Exploring the Risks That Affect Community College Decision Makers

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INTRODUCTION

For leaders, decision making is a charge that cannot be escaped. For those who prefer to avoid this responsibility, the startling truth is that not making a decision is a decision. Executives, including those who lead community colleges, have critical accountability to build a support network with easy access to pertinent information that carries out decisions as intended. Decision making's impending risks—particularly in this age of "I need it yesterday"—are amplified by the likelihood of misunderstanding and miscommunication. The man-hours of gathering, analyzing, and prioritizing information behind a good decision can be thwarted without a clear-cut strategy for how to make a decision with that information.

This chapter provides insights as to why a United States community college organization's leadership faltered as a result of decision making. For this domain, this long-neglected dynamic of identifying operational risks was explored using a tailored risk management methodology developed by the Software Engineering Institute (SEI). Community colleges, federal agencies, and small businesses have similar concerns about institutionalizing effective decision making; this chapter addresses those complexities specifically within community colleges and provides an understanding of managerial decision making at the executive level.

BACKGROUND

As a norm, lessons learned are not examined as a preventive measure in decision making. While elementary in nature, decision making does not necessarily get better with age or experience; rather, it is improved through the calculated assessment of potential outcomes.

Executive decision makers in all types of organizations are plagued with the tribulations of making effective decisions. Existing decision processes do not always result in informed communication. In addition to the misfortunes of a lack of communication, the decisions' contexts are not always well understood. Along with these factors, the rapid retirement of people who have capital knowledge creates an information exodus that has never been documented. Capital knowledge provides critical pieces of information necessary to make informed decisions.

It can be complicated, if it is even possible, to break free from the shackles of poor credibility once bad decisions have been made. The media has replayed too many sagas for this to be denied. In 1986, America was shocked by the destruction of the space shuttle *Challenger* and the death of its seven crew members due to the negligence of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) space shuttle decision makers (Presidential Commission, 1986), whose decision was shuttle efficiency over safety. Withholding information about faulty equipment demonstrated poor judgment when the worse possible consequence unfolded as millions of people watched this televised launch explode. The American calendar once again was tarnished by catastrophe on September 11th when, in 2001, one of the world's greatest defense tragedies unfurled on United States soil. Fingers continue to be pointed toward those who, it is rumored, did not heed warnings that might have prevented the hijacking of airplanes that subsequently were flown into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon (Borger, 2002). Decision making in this crisis was weak, at best, and the judgment lax. Imperative information was not disseminated throughout chains of authority, but instead rested where it ultimately served no purpose other than limited awareness. The unfortunate result of the decision to stifle a warning: nearly 3,600 people died.

Four years later, calamity smothered the United States again when Hurricane Katrina mounted into a Category 4 storm and slammed onto the Gulf Coast in 2005 (Davis, 2005). Water breached the levees, as predicted. Subsequently, Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River submerged cities under 20 feet of water and left 1,300 dead, thousands homeless, and a damage tab of over $100 million. Yet, a few years earlier, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had predicted three American mega-catastrophes: a California earthquake, a Manhattan terrorist attack, and, oddly, the submergence of New Orleans.

In an abstract sense, these cases are lessons learned for all organizations. We must gain understanding by experience in order to develop new solutions. We must continuously analyze bad solutions that result in bad situations where the solution had great probability of being flawed from the start. In addition, we also must describe how to get out of bad situations and proceed from there to good solutions. We must thoroughly understand the contributing attributes that force conditions of harmony between today (what is) and the future (what is to be). The repercussions of not heeding these recommendations could yield yet more catastrophic occurrences that threaten to crumble every facet of our society.

According to Hammond, Keeney, and Raiffa (1999), a good decision-making method is a solid foundation to all occupations and the success of any organization. Organizations and the lives of those involved are enhanced when attention is paid to developing design methods for good decision making. Because everyone within an organization is impacted by the outcome of decisions regardless of their role, failure by leaders to exercise good judgment can prove detrimental to those in all ranks. In a community college setting, poorly designed decision methods have been widely exercised and have resulted in low staff morale and a decrease in staff retention.

Academic governance or management in the business sense—specifically within higher education institutions—has received much criticism over the past several decades. Fain (2004) reported that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools revoked the accreditation of Morris Brown College in 2002 because of significant debt. In 2004, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that numerous colleges were forced to downsize programs, merge, or close after a lack of advance budgetary planning: According to Lee (2004),

legal battles surfaced when higher institutions lost their accreditation because, without that sanction, students were not able to matriculate. In cases such as these when conflict arises from executive decision makers' inappropriate planning, discord spreads beyond the executive level.

In a national study of faculty in governance in 1991, Dimond analyzed decision-making processes and found a large number of dissatisfied people (as cited in Kezar, 2004). Kezar wrote that of the faculty, staff, and administrators, 70% believed that decision-making processes worked ineffectively and noted that new approaches needed to be considered. He acknowledged the widespread governance problem of ineffective decision methods, and detailed that few solutions have been proposed; of those, none had improved decision making. He concluded that the common wisdom was that campus governance needed to radically alter its structure and formal processes. This was the same reason cited in a well-publicized 1998 study by Benjamin and Carroll of the RAND Corporation that campus management was perceived to be wholly ineffective (as cited in Kezar, 2004). All three authors found that campus governance structures and processes did not allow timely review or effective, expert decision making.

While governance examines structure, it remains an understudied area that has had only limited research (Kezar, 2004). Leslie stated in 1996 that what has been documented about governance in higher education rests on anecdote or, at best, a handful of teaching case studies (as cited in Kaplan, 2004). To obtain the maximum level of understanding that surrounds decision authority within governance structures, Kaplan (2004) suggested reviewing the various foundations and systems in place such that varying outcomes can be obtained.

This chapter centers on implementing a risk management program to identify potential problems for the community college to address in order to deliver knowledge that will develop risk management practitioners' abilities to handle continuing challenges such as the community college's increased societal demands and its decrease in funding from state and local levels. Implementing a risk management program increases an organization's success and ability to continue to handle our society's 21st century needs.

With such wide audiences, the academic sector has a responsibility to make and disseminate decisions with seamless transitions. Yet, this same community has made little effort to either explore or communicate

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