

# A Guide for Making Tough Decisions

by John C. Maxwell

If you can't make them, you can't lead.

Good leadership is not a popularity contest. One of the most important days in my career was the day I realized that leading well was more important than being well-liked.

Anyone who has had this epiphany know it's a tough moment: We've all wanted to be the "cool kid" since our grade school days. Now we sometimes find ourselves sounding like the principal.

But our careers are filled with difficult, sometimes unpopular choices, and our success rests on how we handle them. I once heard Colin Powell say, "Trying to get everyone to like you is a sign of mediocrity. You'll avoid the tough decisions, you'll avoid confronting people who need to be confronted, and you'll avoid offering different rewards based on different performance because some people might get upset."

We're tempted to postpone and avoid tough decisions and hard conversations. The great American financier T. Boone Pickens once cautioned: "Don't fall victim to what I call the 'ready-aim-aim-aim-aim syndrome.' You must be willing to fire." Decide. Act. That's your job as a leader.

How do you find the motivation to do what you wish you could avoid? How do you learn to do what others don't want to do and say what others don't want to say?

In a nod back to that grade school analogy, I'm giving you some homework. This worksheet will help you identify the decisions you have to make and the steps you must take in order to make them. Ready?

## Step 1: Take Responsibility.

The bottom line is this: Nothing changes if nothing changes. Procrastination kills leadership effectiveness today and leadership potential tomorrow. Whatever is your biggest problem now will be your biggest problem next week and your biggest problem next month unless you *do something about it*.

List three decisions you've been putting off:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Step 2: Prepare Yourself.

Are you feeling anxious about those looming choices? Let's do some research to boost your decision-making confidence.

**Pick one of the above problems. List the information you need to move forward and the experts and colleagues who can offer insight.**

Info needed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

People needed: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 3: Reflect.

Once you've completed the first two steps, consider where that knowledge takes you. What insights did you gain? Did you discover things below the surface?

#### List your realizations:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 4: Determine your action plan.

What do you need to do *before* you take action? Should you meet with key influencers? Write a step-by-step strategy? Consult with an expert?

#### List your next moves and give yourself a deadline to make them.

Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

Go through that four-step process, and I promise that decision-making will go from overwhelming to attainable. (Notice, though, I'm still not calling it *easy*!) Repeat that process for the additional situations you listed and the countless others you'll face in your personal and professional lives.

Let me offer a few other strategies to make the process easier.

**Act immediately.** Although it is your responsibility to deliberate options and make educated decisions, you'll also encounter situations in which you must think on your feet. Great leaders act with limited information. Don't hedge! Take action using your knowledge and instincts to guide you.

**Be confident.** Don't waste time and energy second-guessing yourself. Someone once told me that I have no rearview mirror. I believe that's true: I have little desire to look backward. I make decisions and move on. You should, too.

**Think payoff.** Your motivation to act comes from the benefits you envision. Is your team morale likely to improve? Will productivity increase? Will you see an impact on the bottom line? Focus on those positives. It's like going to the dentist—you may not look forward to the process, but the outcome is highly beneficial.

Change can be hard, but uncomfortable changes often lead to breakthroughs. In every challenge lies the opportunity for growth. One of the most difficult decisions that I ever made was leaving the organization my father led—the place I had committed 10 years of my life to. That decision was painful and a little frightening, but it was also the move that changed my career