



Royal Bank Letter

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Coming to a DECISION

We live in a world of multiple choices, yet few of us have ever been taught how to make decisions.

In choosing among options, a little common sense goes a long way.

In the end, one bit of wisdom shines above all others: Never make a decision that means you won't be at peace with yourself...

where from Timbuktu to Tahiti. What hath God wrought?

Our ancestor might well ask how it is humanly possible to deal with such an overwhelming array of choices. It would be enough to drive a person of his generation to distraction just to select a bar of soap from the multitudinous offerings in a modern drug store. In his time, a product came in three or four different brands, and not every store stocked all of them. He could buy any colour of buggy he wanted, as long as it was black: imagine his bemusement if he were to stroll among the dense ranks of vehicles of all shapes, sizes and colours in a car lot these days.

The best-considered response to his query might be that we present-day people are able to cope with the cornucopia before us because we are acculturated to making decisions. We do so constantly, and it shapes our individual personalities and lifestyles. We assert our identities every day by deciding what to wear, what and where to eat, and how to spend our leisure time.

If one of our great-great grandfathers were to come back from the dead to the North American town or city where he once lived, the thing that might impress him most would be the tremendous variety of goods and services available to today's average citizen: the long steep canyons of groceries in the supermarkets, the towering piles of dry goods in the mammoth successors to the old chain stores, the travel agencies advertising trips to every-

Though these matters may seem routine to us, there is a decision for better or for worse attached to every one of them. If we choose sensibly, we will dress in a way that does not disconcert those around us, eat food that will not damage our health, and spend our free time constructively rather than frittering it away.

For the ordinary person in great-great grandpa's day, such decisions were pretty well unheard of. There was not much question, for instance, of what to put on in the morning. The average woman donned one of two or three dresses in her possession; the average man walked out in one of a couple of sets of work clothes, except on Sunday, when he would wear his only suit.

What people ate then was largely dictated by what was at hand; if it was pork and beans three times a week, so be it. No lunches in cafeterias or in food courts with their range of quick cuisine from the ends of the earth.

In all but major cities, entertainment was mainly confined to the home, and home entertainment did not mean watching any one of thousands of videos for rent at one's neighbourhood rental outlet. And couples did not have to worry about whether to spend their winter vacations in Florida or Barbados or Hawaii or California, because winter vacations were the exclusive preserve of the very rich.

While our visitor from the past would undoubtedly be surprised by the number of decisions people now make in their personal lives, he would be absolutely astonished by seeing how decisions are made, and by whom, in the late 20th century workplace. In his day, he had a boss who decided everything in the day-to-day running of his (or, very rarely, her) department. In a large company, the boss had higher bosses who passed down unbreakable decrees to the lower ranks.

Now, employee empowerment has spread authority throughout the typical large organization. Also, many more people are self employed than in the time when the bulk of jobs were to be found in big hierarchical companies. In either case, ordinary working

people in the western world today are expected to make more and bigger decisions than at any time in history. Yet in this society of multiple choices, very few of them have had any training in how best to make up their minds, whether at home or at work.

How does one go about arriving at the best decision? Is there an established technique for it? Well, yes; various methods are taught in university business courses. But academic decision-making theory tends to be highly detailed and awfully abstruse.

Besides, history shows that scientific decision-making is none too reliable. Presumably teams of trained thinkers equipped with all the tools of probability theory were responsible for such classic botch-ups as the Bay of Pigs invasion. There was no more scientific business leader than Ford Motor Company's Robert McNamara, but as Secretary of Defense through three United States administrations, he presided over the American debacle in Viet Nam.

As we witness the succession of political and business blunders that pass across our television screens and fill the pages of our newspapers day by day, we can take comfort in the evidence of just how hard it is to make a good decision when our own batting average in this regard leaves much room for improvement. Nobody, after all, sets out deliberately to make a bad decision; but, through the law of unintended consequences, good ones turn bad after they have been put into effect.

As spectators to these public embarrassments, we are likely to comment that the high and mighty of this world could do with a refresher course in good old-fashioned horse sense. But, as has been remarked, common sense is not that common. It tends to be forgotten in the heat of the decision-making process. If it is not entirely forgotten, it is ignored when it stands in our way of doing something we dearly want to do.

At the risk of appearing simplistic, the following are some of the homely teachings which we

learned at our mother's knee, but which we frequently cast aside when approaching a decision. They are couched in the negative because, to paraphrase the Chinese sage Mencius, people must first know what *not* to do before they are able to act confidently on what they ought to do:

Don't be hasty.

Snap judgments are unlikely to yield the best results simply because their maker has not allowed enough time to think things out completely. Consider how often you have convinced yourself that you had a handle on an issue, only to realize on mulling it over that you hadn't thought of a key factor or two. Baseball managers and hockey coaches must make instant decisions in the course of a game, but any knowledgeable fan can tell you about how regularly sports strategists choose the losing option. There is always a certain amount of time permitted to come to a decision. Take as much of it as you feel you need to cover all the bases — and then take more for second thoughts.

Don't be impulsive.

An impulsive decision differs from a hasty decision in that the second entails insufficient deliberation, while the first entails no deliberation whatever. Recklessness is glorified in fiction as the romantic way to act — it's so daring and dashing. But it is likely to be merely the foolish way to act in reality.

Don't trust to luck

It is never advisable in decision-making to do what gamblers call taking a flyer. Be warned that, as the religious philosopher Thomas Fuller wrote, "If you leap in a well, providence is not bound to fetch you out." If you happen to have made a lucky choice, so much the better; but decisions should never be formed on the speculation that "something is bound to turn up," as Charles Dickens' Mr. Micawber would put it. Maybe something will and maybe it won't; but it's just plain silly to rely on it.

Control your feelings.

Many of the most regrettable decisions are made under the spell of powerful emotions such as anger, hatred, love, despair, a lust for revenge, or lust pure and simple. In such emotional states, impulse masquerades as thought. Compelling feelings should be recognized for what they are, and cold-bloodedly discounted when decisions are to be taken. For an indication of just how many disastrous decisions are made in an emotional fervour, see the divorce rate in the western world.

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Take counsel.

This is probably the best way to free yourself from the snares of emotion in striving for an objective decision. Ask for opinions from friends, colleagues or — in a pinch — professional counsellors so that cooler heads may prevail. Even when there is no emotional element involved, it is wise to seek the advice of those you respect when your mind is divided as to a course of action. Here two old-fashioned teachings converge: "Two heads are better than one," and "you can't think of everything." You might have left some key consideration out of the equation which another person can spot at a glance.

Don't second-guess others.

"If I buy this ring and give it to her she's sure to marry me," thinks the would-be bridegroom. But other people have their own lives to lead, and they will not necessarily go along with your unspoken plans. Never anticipate how another person will act unless you have that person's word for it — and even then, watch it! The one you are relying on can always change his or her mind.

Just say 'no.'

"Yes and no are the two shortest words, but they require more thought than any other before being uttered," Talleyrand wrote (and as a great diplomat, he knew what he was talking about). There is a natural urge to say yes to other people's plans so as not to hurt their feelings or give offence. But no is always the preferable answer, even when the best course remains in question. Remember that anything is easier to get into than to get out of. Saying no enables you to revise your decision later, because a no is more easily changed to a yes than a yes to a no.

To thine own self be true.

Many crucial decisions are made under pressure from another person or persons. An iron rule of decision-making is to determine that what you decide is what *you* want to do, not what somebody else wants you to do. In self-defence, we should all cultivate a degree of sales resistance. And keep a keen eye out for the wiles of self-serving persuasion, hidden agendas, and outright lies.

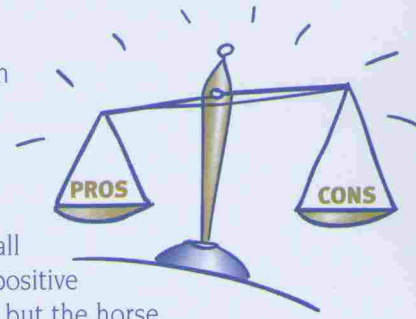
Don't follow the crowd.

While there is individual pressure to do what you don't really want to do, there can also be social pressure. It is a solid principle never to make a decision just because "everybody's doing it." As your mother would say, "If everybody were jumping into the cesspool, would you jump in too?" Trends in society — or in management practice, for that matter — might

not fit the circumstances of your case in any way.

Don't be too sure of yourself.

Some of the world's worst decisions have suffered from the delusion that there can ever be a "sure thing" in all of human existence. A gambler can be positive that a certain horse will win a race — but the horse could break a leg, bolt in the starting gate, or simply not run up to scratch. The false prospect of certainty is what encourages people to put all their eggs in one basket. The successful gambler, if such exists, is the one who hedges his bets.



The common theme that runs through these cautionary notes is the avoidance of wishful thinking. Every skilled propagandist knows that human beings more readily believe what they want to hear than what is actually so.

You don't have to be an amateur to succumb to this fault; it has long been the bane of famous generals and statesmen with large intelligence and planning staffs at their disposal. The above mentioned Robert McNamara, a man of awesome intellect, admitted in a recent book that the U.S. failure in Viet Nam was largely a result of persistently over-optimistic forecasts which defied reality.

The Viet Nam experience posed a good example of how one bad decision leads to another. The commitment of an ever-greater number of troops to patently unsuccessful operations likewise caused dreadful casualties in World War I. One lesson to be learned from the many mistakes of the battlefield is that it is just as important to know how to unmake a decision as how to make one. To back away from your original position can be the most challenging decision of all.

The demon in these cases is pride, which prevents people from doing the obviously sensible thing by admitting their failures. Indeed, some will decide to stick to a course of action in order to save face even when they know that they are wrong.

Changes in direction fall into the category of unpleasant decisions, which are always more difficult to make than pleasant or neutral ones. Shying away from unpleasantness, or trying to soften its impact, is what makes for those compromised decisions that come back to haunt us late at night.

A compromised decision usually makes a bad situation worse by allowing it to drag on indefinitely. The danger of making this type of decision is multiplied by the number of people involved in considering it.

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