

# A WEEK IN *Learning*

## APPROPRIATELY DECISIVE

Spencer Ray, SVP and Chief Administrative Officer

### A Double-Edged Sword

Decisiveness is the ability to quickly assess a situation, identify potential options, and effectively choose one's course of action. This is a critical skill in many aspects of life – particularly leadership. Being indecisive can lead to missed opportunities, lessening of trust among team members, and allowing external factors to determine our future for us. Decisiveness, therefore, is an important trait that can help each of us to be more effective in our roles with Goodwill.

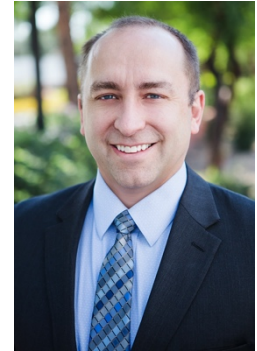
Having said all that, is it possible that our ability to be decisive can be overused? Unfortunately, like most character strengths, overly relying on decisiveness can cause serious misunderstandings. Let me share with you a personal example:

### Making a List – Should I or Shouldn't I?

Years ago, when I was dating my future wife (Sara), I decided to make a list of reasons why I should or shouldn't marry her. Yes, I know...how old-fashioned, right? Don't worry, my children have already educated me on this. Anyways, back to the story.

The “**should**” side of my list highlighted a myriad of compelling reasons why I wanted to spend my lifetime with Sara – her character traits, her ability to help me be better, and just her goodness. Conversely, the “**shouldn't**” side highlighted some real concerns I had about her and whether we would be a good match forever. I felt strongly that I wanted to be with my wife forever, so I wanted to choose wisely. Although the “should” side was much, much longer (fortunately) than the “shouldn't” side, I still had concerns. However, as I came to learn more about the real Sara, I realized my list of items on the “shouldn't” side fell into one or more of the following categories:

- **Just plain wrong:** I was just simply wrong about my initial assessment. This was a natural result of just getting to know her better.
- **Evolving priorities:** I had identified something that mattered at one point to me, but as I came to know her better, I realized that I didn't really care too much about that item anyway. It wasn't that I became swept up in just loving her regardless, but I realized that I had gotten caught up in making a minor thing a major thing.



“Delaying a decision too long may become a decision in itself.”

- **Spencer Ray**

- **Miscategorization:** I recognized that a “*shouldn’t*” item listed was actually a strength and not a weakness. For example, one item was, “She is loose with money” (i.e., she doesn’t value money and spends too quickly). However, as I came to know Sara better, I realized that she just doesn’t care about money and material things. She much prefers to share those things with others in need. Rather than being careless with money, she is very caring about people.

Fortunately, I took the necessary time to avoid the pitfall of being overly decisive, and Sara and I did get married and she has helped me to be a better person ever since.

### Applying This to Ourselves

So, what does this look like here at Goodwill? How can we improve the timeliness and effectiveness of our decision-making without rushing to conclusions? How can we be appropriately decisive? Here are some important cautions that I would invite all of us to consider:

- **Don’t overvalue “first information”:** We tend to be heavily influenced by the first few pieces of information we get, known as Anchoring Bias. Be sure that you’ve considered both sides of an issue before making a decision. You likely will not have the time or ability to exhaustively research every possibility, but be sure to at least have a fair understanding.
- **Avoid trying to prove yourself right:** When making a decision, we sometimes lean one way or the other. We then look for information or evidence to confirm that we were right, known as Confirmation Bias. When gathering information, ask open questions to be sure you’re not swaying the response. This is common with initial perceptions of others - we decide we like them or not, then only see the good or the bad after that.
- **Don’t just hack at the branches...go after the roots:** Sometimes we make decisions to solve immediate problems, when in reality we’re only addressing the branches (i.e., symptoms) of an issue, rather than the roots (i.e., core issue). This happens when we don’t look deep enough at what is happening and simply go after the quick fix. Consequently, despite repeated fixing, we’re surprised when the core issue persists.

Managing these areas can definitely help us to be appropriately decisive. Remember, though, that delaying a decision too long may become a decision in itself. There are times when we need to wait on a decision to gather the needed information. But, if we aren’t careful, that delay can limit our ability to make the right choice. We have to make the best decision possible with incomplete information at times. This last year was a great example of dealing with ambiguity and making the best decision possible with limited data.

While I like to pride myself on my decisiveness in assimilating information and coming to timely decisions, I am learning that I need to use caution and balance because I may be missing key information. This has been critical for me to temper my desire to make quick decisions on complex topics, and help ensure that one of my strengths doesn’t become a weakness through overuse.