

How looking at the big picture can lead to better decisions

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New research suggests how distancing yourself from a decision may help you make the choice that produces the most benefit for you and others affected.

One key to maximizing benefits for everyone is realizing that occasionally the best [decision](#) will benefit you the most, said Paul

Stillman, lead author of the study who did this work as a postdoctoral researcher in psychology at The Ohio State University.

"The most efficient decision is the one that is going to maximize the total pie—and that is true whether more goes to you or more goes to someone else," said Stillman, who is leaving Ohio State to take a similar position at Yale University. "Sometimes it makes the most sense to seem a bit selfish if that is going to maximize overall benefits."

To make a simple example, it might be more efficient for a software engineer to spend time developing new productivity software rather than fixing a friend's computer. Yes, the engineer may seem selfish by earning money and leaving his friend with a broken computer, but his choice creates more overall value for himself and the future users of his software.

In the study, Stillman and his colleagues found that people tended to make the most efficient decision—the one that resulted in the most overall value for the group—when they looked at the big picture, or saw the forest for the trees.

This "big picture" perspective is what psychologists call "high-level construal" and involves creating psychological distance from the decision. The distance may be time—for example, when you're planning an event for a year from now. Or it may be distant because it involves people who are far away, or because you're considering a hypothetical, rather than real, situation, Stillman said.

"High-level construal allows you to step back and see the consequences of your decision and to see more clearly the best way to allocate resources," he said.

The study appears in the July 2018 issue of the journal *Organizational*

Behavior and Human Decision Processes.

In one experiment, the researchers had 106 students complete a task that prompted them to think in a big-picture way or in a more immediate, present-day way. Participants were presented with the goal of improving health and were asked to generate a list of what goals this could help them achieve, such as "longer life." This puts them in a big-picture frame of mind.

Others were told to come up with a list of how to achieve the goal of improved health, such as "exercise." This put them in a present-day frame of mind.

All [participants](#) then played an economic game in which they had to make nine decisions about how to share money between themselves and four other people. They were told that the others wouldn't know who made the decision, and none of the participants could share the money.

For half the participants, maximizing benefits always meant favoring others. For example, for every \$1 they gave to themselves in the game, each of the other four people would lose \$9. The situation was reversed for the other half of participants—maximizing benefits always meant favoring themselves.

Findings showed that participants who had been prompted to think big picture (high-level construal) were more likely than others to make decisions that would maximize the total value—whether they were the ones who benefited the most or whether the others did.

A second study was similar, but in this case the researchers used a different method to create psychological distance in some of the participants. Half the participants were told that the rewards would be distributed a year from now (which would prompt big-picture thinking)

and the other half were told they would be distributed tomorrow (less big-picture thinking).

As in the first study, those participants prompted to think big picture were more likely to choose to maximize total value for the group, whether it benefited them the most or not.

Two other experiments confirmed these findings using different scenarios.

Overall, Stillman said, the results show a way to minimize waste and inefficiencies when making decisions and to maximize net gain for everyone.

"When you create some [psychological distance](#) from your decision, you tend to see things more in line with long-term goals, and you can see beyond the immediate considerations of the here and now," he said.

More information: Paul E. Stillman et al, From "me" to "we": The role of construal level in promoting maximized joint outcomes, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.05.004](#)

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