

By Ben Johnson
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Mental Edge: Sometimes you have to be inflexible

The clearer you are about your policy — as long as it is a reasonable policy — there will be less of a struggle to keep it.

I spend a lot of time helping people navigate shades of gray in life, discussing how to manage the complexity, uncertainty and messiness of relationships, to-do lists and career aspirations. Much of this work involves helping people be more flexible, identifying small steps towards progress.

Occasionally, though, there are times when it is helpful for people to be more black-or-white, or “policy-driven,” about decisions.

If you are overwhelmed by a task, it is usually helpful to break it down into tiny steps. If your house is a complete mess, pick one corner of the kitchen and start dealing with the clutter. If you say, “I will clean the whole house — tomorrow,” you will maintain the paralysis. It will still feel too hard to face all at once.

If you are trying to write a book but find yourself blocked, you could make a list of five main points you know for sure you want to discuss. Pick the first and write a paragraph. When you are overwhelmed, go gray.

If you have little motivation or energy for a project, be flexible enough to do the easiest element you can identify. If you have thank-you notes to write, but absolutely and thoroughly don't feel like it, you could trick yourself into licking the stamps and maybe addressing the envelopes. Make no commitment for more than that. If more happens, it happens. The movement may spur progress later.

So, when does it pay to be categorical or policy-driven about things? For one, there are problem behaviors where yielding a little quickly means you will yield a lot. It is hard to smoke cigarettes just now and then. Having a few puffs at the bar with friends leads to relapse. That is the nature of the product.

If you rationalize that you will only buy doughnuts for yourself when you are really, really in the mood for them, you will probably find that your doughnut-oriented self-care becomes more routine. Your weight-loss goals will be frustrated. Although moderation is usually the best approach with food, there are times it may be helpful to adopt a “no-buying-doughnuts” policy for a while.

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Some people have a bad habit of canceling plans with friends. If you bail on your buddies more than a third of the time, then it may be good to get all-or-nothing about it. Commit to sticking with plans you make, regardless of how you feel later or what better opportunities come along. Be assertive and don't agree to the plan upfront if you aren't willing to stick to your choice.

Being policy-driven about certain marital issues can be helpful. If you are in frequent couple conflict, make a categorical decision not to use the “divorce” word in the heat of a fight. It is not helpful to be gray about it, as using the D-word makes repair and trust so much more difficult when calm returns, which it usually does.

Similarly, make a joint decision that you won't call each other names when you are upset. Labeling your spouse lazy or flabby is just too damaging.

There are some things you don't want to let yourself get used to saying. Indulging these words a little just won't work.

So, if you are having trouble resolving a problem in your life, ask yourself whether you need to be more flexible about it, or whether you need to firm up your value-driven stance. Choose clear self-management policies to institute today that will build self-respect tomorrow.

— Ben Johnson is a clinical psychologist who practices, supervises and teaches psychotherapy. Send comments to Features@ProvidenceJournal.com; put “Mental Edge” in the subject field. You may also write to Mental Edge, Features Department, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence, RI 02902.



Ben Johnson

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