

PUBLICATION

Three Keys to Strong Decision-Making

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I've made a career out of helping other people make decisions. Along the way, I've learned that there are three keys to strong decision-making.

My first job out of college was in management consulting, where we gathered data to help companies make strategic decisions. I then went to law school, and as a corporate lawyer, I provided legal advice and counsel to help my corporate clients make business decisions that were legally sound. By the early 2000s, I shifted into executive coaching, where I now ask probing questions to help successful lawyers and executives make wise decisions.

For example, recently, I coached a CEO facing a tough choice: whether to lay off workers to preserve cash for future operations or keep them on the payroll to spare them economic hardship. I've also helped lawyers make career-path decisions and supported clients across industries as they choose among business strategies, job offers, and promotions.

Looking back on these moments, three principles stand out - guiding ideas I've used and shared with clients:

1. Know yourself and your core values.

First and foremost, you have to know yourself and what makes you tick. You need to know your values. Values are what you believe is important in the way you live and work. I define values as: (i) who you are at the core; (ii) what you hold most dear; and (iii) what you suffer most from compromising.

Research shows that most of the discontent people experience is because one or more of their core values are not being honored in the way they are living. Translated, when you are unhappy in a job, it is probably because your values and the culture of the company clash. So, for example, if you value order and clarity, you likely won't thrive in a family business in which the founder has created a culture of just-in-time decision-making.

Once you are clear about what your values are, you can make decisions based on them. If I value challenge, I can ask myself whether a particular job will challenge me. If I value financial security, should I really be opening my own business during a recession? If I value independence, should I take a promotion that means I report to a controlling boss?

2. Take the time to gather data.

The second key principle of strong decision-making is gathering data. We've all heard that information is power, and that is never truer than when it is time to make a big decision, such as whether to sign an office lease, lay off employees, or take a new job.

What information do you have? Take your time and observe what is actually happening. Do some research. Ask lots of questions of yourself, the wisest people you know, and possibly even AI. Be cognizant of what you are seeing and hearing. Gather data. Run the numbers. Don't ignore the facts.

3. Tune into and trust your gut.

The final principle is perhaps the most important. Trust your gut. I always tell clients that part of a good decision is getting the data, and then you need to trust what you know. Research from Johns Hopkins shows a strong connection between the gut and the brain. Our gut even has its own network of neurons – the enteric nervous system – sometimes called our 'second brain.'

While our enteric nervous system can't actually think, it does communicate information to our brains and can have profound results on our decision-making capabilities. This second brain sends us signals – like those butterflies in your stomach when you are nervous or that sick feeling you get when you are doing something that makes you uncomfortable.

When we follow our gut – our intuition and inner knowing – we are much more likely to make a strong decision. When we ignore that "feeling" we have in our gut, and simply do what we think makes rational sense, we are more likely to regret a decision.

For example, if you are evaluating whether to hire a new employee, don't simply look at that person's resume and listen to their answers to your interview questions. Notice how that person makes you feel. Does he inspire trust? Do you feel that he is the right person for the role? Hiring him may seem to make logical, rational sense, but if your gut says "no," don't ignore it.

As lawyers, you are called upon to make tough decisions every day. If you know your values, gather the facts, and trust your gut, you'll make your toughest decisions with clarity and confidence.

Debby Stone is a keynote speaker, an executive coach, and the author of The Art of Self-Promotion: Tell Your Story, Transform Your Career. Debby made her career transition into executive coaching in 2002, leveraging her prior experience as a practicing lawyer, an entrepreneur, and a strategic management consultant. She is the founder and CEO of Novateur Partners, an executive coaching and leadership development consultancy serving lawyers, corporate leaders, and the organizations in which they work. Debby holds undergraduate and law degrees from Duke University, earned her Certification as a Professional Co-active Coach through The Co-Active Training Institute, and holds the credential of Professional Certified Coach from the International Coach Federation.