Jack Flaherty: [00:00:00] Once you learn to make effective decisions consistently, you gain a confidence. Your shoulders pull back. Your ability to look forward and not look back and wonder if you made the right decisions frees your brain. So you're a better leader.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:22] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:23] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:32] On average, we make 35,000 decisions a day. That's a lot of decisions, which means having a process for making effective, successful decisions is a foundational aspect of leadership. But decision-making isn't usually taught in school or on the job. Jack Flaherty is working to fill that gap. Jack is an advocate for leadership development, particularly in the area of decision-making. He's a consultant, a speaker, and the author of *The Decision Switch: 7 Principles of Successful Decision-Making*. In this episode, number 384, Celisa talks with Jack about his decision-making framework; decision-making as a process, not an event; the importance of self-reflection in getting better at decision-making; the role of empathy in decision-making; and the benefits of incorporating an effective decision-making process into an organization's culture. Celisa and Jack spoke in October 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:40] I know that you say that decision-making is a process and not an event, and I would note, for listeners, that may sound familiar to them because we often talk on this podcast about learning being not an event but a process. But would you just unpack that assertion for us and explain why it's important to view decision-making as a process and not an event?

Jack Flaherty: [00:02:03] Decision-making is a process because there are critical events that happen before, during, and after a decision occurs that often influence whether or not we achieve a successful outcome. Before the decision is made, it's activities, whether it be gaining additional information that we need, collaborating with others to make sure that we're not

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making an isolated decision, and also looking at those who might be impacted. And then, once we've made the decision, there's the follow-through. So often I've seen great decisions that were done with meaningful reason fail because it never gained the momentum it needed or had that champion to overcome the obstacles that virtually every decision faces. And the last aspect of that is the self-reflection. How do we learn from our mistakes, from these activities, and apply them to future decisions so we can continue to improve and make better decisions for both our companies but also for ourselves?

Celisa Steele: [00:03:02] I learned, in reading *The Decision Switch*, that apparently we make something like 35,000 decisions a day. And so that's a lot of decisions. What are the implications of that sheer volume of decision-making that we do on a daily basis?

Jack Flaherty: [00:03:19] There are many references. One that I love to use is decision fatigue, and that is we consume so much information on a daily basis and have to make decisions that we become exhausted, and you no longer put forth the effort. The critical aspect of those 35,000 decisions is to really identify which ones matter, what are the most critical decisions, and make sure that we apply the right amount of effort and due diligence around them to get the outcomes that we seek. And so, throughout the process, the first of my principles is to triage first, to evaluate those decisions that we become cognizant of and become aware of and first identify whether it's our decision to make. Because often we see individuals either don't participate in decisions they should or those that jump into a decision and have no reason for being in that particular process. And so when we look at the 35,000 decisions, it's really breaking down and prioritizing those as to what needs to happen now, what maybe needs to happen in the future, and those that we can let in a sense the world itself resolve those decisions or actions that need to happen.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:34] So making decisions, that's something we all have to do; we all have to do a lot of. And so it does seem—given just that sheer volume, given the quantity of decisions— that having a decision-making process would be very helpful. But I also got from reading *The Decision Switch* that it's not just that a process is helpful in getting through the quantity of decisions; it also speaks to the quality of decisions. Would you talk a little bit about how the process helps make sure that the decisions made are good decisions or better decisions than they would be if you hadn't used that process?

Jack Flaherty: [00:05:11] Sure. I'll first put a lens on this, that we are now amidst a world of technology. You and I, right now, are speaking remotely because we're on a video call and having this conversation. And, looking at the past, we may have had colleagues that we could

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have bounced ideas off at the office. Now we're sitting much more isolated. And so we need to very distinctly look at what each of these phases are so we can make a well-informed decision. It's looking at things like do we have all the necessary information to make a decision? Or are we doing a more siloed type of decision, which is more of a hip-check decision, where it's based on an idea, a gut feeling, rather than actually exploring what other ideas are out there and, almost more importantly, what the perceptions are of other individuals, particularly those that you're going to have to rely upon, and seeing where they are and how they fit into this? Because, as we talked about before, it's a process. They're going to be the ones to have to carry this through. And by making a more well-informed decision, it turns into a much more quality decision. This is where I use the word *consistency*. If we can more consistently make good and well-informed decisions, we're going to be more successful, whether again for ourselves, for our companies, for whatever we're looking to do, and that is such a critical aspect of this, the success portion that correlates directly back to making good, quality decisions.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:43] I feel like too it could be good to pause here for a moment because one of the points that you make, which I think is very important, is the fact that decision-making is such an integral part of our daily lives, and yet most people aren't taught how to make good decisions. And so I think that's part of how you came to focus on these seven principles of decision-making that you write about in the book. But talk about why do you think that's the case? Why is this really important facet of both professional and personal life not given time in school or more time in culture in general?

Jack Flaherty: [00:07:22] I put so much deep thought into this, and this is part of my thesis statement because, if you think about it, in your childhood, we're really not taught how to make decisions. We're punished or reprimanded for making poor ones. Even within our schooling systems, there's no real focus on decision-making. We might have a philosophy class or a history class, but there's no focus on why that individual made that particular decision; it's often focused on the outcome of a decision. And it's only when you get into your working profession, where there are two aspects that are the foundation for how we really develop our skill set. One is mentors, and the second is on-the-job experience. The challenge, though, again is, I go back to that technology reference I made before, is our ability to access mentors and get those really transparent relationships where you can be completely vulnerable with another individual. And saying, "I just don't know" is something that people are so terrified right now of. I also believe that there's a bias in society that anybody who exudes an overabundance of confidence must know what they're talking about. And so you don't question their ability, their decisions that they've made. You just assume that they know how to make good decisions, and so you'll follow them.

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Jack Flaherty: [00:08:44] And the breakdown of that is we then sit back, and we don't ask good, objective questions, and not in a, I would say, deconstructive manner but in a productive, constructive manner and the idea of how do we make this idea better? And I think about this one CEO that I worked for. Brilliant gentleman. Charismatic. I think that allowed him to walk into board meetings, and he would present an idea but present it almost in the fashion of "This is an unfinished idea, and I need the help of this room to finish this idea." I think if we can take that approach of not assuming that we're always right, but that we've got a great idea, and we want others to contribute towards that, it sets up cultures for organizations, or it sets up a way of thinking for ourselves that we're always seeking the best outcome. We don't want to be in a situation where we just want to be right. And I do think that—my last piece on this is—in today's individualistic society, people tend to want to be right, and I think that undermines our ability to make consistent, quality decisions because it's ego versus what the optimal decision is for a particular circumstance.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:09] I'm hearing in there, I think, a tendency for us to expect leaders to have the answer, which means, if we present them with a choice, they can make a decision. And, to your point, then we accept that decision without a lot of questioning, when really the decision could potentially benefit from that "Let's all participate. Let's all think about this. Let's think about what could go wrong or alternatives to the route that the leader has decided on."

Jack Flaherty: [00:10:35] Absolutely. And, if I could just add one more thing, if you look at the composition of today's workforce, particularly Gen Z, they want organizations where they feel like they can contribute. That's where you're going to get the employee retention. That's where you're going to get every ounce of energy from your employees, when they feel like they're contributing. And then the second part of that is, because of the speed of technology and innovation, you just can't have one or two sets of eyes looking at the horizon as to what changes are afoot. The entire organization itself needs to be very mindful of what are obstacles that are coming up? Where are the opportunities? And that way you have hundreds, if not thousands, of eyes that are constantly looking at the horizons or inside the organization and saying, "How can we do this better?" And by rewarding that behavior and really setting the culture from the top down that this is an expectation that you come to meetings with—I don't want to say an opinion—but a well-informed background to have a conversation really comes to a much richer conclusion and one that everyone buys into, and therefore you get the whole organization behind you instead of being a lone cowboy just trying to push your personal agenda.

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Celisa Steele: [00:11:58] I'm thinking of the Ikea effect—if we build it a little bit, then we're going to be more invested in that decision and seeing it to its conclusion.

Jack Flaherty: [00:12:07] Absolutely.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:12] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:42] You focus on seven principles of decision-making: triage first, follow your North Star, collaborate with others, recognize cognitive bias, establish a champion, manage fallout, practice self-reflection. Each of those principles, there's a lot in them, and very rich. I was hoping we could spend a little bit of time on that last principle because self-reflection is also so important in learning. So talk a little bit about what role self-reflection plays in decision-making.

Jack Flaherty: [00:13:14] Sure. Historically, you and I, probably have had mentors, where they would sit over our shoulder and give us guidance and tell us how to do something better. Well, we're in a self-learning world nowadays, and we don't have that as much of an opportunity, so we need to take a demonstrative step. You can formulate it however it works best for your work style. But, if you have a critical decision, writing down what are the aspects of that particular decision, how you came to a conclusion, and then revisiting that after you see the results to see if there was any way you could have altered your approach to get a more optimal outcome. The second aspect of that is that we all have either crutch words that we use, or we have crutch excuses about why we could or could not do something. And again, by writing that down and start taking notes about when those instances occur, we're more apt to close those gaps and become a more effective leader.

Jack Flaherty: [00:14:26] Going through each of the principles, we can start looking at and saying, "Oh, I probably should have collaborated with this individual," or "I had no idea because I joined a company six months ago that, 24, 36 months ago, something happened." So there's an inherent bias about going in a particular direction, and "I should have asked more questions." And that really drives the self-reflection piece, to identify where there's an obstacle or a hiccup and see if we can iron that out, so the next time we're faced with the same decision

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or something similar, we ask the right question. We learn from ourselves. Because they say about 85 percent of us are not very self-aware, meaning only 15 percent of us are truly self-aware. And so we need to question ourselves at times. Even if we are confident, even if we think we have all the background information, it's still good to ask open-ended questions of ourselves as well as others to make sure that we're not falling into the same traps that we might have before.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:34] I was struck by the concept of a decision journal, which you mentioned in the book, and I think it's essentially what you just explained, at least in part—that idea of taking note when you make a decision, thinking about what information did you have, who did you involve. But I liked that idea of making sure to document those aspects of decision-making while it's still fresh in your mind, while you have that decision that you've just made. And then there's that piece of returning to it later, when you have some of the results, and you're really seeing how that decision played out. But I think that could be incredibly powerful as a tool for better decision-making in the future and an incredible tool for learning as well.

Jack Flaherty: [00:16:16] I can't begin to say. I'm a lifelong learner, most of the time by hard knocks. And so I would love to say that I do this every time. But I do know that, when I'm faced with a life-altering change or something that I know is significant, I will take notes, both in my to-do list but also what I've learned or found along the way. That way we can come back because, again, I don't have the world's best memory. It helps me rethink what I was feeling, what I was thinking during that particular time, how do we alter the course going forward, again, so we don't repeat the same mistakes.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:58] I think one aspect of decision-making that we've touched on somewhat—because we've certainly talked about who else could be involved—some choices really are mine to make, I would say. This is a very simple one, but it might be just what I want to have for lunch. But there are going to be others that really need to involve others, like what strategic direction my organization is going to take. And it seems like leaders who solicit input on an important decision are probably going to inevitably end up with some input that doesn't match the decision that's ultimately made. So how do you think about helping those groups, those parties who aren't satisfied by the ultimate decision? How do you think about asking for input and knowing that there might be some dissatisfied people or how to control for that in the decision-making process?

Jack Flaherty: [00:17:58] Sure. There are two principles that I'll hit on. One is collaboration, and I suggest not only soliciting feedback from those that agree with you or those that you have to

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work with, but those who might vehemently oppose a recommendation that you're making and sitting down with them. Often I find those conversations themselves dispel a lot of the—I won't say animosity—but the argument or energy around that because, again, folks want to feel heard. And the second part of that is empathy. It's a theme that I have that goes throughout the entire book, that we really need to understand the impact of our decisions. And so, whether you're negatively impacted because you might be asked, as part of your work, to move or change your role or learn a new position, but also it comes to executive leaders who have contributed an idea that you need to go back to them and have a conversation and talking about why you took a particular path.

Jack Flaherty: [00:19:03] They may not 100-percent agree with it, but, by taking the time out of both your and their day to really express what challenge you were faced with, what information you were provided, your appreciation for their feedback, why you made a particular decision, and that you want them as part of your team because you want to have that objective opinion or perspective to ensure we get to a successful outcome. You take a humble approach in saying, "I may not know everything, but, based on what the facts were, this was the most optimal direction for us to take. But I also want my right-hand person to always be identifying what other roadblocks are out there so they can help me or help the organization navigate what's often a very complex course."

Celisa Steele: [00:19:51] Those kinds of conversations are assuredly important, but admittedly they will take time. And so, as we're talking about the first principle around "triage first," that it probably depends on the level of decision how much time you're going to be able to invest, or how much time it's going to make sense to invest in these upfront, collaborative conversations, and then these follow-on conversations around "Let me circle back with you, explain why I made this decision, even though it's not what you recommended."

Jack Flaherty: [00:20:25] There's a wide spectrum for the speed, and that's one of the foundations again for the platform, is to be able to make decisions with speed. But the platform supports short-term decision-making, even in an air traffic controller, all the way to your audience, who might be building a software platform, and they're looking to see what technologies to use, how to market it, and what their audience is. The latter are a little bit longer in the evaluation phase. So you put time to have some of those discussions because usually it's a richer discussion. But, if we go back even to the air traffic control, the FAA actually implemented a governance program for air traffic controllers so they could communicate because they're not looking at just technology or what they can see out of the sky, but now they can listen to others as well as they go through the decision-making process.

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Jack Flaherty: [00:21:21] And so, yes, some of these are split-second decisions, which you may have to revisit after an event has occurred and say judgmentally, "This is why I chose A and not B." But there's a time to come back because trust and a rich culture are so important for the longevity and success of an organization. The decision itself might be done very quick, but I highly recommend coming back and having some level of rapport conversation with those individuals, functions, or departments and sharing again what you were faced with, what the criticality of that was, what the value of that was, and why we took a particular approach. But never push down or press away their opinions. I would say continue to foster that. I want somebody that's always taking that objective look for the best interest of the organization. And so we can again consistently get the results that we want. And, if you always have yes people around you, we all know where that goes. It's usually not a good situation.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:41] I really like this idea of thinking about decision-making and having an effective decision-making process as being part of organizational culture. I think that's a really interesting perspective on it. So let's think about our listeners, and, if they're leading their organization or leading part of their organization, and they're hearing this and thinking, "Okay, yes, decision-making is a really important aspect of our culture or should be," what would you recommend as some initial steps or a first step if they're really trying to get more intentional and more deliberate about decision-making in their organization?

Jack Flaherty: [00:23:20] So, from a leader's perspective—and I have a lot of thoughts on this one—but for the sake of this one, we'll get targeted. From a leader's perspective, it's demonstrating by example. It's coming to meetings, fostering questions, and setting the expectation that individuals again or groups will come with a perspective, and it may align; it may not align. But setting the expectation that you're coming to a meeting or a decision well-informed is the first step. The second is to not silence, whether somebody who's just hired yesterday or new to the organization, because a lot of times those are the individuals who—because they have a fresh perspective—bring in brilliant ideas that could be hugely beneficial to the organization. Whether you catalog those ideas and revisit them as part of some sort of inventory list, you have that agile, analytical brain working constantly, saying, "How can I do my job better? How can our company operate better?"

Jack Flaherty: [00:24:30] It's by instilling your initial cultural values and expectations by the leadership. And then, as we take this further, it's talking about building cultures of collaboration. Because again, if we start setting the expectation that it's okay to have sometimes almost a level of an argumentative discourse about a decision, that can be okay as long as you

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are arguing the facts, and you're not advocating just your position based on ego. That is a delicate balance that you have to walk because I've seen it far too often that two executives go toe-to-toe, and one just wants to win. And that's where it really undermines your ability to achieve a mission, a goal, an objective because it might be self-interested, because it might mean "I get a higher bonus this year because my department did X better," but it was at the sacrifice of numerous others.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:35] So, Jack, we always like to ask guests that come on the Leading Learning Podcast about their own approach to lifelong learning. But, given our focus on decision-making today, I wanted to tweak that question a little bit for you and ask you how do you go about making decisions about your own lifelong learning?

Jack Flaherty: [00:25:55] This has been a lifelong journey. I didn't fall upon writing a book about decisions because there was a gap in the marketplace. It was a skill set that I lacked, and I had numerous mentors that blessed me with their time and helped me along my way. And so my decision process is I've always focused on what my North Star is, and this aligns with my personal, my career, my everything. And for me it's family first. And so, if it doesn't make sense for my family, then it doesn't make sense for me. And then, when we get into the actual business aspect of it, I look at, from an ethical perspective, to be able to look at the person in the mirror—did I really give the right amount of attention to this and bring in the others that should have collaborated on a particular decision?

Jack Flaherty: [00:26:54] I'm a huge person of empathy, and I've spent my entire life mentoring and building basically kids out of undergraduate. And so I love working with particularly young people but also senior executives and really opening their eyes. Because, once you learn to make effective decisions consistently, you gain a confidence. Your shoulders pull back. Your ability to look forward and not look back and wonder if you made the right decisions frees your brain. So you're a better leader. You make better decisions. People want to follow you because they believe in who you are and what you stand for. And so, for me, it's a lot of who you are as a human being that really, for me, is a driver. So I'm very ethical-bound—a lot of empathy. But again it's also tied to success. I want personal fulfillment myself. And I'm sure your audience does as well, not just for themselves but for their clients. And so, for me, I always come back to my North Star or my goal. What am I looking to achieve? And that can vary across time, but it's so important to be very crystal clear on where you want to go because that will help you make the right decisions so you can get there.

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Celisa Steele: [00:28:20] And so, you, in the book make the point of writing it being part of your own learning journey and that you've had these lessons from the school of hard knocks around decision-making and what works and what doesn't, and that then the book is essentially part of giving back and sharing what you've found to be helpful in making decisions.

Jack Flaherty: [00:28:46] I want to enrich the world and leave it better than I came into it. And unfortunately, early on in my career, some executives and other individuals were negatively impacted, whether their job or their position, because of the risk management reports that I wrote. And so I flipped my entire approach for how I did client service, how I worked with my clients, and I try to put myself in their shoes, saying, "What pieces are missing? Why are they not getting towards their goal?" And, as a result, how I wrote, how I engaged was always focused on their goals and why their current status was inadequate for them to achieve that goal. And, as a personal belief, who I am, what I do in my personal and professional life all follows that "How do I help you?" Because I do believe the more good you put out there, the more good you get back. And so it's a personal philosophy about how we make decisions. And, yes, all of this has been learned through the school of hard knocks because, like I said at the beginning, we're not really taught how to make decisions. And, as I vividly remember my mom, when I was young, she said, "Trust your gut feeling," and it felt like a great idea. But when you think about it, if you're not actually born with a good compass, that might not actually be the right decision.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:11] I just recalled that last week I was on the tennis courts with someone, and she said her mother used to always say, "Make good decisions!" And she realized that her mother would say that over and over, and she would never tell her how to make good decisions. So, maybe these seven principles would help her.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:37] Jack Flaherty is a consultant, a speaker, and the author of *The Decision Switch: 7 Principles of Successful Decision-Making*. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode384, you'll find a link to his Decision Switch Web site.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:53] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on whatever platform you use to listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:31:06] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague, a personal e-mail, or on social media. In the show notes at

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leadinglearning.com/episode384, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:22] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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