

YOUR LEADERSHIP

EDGE

LEAD ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

ED O'MALLEY
AMANDA CEBULA

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The true measure of leadership must be that actions or interventions lead to progress. We define an intervention as an attempt by one or more people to make progress. To Intervene Skillfully is to do so consciously and purposefully. Skillful interventions help manage conflict by bringing it into the open and working through it in a productive way.

Making progress on adaptive challenges takes innovation and experimentation. As advocates for change, we must keep in mind that there's no way of knowing whether an intervention will work until we try it. If it works, great, then we move on to the next one. If it doesn't, we evaluate why, adjust the approach and try again. Change starts with someone who cares enough to work hard and take the inevitable, necessary risks.

PART 4

INTERVENE SKILLFULLY

CHAPTER 19

INTERVENE SKILLFULLY

Make Conscious Choices

To lead effectively you must see the options and make conscious choices to advance your purpose. There are two elements to this idea: “being conscious” and “making choices.”

Being conscious

How often do you really make a conscious choice? Most of us go about our day doing more floating than choosing. Floating from one meeting to the next, one month to the next, one project to the next. Going through the routine. Not thinking much about it.

We “wake up” at the end of the month, the conclusion of a project or even toward the end of our life and wonder, “how did we get here?”

We make hundreds of choices every day (what to wear to this event, who to talk with during the break in meetings, which emails to respond to first, what items to remove from the to-do list, etc.), but few are deliberate and



"WE EAT BRAINS BECAUSE
BRAINS ARE FOR EATING. WHAT MORE
IS THERE TO THINK ABOUT?"

conscious. Few are strategic and purposeful. Most are unconscious and lack logic or strategy.

The number of conscious choices you make each day probably has some corollary to whether you are leading or not. Participants in our programs and experiences report they initially have trouble becoming more conscious about their choices when attempting to exercise leadership. Why?

HERE ARE A COUPLE REASONS:

- ▶ **THEIR UNCONSCIOUS BEHAVIOR IS WORKING FOR THEM.** For example: If you jump in at the first sign of a problem and “fix” things, it builds your ego and solidifies your identity as a “fixer,” even if the better leadership behavior would be to keep diagnosing the situation.
- ▶ **IT TAKES TIME.** You need to slow down to see the choices coming. But everything in life goes faster and faster! It helps to recognize that leadership is abnormal behavior. It runs against the grain. It's rare, and for good reason. To make more conscious choices you'll need to take care of yourself, hold to purpose and choose among competing values. (Check out those chapters in this book.)

Making choices

During jury service, Ed was struck with how hard it was for some members of the jury to make a choice — guilty or not guilty. It was a murder case and a guilty verdict would result in a 30- to 40-year sentence. It was a complicated case, up until the point the prosecutors played a taped confession. Then it was pretty clear. He was guilty. And even with that evidence, three jurors struggled to make a choice. They couldn't present a clear argument that he was innocent. They were just crushed by the weight of the decision.

It's hard to lead if you can't get comfortable making choices — conscious choices, deliberate choices where you choose one thing over something else.

Making choices is hard when working on an adaptive challenge because there is seldom a clear choice. Nothing is 100 percent right or wrong, yes or no, good or bad.

When Ed was in the Legislature he rarely was ready to vote when the speaker of the House said, “The clerk will clear the rolls and the members will cast their votes,” a phrase uttered several thousand times each term. Ed had to press the green (yes) or the red (no) button. There was no more delaying, deliberating or researching. Yes? No? Red? Green? On issues with adaptive elements, he rarely felt 100 percent certain.

It’s hard to make choices in adaptive work, because each choice means we are deliberately elevating one thing we care about over something else we also care about. It doesn’t feel good.

Here’s a simple example from Amanda’s family:

The unspoken rule for family visits is that the refrigerator should be stocked with food everyone enjoys — including a hearty supply of soda. To make changes for a healthier lifestyle, Amanda and her husband rarely have soda around the house anymore. They had a difficult choice to make with the impending arrival of her parents — to stock the fridge with soda or not?

Amanda’s purpose was clear — try to make the healthy choice the easier choice for herself and her family. She thought about the many options for what to do. She could still purchase soda, just not as much. She could wait until they arrived and then decide. She could not buy it at all. After considering the options, she thought about the many interpretations her parents might make if she didn’t have any soda available. They might be upset. She could look like she didn’t prepare for their visit and risk their thinking the visit wasn’t important — they weren’t important. They could interpret her action as disrespect.

But her purpose was clear. She decided no soda.

Just a silly soda example, right? Wrong. The choice ran much deeper for Amanda. Making conscious choices that run against the norm is challenging.

“One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes ... and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.”

— ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU’VE MADE A CONSCIOUS CHOICE?

- Did you think about your action before jumping in?
- Did you stop to make a few observations and interpretations about the choice you were about to make?
- Did you feel the heat go up? (See Chapter 19 on Raise the Heat.)

HOW DO YOU MAKE CONSCIOUS CHOICES?

- **Think like a scientist.** Get in the habit of creating hypotheses. “If I do _____, I think _____ will happen.” Then test your hypothesis and reflect on it.
- **Get really clear on your purpose.** Stephen Covey says, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” What’s your main thing? Knowing it will help you make conscious choices to advance it.
- **Create a menu of options before you choose.** Don’t go with your first idea. Create three or four choices you could make, evaluate and then choose.

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MAKING CONSCIOUS CHOICES?

Read “The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business” by Charles Duhigg. We love the idea of the “habit loop” in Chapter 1 and suspect that making conscious choices in leadership has something to do with rewiring that loop.

Lessons from History

MAKING CONSCIOUS CHOICES

President Abraham Lincoln’s “drafts” folder would be pretty full if he had email. After his death his staff found dozens of letters written months or years earlier, all fully drafted, folded in envelopes and addressed. The letters were harsh rebukes of generals, irate missives to other officials or constituents. The letters show that our 16th president had a temper. The key is, the letters were never sent. By writing them and tucking them away in a desk drawer, Lincoln managed his triggers. He created a buffer between his emotional reaction (which led to the writing of the letter) and his action (choosing not to send the letters).



I just started a new job. I'm known for jumping right in to projects and getting really involved. How can I be most effective as "the new guy" and also not get in over my head too quickly?

- JUMPING JAMAL

Dear Jamal,

A sure recipe for getting in over your head is jumbling up the technical and adaptive elements of your job and treating them all the same.

It's time for some conscious choices. Slow down. Diagnose the situation. Give yourself a little time before you intervene.

What about your job is technical? Make a list. Get on those technical things right away. Use your expertise and authority to solve those problems.

Now, what is adaptive? Make another list. Begin to engage others about the items on that list. Use questions such as: How do you see this dynamic? What concerns you the most about this? What gets in the way of progress on that?

And Jamal! Keep in mind that simply by making those two lists you will already be practicing "making conscious choices"! Well done.

Onward!

