

America Needs a Trimmer

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As president, George W. Bush got ridiculed for calling himself “the decider.” It seemed so pompous and self-important. But in reality, we are all deciders. The quality of our lives is determined by the quality of the decisions we make about how to move into the future.

There are two dominant models for how to make those decisions. The first is the heroic-visionary model. In this model, a leader sees further into the future than everybody else. He goes with his instincts. He takes big risks and makes bold choices. This model seems inspiring and romantic until the heroic leader leads you off a cliff. Napoleon seemed all-knowing until he pursued his invasion of Russia into the wintertime.

The failures of the heroic model induced people to come up with an opposite approach, which we’ll call the technocratic model. The technocrat is taught not to go with his gut but instead to use reason, amass data, and weigh evidence using a formal and impersonal decision-making methodology, like a decision tree, matrix, or spreadsheet. This is the kind of decision-making process that often gets taught in business schools. It seems so sober and scientific. The problem is that the world is complicated, and most of it cannot be quantified and put into a spreadsheet. You wind up with Robert McNamara leading a disastrous war in Vietnam. You wind up with all those finely trained executives at Kodak who didn’t foresee that the future of photography was going to be digital. In their own bland way, the technocrats can be even more arrogant than the heroic visionaries because they don’t have any humanistic insight into how people behave.

So what’s a reasonable person to do?

Well, let’s go back to the 1680s and a British aristocrat named George Savile, who became the first Marquess of Halifax. He lived during one of the most treacherous periods in his country’s history. The Catholic king, James II, was bitterly opposed by the Protestant aristocrats, who feared Catholic domination and French influence. A bunch of Protestant nobles invited the Protestant Dutch prince, William of Orange, to invade England and take over the throne. He did so, sending James into exile in France, from where James launched his own invasion to recapture power, which failed. Halifax managed to be a senior adviser to both King James and King William, seeking national conciliation. He then became speaker of the House of Lords during the Parliament that resolved the crisis and brought forth a series of reforms that increased the power of Parliament and reduced the power of the crown.

He was the very picture of prudent moderation—and in those polarized times, people hated him for it. Halifax was excoriated by those on both extremes for being a “trimmer.” Instead of siding with one extreme or the other, he was accused of trimming his sails to take advantage of shifts in the prevailing winds. The trimmer was an unpopular stock character of the age. One critic compared him to an aquatic mammal reclassified as seafood to dodge Lenten prohibitions on meat, calling the trimmer “a kind of state-otter, neither fish nor flesh, and yet he smells of both.” Another called him a political “hermaphrodite.”

Halifax shot back with an essay titled “The Character of a Trimmer,” which essentially said: *You accuse me of being a Trimmer? You’re damn right I am!* He held up the Trimmer as a social ideal. And in that essay, he gave us our third and best model for how to make good decisions about the future.

Halifax understood the ancient truth that, in politics, the lows are lower than the highs are high. The

sufferings caused by a statesman's blunders are larger than the benefits produced by his accomplishments. A wise statesman therefore exercises restraint, resisting the temptations of power, the seductions of ego. In order to see each situation whole, he must resist the temptations of faction, permanently siding with only one point of view, simplistically dividing the world into the good and the bad.

The Trimmer understands that reality is more complicated than any single person can comprehend, and therefore he insists that no decision be taken until there has been a collision of diverse views. He maintains trust and communication with the broadest possible range of stakeholders but refuses to be owned by any of them. He governs through cooperation and compromise, not through domination and fear. His greatness comes in the art of holding his nation together, not in the exercise of arbitrary power. He perceives that if a leader loses the affection of his people, he can no longer govern except by threat of violence.

To hold the nation together, the Trimmer treats the law not as an impediment to his power but as a sacred trust and inheritance. A great statesman, Halifax argued, doesn't only obey the law; he internalizes it as the essence of his nation's genius. The law represents the accumulated wisdom of his people, hammered out over centuries, and by embodying it the leader gives it warmth and vigor. Those leaders who ignore or flout the law aren't merely unethical but fatally arrogant, putting their childish willfulness over the wisdom of generations.

[Peter Wehner: A word for our troubled times](#)

The Trimmer is the very antithesis of Donald Trump, a man who puts himself above the law, confuses personal loyalty with public service, takes rash action without public consultation, and is contemptuous of restraint. Feeling bored on a Saturday night? Let's go off and declare war on Iran!

Deep down, the different approaches flow from contrasting visions of human nature. Trump sees only the lower registers of human nature: selfishness, greed, the urge to dominate. His method is crush or be crushed; get your retaliation in first. Halifax was no stranger to human frailty. He was forever warning of the seductions of flattery, ego and self-interest. He understood that in politics and life we walk through a dark forest, barely understanding our surroundings. But he believed these weaknesses can be counteracted by a leader who possesses accurate self-awareness—who knows when he is being flattered—and who submits himself to those practices, disciplines, and institutional arrangements that have historically produced better decision making.

Thus, in Halifax's universe, decision making is mostly an emanation of character. In his essay, Halifax wasn't telling statesmen how to crush their foes. He was telling them what sort of person to be—humble, honest, patient, quick to admit when you are wrong, possessing a capacity to handle complexity without searching for easy answers. Morality is not mostly a matter of making big ethical decisions at moments of crisis; it's mostly a matter of maintaining prudent, considerate, and sensible habits amid the stress and uncertainty of daily life.

The Trimmer is not always the most charismatic leader. He's not the guy on the white horse charging off to attack one enemy after another. But Halifax, as an example of the type, displayed a constant generosity of spirit, even to those who wronged him. He possessed an ardent love of England—all of it, and not just one side of it. For a Trimmer, he wrote, "his country is in some degrees his Idol." Yet he balanced the ardor of his patriotic heart with the coolness of his humble mind. His stronger inner passions were checked by an equally strong sense of restraint. His approach brings to mind Max Weber's formula for excellence in politics: "One can say that three prominent qualities are decisive for a politician: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion."

The key Trimmer watchword is *balance*. There must be a balance between competing points of view so that none are excluded during deliberations; a balance between short-term detours and long-term goals. In his essay, Halifax used a nautical metaphor. When the ship is leaning to port, shift your weight to the right; when it is leaning to starboard, shift your weight to the left. When things are going well, the Trimmer inspires confidence more than enthusiasm. He is more likely to be admired by posterity than to

be lionized in his own time.

The modern American leader who most approximated the Trimmer ideal was Dwight Eisenhower. He preserved the New Deal but refused to expand the welfare state. He attacked Joe McCarthy, but he waited until the time was right, when he could damage McCarthy's reputation rather than just boost the senator's visibility. Ike gave his farewell address three days before John F. Kennedy's famous inaugural. Kennedy's speech was heroic, lavishly bold, and audacious. He vowed to "pay any price and bear any burden" to promote the cause of liberty. He vowed to "explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease." Eisenhower, by contrast, warned the country against arrogance, against falling for the temptation to believe that "some spectacular and costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties." He used the word *balance* over and over again—balance the public and the private, civic duties and individual freedoms, small communities and the big industrial complexes. Speaking to a nation at the peak of its power, Ike was warning against hubris. And because his warning went unheeded, America would soon march into Vietnam.

Halifax is writing for statesmen, but you and I can extrapolate from his Trimmer ideal to reshape our own decision-making methods as we try to move gracefully through life. If we do that, we'll find that the Trimmer-inspired decision-making process is quite different from the one exemplified by heroic leaders on magazine covers, and from the bloodless technocrats who confuse their data for reality itself.

Let's walk through each stage of the decision-making process to see how the Trimmer model is superior:

Goal Setting. Today's technocratic education tends to be neutral about ends. Business-school professors don't know which firms their students will wind up in, so they hand them techniques they can use in any company to thrive. Many of these professors cultivate a mode of analysis that's good at thinking about process, but not as well-suited for thinking about purpose. They assume that people are primarily motivated by extrinsic rewards—like promotions and better pay—and will be motivated to work so long as clear metrics are placed before them.

A Trimmer is not neutral about ends. Whether it's running a business or making a work of art or loving a country, she asks: *What moral purpose are we trying to serve?* Trimmers do not believe you can make decisions about means and strategy unless these ultimate questions of purpose are answered first.

People typically find their purpose through an act of moral imagination. Trimmers tend to tell a transgenerational story: *This is what our predecessors left behind; these are the challenges of our own day; these are the legacies we will bequeath to the coming generations.* They describe a long-term mission that warms the hearts and fires the will. Trimmers believe that people will only be motivated to work passionately, endure hardship, and push relentlessly if they are driven by some kind of moral ideal.

The Trimmer also understands that every activity you undertake will change who you are. So every time a Trimmer sets a goal, she is also asking: *What sort of person will this mission turn me into? What sort of organization or nation are we creating here?*

Abraham Lincoln told exactly that kind of transgenerational story: *Our founders left us the ideals embodied in the Declaration; we face the scourge of slavery; we will hand our descendants a unified nation governed by all the people.* He was a total Trimmer in the way he pursued these ideals. He moved toward abolition only as quickly as the country could stand. He compromised to keep the border states from defecting to the Confederacy. His trimming offended the radical abolitionists, but it won the war.

Contact with reality. Back in the 1960s Henry Mintzberg, who teaches at McGill University's school of management, was frustrated by the standardized business-school curriculum that treats executives as if they were chess grandmasters who deliberate from above their organizations, devise grand strategies, and confidently move pieces around the board. For his dissertation, Mintzberg went out and followed managers as they actually did their jobs, which looked nothing like the life of a grand strategist. Daily life for actual executives was a torrent of quick, fragmented encounters: short conversations, small decisions, one problem requiring attention over here, another problem requiring attention over there.

In the flux of real life, leadership is more about constant small adaptations than about bold, systematic decision making. Mintzberg later came to oppose the case-method form of education pioneered by Harvard Business School, which teaches students to make decisions about places they have never visited. That method doesn't prepare students for the actual work of day-to-day engagement—the quick, context-dependent adjustments that leadership actually requires.

Mintzberg's approach is consistent with Peter Drucker's famous assertion that management is a liberal art. He meant that management is not a technique; it's a practice, the way carpentry is a practice. The crucial knowledge required to do this practice well cannot be reduced to rules that can be conveyed in a classroom. It can only be imparted by the example of a wise craftsman in the midst of practicing their craft—knowing exactly how much pressure to apply at what moment, knowing when to press forward and when to hold back.

This is exactly the sort of perpetually shifting engagement that the Trimmer mentality trains you for. It demands that you transcend technocratic calculations and draw on insights from history, psychology, literature, and the social sciences. Most importantly, it demands you apply those general insights on this particular day, in this particular context, with this particular individual—which is where the science of management is surpassed by the practical wisdom of craft.

Situational awareness. Technocrats see a world full of problems, and believe their job is to engineer solutions. Trimmers, by contrast, tend to use organic metaphors, not mechanical ones. They see the world not as a watch to be taken apart and repaired, but as a rainforest with an immense variety of plant and animal life—all growing, changing, and interconnected in myriad ways you will never fully understand. Decision making has to begin with a careful examination of the environment. *What's really going on here? What does this situation allow?*

Respect for complexity requires valuing reality over ideology, close observation over abstract theorizing. And that, in turn, takes a capacity for subjective awareness, an ability to attune yourself to the flow of events. A Trimmer respects data but also seeks to develop a "feel" for the situation, including the submerged forces. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin called this a "sense of reality." It "is not scientific knowledge but a special sensitiveness to the contours of the circumstances in which we happen to be placed; it is a capacity for living without falling foul of some permanent condition or factor which cannot be either altered, or even fully described and calculated."

In developing this kind of awareness, the Trimmer is exceptionally sensitive to dangers of groupthink. She is a member of teams but tends to position herself, as the Franciscan friar Richard Rohr once put it, on the edge of inside. She is not at the core of the group, but she is near the boundary, and so can see the world both from the vantage point of the group and also the vantage points of those outside the group. She is contemptuous of partisans whose opinions are rigidly predictable.

Humility. When Jim Collins was researching his book *Good to Great*, he looked at pairs of companies that had once performed comparably but then diverged, one prospering while the other faltered. He found that the successful companies tended not to be led by celebrity CEOs or charismatic visionaries. They were led by quieter and less colorful executives who combined fierce personal resolve with deep humility. What Collins called "Level 5 leaders" sound like Trimmers—people who have an acute awareness of what they don't know.

[Arthur Brooks: To get happier, make yourself smaller](#)

We are all shortsighted, but Trimmers, aware of their shortsightedness, learn to live with ambiguity rather than rush to judgment. They value second- and third-order thinking: *If we take this action and so change the environment people are in, how will that alter their attitudes and behavior?* If there had been any Trimmers around Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar as he decided to launch the October 7 attacks, they might have asked: *We're about to instigate a campaign of mass murder and mass rape against citizens of a country much more powerful than we are, led by a government looking for a pretext to destroy us. Maybe this is not the best way to achieve our goals?*

Timing. The heroic leader values speed. Move fast. Be decisive. Get out ahead. Have a bias toward action. The Trimmer understands that knowing when to make a decision is usually as important as what decision is made. The Trimmer understands that a strategic delay is not procrastination, but a patient wait until the situation clarifies itself. If you decide too early, you're operating in a fog; too late and you've missed your opportunity. The crucial skill, therefore, is the ability to read the wind, to sense when the timing is ripe. The Trimmer's life is marked by long periods of observation interrupted by bursts of decisive action.

When a young man named Bob Rodriguez asked Charlie Munger to say the one thing he could do to become a better investor, Munger [replied](#), "Read history. Read history. Read history." Only history gives you an intuitive awareness of how events tend to unfold. A person with a sense of history understands that there are different seasons in life. Sometimes it's right to turn up the pressure on your organization to prompt change. Sometimes it's best to turn down the heat, to encourage consolidation. Munger's partner Warren Buffett famously said his job consisted in being fearful in those seasons when others are greedy and being greedy in those seasons when others are fearful.

Judgment is a process. Technocrats often see the world as a blank canvas. They intend to build something, they deliberate on what they should do, and then they execute based on their deliberations. Trimmers don't see the world as a blank canvas. They're born into a specific set of circumstances. Their great capacity is responsiveness. Their circumstances summon them to address some wrong or seize some opportunity. Those who feel summoned by life tend to use what Mintzberg calls an "emergent strategy." They see what emerges around them and then adjust; see what emerges, adjust; see what emerges, adjust. Decision making, in this way of thinking, isn't a discrete event. It's a continuous activity.

This process of constant iteration gives Trimmers the chance to spot unexpected opportunities, to ride the lucky wind when some new technology changes things. It encourages them to jettison ideas that are no longer working. A lot of life is just coping—trying to adjust to the surprises life has thrown at you, trying to discern a good compromise from a bad compromise, trying to find the least bad option when no good ones are available.

The 18th-century Anglo-Irish statesman Edmund Burke embraced exactly this sort of constant, incremental reform. He served in Parliament about a century after Halifax. Like Halifax, he was a passionate guy; his prose ripples with his intense emotional nature and his intense love for his country. But like Halifax, he was acutely aware of how complicated the world is and how little we know. His epistemological modesty produced a spirit of caution. He learned to love fairness but distrust himself. He wrote that you should operate on society the way you would operate surgically on your own father: in the least invasive way possible, because you cherish what you are cutting into.

Burke believed that communities, organizations, and nations are held together by law, customs, affections, beliefs, psychological traits, historical memories, and daily practices—what he called the "decent drapery of life." When idiot technocrats, working in the spirit of engineers, seek to construct a society based on abstract ideas, they don't even see their community's invisible fabric and end up ripping it to shreds. This is exactly what urban planners did in the 1960s and 1970s: building highways through neighborhoods, erecting soulless high-rises, and unwittingly savaging the systems of mutual support that neighbors had formed over previous decades.

Burke distinguished between innovation and reform. Innovation is change organized by alien, abstract principles—the way the French Revolutionaries tried to dismantle everything about the old order and rebuild from the ground up based on abstract universal principles. Reform, by contrast, is an attempt to create change on the foundations of the existing social order, building on its best spirit and practices. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. sought to do. He wasn't trying to get America to renounce the ideals of its founding, but to live up to them. That is the Trimmer's preferred form of change.

Reflection. During the run-up to the Iraq War, I asked Donald Rumsfeld if he ever stayed up nights after a big decision second-guessing himself. Never, he told me: He made a decision and then moved on. That's what heroic leaders are supposed to say. The Trimmer understands, by contrast, the truth of Aldous Huxley's observation that "experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what

happens to him.”

Trimmers know that everything they do could have been done better, and so insist on after-action reviews. Trimmers have the ability to break contact with reality and reflect. To use the management theorists Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky’s metaphor, they get off the dance floor and up onto the balcony where they can see situations whole. Peter Drucker used to advise executives to ask: “If we did not already do this, would we go into it now?” If the answer is no, he counseled, then stop doing it.

[Charles Yu: Don’t call it ‘intelligence’](#)

Trimmers understand that wisdom usually isn’t the possession of one solitary, heroic genius. Wisdom usually is a group possession. It is contained in the conversations that have evolved through the generations, what has been learned and passed down, a tradition of embodied practice.

I’ve been selling the Trimmer ethos pretty hard. But I’ll close with an uncomfortable question: Is Trimming the right approach in all circumstances? Of course not. When the status quo is fundamentally evil and dysfunctional, then Trimming is immoral. Trimming was a bad option in response to Jim Crow. Trimming was a bad option when Neville Chamberlain went to Munich to compromise with Hitler. When faced with an intractable problem, or with a person or movement that is malevolent in its very nature, fundamental rupture and daring rejection is required. When Trimmers fail to recognize this, evil festers. People rightly get disgusted with the Trimmers in their midst, and they replace them.

For some people, this is the history of American politics over the last few decades. The Trimmers like George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama dithered while everything went to hell, so the people chose Donald Trump to ride to the rescue. There are people on the right and the left who believe ours is not a time for Trimming; it’s a time to blow it all up.

I look at such people and conclude that they think about their leaders the way that adolescents sometimes think about their parents: *Because they are not perfect, they therefore must be irredeemable*. I conclude that they have the narcissists’ tendency to see themselves as the pure children of light, doing battle with the children of pure evil. I conclude they don’t have the skill to perform the subtle act of reform, so all they can do is destroy.

Trimming means understanding that any big dispute is usually a competition between partial truths. Social change is mostly a question of proportion. If society is too individualistic, shift a bit over and nurture community. If society is too unequal, shift a bit over and narrow inequality.

This brings us to a final Trimmer principle: Never ascribe to malevolence what can be ascribed to stupidity. Most people are doing the best they can in conditions of ignorance and frailty. Most people on different sides are worthy of compassion and respect. You don’t love your country if you want to burn it all down. You don’t love your country if you hate half its members.

So I march with the Trimmers. This is our Trimmer chant as we take to the streets: What do we want? Moderate progress! When do we want it? Over a gradual time horizon!

Stirring stuff.