

The Management Corner: Are You Struggling to Make Decisions?

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By Allison M. Vaillancourt

Many of us have stress dreams that surface over and over in our lives. Here is one of mine: *I'm driving. It gets dark suddenly. I turn on my lights, but I still can't see. I turn on my bright lights, but that does not help. I say to myself, "This is too dangerous," as I pull over to the side of the road.* Because the dream happens only when I am faced with a situation that has no obvious answer, I do not need an expert interpreter to tell me that my subconscious is warning me to pause until I have better information about the path forward.

Plenty of campus administrators are experiencing a waking version of that dream lately — tempted to "pull over" until they have more data and a greater sense of clarity to navigate the range of decisions that must be made in response to Covid-19.

Unfortunately, the ability to pause and wait until there is light to guide the way is not a luxury enjoyed by those in higher education right now. Hitting pause until a complete set of facts emerges is not really an option, and there is significant pressure to look decisive and act decisive. You know that if you act too rashly, you could do some serious damage. At the same time, you recognize that if you act too slowly, you could make your institution's situation even worse.

Most of us tend to fall back on the decision-making heuristics we have used in the past. But responding to the novel coronavirus doesn't lend itself to repeating what has worked before. That's why deciding how to decide is one of the most important things that higher-education leaders should be doing right now. Here are five questions to ask before committing to big decisions:

- 1: What makes this decision difficult?
- 2: What must be decided now, and what can be decided later?
- 3: Who can help me make this decision?
- 4: What tools and resources can help me consider my options?
- 5: What are the consequences of making the wrong decision?

Understanding *why* a decision is hard may highlight your personal values and help you frame the challenge before you. Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, as I have asked higher-education leaders what is affecting their ability to make decisions right now, they have shared the following responses:

- "I don't want to kill people." (Dramatic, but honest.)
- "I'm not sure students will return if they can't have a traditional experience."
- "I feel guilty about taking away jobs or pay."
- "I'm afraid I'll make a bad call and the whole place will go under."
- "I have a sense there are options and possibilities that we have not yet considered."
- "There are too many options for me to weigh."
- "I'm personally stressed and feeling overwhelmed."
- "If I screw this up, my career may be over."

Like many of your colleagues in senior administrative posts, you may be wrestling with safety concerns, financial worries, and both a paucity and an overload of information — not to mention your personal and career anxieties. Recognizing that you are struggling to make a decision is helpful, but clarifying *why* is sometimes necessary to move forward. Understanding the source of your angst can help you determine if you need more information, if you are being asked to compromise your personal values, or if you are feeling pressured to do something that seems necessary but unpopular.

Once you are clear on the particular mix of reasons for your hesitation, it is worth considering if you are making some decisions earlier than you need to, or attempting to make too many decisions at once. What things must be decided now? Which ones can wait until later and, in some cases, much later?

Despite what those with a bias for action may say, delaying decisions can often be a prudent strategy. Steven B. Sample, a former president of the University of Southern California, was well known for his admonition not to make a decision today that could reasonably be put off

until tomorrow. In his book, *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, Sample argued that unless there are no other options, we should delay a decision for as long as possible, because waiting may bring information to better illuminate the situation.

The point is: You can't wait forever to decide, but you might be able to wait longer than you think. Demonstrating the discipline to collect multiple sources of data is critical for making prudent decisions — as is taking the time to solicit and consider the perspectives of people who think very differently than you do.

There is a joke in leadership-theory circles: When a building is on fire, it is not wise to form a committee to discuss evacuation plans. While you may be pressured to take decisive action in a crisis, pausing for as long as possible to collect facts and opinions from diverse sources and stakeholders — especially from people who tend to disagree with you — will typically yield sounder results. If you are making decisions all by yourself, you are missing an opportunity to explore better options.

Synthesizing multiple data sources and perspectives can prove challenging in the best of times, but is even harder when we are exhausted or even terrified. Using disinterested third parties to gather data, facilitate decision-making meetings, and help work through a range of scenarios can be useful. Colleagues at other colleges and universities, recently retired senior leaders, associates who work in different industries, and trusted consultants are among the resources you may want to turn to at this time.

Outsiders, without personal agendas to protect, can help working groups consider a broad range of possibilities, move past the inclination to consider binary options, and generally reach smarter conclusions. This includes the crucial step of evaluating multiple alternatives against established organizational values.

Finally, while there are some exceptions, it can be helpful to remember that most decisions can be revised or reversed.

One of the university presidents I worked for offered some advice that transformed my thinking about the consequences of big decisions. Collecting input is important, said Ann Weaver Hart, a former president of the University of Arizona, but it is not important forever. "There comes a time when we must simply make a decision. If it turns out we have made the wrong decision, we will make a different decision."

There is no shame in admitting that you made the best decision with the information you had at the time, and that now you find yourself needing to change course given what you've learned. When being definitive seems risky, it can be helpful to announce "tests," "trial periods," "pilots," and "phased approaches" to signal that decisions made today are subject to change in the future.

The decisions you make in the days ahead will probably be less important than the way you

reach those decisions and explain them. While an inclusive approach — guided by data and values — will not guarantee that you make the best choices, it should help you prevent the blind spots that can so often doom decisions made in isolation.

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