



THE ART OF MAKING IMPERFECT DECISIONS

Ellen Freedman, CLM
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I recently attended a partner's retreat. After I presented my management audit report, I was asked to stay on as a "fly on the wall" while the partners discussed numerous unrelated issues. They wanted me to view them "in action" and help them in their decision-making process. What followed was somewhat typical.

The partners were trying to make a decision about the opening of a branch office. Actually, the decision to have the office was already reached by consensus. And from what I could see, it was a sound decision. A partner had several clients who needed to be serviced in the new geographic region. He felt that he could develop a significant book of business if he had a base of operations, because the town, like so many in Pennsylvania, did not welcome "outsiders" into the fold.

Despite the fact that all agreed the new office would benefit the firm, there was no agreement forthcoming about the scope of the office to be opened. It was apparent that this topic had been hashed over quite a bit by the firm. But no progress was being made to actually implement it. Some felt that a very small and modest base of operations was sufficient. Others felt that in order for business to be developed it would be necessary to have a larger office to accommodate additional attorneys and present a more established appearance. But the work did not presently exist to cost-justify the larger office, leaving partners to object about the possible drain on capital. Thus, a stalemate was at hand.

As I listened to the well presented and logical positions and concerns being expressed, I realized that I was looking at a typical case of what I call the Goldilocks syndrome. Goldilocks, as we remember from our childhood, stumbled upon the home of the three bears. In it she found beds which were too hard, too soft, and one which was just right. She found chairs which were too high, too low, and one which was just right. And finally, the porridge choices were too hot, too cold, and again, one was just right. The point is that we have been programmed to believe that there is a decision or course of action which will provide the perfect outcome, if only we keep looking for it, and refuse to settle for a "less than perfect" decision. If only life were as straightforward as those simple fairy tales we grew up on.

Unfortunately, what we fail to recognize and accept is that there is not always a choice which is perfect. And therefore, continuing to “hold out” for it can be futile, and a monumental waste of time. That’s not to say one should surrender one’s position immediately, or fail to put sufficient effort into seeking better alternatives.

What I found particularly interesting at the partner’s retreat was one particular partner who was totally incapable of seeking or accepting an imperfect solution. His vision was much more long term than that of his fellow partners. He saw no way to get from point A to point B in a straight line, and that truly troubled him. It was clear that he felt that enough time and exploration would inevitably produce the perfect answer, and he refused to agree to any decision which provided a shorter term solution. His partners were quite frustrated. They interpreted his actions and questions as being purposefully obstructive of the decision-making process. I thought their interpretation was incorrect, and in fact harmful to their interpersonal relationships.

Several years ago I wrote an article about procrastination. In it I identified the sources of procrastination, and offered some techniques to overcome it. As I later mulled over the partners’ meeting in my mind, it occurred to me that indecision and procrastination have quite a bit in common. Both presuppose that there is perfection looming ahead, either in terms of a process or answer. One tends to want to wait to find it before proceeding.

This is an especially deep trap for attorneys, as most are innately driven to seek out perfection. As a result, attorneys excel at procrastinating. And, they’re even more adept at developing a keen ability to over-intellectualize and challenge, to the point where decisions are almost impossible to make.

Well, in my usual pragmatic way, I offer this sage advice: GET OVER IT!

Goldilocks was fictional. Take the notion of the perfect decision and just let it go. That’s not to say you should not seek out the *best* decision, or give matters your careful thought and attention. However, you should not let yourself be barred from making a decision because there is no perfect option available. Waiting usually does not make a perfect solution magically appear. It just means another missed opportunity, and a decided lack of progress.

Getting past procrastination is often a case of breaking down the task at hand into smaller increments, and starting somewhere, literally anywhere, to get the process rolling. Similarly, un-stalling the decision-making process sometimes involves breaking down the components of the decision into phases, and examining whether there is a better solution apparent that all can agree upon when considered in smaller steps of implementation.



For many of you this sounds obvious. But when you're inside this forest, you often do not see these trees. You need to step back and take a serious look at the issues impacting the decision, and see whether there is an imperfect decision, or series of decisions, which can get everyone from point A to point B, even if not in a direct line.

Compromise involves making seemingly imperfect decisions on an on-going basis. And healthy law firms, like good marriages, are and must be about compromise between partners. And that means making lots of imperfect decisions.

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