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# Two-way Doors Are Great and One-way Doors Are Scary – Thoughtful Decision-Making

How to recognize and respond to two-way and one-way doors. A thoughtful approach to decision-making.



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The contrast was what struck me. We brought a couple proposals to our SVP.

In our first proposal, we asked for a major increase in funding. Tens of millions of dollars we wanted to spend in the coming months to improve our product.

In our second proposal, we planned to make a minor name change to our product, which we felt would make more sense to our customers.

After the standard reading time, our SVP gave us his verdict.

He said the increase in funding made sense. He said the math worked, and he would just like regular updates to see how the increase resulted in changes for the business.

We were 30 seconds into talking, and we had tens of millions in additional funding.

The second proposal went another way.

**Name changes are one-way doors. I want to know that you've explored every option before we consider doing this. I don't think we're there yet.**

We spent the remaining 45 minutes of the meeting discussing data we needed to gather and alternative options to clarify things for our customers. We did not get a green light to make our change.

At Amazon, we spent significant effort trying to turn every door into a two-way door. Two-way doors are reversible doors. They are decisions you can undo. They are decisions you can audit, and change direction as you learn more.

When increasing investment in a business, you can change your mind at any time. While the numbers were large, the cost to Amazon was relatively low. You either get a return on investment, or you don't. Either way, you learn more about your business. Plus, moving slowly has multiple hazards associated with it.

On the other hand, changing a business name can't be undone easily. It's a one-way door. While the cost to Amazon's pocketbooks might be minimal in the short run, it can have long-term ramifications. It requires a slower, thoughtful process to examine potential risk, experiment, and check multiple times that the decision is the right one.

## **Jeff Bezos on one-way vs two-way doors**

From his 1997 letter to shareholders.

**Some decisions are consequential and irreversible or nearly irreversible – one-way doors – and these decisions must be made methodically, carefully, slowly, with great deliberation and consultation. If you walk through and don't like what you see on the other side, you can't get back to where you were before. We can call these Type 1 decisions. But most decisions**

**aren't like that – they are changeable, reversible – they're two-way doors. If you've made a suboptimal Type 2 decision, you don't have to live with the consequences for that long. You can reopen the door and go back through. Type 2 decisions can and should be made quickly by high judgment individuals or small groups.**

**As organizations get larger, there seems to be a tendency to use the heavy-weight Type 1 decision-making process on most decisions, including many Type 2 decisions. The end result of this is slowness, unthoughtful risk aversion, failure to experiment sufficiently, and consequently diminished invention. We'll have to figure out how to fight that tendency.**

...

**Any companies that habitually use the light-weight Type 2 decision-making process to make Type 1 decisions go extinct before they get large.**

## **Two-way doors – moving quickly**

Bias for action is a highly valued trait for leaders. Most decisions we encounter at work will be two-way doors. There are numerous advantages for moving quickly on the majority of our decisions.

- 1. Opportunity cost** – The number of decisions we make is directly related to how quickly we make them. If we spend 2 hours on every minor decision, we can

only make a few decisions a day.

2. **First-movers advantage** — It's not always about getting to market first, but agility is directly related to making decisions quickly. You can launch first and respond to customer needs faster when your decision-making process is lightweight.
3. **Autonomy** — Businesses often discount human feelings, yet there's real value in ensuring that team members feel autonomy. If your team members can make two-way decisions independently, you are adding an essential element of Drive (Take a look at the Drive book. Fantastic read.)



I deeply hope this door is a two-way door.

To be clear if a decision is a two-way door, you can ask a few clarifying questions.

1. **Risk** — What's the worst-case scenario? A two-way door has an acceptable worst-case scenario.
2. **Change** — If we change our mind, how do we undo this decision? A two-way door has a clear path to change direction.

**3. Impact** – If the impact is small, the direction of the door may not matter. You can treat a one-way door as a two-way door if the results don't matter.

When you encounter two-way doors, you want to move quickly. Verify it is a two-way door, and then let someone close to the decision make the call. Move on.

## One-way doors – careful analysis

When we encounter one-way doors, we know that it's time for caution. One-way doors matter. They can't be undone. These should be the source of our worry at work. They're major announcements and product launches. There is a multitude of ways we can address one-way doors.

**1. Alternatives** – You need a list of the alternatives for one-way door decisions.

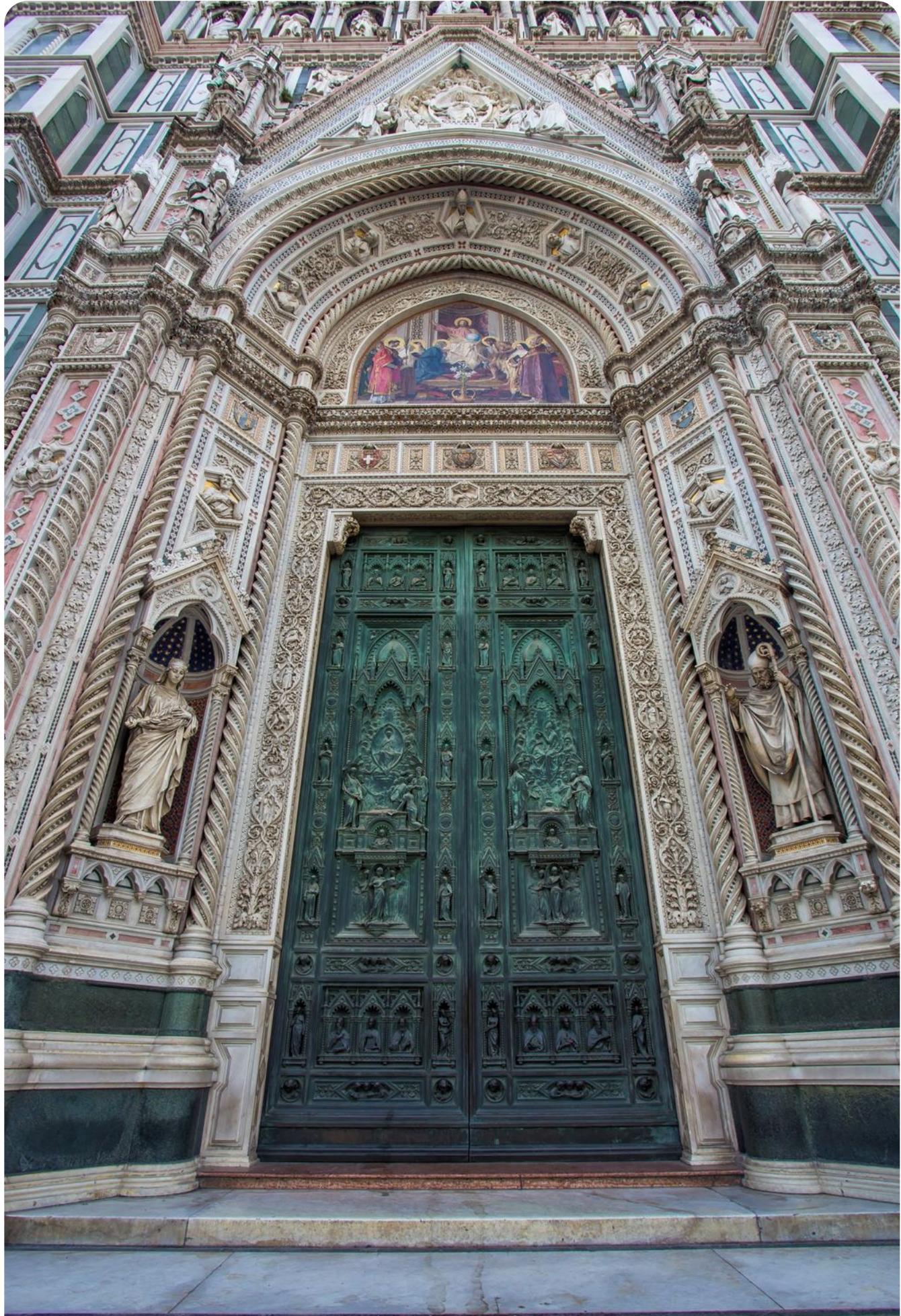
There are rarely only two options to choose from. Always ask, "What else could we do?"

**2. Escalate** – While escalating decisions to a higher leadership level is not something you want to do regularly, one-way doors are a clear exception. This type of situation is where your leadership will want to weigh in. I deeply respected the senior leaders at Amazon; their advice often helped clarify our thinking.

**3. Impact mitigation** – How do you mitigate the potential negative impacts? Do you perform the change quietly? Do you have a method to roll it out to a smaller list of customers? Look at the worst-case scenarios, and see if you can muffle them.

**4. Data and testing** – If it has a potential customer impact, check the temperature of your customers before the change. Trial your new messaging. Gather data on the potential changes. Having more data and more signal from customers reduces risk.

With one-way doors, you need to move cautiously. Write a detailed plan. Bring to the attention of a higher level of leadership at the company. Examine every alternative. As long as you're rarely making these decisions, you can afford to take your time.



# Make one-way doors become two-way doors

In all ways, two-way doors are awesome. Mistakes can be fixed. Decisions can be made quickly and cheaply. Lower level employees can make them without restraint.

When at all possible, you want to change one-way doors into two-way doors. This reduces risk, and decreases decision-making costs.

- 1. Build rollback procedures** — Our toll system (Good to Go) recently planned and announced a two-week outage for a software update. Never plan for big bang launches. They are almost never necessary. You turn what could be a two-way door into a dangerous one-way door. Examine projects from every direction to find rollback procedures to turn one-way doors into two-way doors.
- 2. Choose separate doorways** — Sometimes a bundle of updates looks one-way, when there is a single small component which is a one-way door. Take a close look at your one-way door. Sometimes you can change a large one-way door into a large two-way door, and a small one-way door. For example, if you were doing a product name change, along with a feature launch. It may be better to separate the two. It's much better to keep the one-way door decisions as small as possible.
- 3. Rephrase your decision** — A doorway is sometimes one-way because of how it is phrased. A product launch with reporters is a one-way door, while a beta-release of a product is a two-way door. A price decrease is a one-way door, but a temporary discount is a two-way door. There is value in giving yourself the flexibility of two-way doors.

When encountering one-way doors, before proceeding down the careful and methodical path of making a critical decision, you should always look at the option of making it a two-way door decision.

# Make decision-making changes today

As with other leadership skills, decision-making gains in value as you gain in experience. Over time, your ability to quickly recognize one-way vs two-way doors becomes more critical. Your time will become more valuable, and you will need to recognize when you need to step in, or let others make the decision.

Think of a recent low-impact decision. If there was an opportunity, did you consider delegating it? Did you make the decision quickly and move on?

Think of a recent important decision. Did you give it the proper time and consideration? Did you consider ways of making it a less impactful decision?

Without mindful consideration, our decision-making process can be inefficient. I recommend spending some time thinking through recent decisions you've been involved in. Did you get others involved when appropriate? Did you pick the right style of decision-making?

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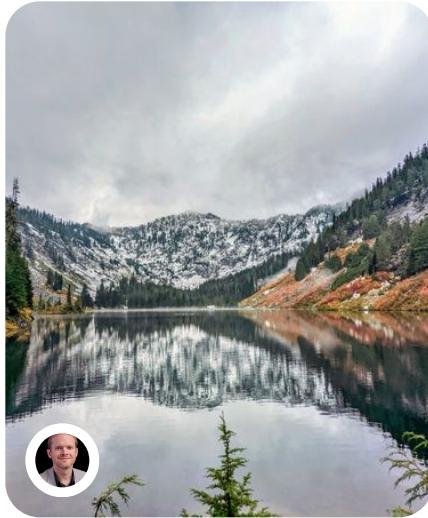
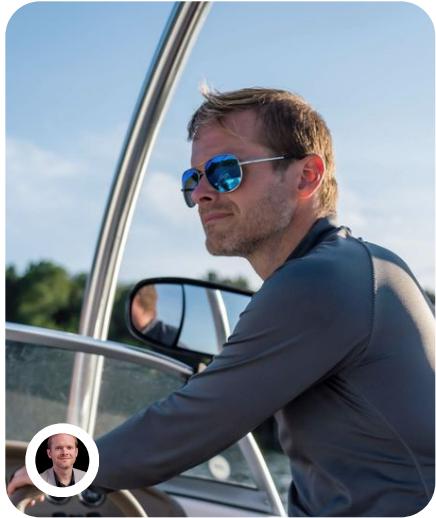
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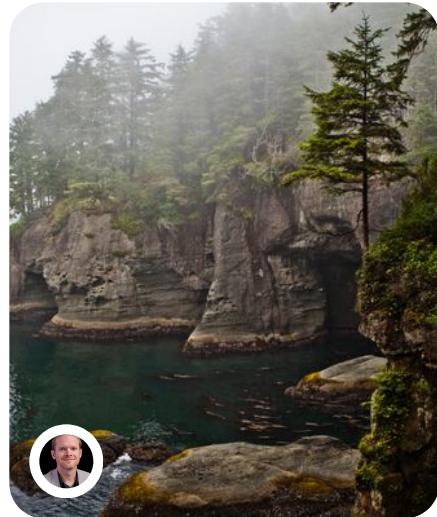
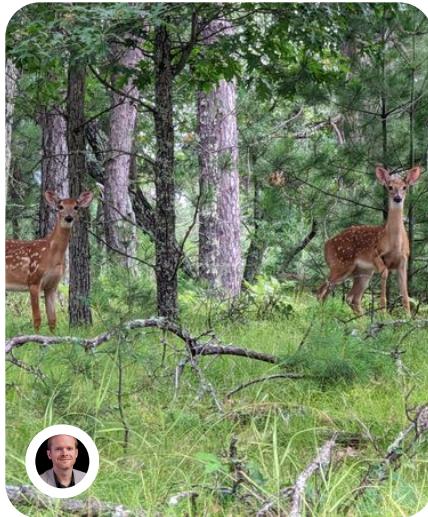
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