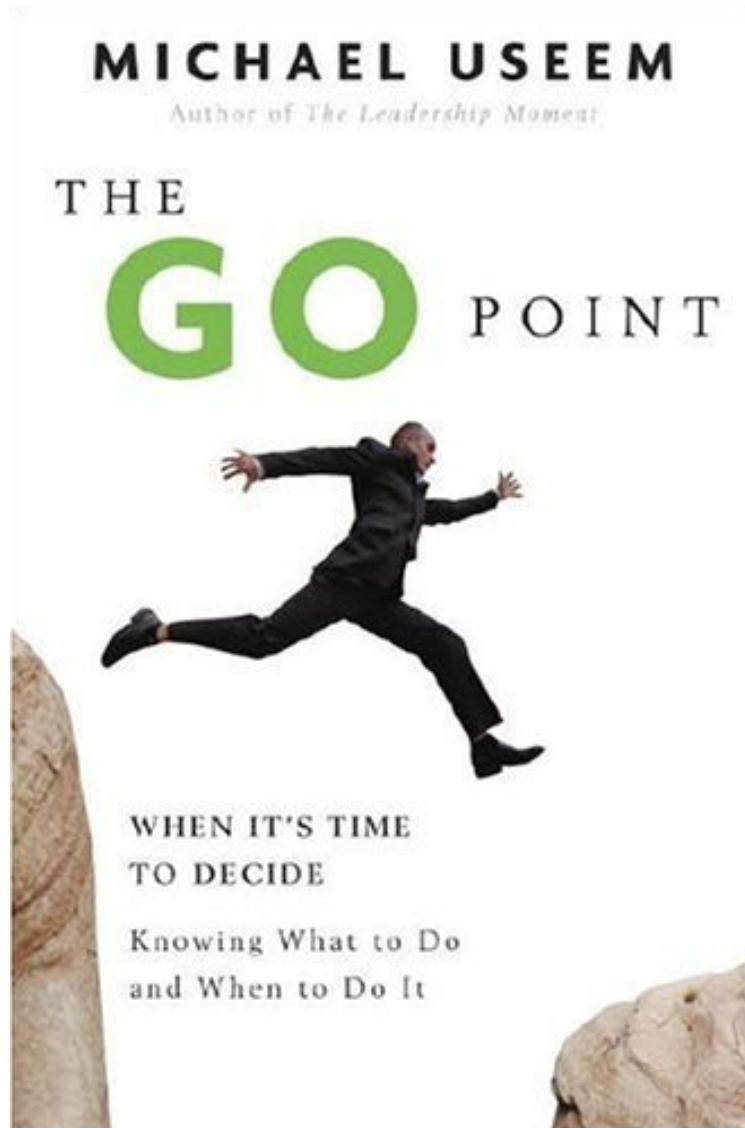


(Free read ebook) The Go Point: How to Get Off the Fence by Knowing What to Do and When to Do It

The Go Point: How to Get Off the Fence by Knowing What to Do and When to Do It

Michael Useem

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Michael Useem : The Go Point: How to Get Off the Fence by Knowing What to Do and When to Do It before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Go Point: How to Get Off the Fence by Knowing What to Do and When to Do It:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Leaders Manual to Making Better Decisions By Peter A. Mello I finally had the chance to sit down with Michael Useem's newest book, The Go Point. I am really interested in his work and enjoyed several of his earlier books including Upward Bound: Nine Original Accounts of How Business Leaders

Reached Their Summits (with Paul Asel), *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win* and *The Leadership Moment: Nine True Stories of Triumph and Disaster and Their Lessons for All of Us*. Michael Useem is the William and Jacalyn Egan Professor of Management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, as well as the director of its Center for Leadership and Change Management. In October 2005, I had the good fortune to participate in Wharton's Executive Education Program *The Leadership Journey* which is led by Professors Useem and Greg Shea. As its name implies, it is a weeklong intensive experience uniquely exploring leadership from academic and personal perspectives. This was clearly one of the most significant adult learning experiences that I have ever had and I was looking forward to reading *The Go Point*. Well, I was not disappointed. I really enjoyed this book and, not surprisingly, part of the reason is that it followed much of the same format and covered similar material as *The Leadership Journey*. The full title is *The Go Point - When It's Time to Decide, Knowing What to Do and When to Do It* and Useem effectively uses storytelling techniques to explore how decisions are made and to present his case. In the preface, he describes "go points" as "times to decide, moments for saying yes or no, instants for jumping in one direction or another when the fate of others depends on it." He lays out the book's objective of "building a decision-making template, the principles and tools for being decisive at times when it really counts: using small steps to make hard decisions, building a network of counselors for testing ideas, keeping options open until they must be closed." And in the Introduction he defines a go point as - "that decisive moment when the essential information has been gathered, the pros and cons weighed and the time has come to get off the fence." The author uses a number of interesting and impactful case studies including the July 1994 wildfire on Colorado's Storm King Mountain which had fatal consequences for 14 wildland firefighters, the Gettysburg Battle of the American Civil War that took more than 50,000 Confederate and Union soldiers lives over 3 days, and the 1972 plane crash in the Andes where 16 passengers survived in the incredibly harsh environment with virtually no resources for 72 days. There are lots of lessons to learn from analyzing the decision chains that lead to the final outcome in each story. Useem uses each to demonstrate the importance of having a decision template "generic enough to apply to many situations, yet specific enough to provide real guidance with real-life choices." What has always interested me in Professor Useem's work is how experience informs leadership and decisionmaking. He states "(decision) template principles should be rooted in tangible experiences, for that often serves as the most enduring and powerful trigger.... My own experience with hands-on-learning as well as volumes of research confirm that principles such as these are best retained and recalled when discovered during moments of intense emotion and acute stress. Embedded in experience, they remain unforgettable." Useem and some of his colleagues and students actually took a "staff ride" and visited Storm King Mountain to try to get a better understanding of what the wild firefighters encountered that fateful day and he writes: "Personal engagements of this kind can cut through the fog of abstraction and connect theory with practice more powerfully than virtually any other learning event.... Classrooms are an excellent vehicle for acquiring decision theory; tangible venues are the indelible vehicles for remembering how to apply it." My personal experience reinforces this view. One day during *The Leadership Journey* we boarded a bus at Wharton and drove out to the Gettysburg National Military Park for a full day tour of the battlefield with a certified guide. To stand on Little Round Top or Cemetery Hill is an incredibly emotional, intellectual and spiritual experience. We often feel that our current world is so complex; however, to think about what it would have been like as a battlefield commander with scant information and limited time to act or react is mindboggling. Chapter 5 - *Making Decisions* is devoted to the reader actually getting engaged in some decisionmaking exercises. We also performed these at Wharton with my favorite being *Necklace Trading*. While the author does a great job of explaining these exercises, nothing can compare to the actual process of participation. The book's website [...] actually provides for some reader interaction but I did not try it out. While Professor Useem is one of the top professors at one of the top business schools in the world, he writes in a very easy to read fashion. Readers don't encounter any jargon or buzzwords. Instead, he uses stories to effectively and powerfully convey his points. Anyone interested in how leaders make decisions, good and bad, must read this book. It will certainly give you a lot to think about in how you approach important decisions and how you can improve the process by establishing your own decisionmaking template.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.
Disappointed By Ferrell Foster I like the book, but you have to email a note to get an answer to four decision-making problems. The email is no longer active. Disappointed. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Making up your mind By John Gibbs Can decision-making be turned into a science? Michael Useem seems to think so in this book. The author invites us to spend some time in the shoes of different people from history who have been faced with important life-or-death decisions. He invites us to consider all the facts, formulate our own decisions, then compare them with the actual decisions which were made and analyse the decision-making process to learn lessons. The name of the book is uninspiring, but the book itself is written in an engaging manner and the scenarios give the reader plenty of opportunity for thinking. In Chapter 1 we find ourselves fighting fires in Colorado, and analysing each decision made over a period of several hours before 14 firefighters were killed. In Chapter 4 we analyse the decision-making mistakes made by General Lee which led to the loss of the battle at Gettysburg. Chapter 5 provides decision-making exercises for teams. So what are the ingredients of good decisions? The book provides a number of them, including: prepare for decisions under stress; establish clear priorities; look to the future instead of rethinking the past; break hard

decisions into smaller steps; consult those most familiar with the context and situation; and clarify what the decision entails before trying to make it. This is a useful book which I highly recommend.

The Go Point—the moment of truth when you have to say “yes” or “no”; when it’s time to get off the fence. Michael Useem—through dramatic storytelling—shows how to master the art and science of being decisive. He places you smack in the middle of people facing their go point, where actions—or lack of them—determined the fates of individuals, companies, and countries. • Why on earth did Robert E. Lee send General George Pickett on an almost suicidal charge against the Union lines at Gettysburg? • How does the leader of a firefighting crew make life-or-death decisions, directing his people—with little information about weather patterns to guide him—to go up or down the mountain? One direction means safety, the other danger. • You’ve just assumed responsibility for a scandal-racked corporation, a company teetering on the brink of disaster. What you decide over the course of the next several days will have consequences for thousands of employees and investors. How do you fulfill your responsibilities? Michael Useem makes you feel as if “you are there,” right in the center of the action. He was there: tramping up and down the mountain where firefighters made their momentous decisions; walking the battlefield at Gettysburg to see for himself just what General Pickett faced before making his ill-fated charge; going into a trading pit where million-dollar buy-and-sell decisions are made that affect fortunes of both the firm and the person making the call. You’ll discover why some decisions were flawless, perfectly on target, and others utterly disastrous. Most of all, you’ll learn how to make the right calls yourself, whether you’re changing your career, hiring an assistant, launching a product, or deciding on a potential acquisition or merger. Smartly written and offering unusual insights into the minds of decision makers such as General Lee, *The Go Point* will provide the guidance for you to move with confidence when it’s your turn to get off the fence. Also available as an eBook From the Hardcover edition.

Useem fashions a template for seeing ahead—Boston Globe—Great decisions are the hallmark of a successful executive. In *The Go Point*, Michael Useem provides invaluable insight into how to make the critical call—Larry Bossidy, retired chairman and CEO of Honeywell International and coauthor of *Execution and Confronting Reality*—The Go Point is a tour de force of a tour through battlefields and boardrooms, illuminating the differences between brilliant and tragic decisions. Michael Useem is a wise, witty, and understanding guide whose insights can dramatically improve leadership and decision-making skills. Go for it!—Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard Business School, bestselling author of *Confidence: How Winning Streaks Losing Streaks Begin and End*—Michael Useem . . . spells out in plain English the consequences of making hard and fast decisions, when they matter most and impact teams of people. There are plenty of books on leadership, but few that explain how to take a team from one place to the next. This one is the best.—Maria Bartiromo, journalist and CNBC anchor—This exciting book is a valuable guide to effective decision making. The Go Point’s great strength is to put the reader inside the heads of fascinating, often heroic people as they seek to “get it right” under pressure and with incomplete information.—Steven Kerr, managing director and chief learning officer, Goldman Sachs Co. —In *The Go Point*, Michael Useem identifies the essence of what it takes to prepare for moments of decision. He draws from an array of compelling accounts to help us appreciate what is essential for decisive decision making when it really counts.—Peter M. Dawkins, vice chairman, Citigroup Global Wealth Management, U.S.—About the Author MICHAEL USEEM is the William and Jacalyn Egan Professor of Management at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and director of its Center for Leadership and Change Management. Dr. Useem is also the author of *The Leadership Moment*. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. In the Heat of the Moment At 4 p.m. on August 5, 1949, Wagner Dodge and his crew of sixteen parachuted into the remote Montana wilderness at Mann Gulch to combat what seemed to be a routine forest fire. By 5:56 p.m., all but three of the firefighters were dead, fatally burned—then the worst disaster in the history of the U.S. Forest Service and one caught memorably by Norman Maclean in *Young Men and Fire*. Forty-five years later, on July 6, 1994, Donald Mackey was helping to oversee a team of forty-nine firefighters spread out on Storm King Mountain in Colorado. Some of the group had parachuted onto the mountain that day; others had come by helicopter, still others by foot. Again, it looked like a routine fire, and again, the fire proved that it is always a mistake to treat any backcountry blaze as routine. By four o’clock in the afternoon of July 6, the Mann Gulch disaster seemed about to repeat itself. In both cases, bad luck and a fatal confluence of environmental factors contributed to the flaming ambush of the firefighters, but individual decisions were critical in each instance. At Mann Gulch as at Storm King, those most directly responsible on site faced a sequence of decision points during their fateful hours in the fire zone, and their decisions at those moments helped take their teams to the brink of disaster and beyond. Wildland fires are a special circumstance, and wildland firefighters—the men and women who parachute, helicopter, or trek in to fight them—a special breed. But while the conditions are unique, the experience of those who fight fires in the outdoors has much to teach us all about decision making indoors, especially when there is little room for error or delay. The go points their crew leaders reach and the consequences that follow are unusually clear-cut and

consequential for the goals of the enterprise. And like so many critical business decisions, fire decisions brutally punish those who do not keep both the big picture and small detail well in mind. The blaze that raged over Colorado's Storm King Mountain on July 5 and 6, 1994, in what has come to be known as the South Canyon fire, has been the subject of extensive official study and secondary analysis, including one by Norman Maclean's son, John, who chronicled the fire's course and the efforts to combat it in *Fire on the Mountain*. Thus, we have an exceptionally well-documented record of the decisions taken by those responsible for the firefighters on the mountain. In analyzing the record, I do not seek to criticize anyone involved or to affix blame for the disaster that occurred on any one individual. Whether they survived the blaze or not, the wildland firefighters who assembled on Storm King Mountain were heroes: they placed themselves in harm's way to protect others, and some paid the ultimate price. But firefighters also feel it is their duty to unflinchingly examine past tragedies to determine what decisions went wrong so they can prevent similar calamities in the future. In that spirit and from their bravery come enduring lessons in the art and science of decision making whatever the zone.

The Basics: Safety, Speed, and Suppression

In attacking wilderness fires, firefighters traditionally form into crews ranging from three to twenty members. The crews are rapidly deployed, combining with other crews to combat larger fires and then just as quickly breaking up and redeploying to other incidents. As might be expected of their organizational chart, crew leaders operate both collaboratively and independently, but during multiple-crew blazes, as was the case in the South Canyon fire, one individual of necessity should assume clear and authoritative responsibility. As we shall shortly see, that did not happen on Storm King Mountain. "On any incident, large or small," states one of the basic fire service manuals, "the Incident Commander has ultimate responsibility for the effective and safe execution" of all aspects of the attack. The commander's duties place a premium on ensuring that decisions optimally contribute to the three primary goals of firefighting: safety, speed, and suppression. Always, the premier criterion for decision making by fire crew leaders and incident commanders is the safety of their team. Even though physical peril looms large whenever crews are called in, fatal injuries are no more tolerable in firefighting than is fraudulent accounting in business or bogus stories in journalism. Yet since risk is always present, wildland fire leaders must be able to appraise it and take appropriate steps toward mitigation. The second criterion for crew leaders and incident commanders is speed. Firefighting is a world of decision urgency. Hesitation and equivocation can do more than delay a solution: they can radically compound the problem. In product markets, the short term can be months; in stock markets, days; in fire zones, hours or even less. A 10-acre fire—small potatoes in the wildfire playbook—if not quickly suppressed can explode in minutes into a 1,000-acre conflagration. "Make sound and timely decisions," the official firefighters' manual exhorts, with good cause. The final criterion for decision making in a fire zone is a set of technical considerations to actually suppress the fire: How many firefighters are required? Where should a fire line be constructed? What aerial reconnaissance is needed? On such technical calls can hang the fate of both the zone's natural resources and the men and women who seek to preserve them. Winding around all these matters and never separate from them are the shifting conditions of the wilderness fires. It is not in the nature of blazes to sit still, and each new shift in the fire can create new and dangerous microclimates—powerful winds, intense heat—that further complicate suppression. An incident commander or crew leader who makes the right choices, handles them quickly, and anticipates correctly where the fire might suddenly go and where his crew should subsequently be achieves the primary purpose of the business: "fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first." Make the wrong choices, make them too late, and all hell can break loose. When "Can Dord" Is Not Enough: Preparing for Decision Making

Wildland firefighters often assume leadership roles with little warning, in venues that are always new. Military leaders, of course, are called to do the same: freshly commissioned officers commanding soldiers in combat, for example, or seasoned officers taking troops onto an unknown battlefield. But unlike graduates of the military academies or war colleges, where leadership decisions have a central place in the curriculum, newly appointed wildfire incident commanders traditionally have taken charge with little or no formal preparation in leadership decisions. Indeed, prior to the South Canyon fire, the responsible federal agencies offered virtually no coursework in how to make decisions when lives depend on them. Poor preparation predictably leads to poor choices. Consider one large adversary of good decisions: overconfidence, a moment when a responsible decision maker believes that a decision outcome is more likely than the factual situation would predict. Business studies have found that excessive audacity is most prevalent when managers face decisions on products and markets with which they are least familiar. In one such study, two researchers examined confidence among product managers of small computer software and hardware firms when they introduced radically new products to the market. The more pioneering the new products—and thus the less familiar the market—the more the product managers were likely to view the prospects for success through rose-colored glasses. Firefighters constantly forced to make snap decisions in unfamiliar terrain face the same challenges. The less they have been prepared for a responsible decision-making role, the more a natural can-do attitude takes over. Without a pool of experience to back them up—experience in firefighting and in decision making—incident commanders sometimes latch onto a flawed firefighting strategy, certain that "we can make it work." In the rapidly changing world of a racing fire, a can-do attitude is both essential and potentially dangerous. In the Heat of the Moment: Acute Stress and Decision Making

Wildland fires can reach 2,500

degrees Fahrenheit, race forward at speeds up to 25 miles per hour—; a gold-medal speed in the Olympics—; 100-meter event—; and leap overhead without warning. At their most dangerous, such fires are said to “blow up,” an inflection point when they acquire a manic momentum of their own. Like avalanches and tornadoes, a blowup is one of nature’s most terrifying spectacles, one reason tension is ever present in a fire zone. For crew leaders and incident commanders, those who carry personal responsibility for the lives of others, the resulting tension can become acute. The more severe the stress, the less optimal decisions are likely to be just at a time when they are becoming most consequential. Research confirms that individuals under time pressure or performing simultaneous multiple tasks are more prone to indulge in poor decision making for a host of reasons including a reluctance to search for relevant information. Studies also demonstrate that the adverse effects of underpreparation on decision making become most pronounced in the most severe conditions. In short, the two enemies of optimal decisions—; poor preparation and great stress—; are particularly pernicious when combined. In studying urban firefighter captains and lieutenants, Fred Fielder found that while seasoned officers actually improved their performance under the stress of a fire, less prepared ones went in the opposite direction. The same is true of responsible officers on aircraft carrier flight decks. According to research by Karl Weick and Karlene Roberts, the officers were more likely to commit errors during stressful landing episodes when their collective mindfulness and mutual heedfulness were insufficiently developed or became impaired by the rush of events. John Salka, a battalion chief with the New York Fire Department, spoke from his own twenty-five years on the front lines when he urged fire managers to pay particular attention to their inner voice—; if well educated—; when taking decisions under stress. For “making the right call when the heat is on,” Salka writes, “intuition is really your subconscious trying to offer up the benefits of a lifetime’s worth of experience.” Drawing on extensive investigation of those facing difficult decision points, Gary Klein concluded likewise that intuition—; if well honed and informed by experience—; improves decision making, especially in the heat of the moment. Note the “well-honed” and “informed” part of that. Decision experience helps one compile a mental reference library that sends up a special alert when conditions look bad. It is what you call on when the ground is shifting beneath your feet and there is little time left to reason things out for yourself and for those depending on you. Unfortunately, in South Canyon on July 6, 1994, well-honed and informed decision capacities were in short supply.

Who’s in Charge? Ambiguous Authority and Leadership Decisions

The decision-making burden on fire leaders is made even greater by three organizational factors that are especially prevalent in combating wildland blazes. First, crew leaders guide a workforce that is largely seasonal since fires are by far the most common in the dry summer months. Second, leaders are required to collaborate with other agencies over which they have no control. And third, as fire crews meld into temporary amalgamations on larger blazes, crew leaders and incident commanders find themselves working with, reporting to, or instructing other crews and leaders whom they have never previously met or barely know. All three sources of ambiguous authority work to undermine optimal decision making. The seasonal crews are often underdeveloped as teams. Although they are forced to work together in ad hoc organizations, the various parties also bring self-interested agendas to bear, and crew leaders and incident commanders must coordinate unknown quantities and unfamiliar personalities. (Think of an orchestra conductor taking the podium for the first time in front of a brass section from Cleveland, strings from San Francisco, reeds from Denver, and percussion from Seattle.) The weak relations among the various parties also tend to result in information hoarding as much as sharing. Incident commanders are sometimes called upon to make critical decisions based on less knowledge than is available within the teams themselves. Add the parts up—; a reduced flow of information to the fire leader, a weakened commitment by the leader to exercise authority, and diminished team compliance with the leader’s instructions—; and you have the ready makings of a decision crisis. All that is needed is an unpredictable fire to spark it.

The South Canyon Fire

“Okay, everybody out of the canyon!” Don Mackey radioed to his beleaguered firefighters. For hours, they had been clearing a corridor on Storm King Mountain to thwart a spreading wildfire. Now that path had become the crew’s only way out. Eighteen people were sprinting for their lives. Could they reach safety? The summer of ’94 baked central Colorado in a heat rarely seen on the mountains. Drought dried out the earth, leaving it gasping for moisture and ripe for ignition. On the morning of July 2, Storm King Mountain began to burn. By July 4 the fire had spread to perhaps 3 acres, a relatively small and slow-moving blaze and one, local officials decided, that could wait while they put out dozens of more serious ones. Not until the morning of July 5 did the first firefighters venture up to contain it. Less than thirty-six hours later, fourteen of them were dead. Elite members of a caste of itinerant warriors who battle in hard hats and chain saws against one of humanity’s oldest enemies, these ten men and four women were consumed by a wall of fire that moved faster than the fastest could run. The crisis on Storm King Mountain was not only a natural disaster; it was also a decision failure, a result of miscalculation. Firefighter Don Mackey made several of the big decisions—; some good, others less so, at least one of them heroic—; but Mackey was not acting alone. He was a product, arguably a victim, of a system that had failed to teach him how to make good decisions. For years the agencies responsible for wildland firefighting had focused on fire behavior rather than human behavior, akin to a business that concentrates on engineering rather than customers. Even when earlier fire tragedies had hinged on human error, the recommendations sent forth from them were usually technical ones. The result was that Mackey and

others hit the mountain with state-of-the-art gear but scant training in how to make urgent choices under intense pressure. As in most disasters, no single decision was responsible for the outcome at South Canyon; instead, it was the result of a cascading series of smaller ones. One of the tragedies of the conflagration is that the errors could have been avoided. Excessive optimism, untested assumptions, unheeded warnings, poor intelligence, failure to clarify authority: at Storm King, nearly all the great enemies of good decision making were present in abundance. The "collapse in decision making" was "almost automatic," a U.S. Forest Service researcher argued afterward. From the Hardcover edition.