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6 Reasons We Make Bad Decisions, and What to Do About Them

Mike Erwin

5-7 minutes



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Research has shown that that [the typical person makes about 2,000 decisions every waking hour](#). Most decisions are minor and we make them instinctively or automatically — what to wear to work in the morning, whether to eat lunch now or in ten minutes, etc. But many of the decisions we make throughout the day take real thought, and have serious consequences. Consistently making good decisions is arguably the most important habit we can develop, especially at work. Our choices affect our health, our safety, our relationships, how we spend our time, and our overall well-being. Based on my experiences from three deployments as an Army officer and from researching [Lead Yourself First](#), I've found the following mindsets to be detrimental to good decision-making. When you have to make an important decision, be on the lookout for:

Decision fatigue. Even the most energetic people don't have endless mental energy. Our ability to perform mental tasks and make decisions wears thin

when it's repeatedly exerted. [One of the most famous studies on this topic](#) showed that prisoners are more likely to have parole approved in the morning than when their cases are heard in the afternoon. With so many decisions to make, especially ones that have a big impact on other people, it's inevitable to experience decision fatigue. To counter it, identify the most important decisions you need to make, and, as often as possible, prioritize your time so that you make them when your energy levels are highest.

A steady state of distraction. The technology tsunami of the past decade has ushered in an era of unprecedented convenience. But it's also created an environment where information and communication never cease. Researchers estimate that our brains process [five times as much information](#) today as in 1986. Consequently, many of us live in a continuous state of distraction and struggle to focus. To counter this, find time each day to unplug and step back from email, social media, news, and the onslaught of the Information Age. It's easier said than done, but doable if you make it a priority.

You and Your Team Series

Decision Making

Lack of input. [The Kellogg School recently found](#) that in a typical meeting, an average of three people do 70% of the talking. As author Susan Cain articulates so well in her book [Quiet](#), many introverts are reluctant to speak up in a meeting until they know precisely what they want to say. Yet, these members of our teams often have some of the best ideas to contribute, since they spend so much of their time thinking. To counter this inclination, send out a meeting agenda 24 hours in advance to give everyone time to think about their contributions, and work to set a meeting culture that allows people to contribute their ideas after the meeting is over.

Multi-tasking. There aren't many jobs left in the world today that don't require at least some multi-tasking. While that's the reality, research clearly shows that performance, including decision-making effectiveness, [suffers by up to 40%](#) when we focus on two cognitive tasks at the same time. When you need to make important decisions, carve out and commit to several blocks of time during the day to focus deeply on the task at hand.

Emotions. Experiencing frustration, excitement, anger, joy, etc., is a fundamental part of the daily human experience. And while these emotions

have a meaningful role in our lives, you probably don't need to see the [research](#) to know that our emotions, especially during moments of peak anger and happiness, can hinder our ability to make good decisions. Deciding to speak or send an email while angry often compounds a tough situation, because the words don't come out right. To counter this, pay attention to your emotional state and focus on the character strength of self-control. Resist the temptation to respond to people or make decisions while you're emotionally keyed up. Practice walking away from the computer or putting the phone down, and return to the task at hand when you're able to think more clearly and calmly.

Analysis Paralysis. While the Information Age has gifted us with an abundance of information, big data, and metrics, there's also no end to the amount of information we can access. And we know that the more information we have to consider, [the longer we typically take to make a decision](#). While the decision-making process should be thorough, the best way to make good decisions is usually not to take *more* time or to look at *more* information. Instead, review the pertinent information you need, set a deadline to make a decision, and then stick to it.

The decisions we make determine our reality. They directly impact how we spend our time and what information we process (or ignore). Our decisions shape our relationships — and increasingly in today's hyper-connected world, decisions contribute to our energy level and how efficient we are in the various aspects of our lives. Inevitably, we all make some poor decisions every single day. But if we are aware of these six enemies of good decision-making, and take steps to outmaneuver them, we can make better decisions that have a positive impact on the people we work with and lead.