

**Making the Right Decision**  
**THE FIRST TIME**



**BY DAWN-MARIE BUCKLAND**

**H**ow often do you find yourself reflecting on a decision — your own or someone else’s — and wishing it had gone differently? Who wouldn’t like to have a way of ensuring that the decisions they make today are the right decisions for tomorrow? Governments are constantly faced with choices, and emotionally charged issues create short-term pressures that don’t always lead to the best interest of the community in the long term. A financially resilient organization creates emotional distance from difficult issues and balances short- and long-term perspectives in making its decisions.

Here’s a common scenario. A city is debating the merits of adding additional freeway access. An interchange would provide business access to commercially zoned land in a highly acclaimed economic development corridor. However, residents nearby fear that it would increase traffic and noise, jeopardizing their quality of life. The conversation quickly becomes emotional on both sides. What is the right decision?

In another example, a celebrated development agreement promises to bring high-wage jobs and critical street improvements to the community. The project takes years to implement, and the city and the developer work hand-in-hand to ensure its success. But the development changes hands during an economic downturn. The city finds that the new developer is in breach of contract, but there are no remedies in place to address the lack of performance. How could the city have approached the agreement differently in the beginning to avoid this unintended consequence?

The public sector faces seemingly endless scenarios that demand complex decisions. All too often we find ourselves questioning the conclusions we reached in the past and agonizing over the decisions before us. Many organizations do make consistently sound decisions, however — decisions that enhance their resiliency. We need to ask ourselves what factors lead to such an outcome and how leaders can create a successful and productive dialogue when difficult decisions are on the horizon.

## A STRATEGY FOR MAKING TOUGH DECISIONS

On the front end of a challenging decision, emotion can be intense, while a logical course of action feels distant and obscure. A 10/10/10 analysis counteracts this short-term bias by creating distance in decision making.<sup>1</sup> The analysis asks decision makers to take a step back and consider the short-, mid- and long-term implications of their decision

— how will they feel about it 10 minutes from now? Ten months from now? Ten years from now? The 10/10/10 analysis works because it explicitly identifies the short-term and emotional reasons for a decision and compares them to long-term considerations.

Going back to the freeway interchange example, nearby residents and elected officials might feel a great deal of angst 10 minutes and even 10 months after the announcement of a decision to move forward. At the same time, commercial landowners and the business community might be very excited by the idea. Ten years later, the interchange would be an inherent part of the transportation system, providing safe and easy access to neighborhoods and commercial areas alike.

The beauty of the 10/10/10 approach is that it can be used informally to simply and quickly think through impacts. The method can also be explained to stakeholders, prompting them to think through a decision more carefully.

## WHEN TO USE 10/10/10 ANALYSIS

The 10/10/10 methodology is most likely to work well when the decision you face meets the following characteristics:

- **Significant Long-Term Implications.** 10/10/10 analysis provides the greatest value where the long-term stakes are high. Providing healthcare at no cost for employees and retirees, for example, has very different financial impacts 10 minutes and 10 months after the decision than the cumulative effect after 10 years.
- **High Public Profile.** Building and maintaining public trust is paramount. With high-profile issues such as a freeway interchange, emotions often run high on both sides of the argument. 10/10/10 helps provide the

### Creditworthiness and 10/10/10

Credit ratings encompass a number of factors relating to the long-term financial health of a government, and the credit rating a government receives has a very high public profile. Therefore, the potential of a given decision to affect credit ratings can be a powerful way to engage others in forecasting a decision’s impact 10 years down the road.

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perspective needed to make the right decision for the long term.

- **Not Easily Reversible.** Some decisions cannot be easily undone if the choice later proves to be unwise. In these cases, 10/10/10 can add needed foresight. A 20-year development agreement binds a community to its terms for the duration. If the city in the second example had conducted a 10/10/10 analysis, decision makers might have seen past the initial euphoria of “getting the deal done” and realized the need for stronger terms and conditions to protect against the unintended consequences.
- **Multiple Processes or Plans Affected.** Organizations can use 10/10/10 to assess the ultimate impact of a decision about integrating plans. A long-term staffing plan is a great resource if thorough consideration is given to how it will be integrated into the budgeting and long-term financial planning processes.

The analysis helps all stakeholders distance themselves from the emotions provoked by the issue at hand, which positions leaders to make those courageous decisions that might otherwise paralyze an organization.

## CONCLUSIONS

Public service includes any number of issues that are rife with passion and emotion. Short-term bias is a natural and common response, whether because of emotions about pending changes or limited terms in office. Since many decisions cannot be undone without substantial costs or consequences, 10/10/10 analysis helps all stakeholders distance themselves from the emotions provoked by the issue at hand, positioning them to make better decisions. It provides an opportunity to question assumptions and identify options that will ultimately lead to better long-term results. ■

### Note

1. Many people have written about 10/10/10 analysis for decision making. Sources include: Suzy Welch, *10-10-10: A Life-Transforming Idea* (New York: Scribner, 2009); and Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work* (New York: Crown Business, 2013).

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