three primary sources of internal stimuli are:

The big picture of your life

Principles

Values

When you reflect on the big picture, you ask yourself:

In the big picture, what do I want this decision to mean, not just in this instance but over the course of my life?

What do I want the impact of my leadership to be in the long term?

How do I want to present myself in life and as a leader?

When you reflect on principles, you ask yourself:

What principles, e.g., integrity, responsibility, compassion and forgiveness, do I most need to demonstrate when I respond to this situation?

What values are most important to me when deciding how to respond to this situation?

Other questions to consider during the reflection phase include:

How is this situation affecting my ability to achieve my most important leadership goals?

What mental biases might be coloring my understanding of the situation, and how might they influence a potential decision?

On the surface, The 4 R's may look like an orderly, step-by-step process. In reality, The 4 R's weave in and out throughout the decision process. Recognition and reflection often seem to happen simultaneously. Once you make a conscious choice to pause to recognize your experiential triangle, things move very quickly. As soon as you recognize thoughts, feelings and actions, you'll probably find you're also beginning to reflect on what matters most to you. That's a good thing, because the sooner you can get into a calm, reflective state, the less likely you are to make a premature, ill-considered decision.

Reframe

The third R, reframing, begins by taking the results of your reflections and considering whether or not you need to change how you interpret the factors affecting a required decision. More often than not, reflecting flows into a realization that you need to change how you think about the situation.

Reframing contributes to effective decisions even if you discover you don't need to change your perspective about the situation at hand. That's because this third R acts like a spotlight on the most effective option or options for action, inspired by the previous two Rs. Whether you literally reframe a situation (as in most instances) or validate your existing frame (occasionally), the thoughtful process of the third R helps ensure that the decision you ultimately make is wise.

Questions to consider while reframing:

How has reflection changed the way I think about this situation?

Do I need to change my thinking about this situation or not?

What different choices are available to me if I think about this situation in a new way?

Just as recognizing flows into reflecting, reflecting seems to flow naturally into reframing. And just as the first two R's may have danced together in your mind, reflecting and reframing may move back and forth in tandem.

As you move through the reframing phase, you may notice a feeling of relief, as though you can breathe more easily. That's because reframing, though a cognitive process, is also emotionally freeing. When we reframe, we can see more possible choices. We feel lighter. Whether or not we change our frame in some fundamental way, we can be confident that the decision we are about to make is measured and values-based. Armed with a realistically positive frame, we can now make a wise decision.

Respond

The fourth R, responding, might appear to be the easiest of The 4 R's to master. At its simplest, responding is about making a decision. It's about doing something or choosing not to do something.

Questions you may want to ask before making a final decision include:

What should I do?

Should I take a particular action or not?

For each action I could take, what could be the unintended consequences?

It's tempting to jump to a decision as soon as you've cycled through the first three R's. Sometimes, as soon as you have reframed your situation, you may be off and running with a smart decision. At other times, you may feel unsure about your decision and perhaps need to revisit some earlier phase of The 4 R's process. For instance, you may need to reflect further on whether you've fully taken your values into account. Or you may need to be more creative in reframing your situation to open up the most productive choices about how to proceed.

Finally, having moved through the first three R's, you can now take advantage of those conventional decision-making models, applying quantitative methods to identify and evaluate options when the leadership or organizational challenges are complex and would benefit from data science applications.

However, returning to those 35,000 decisions that fill each day, it's a safe bet that most of your choices as a leader and human being don't require sophisticated analytical tools. The decision-making differentiators that genuinely make a difference are the moral and emotional competencies at the heart of The 4 R's decision-making model.

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