The Efficient Indecision

What kind of leader will you be if you can't even decide on that?! ~ my father

We are increasingly overwhelmed by frameworks, techniques, methods and insights from success gurus on what it takes to be the best leader. Countless are the times we read articles about how to make the right decisions, which words more often than not enter through one eye just to leave through the other, but when have we ever stopped to analyse what it takes to *not* make one?

I spent the better part of my life battling my inherent, unlimited indecisiveness. I have always struggled with decisions, creating battlegrounds in my mind where the different options battle each other, firing pros and cons at one another in what may become an endless fight. And every time I did, there was my father striking me with *"What do you expect to achieve if you can't decide that?!"*. Normally, those interventions triggered the automatic question in my brain: What does one thing have to do with the other? And I would simply dismiss it afterwards. However, the older I became, the more I thought about it and the more aware I was that I needed to put some effort into being more decisive.

That's where the journey begins: I thought long and hard about why I was so bad at decision making, and on how to improve. I tried everything from plotting all the possible situations where I would need to make a decision and think about it in advance, to embracing the ultimate nihilistic approach and tried to convince myself there was no intrinsic value to get from any decision (and thus I would 'whatever' my way through everything). I also reached the richest conclusions, slowly working towards a thesis on how indecision is just a symptom of a far more structural problem, the lack of definition of oneself. I couldn't choose because I didn't know what I wanted, which in turn was due to the fact that I didn't know who I was, or what defined me. So, I started working on that, building character, becoming a better person and I quickly found myself on the self-development loophole, watching countless videos of the same success guru's that teach how to make decisions and give you the secret for success that will make strangers come up to you in cafés and say: *"You're amazing! Are you some sort of genius?"*.

At this stage, in high school, I was at the top of the world, almost no decisions to make, thinking I knew everything there was to know about life, something that lasted until I had to choose my Bachelors. I had been hearing *"don't worry, you have time to choose"* since my first high school year and I took the advice maybe too seriously. I was, somehow, able to procrastinate the decision until the last hours of the last day of applications, which culminated in me taking the

easiest choice - closest faculty to home, the most hyped course at that moment, etc. In truth, I was back at square one, not being able to make an actual decision which I could firmly stand behind. The first college experiences just aggravated that: there was so much to do, so many opportunities, so much unknown out there that the feeling of ignorance of the early teenage years came back (you know, as a young teenager you realize there is so much you don't know, at sixteen you think you know everything, and when you enter college you find out you don't know anything again).

There I was, a little freshman in an ocean of opportunities who quickly started seeing it as a clean slate and tried to take advantage of all the things the university life could provide. I quit volleyball (a huge part of my life up until that point), I met new people, made new friends, and for the first few months I said yes to basically everything. I joined different student associations, volunteering groups, never missed the weekly college party. I did case study competitions, signed up for every workshop I could fit in my schedule and tried to work on a business idea with some friends. You might be seeing where this is going, it wasn't long before I was overwhelmed by commitments and projects and, I had to, once again, decide - a word that I was dreading by then.

That's how I entered 2019, with nineteen years of life experience and halfway through the first year of college. I was tired of grinding relentlessly on decisions, what was wrong with me? Maybe I was not bright enough, yet, people mostly say that intelligence comes from genetics, but fortunately hard work beats intelligence when intelligence fails to work hard, right? And hard work comes down to will power, which in turn comes down to dedication and the ability to make actionable plans… which, well, is a big part of intelligence. Nevertheless, I considered myself both hard working and fairly intelligent, I just couldn't put my finger on what was it I was missing. Until, one night, after rolling side to side on my bed, moving the blankets up and down, I had my proudest breakthrough. I was revisiting the decisions I had to make and I wondered: what if, just imagine, instead of wasting so much time, attention and energy on trying to make the best, most effective decision, I started looking for ways to become more efficient at *not* making decisions?

Let's break it down and simplify the decision areas into internal - those that mostly only impact yourself (e.g. bachelors, what to eat, etc.) - and the external decisions - those which outcomes will affect others (e.g. corporate decisions, team projects, etc.). Although Peter Drucker's advice focuses on the external decisions, I find it to be most useful for internal ones.[1] When it comes to internal decisions the key word is automation. That doesn't mean we should become lifeless machines, it just means we could layout the conditions, so we don't really have to choose, with a set of sequential steps and definitions. I, particularly, find deciding on what is "right," rather than what is acceptable to be

[1] From Peter Drucker, "Managing Oneself: The Effective Decision", 1967

the most valuable input. However, I don't see this only as a step to take in the middle of process of decision making, it is something to be done a priori. Defining what is right is nothing more than defining the values that guide you, maybe you value novelty/ innovation over quality (and you can now instantly choose between that weird characteristic dish and the steak that you know is good) , or you value learning for pleasure over success in work life (and you can now instantly choose between that bachelor about the subject you love and the other that is guaranteed to land you a job). It means setting a concrete vision for yourself. As Bob Iger, previous Disney CEO, puts it, "true integrity, a sense of knowing who you are and being guided by your own clear sense of right and wrong, is a kind of a secret weapon".[2] After setting those values, all there is to do is to see which choice answers most of them, which becomes automatic. Maybe we will find out that the decision itself won't contribute to any, so we'll be better off not making it.

External decisions, on the other hand, usually come through leadership situations, when we are deciding for other people as well. It's what all those frameworks, processes and techniques are about, and this is where I would like to go deep and shift the focus to what it takes to not actually make them. Let's begin by describing the setting for such a decision: we are assuming some sort of leadership role (either in our group of friends or as a multinational company executives), we are facing a problem and have to think critically about the information available and make a decision that will impact the population (i.e. our friends or the company). As we can see the leader's decision setting involves more than the act of decision-making, it also includes problem-solving and critical thinking. All of which need to be analysed in regard to the context of the generation. It's common to do it by comparing generations but none is better prepared for leading than the others. Each is prepared to tackle their own generation needs, which change through time (the context changes). I believe it's irrelevant to discuss whether the emerging leaders is being sufficiently prepared, because they are shaped by their generation, their context, so there will always be people sufficiently prepared. In fact, what I would rather focus on is the needs that those leaders will be answering and see how we could become them by analysing what will the leadership skills have to translate into, practically, in the near future.

What is, then, the context for our future leaders? To answer, we must analyse the main drivers of the younger generations, which, I found to be Purpose and Development. The World Economic Forum/Global Shapers Annual Survey 2017 found that 40.6% of young people think sense of purpose/impact on society is one of the most important criteria when considering a career

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[2] From Bob Iger, "A Ride of a Lifetime", 2019

opportunity and that the opportunity to grow and advance ranks third at 40%.[3] A 2017 study by American Express shows that 76% of future Millennial leaders think that businesses of the future will need to have a genuine purpose, preferring to work with people and organisations that share their values, and that both millennials and Gen Z consider their work a reflection of their identities, while 75% of Millennials think that successful businesses of the future will see management look beyond the usual models of doing business and be more open to collaborating with new partners.[4] Last but not least, a global study by Manpower Group states that "rather than one long job for life, Millennials understand the need for continuous skills development to remain employable. Ninety-three percent want lifelong learning and are willing to spend their own time and/or money on further training. Four out of five say the opportunity to learn new skills is a top factor when considering a new job, and 22% intend to take an extended break from work to gain new skills and qualifications".[5]

So, why Purpose? In a world of burgeoning opportunities, young people are more and more characterised by the fear of missing out, they don't want to lose on one thing by choosing the other. This fear leads us to ultimately go towards that which provides more sense of purpose, impact and belonging, so we can fill the gaps left by all the opportunities missed. We are drawn to purposeful missions and want to make a stand, have an impact a be recognised by our values. This has had huge benefits particularly when it comes to environmental changes and reducing inequalities.[6] On the other hand, this eagerness to act and stand up for something also means that people may fall into radicalisms, and suddenly if you are not a supporter, you're seen as the enemy. That's when protests against racism become national riots, awarding a man instead of a woman makes you sexist and being completely out of line is okay if you are not straight.

These are very controversial topics, aggravated by the risk of extremisms on what I call the modern-day Tolerance Paradox. Back in the 1940's, Karl Popper stated that "if a society is tolerant without limit, its ability to be tolerant is

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[3] See Shakir Akorede, "Here's what millennials really want from business, and why", Sept 12, 2017. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/09/heres-what-millennials-really-want-from-business/

[4] See America Express, "Redefining the C-Suite: Business the Millennial Way", 2017. https://www.americanexpress.com/content/dam/amex/uk/staticassets/pdf/AmexBusinesstheMillennialWay.pdf

[5] See ManpowerGroup, "Millennial Careers: 2020 Vision", 2016. https://www.manpowergroup.com/wps/wcm/connect/660ebf65-144c-489e-975c-9f838294c237/MillennialsPaper1_2020Vision_lo.pdf?MOD=AJPERES

[6] See Isabelle Gerretsen, Sarah Lazarus, and Yoonjung Seo, "Global climate strike: Meet the teenagers skipping school to fight for a greener planet," CNN, March 15, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/14/world/global-climate-strike-teenagers-school-walkout-greta-thunberg-intl/index.html

eventually seized or destroyed by the intolerant".[7] Right now, we can imagine a little tweak to this paradox: if a society allows the radicalization of the "*intolerated movement*", they will ultimately become the intolerants.[8] People are being drawn to a form of radicalism masked behind what we, as a society, deem as good values, and it is because of the eagerness to stand up for something, to be a part of change, which creates a dangerous need to take a side in everything and anything. This is what I find to be the most pressing risk and it is where thinking critically becomes more important and translates into simply valuing moderation as a priority. Leaders must provide purposeful missions that generate impact in society, but also emphasize the power of balanced actions and beware of extremisms.

The second big generational driver is Development. Again, because of the huge amount of opportunities that exist and their accessibility, young people face a lot of competition and they are betting more and more on differentiating factors,. They always want to become better, thus the boom in the self-development industry exploded in the last few years, even with the scepticism of the late comedian George Carlin.[9] It also comes down to their very high professional ambitions. In reality, contrary to the lazy label, seventy-three percent of Millennials report working more than 40 hours a week, and nearly a quarter work over 50 hours. These young adults see development and work as a way towards freedom and autonomy, they want control, they want flexibility and they want to take ownership of their time, decisions and outcomes in order to leave their mark on the world.

We are, now, able to describe the people that can take part in the next generation of leaders. Leadership is, today more than ever, the ability to empower others, which shines a new light into the words of Ronald Reagan: "The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things". A phrase that might seem cliché at first but that we have seldom seen applied practically, until recent years. In the corporate world, for example, decision making is often centralised in a hierarchical structure, where the decisions flow up and down to get approved. However, companies are transitioning into more decentralised structures, giving decision power to the different teams and bringing people in on them.

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[7] Karl Popper was a 20th century philosopher of science, very famous for, among other things, having written "The Open Society and Its Enemies", where he states the Tolerance Paradox.
[8] With "intolerated movement", I am referring to the emancipation movements of oppressed minorities.
[9] In his words: "*If you're looking for self-help, why would you read a book written by somebody else? That's not self-help. That's help! There's no such a thing as self-help. If you did it yourself, you didn't need help.*", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCsM35H9TFA

Last December, I had the opportunity to do a case study for a German start-up that was organised in a very modular way, in what they called decision circles, which removed hierarchy and, instead, defined scopes for each circle, so that the responsible for each circle had total freedom and power over everything that was inside their scope. This generates some problems, of course, mainly due to the amount of trust deposited in new employees, but it's what attracts younger generations and if you pair it with continuous training to enable people to make decisions, you have become a next generation leader, successful at outsourcing decisions. Going back to my own, selfish, situation, I realised that if I could gather this conditions, giving other people the chance to contribute, take power on decisions and educate them on how to make them, I could not only bring a lot more value to the table but also provide a lot more value to the team. I had found how to be more efficient at not making decisions, providing value and empowering others so they could make them.

The question that imposes now is: does this make me an effective leader? To what I reply with yet more questions: What does it mean to be effective, and do I want to prioritise it? According to the Oxford dictionary, 'effective' means to be successful in producing a desired or intended result, and, in this day and age, that is simply not enough. There is another word, however, that is gaining more and more value: efficiency (achieving maximum productivity with minimum wasted effort or expense). While the effective leader is the one who makes no mistakes, the efficient leader is the one who creates more value from less. And, dare I say it, it is no longer about you good you are at doing a certain thing, it's about how many opportunities and how much value you can create, thus efficiency becomes the first priority. That's also why it is so powerful to decentralize decision-making, to provide continuous training to employees and to have a concrete purpose for what you do. This are actions that build upon themselves, becoming an eternal flywheel of value.[10]

For all these reasons, I recklessly challenge Peter Drucker's conclusion that "to be expected (by virtue of position or knowledge) to make decisions that have significant and positive impact on the entire organisation, its performance, and its results characterises the effective executive".[11] Although I believe he is, indeed, describing an effective decision-maker, his words no longer apply to leaders and executives, who must become more efficient in favour of effective.

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[10] The flywheel effect was coined by Jim Collins in the book "Good to Great". It relates to a rotating mechanical device which resists changes in its rotational speed due to moment of inertia, therefore it requires effort to trigger movement but turn upon turn, its builds momentum until a point of breakthrough when it basically gains speed by itself without you being able to say what was the big push that made it go so fast. What seems like a revolutionary breakthrough, is nothing more than an organic development process. For our analogy, it means that we achieve greatness by the including different people in the decisions that build up our momentum, and from what seems like nothing we create immense value.

[11] From Peter Drucker, "Managing Oneself: The Effective Decision", 1967

In fact, the efficient leader is the one who provides a path other people can follow so that *those* people (not the leader) have a significant and positive impact on the organisation. These executives are aware of what drives their contemporaries and are able to provide purpose and empower them with decentralised decision-making structures and focusing on 'learnability' instead of 'capability'. On the other hand, they tread carefully, reminding the virtue of balance to mitigate the risk of extremism that comes with the eagerness to belong and act, which are very characteristic of the current youngest generations.

As a final remark, even though I haven't addressed critical thinking directly, the theme is intrinsically connected to all of the essay, as I don't see it as 'skill' to be fostered but rather as a state of mind, in which we can choose to be in. We just have to make that decision... or, perhaps, outsource it?

(I know dad, I know… I have to, at least, decide on something.)