

TWO GUARDRAILS FOR EVERY GOOD STRATEGY**By Stephen R. Graves**

Usually, voices in your head are not a good thing, but I have learned about two that are reliable. For planning and strategy, two “voices” we should listen to – in balance – are thoughtfulness and humility.

Thoughtfulness. The main idea is: Do not be impulsive and superficial in the planning and pursuit of your vision. Instead, be thoughtful and comprehensive. We see this modeled in the life of Jesus Christ. Early in His ministry, Jesus used the phrase, “count the cost,” as He was teaching and training His disciples: “Don’t begin until you count the cost. Who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you” (Luke 14:28).

Jesus, speaking to small farmers, used the illustration of building a tower – probably adding a side building onto an existing structure. He was cautioning that before making a major jump in strategy and committing lots of resources, evaluate the cost – all the costs, not just start-up costs. This is an idea managers and executives often struggle with. David Brooks wrote, “human beings are overconfidence machines,” citing a study in which 99% of business professionals overestimated their success.

It has been said that many business and professional people are great sprinters but horrible marathoners. The gun goes off and we sprint frantically, trying to take advantage of the opportunity: a new market to step into; a seemingly perfect hire; an acquisition possibility. Then we realize we are making a strategic shift far riskier than expected. We have great vision enthusiasm, but we sputter out after 100 yards.

We need to ask questions like: What resources will I need to see this venture through? What obstacles might I face? Will I look back and call this an impulsive decision? Who would see things from a different point of view and what could I learn from talking with them? Consequential outcomes require consequential input. We must invest the time to make wise decisions: “The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty” (Proverbs 21:5).

Humility. There is a counterweight to all this talk of comprehensiveness and forethought: Do not be presumptuous and arrogant about your self-contrived plans. Instead, be humble and reverent. Just as Jesus exhorted His listeners to “count the cost” before finalizing plans, we should remember even finalized plans are never set in stone.

We see this plainly in the New Testament’s book of James, which is so real world and immediate in its teachings. Toward the end of the book, a paragraph gives us the corresponding other bookend to Jesus’ “count the cost” message: “Look here, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.’ How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog –

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it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise you are boasting about your own plans, and all such boasting is evil" (James 4:14-16).

Everything we do should be under the banner of "the Lord willing." Not just a lip-service, "Lord willing," but a heartfelt, "God is good, and if He chooses to advance my cause or if He chooses to block it, He is still good." Humility without thoughtfulness creates leaders who make decisions with an unhealthy weight of emotion and leaders who do not finish things. Thoughtfulness without humility produces leaders who cannot handle failure and have no empathy. It takes both.

© 2024. Dr. Stephen R. Graves describes himself as an organizational strategist, pragmatic theologian, and social capitalist. He advises executives and business owners, as well as young entrepreneurs. He is author of numerous books and many articles, and a public speaker. His website is www.stephenrgraves.com.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had an impulsive idea and responded to it, only to later regret what you did? What was that situation like – and what were the consequences you encountered?
2. Think of a time when, instead of acting hastily, you chose to be thoughtful, "counting the cost" as Jesus taught. Compare the outcome of that circumstance with the impulsive action you described in the first question.
3. It is suggested that we balance thoughtfulness with humility. How do you understand what it means to do this?
4. What does it mean to make decisions and take strategic actions in light of being aware that what God wills might be different from what we want to happen? Explain how you see both thoughtfulness and humility working together in this context.

Challenge for This Week

Are you presently facing an important step or strategy that requires thoughtfulness, being aware that acting with haste could prove very costly? This week consider how these two "voices" – thoughtfulness and humility – could be good tools for guiding you to the right decision.

It was noted that both thoughtfulness and humility can involve a willingness to consult with others and receive their perspectives, which might be very different from yours. Invite a trusted friend or advisor, mentor, accountability partners or your CBMC group to offer their feedback on the issue you are facing.

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:
Proverbs 20:21, 28:22; Romans 2:6-8; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 4:10

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