Doing The Right Thing

It really is not hard to know what is the right thing to do. Almost every moment of every day we make these decisions. It is simply a part of being human. For some of us it is an instinct that, for minor decisions, requires little consideration. However, for decisions that potentially have a major impact on others, deeper consideration is necessary.

I recently read a fascinating book by Daniel Kahneman called 'Thinking, Fast and Slow' in which he refers to the consideration of problems and events in terms of System 1 and System 2, where System 1 is a fast, intuitive response and System 2 is a response borne out of deliberation.

The vast majority of us make intuitive decisions all of the time based on what we instinctively believe to be the right thing to do. I accept that in different people even the intuitive response may be made on a balance of what is good for me and what is good for others and depending upon how you are made that balance may well be different.

It may be that for someone very self-centred, that an intuitive response to a situation would be heavily weighted in terms of the impact of my decision on me and me alone. For someone that is highly altruistic, then the balance would be weighted very much on the impact of the decision on others. In extreme cases of altruism, the impact of a decision on the self can be insignificant. To my detriment, I appear to fall into this category.

I have made these observations relating to the System 1 response, which is intuitive, however, the same will apply to System 2 judgements. If you have a situation that calls for some degree of consideration, maybe even some soul-searching, in order the make a decision, then whether you are self-centred or extremely altruistic will have a great say in the actions that you decide to take.

Let's take a look at some of my actions in certain circumstances during my life.

In my first proper job after leaving school I was a Field Engineer working for Burroughs Corporation, fixing adding and accounting machines, and later, computers. My job was to visit customer's offices when the machine went wrong. There were many occasions when a machine had failed and the customer had an urgent payroll to get out. To me it was what we call a 'no-brainer', a System 1 decision; I would work evenings, weekends, whatever it took to fix the machine. Here was someone in trouble who needed my help and I was the only one that could help, so I helped. There were no overtime payments and I never considered such a thing. I suppose that all I needed was to get the satisfaction that I had helped. This attitude led to many of my customers becoming friends.

When I was 30 years old I transferred from an engineering role as UK Support Manager to the role of a trainee salesman. This was almost forced on me by the number of sales managers that I had helped, who insisted that it would be a good move for me, as I was a 'natural salesman'. I didn't know about that; I just helped people.

As a salesman, the right thing to do is to sell something that the buyer wants and/or needs and then to make sure that it does what it was bought for. That is precisely what I did. Sadly, at that time, there was too much 'sell and run', after picking up the healthy commission. I occasionally got into trouble with my boss as I spent, in his view, too much time making sure my customers were happy rather than looking for the next order.

When Fiona and I were blessed with Tim in 1994 and then Ellie in 1997, these three people became my life. The love that I felt for my family was sometimes overwhelming. There is no doubt that I would have cared for Fiona no matter what befell her, through thick or thin, through the good and the bad times. However, Fiona didn't feel the same. As a result of the destruction of NCR, she left the family and joined the other side, claiming to all and sundry that I was a fraudster.

What could I do? Simple. I could only ensure, as best I could that the children suffer as little anguish as possible and that their lives were as normal as possible. I did everything I could during almost 4 years after Fiona left, to get the family back together, but to no avail. I gave up my business in order to care for them and had to live on benefits. They never went without and I believe that once they had come to terms with the loss of their Mum from the family home, they led happy lives.

Despite Fiona's adultery, for the sake of the children, I always felt that the family should be together. Whether Fiona and I could form a loving relationship again I wasn't sure, but that was for us, as adults, to work on. The right ring for the children was for the family to be together.

When, at the age of 89, Mum could no longer look after herself, we had few options. For various reasons my two brothers could not take her into their homes so there were just two options, either she went into a care home, with the stress and costs associated with that option, or she came to live with me. Yet again it was a 'no-brainer'. It was the right thing to do. I cared for Mum for 8 years before she died.

It goes without saying that when I started Postal Solutions Limited (PSL), the Postmaster Generals that had put the future of their organisations in my hands were very important to me. Working together with the United Nations and NCR in order to modernise the Posts of the developing world, we had a great responsibility. A number of Posts in Africa had actually mortgaged their postal headquarters in order to fund their modernisation projects. It was unthinkable that I should betray the trust put in me by such esteemed people that trusted me and needed my help.

I had trusted Mike Buchanan. I had no reason not to trust him. Everyone at NCR trusted him. When I realised that he had lie to me and deceived me into moving funds for his personal benefit, I was very scared. What could I do?

On the one side I had NCR, a company that had believed in my plan to develop its global postal business. A company that had invested funds that allowed be to start PSL and had funded the initiative for 2 years. However, here was a company that appeared to be so incompetent as to allow Buchanan to sign off the movement of funds from its bank accounts with no financial controls whatsoever.

On the other side we had many Postal Administrations in the developing world that had invested their hard earned funds in the modernisation projects managed by PSL in conjunction with the United Nations and NCR.

My fear was that if I revealed that Buchanan was embezzling funds from NCR, then NCR would stop the funding for the postal program thereby causing great losses to our customers.

This was a complex System 2 judgement. I had to consider many factors - moral, financial and legal, before making a decision. My conclusion, whichever way I looked at it was that I could not put my customer's projects and their considerable (for them) investments, at risk.

So, I said nothing. This appeared to be the right thing to do. NCR seemed to have lost control of a bank account and not even missed the money, whereas our customers had invested their hard-earned funds in these very worthwhile projects. However, what I did not know when I made this decision was the amount of money that Buchanan had access to – it just kept on growing.

Last of all we come to 'the truth'.

When NCR finally discovered what was happening, the lies and the cover-up started. They distorted their evidence to the court and pursued me as if I had conspired with Buchanan to steal the money. They determinedly focussed on my destruction and the destruction of PSL and with that the destruction of our projects and therefore the loss of huge investments by our customers.

For 14 years I have been writing and fighting for the truth of this odious affair to be known. Truth must win through.

That is most certainly the right thing to do.