

**THE TRUTH  
ABOUT**

# MAKING SMART DECISIONS

“Get it right  
every time...”

Robert E. Gunther

*Collaborating Writer, Wharton on Making Decisions*

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## Preface

Think quickly. Should you buy this book? You have to make a decision. Every minute of every day, you are making a series of small decisions that could change the course of your career and your life. Our lives are the sum of our decisions. Your success is largely a result of the quality of your decisions. Have you given any thought to how you make decisions?

This book won't keep you from making stupid decisions. Alas, it won't offer you a life without regret or buyer's remorse. It will help you step back from the heat of decision making and think about *how* you approach decision making. I've had the opportunity to work with some of the leading researchers in the field of decision making, including Paul Schoemaker, author of *Decision Traps* and *Winning Decisions*, Howard Kunreuther, co-director of the Wharton School's Risk and Decision Processes Center, and Jerry Wind and Colin Crook, authors of *The Power of Impossible Thinking*. I have learned a great deal from them about making decisions.

I wish I could say that all this good schooling has kept me from making absolutely disastrous decisions, but I'd be lying. I've walked away from a stable job to start a business (turned out to be a pretty good decision). I've moved 2,000 miles from Pennsylvania to Colorado with a St. Bernard and three kids and back again in one year (a disaster but a fascinating adventure as well). It is a decision I'd make again in a heartbeat because it was for the sake of family. So the little knowledge I have hasn't kept my tail out of the fire. But the way I think about and approach decisions has changed.

There is no simple formula for decisions, but we can become better at making them. No decision is perfect, but often doing nothing is worse. The time to act is now. On the following pages are a series of sharp insights that will give you new ways of thinking about your decisions. There are no shortcuts or machines to make decisions for you. You just need to dig in, open your eyes and get to work. I hope the following truths about decision making can help you in making your own tough decisions.

But some decisions are not all that tough. I mean, buy the book already.

—Robert Gunther

## Introduction

In his '50s, after leaving the White House, President Theodore Roosevelt was faced with the opportunity to explore the Amazon in South America. The journey down the appropriately named River of Doubt (now Rio Roosevelt) was a prospect that was fraught with danger and almost killed his son Kermit. This was a time when the twenty-sixth U.S. president could have basked in the glory of his past achievements, writing his memoirs and putting his presidential library in order. A careful and calculating decision maker might have weighed the risks against the opportunity and wisely decided to stay at home. Roosevelt was not that kind of man. You can almost hear him responding enthusiastically with a single word: “Bully!” He said the trip made him feel like a boy again.<sup>1</sup>

There is an underlying assumption in much of the decision-making literature that making decisions should be based on a rational process. We know that it isn't, but these detours from rationality are usually seen as obstacles to effective decision making. And they certainly can be. Rational approaches also represent the part of decision making that is most easily trainable. We can recognize how problems such as overconfidence or *groupthink* cloud our judgment, as we will consider later in this book. It is important to recognize these challenges, particularly for large decisions that need to be carefully thought out. But it is also important to recognize that none of this would have led Roosevelt into the Amazon, for better or worse, or to the other wild successes of his hard-riding career.

This aspect of decision making is captured in the popular MasterCard commercials. While we can put price tags on some things, others defy this process. You might see Roosevelt tallying up the risks and costs of his trip on one side—the boat, the guides, the mosquito netting. On the other side would be the chance for a 50-something-year-old man to feel like a boy again: priceless.

This is what is so shocking about Malcolm Gladwell's observations in *Blink*.<sup>2</sup> He shows how a moment's intuition can sometimes be better than months of study and careful analysis. We can't assume that every decision can—or should—be made in this intuitive way. Shooting from the hip can sometimes get you killed. In *Th!nk*, a

book-long response to Gladwell, author Michael LeGault blames fast and loose, nonlogical thinking for everything from declining student performance to failures of emergency response to the potential collapse of civilization.<sup>3</sup> There are hard problems that demand a more rational approach. Diagnosing and solving problems in a system or machine usually benefits from a rational approach. You may want your auto mechanic to have good intuition, but you also want him to be able to hook up the engine to a computer to find out what's wrong.

On the other hand, as we will consider in some of the Truths of this book, we tend to be somewhat risk averse as a species, and a systematic and logical approach may actually make us overcautious. By all means, look the decision squarely in the face. Consider it from every angle. But also focus on the intangibles that might be harder to place into a systematic equation of risks and returns. After you've done all this careful analysis, step back. Ask yourself: What would Teddy Roosevelt have done? If you hear the word "Bully!" going through your head, maybe the crazy decision is the right one. Don't underestimate the power of deciding boldly.

As Roosevelt said, "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."



TRUTH

1

Before a major decision,  
get some Z's

 This sounds like something your mother would tell you, but now Mom has a team of researchers at her side to back up what she says. Studies show that students who get enough sleep before a test can achieve higher grades—even if they don’t study more. One of my study partners in college used to keep a jar of No-Doze on his desk and offer them around like candy during study sessions. Maybe he would have been better off just turning in early and arriving at the exam well rested.

Sleep deprivation, on the other hand, can lead to disastrous decisions. Three Mile Island happened on the night shift. Some of those who decided to launch the Challenger space shuttle had been awake for 72 hours. U.S. transportation studies find drowsiness a factor in nearly one-quarter of highway crashes and near accidents. Staying awake for more than 22 hours leads to the equivalent psychomotor performance of a 0.08 blood alcohol concentration. If you have a choice, wait until you have a good night’s sleep. If you have a big decision, don’t sit up all night worrying about it. Write it down and revisit it in the morning.

“Never make a serious decision when you are exhausted, tired, or sleep deprived,” said David F. Dinges, Ph.D., chief of the Division of Sleep and Chronobiology and head of the sleep lab at the University of Pennsylvania. “That is a Russian Roulette game. We will all make mistakes by virtue of our biological limits when we are sleep deprived.”

While ample rest is a simple idea, it’s hard to do in our 24/7, venti-double-latte-driven world. From a practical standpoint, it’s not always easy to get a good night’s sleep. But if you don’t sleep, don’t decide. Pay attention to your level of fatigue and make your decision when you’re well rested, if at all possible. Remember, huge disasters such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill and others were based on decisions made by managers who were very short on sleep.

**Never make a serious decision when you are exhausted, tired, or sleep deprived.**

The bottom line is to pay attention to your physical state when you’re making a decision. Are you dog tired? Your physical condition will affect your decisions. If possible, make sure your eyes are wide open before you step onto the court. 