

Making the Tough Calls

Five steps to make the process a bit easier.

by Dr. John C. Maxwell

Closing a small-town plant that employs hundreds of residents. Firing a key staff member. Acquiring another company. Dissolving a long-time business relationship.

Ninety-five percent of the decisions a CEO makes likely could be made by a reasonably intelligent eighth-grader. But the CEO gets paid for the other 5 percent for making tough calls like the ones I just described.

What exactly is a tough call? It's a decision you know you should make because it will help you and/or your company, but you often hesitate to make it for a host of reasons some good and some not-so-good.

You may be nodding your head as you read, traveling down memory lane to a time when you had to make a tough call. In fact, that's one way to identify tough calls--you definitely remember them. And every time you think of them, you groan. That's just the way it is with a tough call. It doesn't matter how much time has passed since you made the decision, it still makes you groan.

Every tough call that I've made in my life had the following things in common:

1. It required much energy, time and prayer.

The decision didn't just make me tired; it sapped my strength. And I had to go to God often with one simple request: "Help me, help me, help me."

2. It demanded a risk.

If there's no risk involved, you're not making a tough call.

3. It was questioned and criticized.

I've never made a tough call that prompted everyone in my company to proclaim, "Oh, what a wise man you are." I have, however, made tough calls that made them say, "That was one of the stupidest things we've ever seen you do." My point is this: if you make a decision that brings unanimous approval, it wasn't a tough call.

4. It cost me greatly.

Sometimes it cost me financially, sometimes it cost me relationships, and sometimes it only cost me sleep. But trust me the cost was high.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why people are often hesitant to make tough calls. But if you're a leader, you might as well accept the fact that tough calls are part of your job description. They're not optional; they're a requirement.

Tough calls will never be painless, but you can make the process a bit easier by following these five steps:

1. Do your homework.

Never make a tough call on the spur of the moment. If you do, I guarantee you'll regret it. Instead, research all your options and the ramifications of each one. Evaluate the decision from the perspectives all the people or groups who might be affected. List the pros and cons. Don't give due diligence the short shrift.

2. Set a deadline.

Why is a deadline necessary? Because when it comes to tough calls, we tend to procrastinate. So set a time limit for your decision and stick to it.

3. Seek counsel from the right people.

When you're contemplating a tough call, talk it over with a trusted, objective outsider who knows your business and can help you see things you may have missed in your homework.

4. Make your decisions on principles and values that you believe in.

That makes your tough calls consistent with who you are, what you teach and what you believe.

5. Understand the emotions of making the tough call.

Scott Peck was right when he said, "The best decision-makers are those who are willing to suffer the most over decisions but still retain their ability to be decisive."

Are tough calls worth all the time, energy and agony they involve? Absolutely. Why am I so sure? Because every time I've had to make a tough call in my life, it lifted my leadership to a higher level. In other words, it led to a breakthrough.

Read this very carefully: You are only one tough call away from a breakthrough. Isn't that encouraging? You get a breakthrough by making a call you don't want to make even though it's the right thing to do. And when you make that call, you suddenly take yourself, your company or your family to a whole new level.

So go ahead. Make that tough call you've been putting off. Then fasten your seatbelt and prepare to rise to new heights.