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Do you ever need to make a decision, and jump right into reaction mode or get moving too fast on your specific plan? Have you ever presented that plan to a boss or client and it wasn't what they were looking for? This month's articles are all about asking the right questions first. They can help you remember to take a moment and look at the root problem before making any major moves or conclusions.

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ASK THESE FOUR QUESTIONS TO MAKE A GREAT DECISION

"What were they thinking?" Roger, the CEO of a mid-sized US-based company was shaking his head, lamenting a recent recommendation presented by one of his business units. "I just don't get it! It's like they didn't think through the ramifications of this idea. It's patently obvious that this is the wrong thing to do!" Patently obvious to the CEO, but how about to the rest of the team?

In my experience of working with hundreds of CEOs and their teams, I have unearthed four specific criteria your team can use as a litmus test to making a great decision and/or presenting a recommendation:

1. Are the recommendations and/or decisions based on evidence, logical inference, and informed guesses?
2. Are the ideas and plans presented in a coherent and well, thought-out fashion?
3. Do the decisions reflect a "systems thinking" mentality as to what is best for the company or a functional or "silo" approach that relates to that business leader's span of control?
4. Are the assumptions captured, and can the information, conclusions and decisions be revised as conditions change?

Which one of these is your team's biggest challenge? I don't know about your specific circumstances, but many executives struggle mightily with the first criteria: the "soundness" of the recommendation and/or decision. The team either lacks the critical thinking skills to thoroughly think it through OR they suffer from some unsuspecting biases that keep them from seeing all the possibilities and facets of the decision.

It wasn't until I had taken "The Fundamentals of Legal Principles" during my junior year at the US Coast Guard Academy that I really understood a simple framework to thinking

things through. The professor turned everything (and I mean *everything*) into a hypothesis (what's the problem?), analysis, conclusions, and then recommendations. You have to cover each item in order to get an "A."

Unfortunately, what most of us do is leap from the problem into detailed recommendations, without passing "Go" or through the heavy lifting of root cause analysis and then conclusions that are supported by facts.

And when we present that "rock" – that recommendation to the CEO, she stares at the rock, looks at it from a few angles, and declares, "That isn't the rock I was looking for!" She throws it over her shoulder and tells the team to start anew.

I call this "The Rock Phenomenon" – and I'll share specific ideas on how to overcome this unfortunate situation next week!

HELP YOUR TEAM AVOID THE "ROCK PHENOMENON"

To prevent the "Rock Phenomenon" from occurring in your team, take the time to mutually agree on the problem. It might not be the most apparent, obvious problem, so go around the table and let everyone weigh in on what they think might be the problem or issue to be solved. Restate the problem in a number of different ways to learn more about its dimensions and related problems and issues. You may find that your original idea is not the problem at all!

When you take the time to define the issue, problem or process to be considered, it drives the subsequent thinking and the potential recommendations. And as you are defining the issue, think about how you are framing that specific problem. When you frame a situation in terms of potential gain, you will act differently than if you frame it as a potential loss.

For example, when you see something as an opportunity or gain, you will be more flexible, adaptable and willing to take greater risks. Whereas, when you see something as a threat or loss, you will be more aware of the risks and consequences.

In addition to defining and framing the problem, you might want to answer a few other specific questions that might help the team avoid the Rock Phenomenon:

- **Background.** Give the reason(s) for chartering the team. Share why this is a perceived problem or opportunity and any information that would be useful to the people who must deliver the results.
- **Goal or Deliverable(s).** What do you expect the team to do and what changes are expected? How will you measure success? What will the measure(s) be?
- **Decision Strategy.** Will the team be "empowered" to make the final decision or is this a recommendation?
- **Membership.** Choose your members carefully and share why they have been given this responsibility. For high-stakes problems, consider using a facilitator to keep the team on track and to provide training as needed.
- **Duration.** Time expands to the amount of time allotted, so share how long you expect the team to work on the project. Intact work groups are perpetual; task forces, process improvement, and problem-solving teams have a finite lifespan – typically no more than six months or they simply lose steam and wither away.

Now that you have thoroughly addressed the issue, you have set your team up for success!

YOUR FIRST QUESTION COULD RUIN A PANEL DISCUSSION

So here's the problem: Most panels start with an incredibly long, incomprehensible, multipart question directed to the first panelist. The person starts talking....and she's going to keep speaking until she is done.

It might be possible to be salvaged at this point, however, the vast majority of moderators "[hot potato](#)" the question to panelist #2 and ask for his opinion. Of course, he will answer the multi-part question. And how long is he going to speak? The exact length that panelist #1 talked, of course! Otherwise, he will feel that he is not providing as much value as panelist #1. So he goes on and on – even if he doesn't have much to add – he'll ad-lib just to keep up with the same volume.

It gets worse. So, the moderator looks at panelist #3, who is sending the visual signal of "Of course you're going to ask me." And what does the moderator say? "Of course, [panelist #3], what do you think?"

And then panelist #3 offers her opinion. What? Is she going to make it short? No! That's impossible because two speakers have already gone on and on and on and on. She will keep going the exact length that panelist #1 and #2 took, while adding no additional content.

But what happens if there are FOUR panelists? Even though the moderator might even sense that *perhaps* something has gone awry, how can he not ask the fourth panelist? All he does is recap everything the prior panelists said, and he will keep going until at long last, he's done.

The problem is that this first question has gone on for 20 to 25 minutes and the audience has completely checked out. They are doing the math: "We heard one question that took 20 minutes. How many questions are we going to get to in this 60-minute panel?" And at that moment, you can see it in their eyes. They have given up hope. They start wondering, how close am I to the door? Can I make a quick exit?

This is not how you want to do it.

You actually want to ***start fast and give them hope.***

Here's what you do, according to my good buddy and Founder of Extreme Meetings, [Brian Walter](#). "You ask a slightly less complex question and then you, as the moderator, are poised like a panther on a branch, waiting for a baby deer to walk by. You're ready to pounce the second that there is a pause and you're going to interject more of a follow-up question. And after that, you're going to immediately go for a contrast with someone else on the panel.

Here's an example:

BRIAN: Connie what's the biggest financial mistake most speakers make during their first five years?

CONNIE: They fall for the myth that there's going to be tons of exposure, so they agreed to do something for free.

BRIAN: Really now, why is that? Why do they do that?

CONNIE: Because they're desperate and they believe that people are nice and that they're going to hire them.

BRIAN: Interest hinging. Tammy do you agree? You think she's crazy? What do you think?

TAMMY: Two separate questions but I disagree with that because I think when you're first getting started I think you should speak as often as you can to get feet on the stage so that you get better and better as a speaker.

BRIAN: Interesting. Sylvie, who is right? Connie or Tammy?

SYLVIE: None of them. None of them because it always depends. It depends on the situation you're in, your business. Do you need exposure or not? I think it depends.

BRIAN: David, settle this. Who's crazy, who's right?

DAVID: Well, I think you know speakers who don't like to sell. I always say I'd rather be salesy than broke!

WOW! How much time did that take? Fifty-two seconds. Five questions. Four panelists weighed in with four different opinions. In one minute, we've given the audience hope. They are now thinking, "That was fast moving. I wonder if it's going to be like this the whole time?"

Here's a final hint from Brian: Start fast and show that you will interject quickly when there is a micro-pause when it seems that the panelist has finished her question. Now, if Connie had said 'and...' and I cut her off, you would say 'Gosh, that guy is rude.' So, you have to make sure a thought gets finished before you jump in – but jump in you must!

It all hinges on that first question and answer. It could destroy your entire panel discussion and it becomes tough to recover. So why not start fast and give hope?

FROM THE BOOKSHELF:

TO HEAL A FRACTURED WORLD: THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY

A colleague mentioned the name of a book he read that made a profound impact on him and his view of the world. It is [*To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*](#) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Have you heard of it? I had not, so I ordered a copy and started reading it this week.

Early on, the author describes that "Happiness, as opposed to pleasure, is a matter of a life well lived, one that honors the important, not just the urgent." And isn't this true about teamwork as well?

He goes on to say, "Happiness is the ability to say: I lived for certain values and acted on them. I was part of a family (my team) embracing it and being embraced by it. I was part of a community (the organization) honoring its traditions, sharing its griefs and joys, ready to help others, knowing that they were ready to help me. I did not only ask what I could take; I asked what I could contribute. To know that you made a difference." Ah, now that is the essence of truly extraordinary teamwork!

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