
Head or Heart?

RPR Musing #1

Using your head to figure out when it's safe to follow your heart

By Richard Pomerance, Ph.D.

I'm often asked whether decisions about people should be made with the head or the heart. "Aren't your techniques too cerebral?" some folks wonder. "Aren't you over-thinking the process of making people decisions?" . . . "Don't you risk taking all the passion and romance out of relationships?" . . . "Why are you trying to make life so calculated?!"

I plead innocent to all of the above! Sure, life is a risk, and the joy and pain of failure is part of the human condition. But how much risk do we want to take? Personally, I'll take a risk of diving into a very cold lake, but not into an unknown, possibly empty swimming pool, at night, after a couple of drinks. Call me old-fashioned, but quadriplegia just doesn't appeal. And if I were inclined to have sex with an unknown person, I'd use a condom, as annoying as that might be.

Context is Everything

So should we lead with the head or heart? It depends. Going with the heart in a certain situation could be an occasion for fun and happiness, and even some terrific personal development. But do the same thing in the wrong situation, or at the wrong time of life, and you could find yourself in big trouble, with consequences that change your life permanently, and in very bad ways.

Take love affairs. If you're a 20 year old woman in a college circle of trusted friends, a romantic liaison would probably be safe. Worst case, it might end in sadness and pain, but hackneyed as it may sound, you'll learn from the experience and take this knowledge into your next relationship, wiser for what you've been through. And at very least the sex will have been great!

By contrast, suppose you met the same guy when you were 45, and each of you were recently divorced. Each of you is emotionally vulnerable coming out of a marriage, and if one of you happens to have found someone who keys into your personal blind spot, you could get badly hurt. The odds are much higher than with the 20 year old's situation that you might get into trouble.

It's the same in business relationships. If you're just coming out of school, or you can afford to take a cash hit if things don't work, then it might make sense to hook up with a group of people you know who are about to embark on an entrepreneurial venture. Maybe they're college chums. Maybe they're army buddies. The specifics don't matter; there's safety in familiarity.

Unfortunately, many people partner in business without ever really looking at who they're dealing in any but the most limited, mission-bound terms. Or they go by the fact that as buddies, they can count on each other. The problem is that they're predicting the future by way of the past, and in this case it turns out that the past is a poor predictor of future performance. It's like getting married after a great one night stand! So when we partner up on instinct, a high percentage of the time these relationships end in disaster.

If you've got responsibilities to your family or you need to begin socking away money for retirement, then betting that a new enterprise will succeed because it *has to* succeed probably isn't the best leap of faith. Again, it's all about the context of your life.

Getting the Best by Imagining the Worst

So what to do? Here's an approach you might consider, deploy what I call the "ouch" litmus test:

1. **Think about it.** When you're considering "just going for it," imagine the worst possible outcome of the hookup.
2. **Assess it.** If that outcome is acceptable, then it's something to "just do."
3. **Know your tolerance.** If it's too painful, or even tragic, take the more conservative path. Forget the question of how likely the outcome may be. Bad outcomes always seem unlikely when it looks like we're about to get the goodies. Just ask whether you can tolerate the possibility of the relationship blowing up in your face.

Head + Heart

It all comes down to using your head to figure out when it's safe to use your heart. Use your instincts right away to guide yourself toward what's appealing. Then stop, and use your brain. The techniques of reading people right will help you understand how to do this. When you can give yourself the "all clear" signal about the relationship, then the fun starts. You can rock and roll with reasonable risk — and that's what a whole bunch of life is all about!

Dr. Richard Pomerance specializes in helping individuals make better people decisions in their personal and business lives. Contact Dr. Pomerance at doctorp@smartrelationshipdecisions.com. For more information, visit his Web site: www.smartrelationshipdecisions.com.