

LEADERSHIP ■ CHOICE

# Lead by Choice

Your choices affect outcomes.



by Sheena Iyengar

**W**HAT WAS THE LAST good thing that happened to you?

Maybe you found a great job, made a new friend, or won a competition. And what about the last bad thing? Did you have an accident, suffer a serious injury, or lose something of great value?

*When these things happen, whom or what do you attribute them to?* You may think that your life is shaped more by fate or chance than by choice. Do you believe that the universe, or some all-knowing being, has a grand plan for everyone? Or that there is no plan, and events occur randomly, often senselessly? Or that there is a plan, an imperfect and malleable one, that we design for ourselves and do our best to implement?

Regardless of your beliefs, *choice puts some measure of control in your hands*. Yes, you are subject to fate and chance—and you hope to be treated well by them—but you also make your own choices (and live with the consequences).

As Cassius said to Brutus (in *Julius Caesar*): *Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings*. Might you become master of your fate through choice—no matter what the stars say?

This question weighs on leaders who are supposed to make things happen by recognizing a chance for change, developing a vision of the form that change will take, and then enacting it. This process is at odds with seeing the world as governed by forces beyond your control. Even though you can't expect to always succeed, *you must believe you can make a meaningful impact through your choices*.

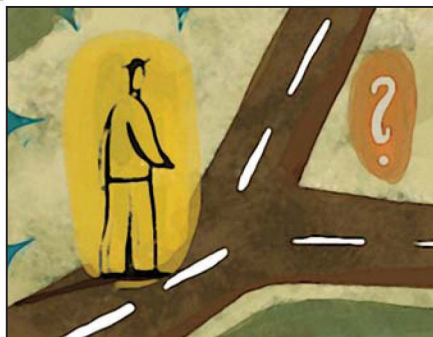
But believing is only the start. You must also cultivate a better understanding of the nature of choice—how it functions, and how it affects your behavior—to make the best of it.

## Four Aspects of Choice

You're most effective when you know and internalize four aspects of choice:

**1. Choice is a state of mind.** To make a choice, first you have to see the choice, and this isn't always easy or natural. When *Steve Callahan*, an avid sailor,

set out in 1982 on a boat race from the Canary Islands to the Caribbean in a one-man boat he had built himself, he was looking forward to a great adventure. But within a week, his boat capsized in a storm, leaving him stuck in a leaking inflatable raft 800 miles from land with no supplies and little prospect of rescue. In his account, he notes: "I am captain of my tiny ship in treacherous waters; I have overcome almost certain death. I now have a choice: to pilot myself to a new life or to give up and watch myself die. *I choose to kick as long as I can.*" Although Callahan was in a desperate situation, he decided *he still had a choice* and believed that *his actions would make a difference*. And, 76 days later, a boat discovered Callahan. Being the only person to have lasted more than a month at sea on his own, he was not only skilled but lucky. Seeing choice in the midst of a crisis is courageous, but it doesn't guarantee success or survival. However, the motivation it provides can help you turn the odds in your favor—and sometimes that's all



you need. When you feel lost, adrift, or unsure, whether at sea or at work, *embracing choice can restore equanimity and give you the confidence to keep going*.

**2. Choice is a currency.** About half of a CEO's daily job activities take nine minutes or less each to complete, while only 12 percent take more than an hour. On average CEOs engage in 140 tasks per week, any of which could require them to make a series of choices. So, leaders are constantly choosing. This is part of what gives them their power, but it can also compromise their performance if they take on more than they can handle. Many managers are reluctant to delegate choice to subordinates, perhaps considering them incapable of choosing well. But by being miserly with choice, these managers *mismanage* and demotivate employees by depriving them of choice, sending the message that they can't be trusted or haven't earned the right to choose. This is not to say that managers should shower their teams with choice. In fact, *employees rate their managers as most competent when the*

*managers give them a moderate amount of choice*. So, in distributing choice, be neither tight-fisted nor a spendthrift.

**3. Choice is intoxicating.** The experience of *having choice* is often pleasurable, but it can also make you sick. Just the right amount, and you'll feel happier, more capable. Too much, however, and your head begins to hurt, and you feel like you're drowning. You thrive when you feel in control, but more choice doesn't always enhance your sense of control. Depending on your level of tolerance for choice, a high dose may feel like knocking back a glass of liquid courage, or it could leave you dizzy and disoriented. The exact relationship between *choice* and *control* varies from person to person, and culture to culture.

In a study of Citibank employees, we asked everyone from tellers to sales reps to managers about their choices at work. Although they often had the same job responsibilities, executed in the same way, *they felt they had different degrees of choice depending on their cultural backgrounds*.

**4. Choice is a skill and an art.** Effective leaders are dedicated practitioners of choice. They look beyond hierarchy and re-imagine the modes and means of control. They question their choices and, when necessary, come up with new ways of achieving their goals. Choice has its limitations, and sometimes you may need to relinquish it to appreciate its true power. All of this requires practice because choice can confuse, mislead, and overwhelm you. Even *natural* leaders have to work at exercising choice to avoid being seduced by it.

*To be the master of your fate, you must exercise choice judiciously and responsibly*. Although choice motivates people, *it doesn't ensure a good outcome*. Through study and practice, however, you can learn to differentiate between choices that benefit you and people around you, and choices that interfere with or distract you from your goals. When it comes to choice, *expect the unexpected* because choice is an art—it does not look the same to all eyes.

You can learn from others, but you can't simply follow a formula or replicate their choices; leadership requires you to *face yourself—to discover what you may not want to know*, and use it to build a better future. **LE**

Sheena S. Iyengar is the S.T. Lee Professor of Business at Columbia Business School Management Division. Call 212-854-8308, email [siyengar@columbia.edu](mailto:siyengar@columbia.edu) or visit [www.columbia.edu](http://www.columbia.edu).

**ACTION:** Exercise choice wisely.