

Managing The ‘Shoulds’ Of Decision Making

By Nancy Byerly Jones

Choices. The fabric of our personal and professional lives is heavily interwoven with the decisions we have made or not made. And, most of our choices have a direct or indirect, negative or positive impact on the lives of those who live and work with us.

This writing reflects upon our decision making skills. Are they strong, so-so or needing improvement? How do the “shoulds” imbedded within us and heard via our inner voices or gut feelings influence our decision making? How can self-evaluation tools help us distinguish better between our self-imposed “shoulds” and those imposed upon us by others (e.g. parents, significant others, friends, partners)?

You should not associate with him. You should attend church. You shouldn't leave home in dirty underwear. You should make your bed every day. You should only take these types of cases. You should live and work in a certain location. If you want to be considered a “real” lawyer, you should do it on a full-time plus basis. You should or should not do this or that.

What about all the “shoulds” we impose upon ourselves?

Should I take this case? Should this case go to trial? Should I hire an associate? Should I allow my kids to do this? Where should I locate my office? What should I eat? Should I marry? Should I stay married? What should I wear? Should I say anything? How should I say it? Should I work for a different firm? Should I change my career course?

Tongue Overload

How very attached to our tongues and thoughts the “should” word seems to be. Think of the power that one little word yields over so many of our thoughts, words and decisions, from big to small.

No doubt some of the “shoulds” coloring our decisions are safety valves constructed from past lessons learned. Those types of “learned by hard core experience shoulds” can help us avoid making (or remaking) unwise and foolish decisions.

Far too many “shoulds,” however, (i.e. the “you shoulds” of our lives!) reflect voices other than our own – some of them manipulative voices that we have allowed to dictate many of our actions and non-actions. Herein lies the danger zone of the “shoulds” in our lives which leads us to critical questions to ask of ourselves: Are we allowing the “shoulds” of our lives to negatively or positively affect our personal and professional decisions? And, to which “shoulds” are we listening?

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Self-Evaluations

Achieving true and lasting satisfaction with the decisions we make in our lives depends heavily upon how honest we are with ourselves. Before making major personal or career decisions, we need to ask ourselves:

Are we making a decision because we feel it’s right for us or because someone else thinks we should be doing it (whatever “it” is)? Are our decisions in keeping with our personal values? Our family’s needs? The personal and career goals we’ve set for ourselves? Our competency, skills and interests? Our budget? Our physical limits? Our emotional limits?

These and many other questions should (there’s that word again!) be carefully pondered and honestly answered before making the bigger decisions of our lives. And, at the very least, whether we are faced with a big or small decision, it is always wise to ask ourselves which type of “shoulds” are being used to help us in reaching our decisions – the ones learned from our personal life experiences or those unsolicited ones preached to us by third parties?

Career Reflections And Decisions

This next section reflects upon our career-related decisions since those types of decisions made play such a major role in the quality of our professional *and* personal lives. Find some quiet, uninterrupted moments (solitude – now there’s a challenge!) to reflect upon your work, its pros and cons, how your standards or ethical values compare with your co-workers, what motivates you and how you want to be living your life both in and out of the office. The following exercise can help as well:

- Think of someone whom you admire and whose career appears to be *in sync* with their personality, ethics, desires and skills.
- Think about how would you characterize this person?
- After considering the person’s character traits, make a list of their characteristics (i.e. honest, down-to-earth, decisive, empathetic, organized, full of life, inquisitive, knowledgeable, fair, resourceful, respectful of others, adventurous, etc.) Don’t stop short – allow enough time to write down every possible adjective you can think of that paints a pretty good picture of your chosen person.
- Now do the same for someone whose career choices seem totally *out of sync* with their characteristics. This person may be someone who works poorly with others, who seems to carry an ongoing dissatisfaction with their work, their co-workers and the world in general, who appears to have disjointed life styles or whose ethics you may question (i.e.

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self-centered, disrespectful, deceitful, poor listener, cowardly, unfair, loud, arrogant, etc.).

- After making your lists, think about each of the qualities you have listed in describing these folks. Consider how many of their qualities you share -- the good, the bad *and* the ugly!
- Identify the areas in which you need to improve (e.g. become a better listener, be more decisive, gather more input from staff before making certain firm decisions such as computer-related matters, etc.)
- Make a short hot list of those traits you want to work on improving (e.g. Are you sporting a bad attitude, are you a poor listener, ego too big, too thin-skinned, overly or too easily influenced by what others think you *should* do?)
- Review this priority list several times each day to help ensure you steadily stick with your efforts to improve in needed areas.
- Keep this information about yourself in mind when making decisions so as to maximize your chances of smart decision-making.

Law Office Decision Making

Now, let's take a brief look at your decision making skills within your office. If other members of your firm were asked to give their honest opinions about your decision making skills right at this very moment, what would be said? Would they describe you as:

- decisive;
- indecisive;
- impulsive;
- a shoot from the hip kind of guy or gal;
- wishy-washy;
- unprepared;
- fair;
- biased;
- off the wall; or
- a rather steady, calm type?

How would you describe yourself when it comes to your in-office decision making characteristics? Do your decision making skills need some honing?

It's easy to point our judgmental fingers at others and to identify their problems and weaknesses. The harder thing to do is to turn our fingers around so that they point

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directly back at ourselves. We may not be able to change another's personality or bad habits, but we surely can address and work on our own areas needing improvement. If every person within a firm would work on improving themselves more rather than complaining about what someone else is or is not doing, we would benefit individually and our firms would take *huge* progressive and productive leaps as a whole.

Typical Office Complaints

One of the most common complaints I hear repeatedly from law office employees concerns the failure of leadership to make needed decisions in a timely manner. The next most common complaint is the unwillingness of firm leaders to stick to whatever it is they say is going to happen. For example, attorneys promise their staff members they will begin holding weekly meetings and they do, but only for about two to three weeks. After that, the excuses start and by the end of another month, no one even tries anymore to schedule such a firm meeting. Sound familiar?

Great Skills, Bad Habits?

Another example would be when a firm employee is not held accountable to heed the firm's rules and policies. Perhaps the employee has incredible skills upon which the law firm relies heavily. This person, however, is perhaps habitually and notoriously late for work. Or, worse, someone's attitude stinks on a daily basis and the person seems to thrive on keeping the pot of turmoil stirred up! If these types of employees can be chronically late or be the office whiner ad nauseam without any consequences, why should he or she change her morning routine or do any attitude adjusting?

The 'Costs' Of Avoiding Tough Decisions

If only leadership could read the thoughts of staff members who somehow manage to get in the office on time most days and who demonstrate positive, productive attitudes. They are human too and firms are at a high risk of employee dissatisfaction and turnover when decisions are not made and enforced fairly across the board. Office morale, productivity and employee loyalty definitely and dangerously suffers when:

- there is a failure to make tough but needed management decisions regarding policies;
- there is unfair enforcement of firm policies and procedures; and
- habitually sour attitudes are allowed to exist and do their damage.

Some employees will eventually get fed up with these types of things and they will quit. Leadership may or may not be told the primary reasons they resigned. Other employees who stay with the firm might deem the injustice of it all as their excuse for not being as productive as they could be. Their unspoken thinking may be along the lines of: "If so and so can get away with their crankiness or daily tardiness, then why should I work my you-know-what off for this firm; I'll do enough to get by and no more!"

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These situations are very much alive and well in many of today’s firms. From my years of experience as a law office consultant/advisor, the types of office situations described above need our immediate attention. This means tough, but necessary decisions being made by the firm’s leadership.

But I’m Too Busy Practicing Law...

We rationalize our failure to make the tough decisions by telling ourselves that we are too busy practicing law to have time for dealing with difficult administrative or partnership decisions. It seems far easier to not rock the boat and to let things just plod along as they have been. This works for a while, but never makes the problem go away.

When it comes to facing and making decisions for internal “health” of our law offices, procrastination can come with very high costs. It *will* come back to haunt us sooner or later if we put off making needed decisions. There are no perfect answers so every decision we make has its costs. The costs, however, of making the tough decisions up front and sooner than later are far, far less than the ever-growing damages that occur when we bury our heads in the sand.

While it is not the fun part of practicing law, it is essential that we learn how to make timely, smart and reasonable law office management decisions. More importantly, our decisions should (oops there is that word yet again!) be made with the necessary commitment to stick with them once made. If we find we absolutely made a wrong or faulty decision, then we need to find the courage to own up to our mistake, correct it and move on.

Doing The ‘Right’ Thing

Self-exploration is indeed an on-going, life-long, educational process. Self-knowledge helps us call forth the necessary wisdom and courage to make the best decisions under the circumstances. Knowing our strengths and weaknesses help us to live our best personal and professional lives and to live them in harmony with whom we really are. And, it does take a great deal of courage and wisdom to avoid entrapment in a life designed and dictated by others.

Some of the toughest career decisions we ever make are ones that require every ounce of courage and wisdom we can muster (e.g. the reporting of a peer’s substance abuse or sexual harassment problem, the dismissal of an unproductive or insubordinate employee, the dissolution of dysfunctional partnerships or moving forward with a major career or personal change). These types of decisions are often avoided because:

- they may seem to guarantee “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” consequences;

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- we worry our actions or non-actions may be viewed negatively by others who are not privy to all the facts;
- they may cost us popularity regardless of having done the “right” thing ethically and in accordance with our job responsibilities; and/or
- they may result in some tough consequences for ourselves or others.

These types of potential “costs”, however, are more than outweighed by the long-term benefits enjoyed from wise and courageous decision-making.

Final Thoughts (And Another ‘Should’ Or Two)

Choices. Choices made by ourselves and others for us. They indeed have a heavy influence over the fabric of our lives.

“Yesterday is a canceled check. Tomorrow is a promissory note. Today is the only cash we have so we must spend it wisely.”

Are we spending our days wisely whether in and out of the office? The “shoulds” within us – are they ones put there from personal experiences or imposed upon us by others?

Life is far too short to be complicated and burdened with decisions made for the wrong reasons or due to the wrong “shoulds.” What can each of us do to improve the quality of decisions made for our offices or regarding our personal lives? Or, perhaps the better question is: What *should* ... make that *can*we be doing to improve the quality and success rate of our decision making skills?

[NOTE: The questionnaire and worksheet accompanying this article provide a few thoughts to ponder when making decisions about your personal or professional lives. They are not intended to be all-inclusive or as a “one-stop” self-assessment toolbox. I do hope, however, the questions above and these other tools will provide you with at least a preliminary start towards making smarter career and personal decisions.]

Career Reflections

1. Why did I choose my current work (money potential, service to others, travel, etc.)?
2. What are the most enjoyable aspects of my work? Least enjoyable?
3. What are my most profitable areas of my practice/work? Least profitable?
4. Am I managing and balancing my personal and professional lives satisfactorily so as to enjoy a reasonably good quality of life?

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5. If I could leave the practice of law without suffering a financial loss, would I?
6. What would I want to do if not practicing law?
7. If I went on a sabbatical, what would I like to do and for how long?
8. What do I like most about the other employees within my office? Least?
9. What concerns me most about:
 - ◆ My clients?
 - ◆ Other clients of the firm?
 - ◆ My partners?
 - ◆ Associates?
 - ◆ My supervisor (if solo, this means you!)?
 - ◆ Staff members
 - ◆ Firm's risk management systems & policies?
 - ◆ How technology is used (or not used) in my office?
 - ◆ Overall firm management and leadership?
 - ◆ Prior big decisions made?
10. What are my personal ethics/standards/values? The firm's?
11. Do the firm's office's values seem to be in harmony with mine?
12. Do I enjoy a consistently good working relationship with my staff? My partners? Associates?
13. What seems to be the primary motivating factor in my office (i.e. money, excellent client relations, quality work product)? Secondary?
14. How do we treat each other within my office (i.e. respectfully, fairly, honestly, empathetically or rudely, unprofessionally, unfairly, bullying, etc.)?
15. In what direction is my firm heading or do we just seem to be going in circles year after year?
16. Am I in agreement with where the firm appears to be heading? Why or why not?
17. Am I earning enough money and other, non-monetary "perks" and incentives in consideration of what I do?

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18. How much time do I spend daily complaining about my work? Praising it? Every day or just occasionally?
19. When am I happiest? most motivated? most productive?
- 20 . Do I enthusiastically believe in and agree with the purpose of my work? (i.e. Is my heart in my work?)

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"Career & Personal Pros/Cons"

	The Positives	The Negatives	Outstanding Decisions Needing to Be Made
My Work in General			
Clients			
Partners			
Associates			
Support Staff			
Office Management			
Family			
Friends			
Physical Health			
Mental Health			
Other Activities (i.e. Church, Sports, Community, etc.)			

NOTES: _____
