7 Decisions That Determine Personal Success

Every minute of every day, the individual choices you make have dramatic consequences for the rest of your life, and may even shape the lives of generations to come.

Q & A With Andy Andrews
Andy Andrews’s best-selling book, The Traveler’s Gift: Seven Decisions that Determine Personal Success, is the stunning story of one man’s search for meaning and success in life by traveling back in time and conversing with seven historic individuals. Its message of hope, faith and perseverance is transforming thousands of lives worldwide every day. His book is an international sensation, remaining on the New York Times bestseller list for four and a half months and has been translated into nearly 20 languages. Success from Home recently sat down with Andy to talk to him about the book—breaking down each principle and how we can use it to our benefit.

SFH: Where did you get the idea for the book?

ANDY: Truthfully, it goes back a ways. I lived a relatively normal life until the age of 19; that was until both my parents died—my mother from cancer, and my father in an automobile accident. I took a bad situation and made it much worse, referring to the choices I made during this tragic period of my life. Within a span of several years, I found myself literally homeless, sleeping occasionally under a pier on the Gulf Coast or in someone's garage.

It was at that time when I asked myself the question that would focus my search for what would ultimately affect millions of people: Is life just a lottery ticket, or are there choices one can make to direct my future? To find the answer, I first went to the library where, over time, I read more than 200 biographies of great men and women. How did they become the people they were? Were they simply born this way or were there decisions made at critical junctures in their lives that led to their success? And if they were born this way, what were my chances of turning my life around? And if it was something they did, what did they do and how long did it take them to do it?

After studying these great leaders I finally determined there were seven characteristics that each person had in common. And what would happen if I were to study these seven common denominators and harness them in my own life? The Seven Decisions, as I call them, were the engines I used to carry my life in a different direction. And more than 20 years later, these same Seven Decisions became the outline around which I built the story of The Traveler’s Gift.

Another question I get is why I included historical figures in the book. The figures I use were people who lived a life of truth and honor. I looked at them not only for what they stood for but explored what their greatest life challenge was and the principle they used to overcome this challenge.

The First Decision for Success: The buck stops here.

Harry Truman

SFH: Your First Decision talks a lot about personal responsibility. Why did you choose Harry Truman to best illustrate this point?

ANDY: I can’t think of any decision in history that held more importance and more consequences then Harry Truman’s decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan at the end of World War II. That was truly the ultimate “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” scenario. Yet he was put in a position to make that decision, knowing fully the responsibility would rest with him on what was going to happen because of it.

The topic of responsibility today is a huge issue everywhere you look. On television and on talk radio there are two very distinct sides to the issue and I feel a lot of them fail to understand what responsibility is all about. You have one camp that blames other people for not accepting respon-
sibility for their actions, and the other camp says, “It’s not their fault.”

If both sides could just understand that responsibility has nothing to do with blame. It has everything to do with hope and control. If everyone could understand this, a lot more people would be grabbing for all the responsibility they could get their hands on because who among us doesn’t want to have hope for a greater future that we can control?

If somehow you can look in the mirror and say, “I’ve had some crazy things happen in my life that I had no control over,” the better off you will be in the long run. If you blame yourself for these uncontrollable forces for your lack of success, you will be forever caught in a web of the past—never in charge of your destiny.

It’s important to understand that you are where you are today—mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally and financially—because of the decisions you have made. So the challenge is making better choices, never second-guessing and always looking forward.

**The Second Decision for Success: I will seek wisdom.**

**King Solomon**

**SFH: What can we learn from King Solomon about seeking wisdom?**

**ANDY:** First of all, King Solomon is known as one of the wisest men in the ancient world. He wrote the proverbs for the Bible and was an icon of wisdom in his time. Looking through the lives of great men and women throughout history, I learned that wisdom has little to do with books or traditional education. Good teachers and good schools will make you smart, but being smart doesn’t have anything to do with having wisdom.

Seeking wisdom has to do with the people we hang out with, the books we read, the things we listen to and watch on television. Why is it that so many of us can sing the theme song to *Gilligan’s Island* but not all of the words to the *Star-Spangled Banner*?

And yet, when we talk about all of the good books, music and programs that can change our lives, we choose not to expose ourselves, or our children to them. Instead, we let a constant blare of information from radio and television to enter our home. As parents and keepers of our own lives, if we know this information is getting in there, why don’t we choose what goes in? It’s important to train your eyes and ears to read and listen to books and uplifting tapes and CDs that can bring about positive change in your personal relationships and a greater understanding of your fellow man.

Seeking wisdom also means choosing your friends with care. Most of us are terribly confused over what a real friend is. For years I have polled executive boards and have asked them to write down the most common aspect of a true friend. And over and over again I get the same answer: “A true friend is someone who accepts me as I am.” I feel this is entirely the wrong answer. A true friend is someone who holds you to a higher standard; who expects you to be the best you can be. A true friend expects you to improve, expects you to do what you said you were going to do when you said you were going to do it. A true friend also expects a constant and never-ending improvement in your life.

**The Third Decision for Success: I am a person of action.**

**Joshua Chamberlain**

**SFH: Out of all of the historical figures detailed in your book, it’s intriguing you chose a Civil War general that most people have never heard of. Yet it was his courageous decision that helped turn the tide of the Civil War. What can we learn from his heroic efforts?**
ANDY: I chose Joshua Chamberlain because most people have never heard of him and yet with one event he accomplished so much for our country.

Over 140 years ago Joshua Chamberlain, an unassuming teacher turned Union Army colonel, was at Gettysburg on the extreme left flank of 80,000 men, on top of a ridge the Confederate Army desperately wanted. His orders couldn’t be clearer: Under no circumstances was he or his men to leave the hill they were guarding.

Withstanding wave after wave of Confederate attempts to take the hill, Chamberlain and his men didn’t leave. And as the day drew on and casualties mounting, he made one of the boldest moves ever recorded in American warfare: he ended up mounting an offensive charge of his own, making the Confederates believe Chamberlain’s forces had been reinforced, basically bluffing his way to victory.

History records that, had this obscure and non-decorated colonel not made that move, the South would have been victorious at Gettysburg and would have turned the tide of the war to their favor. I use Joshua Chamberlain as proof that ordinary people can make a difference in the lives of others and become effective leaders, not only those in powerful positions.

The third decision is about taking action, inspiring others with your activity. Leading is doing. To lead, you must be moving forward. Many people move out of the way for a person on the run; others are caught up in their wake. Your activity will help create a wave of success for people to follow.

The Fourth Decision of Success:
I have a decided heart.
Christopher Columbus

SFH: What is meant by having a decided heart?

ANDY: More people fail at what they do because of an undecided heart than for any other reason. What’s an undecided heart? It’s the people who need approval from others, constantly analyzing things from every possible angle and, even after all of that, they still cannot come to a decision.

The point of having a decided heart is not that we will always make the correct decisions all of the time. We are not made with the ability to see the future, and we cannot gather enough facts to make correct decisions all of the time, but we can make a decision with a decided heart, then go about the business of making that decision work.

And that was Columbus at one point. History tells us that he really didn’t know where he was going when he sailed from Spain to find the New World. In fact, he didn’t even know where he was when he got there. And yet, he was able to mobilize people who followed him because he had a decided heart. The great thing about people who have decided hearts is they don’t even have to be right a lot of the time and things will work out for them.

Most people fail to jump out of the way and quiver because of the criticism that forces people into this analysis mode—and this criticism eats at them like a cancer. Criticism, condemnation and complaint are creatures of the wind that will eventually pass for those who have decided their course for the future.

The Fifth Decision for Success:
Today I will choose to be happy.
Anne Frank

SFH: You wouldn’t think a young girl who was being pursued by the Nazi regime, hiding in a closet with family and friends during World War II, would have much reason to be happy, right?

ANDY: If you read Anne Frank’s diary you will understand that her happiness, her outlook, was truly a choice that she had to make every day.

Choosing to be happy, choosing to be a person other people want to be around, puts you in a position of gaining more opportunities and more encouragement to succeed in life. Happiness is not an emotional phantom floating in and out of your life. Happiness is a choice, the end result of certain thoughts and activities, which actually can bring about a chemical reaction in your body.
Andy Andrews

In the past, you may have experienced discouragement in particular situations, until you compared the condition of your life to others less fortunate. Just as the fresh breeze cleans smoke from the air, so a grateful spirit removes the clouds of despair. It is impossible for the seeds of depression to take root in a thankful heart.

The Sixth Decision for Success: I will greet this day with a forgiving spirit.
Abraham Lincoln

SFH: How does forgiveness help diminish the resentment and anger we feel towards those that have wronged us in the past?

ANDY: I look at anger management as a waste of time when you consider what people are trying to get from it. People want release from the rage and anger that is boiling inside of them. The idea is flawed from the beginning. Why would you want to manage something like that? Why would you want to go to a class to learn how to keep anger, resentment and rage inside of you and manage it? It simply cannot be done. Someone needs to start talking about anger resolution and how you get rid of it instead of managing it. And that is what the Sixth Decision is all about, choosing to forgive.

It is what Abraham Lincoln did with the South as well as his political enemies. Instead of harboring his discontent internally, he forgave them and went on to become one most endearing U.S. presidents.

So the question is, How do we release that anger, the rage and the resentment? We do it by making a decision to forgive. Understand that forgiveness only has value when it is given away. Through the simple act of granting forgiveness, you release the demons of the past and create a new beginning.

The Seventh Decision: I will persist without exception.
Gabriel the Archangel

SFH: The “persistence without exception” philosophy is one that most people have never heard of. Can you tell us more?

ANDY: What most people have heard is “I will persist.” It’s the “without exception” that nobody has ever been accustomed to including.

When you persist, you are doing what your mom and dad, teachers and coaches are telling you to do. And if you come to a point where you think you have done all that is possible, then you can quit usually with no problems, telling yourself you have done your best. Nobody calls you on it and society holds no ill will for those who quit as long as they have persisted—if they have “hung in there.”

But when you persist without exception—that’s a whole new ball game. It means you have to find a way when there is no way. And when you persist without exception, you allow miracles to occur. The game is not over until you say the game is over. You control the game clock. It’s as if you are in the Super Bowl and you have the ball and the clock is about to run out. But the difference is you control the clock and you can set it back until you cross the goal line. Then, when you cross the goal line, you can say the game is over.

SFH: What is the one message you want people to get from The Traveler’s Gift?

ANDY: When I wrote The Traveler’s Gift I wanted people to understand that every minute of every day, the individual choices you make have dramatic consequences for the rest of your life, and may even shape the lives of generations to come.

I wanted people to know there is hope when the world only shows despair. And no matter how old you are, what financial situation you are in or what part of the world or country you live in, there are seven principles you can harness to help you live the life you choose. It’s my hope that your exploration of The Seven Decisions and the inspirational teachings will lead to an extraordinary fulfilled life and the desire to share them with others.