

Chapter 11

Lucky #9 - Decisions and Courage

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Lucky number nine centers on decisions and courage.

Being a good decision-maker is a skill demanded from virtually every job, yet there exist precious few proven ways to actually train someone to consistently make *exceptional* decisions. A large percentage of this decision-making comes from skills learned over time, often including a fair share of erroneous decisions, while a significant portion is raw instinct.

The courage to make tough decisions originates, naturally, from self-confidence. With

respect to decisions, evolving as a leader means coming to the realization that fundamentally, there are no consequences that cannot be overcome from a difficult decision - that you are doing the right thing based on personal experience, intuition, and capabilities. Self-confidence dictates that, as a leader, you have earned the right to make the toughest decisions and have no fear of making the wrong decisions. You are thoughtful, fair, and cautious but decisive.

Yet, it can be one of the most difficult aspects of leadership because it requires resolute fairness and honesty at the risk of indecisive paralysis. This can be magnified in situations where relationships have reached a comfort level in which

difficult decisions threaten to create confrontation. It's bordering on cliché to point out that confrontation can be avoided by avoiding confrontational decisions, but this is both poor leadership and a roadmap to failure.

Referring to the key elements of communication, mastering the art of delivering straightforward, open, and honest decisions will achieve the most desirable results. Even in dealing with close colleagues, paralysis can be avoided entirely when decisions are made with the openness and honesty you would expect from those making decisions that affect you.

Whether it's effectively delegating work, inspiring and motivating staff, or cutting loose an employee, a good leader

must possess and demonstrate courage in each and every decision impacting the organizational goals.

I often tell people, "I love making decisions." When asked if I fear making wrong decisions, I reply honestly that I absolutely do not. Why? Simple: Regardless of what decision I make, I'm always one decision away from improving the course of the last one.

My evolution as a decision-maker began, of course, very early in life, watching my family and others around me in Brooklyn. The lessons I learned as a youth carried over into the music business, where crucial decisions are made in rapid-fire fashion on a daily basis. I had to make quite a few major decisions early in my

professional life, including making the jump from my comfort zone in the music business to the unfamiliar and daunting technology industry.

Decisions take courage. That became evident early in my own career, but I also observed in others around me. Courage is a trait that helps anyone make tough decisions through thick and thin. I relied heavily on courage when helping my dad toward the end of his life. It was indescribably difficult to have a conversation with him about end-of-life arrangements, but it had to be done. In retrospect, I now consider my father's death to be a seminal moment in my life with respect to cementing my courage in making tough decisions.

My Dad went through most of his life with a touch of decision paralysis, that is, until the point when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Near the end of his battle, he still hadn't made the brutally tough medical and life support decisions, leaving me and my siblings with no game plan for his final days. As a family, we literally did not know what he wanted, and we certainly did not want to make those decisions for him when the time came.

Carrying that enormous burden, I decided the time had come to introduce him to a new concept by presenting Dad with the "My Five Wishes" form offered by the hospital for just such occasions. The form provided a convenient template for the desires of terminal patients,

but the decidedly inconvenient decisions had to be made during his final days.

As difficult as it is to recall this experience, the most difficult of my life in discussing with my father the last decisions of his life.

But the decisions had to be made.

So, on one of the few evenings when he felt lucid, I summoned the courage to sit with him and discuss the concept of listing his wishes should he not be able to make his own medical decisions - to, in essence, be in the driver's seat no matter what happened to his health.

He didn't want to engage at first, but I pressed on. He agreed to review it later. So, when my brother came to town, we

sat at his bedside to go over the form with him. As his son, I reminded him that he always told me and my siblings that he did not want to place all the pressure on us to make the decisions about his death. I promised him that we - myself, my brother, and my sister - would carry out his wishes as he decided, even if he became incapacitated at any point.

"This is the worst conversation for me to ever have in my life," I told my dad. "What you've always wanted in your life was not to put extra pressure on your kids, and I have to tell you that if you fill this out and we do it with you, and these are your decisions. We're just going to follow this playbook."

We engaged in a straightforward, open discussion regarding his

medical care and final arrangements, with me offering suggestions and him asking for our feedback on his list of wishes. It turned out to be an incredibly empowering experience for him at a time when most people are rendered powerless. And ultimately, he made the tough decisions that provided his children with a definite playbook and peace of mind for the entire family as he succumbed to cancer. It was great to see him feel so empowered at a time of such vulnerability.

After the initial conversation, my father said to me, "Man, you've got a lot of guts. I don't know that I could have done that with my father."

I felt I absolutely had to do that with him, despite the pain

and agony I went through in coming to terms with Dad's illness. As much as it hurt, I had to muster the courage to help him get his affairs in order. In doing so, I found strength in places within myself I never knew existed.

We made tough decisions, my father, brother, and I, at the end of his life. But we made the *right* decisions, drawing upon the courage and the desire to do what's right even in the most difficult time imaginable for any father and son.

Even though I realize that I learned much of my decision-making from my father - be cautious, meticulous, thoughtful, etc. - I also realize he influenced to not to be over-cautious to the point of paralysis when options arise. My

dad habitually considered all options from all sources, often resulting in slowing or bringing his process to a complete halt.

As a youngster, and probably until the end of his life, he wanted to be absolutely certain his decisions led to success. He feared something going wrong, no matter how minor, so calling the shots posed constant risks for him - risks he often decided not to take.

This often occurred when my mom would ask him to do projects around the house. My dad would circle those projects for weeks, months, sometimes even years, planning every move he was going to make, every screw, nut, and bolt he needed, the exact right amount of paint and the right amount of brushes and rollers or whatever he needed. It drove my

mom crazy. Make no mistakes - my father was a great man who taught me so much, but no one is perfect, and I gained vast amounts of knowledge from his strengths and weaknesses.

This powerful lesson has carried over to my professional career many times over. Sometimes the decisions will be relatively easy or involve people with whom you share no significant bond; sometimes, the decisions will prove painfully difficult, affecting people you feel close to inside and outside of the workplace.

Most decisions in life and in business aren't nearly as heavy as making plans to take care of an ailing parent, but still require quite a bit of courage. Being courageous in your decision-making often means

you're a strong leader, too, adhering to what you believe in and advocating for your team.

You must have the courage to make decisions regardless of the circumstances. A leader must possess the ability to have very honest and candid conversations with people about their performance based on facts.

Those who respond positively to fact-based, honest decisions are employees you want to keep.

Those who respond negatively or refuse to accept the facts can infect an entire staff and jeopardize the entire company's mission. The decision to remove them, with compassion, from the equation then becomes fairly obvious.

While the CIO at Nationstar Mortgage, we had a major project underway, but in the process of

fixing the system, it sent out many false alerts throughout the organization. My team had essentially inherited an incredibly ill data environment. When we set up instrumentation to monitor its health, it threw off countless alerts - including "false negative" alerts.

Nothing wrong happened with the warnings, yet we realized the alerts could easily confuse our staff and have them up 24x7 for no reason - maybe. The alerts happened so frequently that the guy in charge of the platform turned off a batch of the alerts so they could focus on what they knew to be wrong. As (bad) luck would have it, the batch turn-off left us without visibility to a critical "new" issue, which in turn, caused a critical system shutdown during the worst

time of the monthly business cycle.

My immediate superior - the president of the company - pinned the data environment stabilization project as one of the company's top priorities. When I went to him and explained the outage, he went into a ballistic rage.

"I want a name!" he barked in anger. "I need an ass! Somebody's getting fired over this!"

I responded by asking for some time to figure out what happened, talk to my team, and collect relevant data, in order to provide him the most complete information about the outage and the issues that caused it.

Somebody once explained to me, "When you have somebody working

for you, and they're a fuck up at the onset, it's a reflection on them. But if they continue to be a fuck-up and they continue to work for you, and you do nothing to change the situation, it becomes a reflection on you. Don't ever let it become a reflection on you." And most people allow that situation to become a reflection on them. In this case, I knew the team member responsible was no fuck-up, and his abilities would ultimately reflect positively on the company, the team, himself, and me.

At the end of the following day, I visited the company president again only to find him just as eager to fire someone in retribution for the brief outage.

"What did you find out?" he asked me. "I need a name. I need an ass!" he repeated insistently.

Instead of giving him what he demanded in anger, I offered him a story.

"This guy for the past 15 weeks, has been killing himself nights and weekends to finish this project," I said. "And I can't give you his name, and you can't fire him because he's one of the best guys we have, and he made an honest mistake. I don't even know that it was a mistake. He made a judgment call, and it just didn't work out. We all make judgment calls, and they all don't work out exactly right."

This clearly wasn't the answer, or story, he wanted from me. But

I continued and stood with my convictions. I explained that I intended to address my entire team later that day, and I welcomed him to join us.

He showed up and chose to speak at the meeting. I thought to chew some ass, instead telling the team that while the mistake initially angered him, he thought they should know what kind of leader they had. He described how I stuck to my principles in our conversation and that alone saved someone their job. It turned out to be a defining moment in my career as his confidence and trust in me grew stronger from that incident. He valued the integrity and found the integrity himself to communicate that to my team.

Standing up to your boss and refusing to comply with a direct request took courage on my part - or maybe just a judgment call. There are times when you have to decide to do the right thing, even if it's a difficult decision to act upon. That's where courage in decision-making comes in. And that's how it can tie directly back to the way people perceive your leadership and dedication.

Many times, the toughest decisions - the ones requiring confidence - are guided by instinct. Part of the reason I protected my team member out is that I knew instinctively it was simply the right thing to do. He made an honest mistake, and firing him wouldn't have done him, the team, or the organization any good in the

long run. I had no guidebook or unwritten rules to tell me that. I just knew it.

As you make more decisions and see them pan out to successful conclusions, it will become easier to tap into your instincts. Make one good decision based on instinct, and it can easily be attributed to luck. The second solid decision, you might see it as, "Huh, that was kind of interesting." Three times, and you're definitively on to something. The fourth, fifth, and sixth good decisions should spark an epiphany. You can begin to confidently see your decision-making ability as an internal mechanism, a leadership compass pointing true north every time. And when your inner compass points, your instincts will allow you to go

in that direction with more and more confidence.

At the end of the day, making decisions equates to making a commitment, which in itself can be an obstacle to many. In the decision-making process, being committed to the decision is the paramount challenge - a challenge that must be met head-on and conquered to become an effective leader.

Commitment requires that you approach each decision with sincere effort and realistic expectations and that you keep your eyes wide open throughout the decision-making process. Once you announced that you're going to do something, you must follow through in some substantial way. This principle applies to *all* the Lucky 13 leadership competencies.

Furthermore, commitment conveys to your staff that, no matter what the situation, we are going to succeed. If you, as a leader, remain positive and truly believe in your success as a factual outcome, the staff will buy into your decisions. And in the inevitable event that the results of decisions don't meet expectations, maintaining a realistic outlook will allow you to tweak, adjust, and move forward to the goal.

Commitment can be daunting because so many people may see it as completely abandoning alternative ideas. But I view this as a thoroughly false concept. On the contrary, committing to an idea is a show of confidence in the present situation. It's a means of expressing that, although you

remain aware and open to other ideas, we're going with *this one right now* and we're going to go crush it.

Between finding the courage to make tough decisions and realizing that you are, to an extent, tied to a decision, at least temporarily, taking the lead on decisions can be intimidating. Therefore, it is essential to make tough decisions and stand behind them often and build that specific leadership muscle.

In many ways, decision commitment can be like running. I don't consider myself a runner, but I know if I go to the track every day and run a lap, it will get easier. I'll gradually get physically and mentally used to doing it and soon be able to run greater

distances with less effort. And to get even expand on the metaphor, the more I run, the more I can figure my comfort levels and limitations and how to adjust my running practices to optimize my time at the track.

I'm certain my Dad's myriad of unfinished home projects taught me much about committing to decisions. I adopted the exact opposite of his start and stall approach, diving headfirst into projects and figuring it out as I went along, relying heavily on instinct and confidence, and then experience.

The most important thing to remember when making decisions is that even though you've committed, the decision can ultimately be changed. This fundamental concept should

assist people who encounter paralysis from the fear of failure, which haunted my father.

Deciding means to cut off from all other options at that moment. To commit entirely. But here I am offering that it is not an end-all commitment but rather a sincere, honest effort with a realistic set of expectations. Drawing upon baseball, for baseball mimics life, I'm not suggesting taking out my starting pitcher after walking the first batter or even the first two batters. Decisions should never be that whimsical. However, if after I've made my trips to the mound and discussed adjustments, and the game continues to get out of hand, my initial decision necessarily must be changed.

In other words, the decision process should not equate to: "I've abandoned everything else." Decisions as a leader in the business world should be more along the lines of: "I still have other options, but I'm going with this option right now, and we're going to go crush it as a team."

Make decisions with your eyes wide open to limitless possibilities. Approach every decision with a positive attitude. Believe in your success. Believe in the fact that your decision will have the desired outcome or better. And remain aware that if your decision fails, you can always adjust and/or try something else with the same confidence and mindset.

Confident, committed decision-making absolutely must become part of your leadership tool kit. Remember, you are always only one decision away from fixing one that didn't turn out as you expected. Keep moving forward!