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How To Adapt The "Serenity Prayer" For Business Decision-Making

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You've probably heard of the Serenity Prayer, whether or not you know it by name. It goes something like this: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

This is powerful advice when facing challenges in life, and it forms the cornerstone of many therapeutic approaches for addiction and other disorders. But it also has important — and overlooked — applications in the business context.

Behind the serenity prayer, which was first published in a 1951 magazine column by an American theologian, is a much older Roman phrase. The 2,000-year-old Stoic expression translates roughly as, "what is up to us, what is not up to us." In business, as in life, it's easy to lose track of this key distinction. And that's where endless stress, frustration and distraction arise. (Credit due to Ryan Holiday, who highlighted this theme in his 2014 bestseller [The Obstacle is the Way](#).)

The heart of this Stoic credo, and what makes it so effective as a decision-making tool, is that it radically simplifies our options. Any decision involves taking into account multiple variables, weighing pros and cons, and forecasting the likely future impact. The more variables, the harder — and more paralyzing — a decision becomes.

Suppose you own an auto repair shop and are thinking about opening up a new location across town. Yay or nay? You might ask whether timing is bad, considering that a recession seems on the horizon. Or you might get hung up on whether a big-name repair franchise is going to move in and eat up your business. You might wonder whether your suppliers, who have always been great to you, are about to change their policies.

The thing is these questions are largely out of your hands. You could agonize about them endlessly, but ultimately, they're not "up to us." The power of the Stoic ethos is that it lets us take all this off the table. We're left with what we can actually control — the stuff that's actually "up to us." In the repair shop example, that could mean turning your energies to weighing potential market size and revenue, asking if you have the personal time and resources needed to double your footprint, and calculating the hard costs of opening a new garage.

My point is this: By limiting your decision process to considering what's really "up to you," you're left with a smaller pie of variables and, ultimately, a more manageable decision. More of your energy and intellectual horsepower is freed up to focus on that stuff that matters. Instead of being lost in indecision or acting on impulse or desperation, you can actually make an informed decision with the relevant information.

In my own entrepreneurial journey, I've come back to this principle time and time again. Early on, for example, Hootsuite was up against much larger and better financed competitors in the [social media management space](#). I had bootstrapped the platform with credit cards and love money, while the other guys were sitting on millions in venture capital.

But there really wasn't much we could do about that. Worrying about what competitors were doing at that stage, or letting that overwhelm our decision-making process, wasn't helpful. (I'm not saying that these factors would *never* matter, just that they were beyond our control at that juncture.) What we could do, in contrast, was control how well we executed on our own vision. Were we building the best platform with the resources we had — the one that was easiest to use and had features people really needed? Were we being creative in our viral marketing efforts? Were we hustling to sign larger clients? Were we responding promptly to customer support requests? All those things were "up to us."

The same logic can also prove helpful in the face of macroeconomic changes that no one person or company can control. The stock market has had a long bull run. Does that mean we're due for a downturn? Should you cut back on spending and growth and instead stockpile a rainy day fund? Well, the simple reality is that the market can't be controlled or predicted. You can educate yourself, but you can't forecast the future. The worst-case scenario is getting paralyzed into inaction by circumstances that you don't have control over.

So what can we control? In *The Obstacle Is The Way*, Holiday identifies a string of factors that each of us can influence: our emotions, our judgements, our creativity, our attitude, our perspective, our desires, our decisions and our determination. I'd summarize all that as our *outlook* — the frame of mind that we bring to any situation. Admittedly, it's not always easy to control this. In the heat of the moment, emotions get the best of us; false judgements creep in. Determination falters; poor decisions are made. But it's important to remember that we *can* control these things, with patience, time and planning. And that's where our efforts should be expended — not in worrying about factors beyond our control.

In the age of AI and machine learning, using an ancient Stoic mantra as a decision-making tool may seem simplistic or out of date. We now have predictive algorithms that can take endless variables into account and prescribe a course of action. While there's a place for this in business, the reality is no algorithm can eliminate risk or know the unknowable. Embrace these tools, by all means. Use them to shine light on the factors you can control and inform your decisions. But remember there is and always will be stuff we don't know and can't control. But that shouldn't stop us from going forward. You can learn to love your fate, even if you can't control it.

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Great reminder that taking into too much extraneous information simply clouds a decision. Influencing the things within our span of control is what we can do. If we do that well, we can hopefully be aware enough to take advantage of the opportunities which get presented to us. Thanks for posting.

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