

Managing decisions: '90s-style

Work situations are very tricky. Managers spend most of their time making crucial decisions that help them to manage situations successfully. An advantage of studying a management course is that it hones one's decision making skills. The science of management has models for making appropriate decisions. But when models of a different world start influencing me, I find all my decision-making skills going awry in off-work situations. Let me elaborate.

This situation can be as simple as being in a supermarket. Say, for instance, that I want to buy toothpaste. I find racks displaying toothpastes of different companies. Which one should I buy? Here comes the image of a pretty model from a commercial I have viewed in the past in a TV. "Hey, use this brand. My husband recommends it." By some coincidence, all them seem to have husbands who are dentists. Then there are those cute children brushing vigorously and recommending the taste of yet another brand of paste. My son has already picked up one of those. How about that brand which whitens enough to reflect the flash of the camera? Should it be an ordinary paste when I can choose a gel instead? What color paste or gel — striped or red or blue or the clear 'see-through'?

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It is then that my voice of reasoning takes over and recommends a fluoride toothpaste. Baking soda? Peroxide? I am thrown back to the days of my chemistry lab and smells of reagents pervade. It is then I wonder whether I can choose a paste that is gel, has cinnamon flavor and is filled with all FDA approved chemical "-ides" and packed in a stand-alone bottle-shaped plastic dispenser with some dentists' association approval stamp on it. Of course I don't find the product that matches my fancy, but I wonder how long it will be before I get one. At the rate things are moving the wait may be short.

On the positive side, I only have to think about things like weather. Weather has always been known for its unpredictable nature. Imagine the havoc it used to wreak on our forefathers — tornadoes and cyclones destroying homes and crops; farmers sowing seeds only to see that rains fail to materialize. But now, thanks to our sophisticated forecasting models and satellite pictures, weather is no longer the scourge it was. In the past, travel was another major problem requiring detailed arrangements.

But all it requires today is a phone call to the travel agent. Many things which were once complicated have become simpler with technology.

But when I try to decide on the simple things in day-to-day life, I realize how complicated it has become. Most innovations are directed towards making complicated issues simple ones; but in the process some of the simple things have been made complex. Nobody will dispute the fact that for a Pilgrim's father who is fighting the bad winter, choosing a toothpaste is the farthest thing from his mind (not that he has any choice!) Everybody will agree that a number of terrible diseases have been cured, but with hospitals, insurance companies, governments, investigative agencies and so on, health care has become very complex. It only leads me to believe that man thrives on complexity. If most of the complex issues have been reduced to simple ones, then perhaps man likes to turn simple things into complex things, even if it happens to be a simple product like toothpaste. Or for that matter, using so many words to convey a simple axiom! *Bhaskar is a graduate student in business administration and guest columnist for The News Record.*