

The Formula for Good Judgment (and the Cure for Bad Judgment)

Fancy decision-making models abound in the world of work, but they are not what most leaders use day-to-day or meeting-to-meeting. Decision making in the business environment is based on human judgment. Not surprisingly, good judgment equals good decision making and bad judgment equals bad decision making. Fortunately, good judgment is learnable.

But first, let's explore the concept of "bad judgment," because therein lies the path to good judgment. Think about the times you've accused someone of outrageously "bad judgment." Odds are the situation fell into one of these two, opposing categories.

1 *Missing the bigger point.*

You know the aphorism about seeing the forest for the trees. That represents one kind of bad judgment, being so focused on the details that larger issues are lost.

Old joke alert: You've probably heard the one about the three tourists captured by cannibals in French New Guinea. To kill the tourists, the cannibals set up a guillotine abandoned by French colonialists. Tearful and shaking, the first tourist got on his knees as his head was forced into the guillotine. The blade was released and shot down the length of the guillotine, only to stop a few millimeters from the tourist's neck. The cannibals

took this as a sign from above that the man was to be released, and so he was. The second tourist—well, let's cut to the chase, the same thing happened to him. As the third tourist, an engineer, got on his knees, his trained eyes squinted up at the mechanism. A smile washed over his face and he beamed at the cannibal leader, "Hey, Chief! I think I know your problem!"

Sorry.

But we see this deadly dumb focus on details all the time. We see military briefers who will doggedly plod through each and every PowerPoint slide, regardless of the interests or needs of the audience. We see software writers who are determined to add just one more feature, until a market window slams shut. The list goes on and on. The devil is in the details indeed—and sometimes, so is the difference between success and failure.

2 *Missing the finer points.*

There is an opposite problem. Although it's not a standard aphorism, there are people who can't see the trees for the forest. You might get the occasional big, broad idea from them, but it will reflect no understanding of what is required to achieve the idea. And we've all seen the imperious executive spouting The Big Directive, clueless about what balls will be dropped, or other repercussions incurred in pursuit of this shiny new object, or as a result of it.

The nineteenth-century economist Frédéric Bastiat used this idea in distinguishing between bad economists and good economists:

“There is only one difference between a bad economist and a good one: the bad economist confines himself to the visible effect; the good economist takes into account both the effect that can be seen and those effects that must be foreseen.”

THE FORMULA FOR GOOD JUDGMENT

Both kinds of bad judgment beget bad side effects. What's the cure for either type of bad judgment? Combine them. Fuse the two kinds of bad judgment together and you get good judgment. Kind of like sodium and chloride. Separately, they're toxic. Together, they're salt.

If you want to develop good judgment (or help someone else achieve it), learn to do both kinds of judgment, starting with your preferred style, and then consciously and deliberately, looping over to the other style and back again a few times. That's it.

So, if you're a tree-type person (the engineer at the guillotine), go ahead and focus on your critical details, but then loop back the other way. Give meaning and context to the details by asking questions such as these:

- What's the ultimate point here? And, what's the point of that?
- What were we originally funded to produce?
- What's the broader impact of the decision I'm considering? Could anything negative be created by my positive intentions?

Then loop back over to “crucial details” and see if you still like the game plan or want to alter it a bit. Make a couple of little-picture/big-picture loops until you are satisfied with your thinking.

That's how good judgment works: You dance from side to side, like the Texas two-step.

On the other hand, if you're a forest-type person, a Big Thinker, go ahead and revel in that Big Picture, but then loop over to Detail Land with questions such as:

- What would be the first, concrete step?
- What will it take to make this happen in terms of time, money, and effort?
- What might we have to stop doing in order to do this thing?
- Who else, or what else, might I affect with this effort?

After you've got some of those grimy details in hand, loop back to your lofty heights and see if you still like the scenery. Again — consciously and deliberately — jog around this track a few times. It is the only way to move from a vaporous vision to an actionable one, one you'll be proud of when it's achieved.

Whether you're a big-picture or a detail-oriented type, if you make the loop enough times, in the end you'll be able to see the forest and the trees. One direction will feel natural to you, but the other you will have to push yourself toward consciously and deliberately. With practice, good decision making will become habit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It would be lousy judgment if we didn't credit the smart guy who came up with this model. Years ago, our friend and former colleague (and intercultural communication overlord) Dr. Milton Bennett delivered these fine thoughts in a class we were co-teaching. It made loads of sense and has stuck with us since.