Mindfulness Leads to Better Decisions

Key Concept
Faced with a decision, we are more likely to take the path we want rather than the path we should. The reason is that the want choice is quickly identified through assumptions, easy categorizations or past experiences; the should choice only emerges when time and effort is made to consider new situations or alternative attributes. Increasing the state of conscious awareness known as ‘mindfulness’ during the decision making process will allow decision makers to see the better choice... before it's too late.

Idea Summary
There is a decision to be made. The decision makers know what they want to do, and take action. Reflecting on the action later, however, they realize that they did not make the decision that they should have made. On reflection, they see the attributes of the should choice — the new elements or special situational factors that suggest a better choice to the one they made.

Why, then, did the decision makers not make the want choice in the first place? Because they made the ‘mindless’ choice. Mindlessness is not taking the time nor making a concerted effort to consider all the attributes of the choices before them. For example, mindless decision-makers will rely on past assumptions or experiences, without considering whether new circumstances point to a different choice.

The opposite of mindlessness is mindfulness. Mindfulness is a state of conscious awareness that, in decision-making, means taking the time and making the effort to consider alternative attributes and new situations — without taking any cognitive shortcuts.

Mindfulness is present during retrospection on past decisions. That’s why decision makers recognize the mistake they made. The key to more rational decision-making, therefore, lies in mindfulness-based intervention during the prospective phase (as opposed to the retrospective phase) of the decision-making process.
Business Application

For leaders who have been disappointed — in retrospect — with the choices that they or their subordinates have made, this research offers a path to improvement in decision-making: mindfulness, in which decision-makers deliberately and consciously consider all the attributes of the different choices.

Introducing mindfulness is easier said than done. Time is often the culprit. It's easy to take the time to be mindful when the pressure of making the decision is past. But in the heat of the decision, we are less likely to time to ponder all the alternatives and the specifics aspects of the particular situation under consideration; instead we rely on past categories and distinctions, which distract from the more pertinent elements we should be considering. (This distraction from the important elements that should be considered can be compared to advertising, which focuses us on the concept that drinking Coca-Cola makes us happy, while distracting us from issues such as calories or other impacts on health.)

To make the best decisions, avoid the distractions of easy categorizations and assumptions, or of what may have happened in the past. Focus on the present, taking the time to carefully consider all the new and perhaps unexpected attributes of the different choices; carefully identify which choices have the preferred attributes. The result will be mindful, not mindless, decision-making.

Further Reading


Further Relevant Resources

Ben Shenoy's Harvard Business School

Ben Shenoy's personal website

Michael Pirson's profile at Fordham University Graduate School of Business

Ellen J. Langer's profile at Harvard University

Harvard Business School Executive Education profile at IEDP