

The Wisdom of Ignatius Loyola for Contemporary Business Decision-Makers

This presentation examines the contributions of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, to the theory and practice of decision-making in contemporary business contexts. It aims to compare and contrast prevailing models of business decision-making with the principles and methods articulated by Ignatius nearly five centuries ago. In doing so, the presentation considers the extent to which Ignatian discernment can inform and enrich modern approaches to leadership and organizational decision-making. It concludes by providing guidance for educators at Jesuit institutions on how to embed Ignatian decision-making frameworks into their courses.

Contemporary business decision-making research reflects a shift from purely rational, analytical models toward integrative frameworks that embrace cognitive psychology, intuition, organizational structure, and behavioral economics. The field increasingly recognizes how context, motivation, and systematic processes—or their absence—shape outcomes, yielding more robust and practical guidance for leaders and managers.

For example, research by Shepherd et al. (2024) explores how top management team intuition influences strategic outcomes. They conclude that, under the right contextual moderators—such as high environmental complexity or time pressure—managerial intuition can outperform analytic methods. Yet, organizations must be careful: intuition is most effective when grounded in deep domain expertise and collective experience rather than individual “gut feelings.” This underscores the value of seasoned leadership and a mix of analytic and intuitive approaches.

Nuthall (2022) also emphasizes the role of intuition. His review and empirical analysis explore the role of “objectively informed intuition” in managerial decision-making. He finds that most business decisions—especially in small and medium-sized enterprises—result from a blend of intuition (unconscious, rapid cognition) and conscious logic. Nuthall identifies three critical contributors to

effective intuitive decision-making: personal characteristics (including intellect and personality), training, and practical experience. He introduces a quantitative model that ties these factors to the quality of management decisions, arguing that improving decision outcomes requires targeted development of all three domains.

Beshears and Gino (2015) argue that leaders significantly influence organizational decisions not just by direct command but through structuring the environment in which decisions are made. They introduce the concept of leaders as "decision architects," emphasizing that instead of attempting to rewire individual behavior, leaders should redesign processes to promote better choices across their organizations. This approach targets two common sources of error: insufficient motivation and cognitive bias. By altering choice architecture—such as changing default settings or how options are presented—leaders can nudge decisions toward superior outcomes.

Wedell-Wedellsborg (2017) contends that a central failure in contemporary business decision-making stems from addressing the wrong problem. Organizations tend to display a bias for action and leap into solution mode without adequately defining or reframing the problem at hand. Through examples and a practical three-step process (frame, reframe, move forward), he demonstrates that reframing often produces markedly better solutions and avoids wasted effort. He highlights research indicating that as many as 85% of companies frequently attack the wrong problems, with significant implications for innovation, resource allocation, and strategic focus.

Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, made enduring contributions to decision-making practices through his development of the practice of "discernment," a reflective approach intended to integrate rational analysis and personal values. His methods—rooted in a balance of reason, emotion, and ethical consideration—remain highly relevant for contemporary business decision-making.

The process of discernment calls for clarifying the decision, reflecting on values, consulting reason and emotion, considering pros and cons, and achieving a state of "indifference" in order to make

an unbiased choice. Beyond the standard approach to decision-making that emphasizes reason and intuition, Ignatius believed that decisions must be approached with both head (rational analysis) and heart (feelings and motivations). A good decision is confirmed when intellect and emotion are aligned (what he called "consolation"), whereas persistent unease ("desolation") suggests reconsideration is needed. He urged a careful, sometimes laborious preparatory process to ensure freedom from personal bias and outside pressures, and he emphasized the importance of reflection, offering a systematic approach known as the examen to facilitate the process of reflection and preparation for moving forward. The ultimate goal of decision-making was to pursue choices that served the greater good, a tradition now summarized by the Jesuit motto "Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam" ("For the Greater Glory of God").

The implications of Ignatian discernment for business leaders include the importance of: integrating values and emotion into the decision process alongside financial or technical reviews; encouraging discernment before decisions and reflection afterwards to cultivate clarity and reduce rash choices, prioritizing the broader impact of decisions on employees, customers, and community—core to the Jesuit tradition, and maintaining flexibility and openness through Ignatian "indifference," that is, overcoming ego needs to focus on mission and values. Ignatius Loyola's framework blends practical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and ethical discernment in decision-making, providing timeless strategies for those navigating complex challenges in modern organizations.

This presentation concludes by describing classroom exercises that educators can utilize to promote an Ignatian approach to making decisions in any organizational or personal context. In particular, two approaches will be emphasized: (1) a values sort exercise that fosters deep reflection on one's personal values and priorities; and (2) a personal mission exercise that guides learners through a discernment process that leads to an articulation of a personal mission statement that reflects the core of one's character, is values-based and is actionable. The personal mission is meant to be a living

document that evolves as one's life circumstances change. Together, these two exercises build self-awareness, the foundation of emotional intelligence, and enhance leadership capability in the Ignatian tradition.

References

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