

# SMaRT Decision Making

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Stress is the hallmark of tough situations, and yet stress itself makes it even harder to pull yourself and your company out of those situations. Business executives often have an overwhelming sense of responsibility—so overwhelming that it interferes with their ability to see what is working, what needs changing, and what is actually under their control. Stress comes not only from that sense of responsibility but also from the pressure of finances and team management, interactions with vendors and customers, and the need to constantly stay ahead of competition.

Yet, when stress levels are high, the quality of decision making plummets. As one business owner explained, “Sometimes it’s difficult when you’re in the middle of a problem to see everything going on.” A study cited by the Association for Psychological Science found that the negative impact of stress on decision-making, including risk aversion and antisocial behavior, increases during the first hour after a stressful event. What can you do in that first hour to decrease your stress and increase the quality of your decisions?

## Accept

Under stress, your first temptation may be to find a target to blame. But placing blame or making a judgment does not change the problem, nor does it produce solutions. Acceptance opens the mind to thinking of new possibilities. In studies of depression, people who were able to move on to solving problems were most likely to reverse the sense of helplessness that accompanied their stress. When you accept that the problem exists regardless of blame, you free yourself to solve it.

## Slow Down

In the face of a problem, often the most comfortable action is to declare a solution and move on. However, quick fixes are notorious breeders of unintended consequences. They also inhibit research and creative thinking, which could bring about longer term, more profound, and more helpful solutions. Instead, try acknowledging your stress and giving yourself (and your team) a moment to settle. By slowing down when you are under stress you are improving the chances that you and your team will find the long-lasting, quality solutions you need.

## Affirm the Positive

Negative thinking takes many forms: “I am not good enough. If I had more money, I would be happy. If I exercised more, I would be happy. I am a fraud.” The stress of negative thinking drains your ability to clearly see a problem, let alone find a solution to it. By purposefully directing your awareness away from negative thoughts, you decrease this source of stress. You free yourself to hear the contributions and concerns of others and to consider the wider effects of your decisions.

The following mantras will help you relax, accept, slow down, and listen:

- ➔ I am stronger than I feel.
- ➔ This is but a moment and this too shall pass.
- ➔ I'm doing my best right now and that's all I can ask of myself.
- ➔ This moment/situation/event is not my life. My life is what I make of it after this moment is over.

## Prioritize

You are stressed. What would you need to do right now to remove the stress? Perhaps “escape to the Bahamas” is out of your control, but taking a walk, listening to music, reading, calling a loved one, or playing a game are well within your immediate control. How do you get the freedom to make that choice? You prioritize. Ask yourself: “What am I required to do; what must I do that nobody else can or should do for me?” If you are doing something unnecessary, delegate or remove it from your list. Learn to say, “No.”

## Celebrate Success

You stress affects your entire company. A study of 1,100 employees found five main causes for negativity: excessive workload, anxiety about management’s ability, anxiety about job security, boredom, and insufficient recognition. Two of those items are immediately under your control when facing a problem:

- ➔ Giving your team confidence in your ability.
- ➔ Giving everyone, including yourself, recognition.

Celebrate the small successes and publicize decisions made and actions taken so that everyone, including you yourself, is aware of progress. Let your team know that you appreciate their help in preparing for a presentation, whether or not you win the job; alerting you to a problem, whether or not it is immediately solvable; and taking on a situation that you have delegated.

## Accept Help

Sometimes moving away from blame, rushing, negativity, overwork, and team neglect is difficult under the stress of problems that you did not anticipate and that will not wait for a solution. By seeking help, you establish a partnership for the purpose of clarifying the situation and ensuring that stress will not overwhelm your native ability to think clearly and act decisively.