

Best decisions often need a contrarian

Andrew Gibbons

Poor decisions are made for many reasons.

One very easy way to make better decisions is to do something counter-intuitive, and totally against a lot of people's natural instincts – that is to seek out the opposing thoughts of one or more who you know think whatever it is you are about to do is a very bad idea.

The Contrarian may just be what you need to get a reality check, to burst the bubble that all others have blown, and to provide an option that is as valuable as it may be unpopular or uncomfortable.

A Contrarian at the right time could be the only valid voice in a noisy sea of supporters, and it is entirely possible to be right even when you are in a minority of one.

'Bad idea Prime Minister, you really don't need that European referendum'...or 'Bad idea Prime Minister, you really don't need to risk your working majority'...were those words ever spoken? If so, were they genuinely considered, amongst the clamour to agree for whatever reason? Was someone or a small number of sensible naysayers swamped by the ill considered views of a lemming like majority heading for the cliff they could not see?

Not all Contrarians will voice alternatives that are right, and they have no monopoly on successful decisions, even if their views are rejected, they can influence better decisions by having to justify a proposed option, and test its likelihood of success.

The most emotionally intelligent Contrarians do their stuff constructively, and understand that for their views to have any chance of success, they must tread with care, not be over critical, and have a solid basis for their position. They articulate complex positions concisely and persuasively, and appreciate the delicate nature of the discussion.

It takes a particular character and skill set to be an effective Contrarian, and I am not suggesting that someone who opposes everything, and has a reputation for seeing problems in every suggestion is worth the label. A Contrarian is selective about the issues they feel genuinely will not work, and is prepared to take the consequences in order to make known their views and concerns.

Having the strength of character to 'do the right thing' and make known a heart felt often unwelcome viewpoint knowing it may prompt a storm of opposition, or ridicule is a personal choice, and the context may often be such that this would be a foolhardy thing to do. I believe very strongly that the absence of such an opposing force leads often to poor or reckless decisions carried along on a wave of consensual folly.

Just as it takes a lot of character to be a contrarian, so does it take this to seek one out, to listen to what you don't want to hear, and answer questions you don't want to be asked.

'Who here feels this is a bad idea?' is not something I have heard often enough in a meeting for instance.

Decision makers I feel, should wherever possible look for, and provide a platform for Contrarians to say their piece.

If those that make significant decisions listen only to the fawning supporters afraid to voice concerns, poor decisions will continue to be made, with so often very serious and harmful consequences.

To genuinely listen to, and take account of advice that is unwelcome takes a certain rare strength, and I wish I saw more decision takers with the capability to do this, and to accept the position of others with good grace where they judge this to be appropriate.