

BASIC RULE OF DECISION-MAKING

Decisions – everything we do in life, each action we take, the choices we make in everyday life – all of it starts from a mere decision. It can be from the smallest things like brushing our teeth in the morning to major decisions that sets us for life, such as choosing a life partner.

Although we may not realise it, there isn't a single thing that we do that does not involve decision-making. A lot of it we do unconsciously – routine actions that are deeply embedded in our daily lives. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that they are what they are – the decisions that we make.

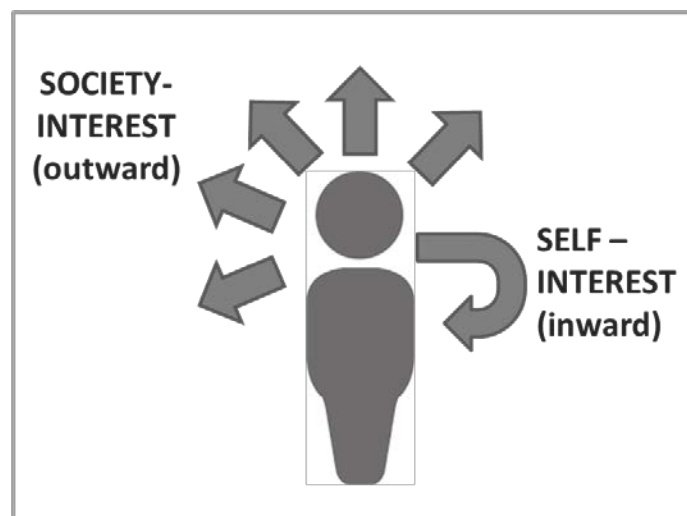
Take the earlier example of brushing our teeth – we can always choose not to brush our teeth when we wake up in the morning but for obvious reasons, we still decide to do it. We know that our mouth would smell terrible if we don't and brushing our teeth just seems to be the right thing to do.

The difference is the magnitude of a decision i.e. how big of an impact it would have on our life. In reality, this is what usually determines our view of a decision, whether we actually categorise it as a real decision or as a routine action that just passes us by. The problem does not lie with the daily life routines, which we naturally overlook anyway. The challenge lies with the decisions on matters outside of this scope – the real decisions.

Before we go any deeper into understanding the basic rules of decision-making, let us first understand the different directions and impacts a decision would have on our lives.

Basically, each decision we make would determine our actions. Each decision and action would have an impact on us, our surroundings and in most cases, both. The impact is usually the main consideration we evaluate before making a decision.

If we were to objectively categorise the impact of a decision, there are basically two directions the decision can flow to – inward or outward. I coin it as the double "S"; "self" interest or the interest of the "society". These are the factors that influence our decision the most.



The Double S Decision Model

It is natural and expected for most of us to choose a decision that fulfills our self-interest more. There aren't many problems when a decision we have to make only involve and impact ourselves. The dilemma starts when we have to make bigger decisions that impact others as well. The more people involved in it, the harder the decision-making process will be.

Some of us take the easy way out; we avoid making these hard decisions and leave it to others to do it – even at times when rightfully we should be the one making the decision. Such cowardly and irresponsible act tells us a lot about a person's character and value, especially so in leaders.

Decision-making is never easy, especially those that involve difficult matters. We are bound to face confrontations and make unpopular decisions, although they are, as a matter of principle, the right ones to make. If we are weak in our principles and would rather avoid confrontations than stand up for the right thing, there is a tendency for us to make popular but wrong decisions. In essence, this is not much different from the earlier situation of a person avoiding making a decision.

Fundamentally, what we want to achieve when making a decision is to make a right decision, at least to the best of our ability. The definition of a right decision might differ from a person to another but the basic principle remains the same – how a decision is in line with righteousness and how positive the impact of a decision has on us and the people around us.

So, how do we actually make a "right" decision?

Knowing that we may differ in interpreting the definition of a "right" decision, how do we reconcile the differences and achieve a generic understanding that the majority would be able to agree as "right"?

***You know you have made the right decision
when you feel at peace in your heart.***

Unknown

The basic rule in making a decision – a *right* decision – is fairness. If we are able to do this, rest assured that we have made the right decision.

But then, how do we determine and practise fairness in decision-making?

If anyone were to come to me to talk about leadership or decision-making, the first thing that I would start preaching about is fairness – my protégé Intan and people who are familiar with my leadership style and philosophy can attest to this.

Fairness is the opposite of *zalim*. *Zalim* basically means putting things in the wrong place; and this is something I am totally against. I must admit that I have a low tolerance level in these kinds of situations – people skiving of work, taking what is rightfully not theirs, throwing innocent people under the bus, etc.

People close to me know how much I propagate and emphasise on fairness. There have been quite a number of occasions where I would openly express my disappointment and disagreement when I felt fairness was compromised. If need be, I would even fight my way through to try and make it right even if it means getting into arguments with my superiors or the people closest to me. I remember hearing about a CEO complaining to another person about my stance on fairness after disagreeing with him on a particular matter.

Fairness is what justice really is.

Potter Stewart, Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court

It is not that I am trying to be a hero of any sort but it is something that I just feel strongly about. The principle is based on a strong fundamental belief that has molded me to become the person I am today – Islam.

Fairness in Islam

Fairness is an integral part of Islam. It is the hallmark in the Islamic political, social and economy systems – basically it applies to every aspect of life.

All the Messengers brought this same message to mankind – to establish and uphold justice.

And for every nation is a messenger. So when their messenger comes, it will be judged between them in justice, and they will not be wronged.

Yunus 10: 47

The status of fairness and justice is elevated in Islam, given the appropriate standing it should have.

Abdullah bin 'Amr bin Al-'as reported: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "The just will be seated upon pulpits of light." Those who are fair with regards to their judgement and their family and those who are under them."

Muslim

Justice is so important that it must be meted out in all fairness regardless of relationship or status of a person – even if a decision goes against one's own self, parents, relatives, poor or rich; everyone is the same when it comes to fairness.

O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever Acquainted with what you do.

An-Nisa 4: 135

I remember the story that was shared during one of the Certificate in *shariah* classes I attended. It was about the famous judge in Islamic history, Shuraih Al-Qadi who practised true fairness in passing judgments, regardless of a person's status. The story was about a case involving Caliph Umar Al Khattab,

who was the *Amirul Mukminin* during the incident. The Umar al Khattab had bought a horse from a Bedouin. The horse seemed to be in good condition so Umar paid the price and rode off. As he was riding of, he realised that there was something wrong with the horse – some sort of defect. He therefore went back to the Bedouin and asked the man to take back the horse and return the money that he had paid. The Bedouin refused Umar’s request claiming that the horse was in perfect shape when he sold it to him.

Umar Al Khattab, who was a just ruler, then asked the Bedouin to choose a judge to arbitrate the matter. The Bedouin chose Shuraih, and Umar agreed. After listening to the Bedouin, Shuraih then turned to Umar and asked, “Was the horse normal and healthy when you bought it?” Umar replied “Yes, it was”. Shuraih then said, “Then keep what you bought or return it as you took”. Umar looked at Shuraih in admiration and said, “Thus Justice should be: statement, distinguishing words and fair justice”. Umar then appointed Shuraih as the Chief of Judge of Kufah (present day Iraq).

This is justice in Islam, how fairness is practised regardless of who is involved – an ordinary man taking to court the most powerful leader in Islam, the Caliph himself when he refused to take back what he had sold just minutes before. This ordinary man then chose the judge to decide on the matter and following the presentation of his case, the judge then passed a judgment that was not in favor of the Caliph.

Best of all, the Caliph accepted the judge’s decision voluntarily and admitted the judge’s wisdom and fairness. The Caliph even gave the judge a greater duty that he was worthy of – this is how much fairness is emphasised, practised and appreciated in Islam.

As mentioned, fairness is required in every aspect of life in Islam. In business transactions for instance, we are called to be fair to buyers, for example declaring any defects on our goods before selling them.

Hakim bin Hizam narrated: Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, "The seller and the buyer have the right to keep or return goods as long as they have not parted or till they part; and if both the parties spoke the truth and described the defects and qualities (of the goods), then they would be blessed in their transaction, and if they told lies or hid something, then the blessings of their transaction would be lost."

Bukhari

We were also reminded to measure and correctly weigh our goods to ensure that our buyer rightfully receives what he or she paid for and nothing less. These are practices embedded in Islamic teachings that propagate fairness in our daily lives.

And give full measure when you measure, and weigh with an even balance. That is the best [way] and best in result.

Al-Isra 17: 35

Another classic example is on a topic that is unpopular with Muslim women – polygamy i.e., Muslim men are allowed to marry up to four wives. However, the men are reminded that in order to marry more than one, we have to have the ability to be fair. If we can't, we should only marry one – yes again, fairness receives its appropriate place.

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice].

An-Nisa 4: 3

By default, it is a consideration designed to balance each decision we make so that we continue to be on the path of righteousness, benefiting us as individuals as well as the society at large.

O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm for Allah, witnesses in justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what you do.

Al-Ma'idah 5: 8

Practising Fairness in Decision-Making

Without doubt, practising fairness isn't easy. Being good is much easier compared to being fair. Being good translates to just plain actions that would naturally meet everyone's definition and expectations – it's a voluntary decision of expressing goodness to others. Fairness, on the other hand, involves various considerations, both internal and external with special emphasis on rights.

Being good is easy, what is difficult is being just.

Victor Hugo, French poet and novelist

Generally speaking, we were not born to be fair – it is human nature that we are rather selfish beings – just look at how young children fight over toys. A majority of us have the tendency to put ourselves first before others, even if it involves those we are closest to.

Let me give you a simple example, if we were to look at a group photo that we are in, the first person whom we will be looking at would be ourselves. It is not entirely wrong to behave as such, it is more of a natural reaction. However we have to consciously remember that there are more than just us in this world.

Nevertheless, the ability to be fair can be developed over time through practice and empathy. It takes a lot of effort in understanding and analysing the situation as well as the parties involved. The key is to first set the right intentions and let the thinking process follow through.

***Fairness is not an attitude.
It's a professional skill that must be developed and exercised.***
Brit Hume, political commentator and television journalist

Fairness is Not Equality

We often get mixed up between fairness and equality. Let's make it clear – fairness does not equate to equality. Basically, fairness is about receiving what is rightfully ours, in most cases proportionate to what we have given. The guiding rule in determining fairness is rights, which are different in different situations.

***Fairness does not mean everyone gets the same.
Fairness means everyone gets what they need.***
Rick Riordan, author of the Percy Jackson & the Olympians series

Let's take the example of the staff annual bonus payout. If we were to define fairness as equality, then everyone should receive the same quantum of bonus. But then, is such a practice fair in the first place? It is an undeniable fact that everyone contributes to the success of a team but we cannot deny there will always be outstanding individuals who contribute more than others. They should be rightfully rewarded as it is only fair for them to receive more compared to the rest for the additional efforts they had put in.

This fairness model is not something that is established without basis. It is a system that was introduced by Allah into our life right from the start – the

concept of rewards, sins and its corresponding endings, which would depend on how well we have behaved.

Then We made you successors in the land after them so that We may observe how you will do.

Yunus 10: 14

Allah is Just and Fair. For this reason, He created a perfect system to measure our performance in this world so that we will be rewarded accordingly in the hereafter. The system is simple yet fair – if we do good things, we will be rewarded and if we consistently do so, *insha Allah* we will end up in heaven. If we fill our life with wrongdoings and sins, we will be punished in hell. Interestingly, even the period we will be punished in hell differs from one person to another, depending on the severity and quantity of our sins, the heavier the weight of our sins, the longer time we will spend time in hell. Everything is proportionate to what we put in – this is fairness in its most perfect condition.

Misinterpreting and Misrepresenting Fairness with Favoritism

Acknowledging the fact that fairness is not equality does not eliminate it from issues or problems in implementation. Some of us misuse this concept to practise favoritism by rewarding people based on how much we like a particular person instead of how much they have contributed. In most cases, such action is misleadingly justified with the earlier phrase “fairness does not mean equality”, which is a total misuse and misrepresentation of the concept.

We need to realise that favoritism breaks every single rule of fairness from its core. We cannot deny that it is human nature for us to like certain people more than others – there are certain people whom we simply can “click” with. It is also natural that we want the best for them and if given an opportunity to

give more to them, we surely will. But regardless of the close relationship we have with a person, it is only fair that they receive their share proportionate to what they deserve.

At the same time, we also need to be mindful not to be on the other extreme. As we become more careful and cautious to not practise favoritism, we might unintentionally *not* reward our favourite people even when they deserve it, merely for the sake of managing perception. This should not happen; everybody deserves what they deserve, that is the basic rule.

One day, over lunch, a close brother of mine confided and asked my opinion about an advice he had given to a CEO. A few months back, a brother of ours left the company. His notice period was cut short as he applied for an early release, which was approved. The early release required him to pay back the notice period to the company. After a few months, this brother of ours requested the CEO to waive the payback. Prior to his resignation, there were many other resignations with early release and all of them paid back the notice period. This brother of mine had advised the CEO to maintain his stance of requesting the payback and felt bad about it, as this particular brother who left is very close to us. Knowing that the CEO would take his recommendation seriously, he could have advised the CEO to waive the amount but he did the opposite because he knew that it was not the right thing to do.

Without doubt, it was a fair advice given – we have to be fair to the company and to the others who had paid back their notice period. I told him I would have advised the same.

Deciding Fairly

Being fair in decision-making is extremely difficult, it is easier said than done.

Different people having different interpretation of fairness and most of the time, they would be inclined to a definition that is skewed to their personal interest. So, to start with, being fair is not about meeting everyone's individual definition of fairness.

Nevertheless, along the process, although it is not as important as the actual act of being fair, we would need to manage the situation sensitively and appropriately so that we are at least perceived to be fair to the majority. However, this does not mean we can ever compromise the underlying need to be fair.

Acknowledging the challenges in making fair decisions, let us pen down some guiding principles to assist us with our decision-making process.

1. Define and/or understand the rights of everyone involved.

The most important factor that we need to take into consideration when making a fair decision is the rights of the people involved. Each person has their own individual rights that need to be respected and fulfilled. Our decision must not in any way shortchange anyone's rights.

A strong reminder to all of us: we do not want to fall into the category of oppressors – it is wrong to take away the rights of another person in the decisions we make. Among the people whom supplications are guaranteed to be accepted are oppressed people.

Ibn `Abbas narrated: The Prophet (ﷺ) sent Mu`adh to Yemen and said, "Be afraid of the supplications of the oppressed as there is no screen between his invocation and Allah."

Bukhari

2. Evaluate the impact of a decision on the parties involved.

We also need to understand and evaluate the impact that our decision would have on all the parties involved – we are to analyse it from various perspectives, both good and bad. This also includes evaluating the impact it would have on us. Sometimes, we are too engrossed in trying to be fair to others that we forget to be fair to ourselves, which is just as important.

The most ideal position is to strike a balance in our decision so that it comes out as fair as possible for everyone. These days, a full proof fair decision is not easy to reach, especially in the present uncertain and hectic lifestyle. Nevertheless, it is not an impossible task and minimally, we should still consciously do our best to reach the fairest decision; this is the least we could do.

3. Focus on the objective; put personal interests or agendas aside.

Self-interest is a natural trait of humans and as much as we try to deny, it influences our decisions and actions. However, in making a fair decision, these self-interests need to be put aside; we need to be objective and focus on evaluating the matter at hand and not what it has in store for us. Once we are able to do that, *insha Allah* we will be able to make a fair decision.

Trust me, in the end, the benefits of a fair decision would come back to us.

Just like the story of the famous Islamic judge Shuraih; his fair judgment caught the attention of the Caliph and he was honoured with the great responsibility of being the Chief of Justice of Kufah. Even if we don't get to see the immediate benefit in this world, rest assured that we will be fairly rewarded in the hereafter.

4. Put personal relationship second.

We are beings who are easily influenced by our surroundings. The ones who influence us the most are the people closest to us. If they are in the picture, it is highly likely that we will naturally be biased towards them.

When it comes to being fair, it does not matter how close we are with someone. It was said in another story that Shuraih had also passed a strict judgment on his own son.

On the same note, even Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) openly expressed that he would judge and punish his children the same like everyone else if they were found guilty of any wrongdoing.

Although it sounds straightforward, it is difficult to practise. It can only be done if we are able to build a strong internal belief on the importance of fairness.

5. Fear Allah.

The secret to making a fair decision is to fear Allah, that's the best answer. Why do we say this?

Remember that we will be held responsible for each decision we make in this world. On judgment day, our limbs will be our witness and only the truth would be told. We will have to face the consequences of our decision and therefore, if it was an unfair one; we should know that the worst awaits us.

That Day shall We set a seal on their mouths. But their hands will speak to us, and their feet bear witness, to all that they did.

Yasin 36: 65

If this scary fact is not a good enough motivation for us to carefully evaluate and make a fair decision, I sincerely don't know what will.

Be Fair Always

We can never avoid making decisions in life, it is part of living. How we live and move forward in life depends on the decisions we make. Hence, it is important that we develop the skills to make the *right* and *fair* decisions.

Being fair is indeed not easy to practise but despite this undeniable fact, we still need to try our best to be fair in whatever we do. Remember that everyone in this world (including us) has their individual rights; rights of children over their parents, rights of spouses over each other, rights of neighbours, rights of the people over their leaders – each of us has our own rights in our individual capacities.

At the end of the day, everyone wants to make the best decisions in life. We just need to stick to the basic rule of decision-making – practising fairness. As long as we are able to practise this each time we make a decision, rest assured that we are on track to make the right decisions. Even if they are not the best decisions, at least we won't be making the wrong ones.

Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded.

An-Nahl 16: 90