

The Art of Making Difficult Decisions Effective Leadership in Troubling Times

Co-Authors:

Dr. Vicky Owles, Vice President for Student Development, Stephens College

Dr. Suzanne Onorato, Assistant Vice President for Community, Emory University

Dr. Michael Anthony, Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Rochester Technical Community College

Dr. Terry Mena, Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students, Lamar University

There is never an easy answer in moments of crisis or difficult situations. No two situations are ever alike. In those moments, how do you decide the right course of action? Who do you turn to when you are in charge? Leadership requires decisive and thoughtful responses that consider the whole picture, and this article provides tips on how to make difficult decisions in equally difficult times.

In discussions with the co-authors, our conversations naturally turn to the challenges, both good and bad, of being a senior student affairs officer at our various institutions. The reality is not many professionals can freely share what's on their mind at their home institution, so confiding in other colleagues, at other institutions, helps in those times of clutter and confusion; if only to sort through the problem at hand. Conversations often begin with the intent and idea to offer support, and can so easily become sessions of "well you think that's bad...you should hear what I had to deal with." For a moment there is relief that their problem is not yours, but that doesn't solve your current problem. Then there was a reality that we all came to realize, not one of us received formal preparation for the complexity of decisions we now face. So, how did we learn to make them? How did we learn what to do and what to say in the midst of a crisis? The answer we decided was not as easy as we thought, because every situation is unique, even if it is similar to a situation in the past. There are always so many factors to consider and yet everyone expects a decision to be made quickly. We concluded that while decisions and situations may seem relatively straight-forward, the complexities lie in the actual act of making the decision.

There is no "*easy button*" in moments of crisis communication or difficult situations. So in those moments, how do you decide the right course of action? Who do you turn to when it's you in charge and you need guidance? How does one learn those skills other than by experience and mentoring? Yes, there is probably an emergency procedure manual or policy handbook to guide you, but for those in a senior level management position, it is not always that easy. Whether natural disasters, human resources issues, student situations, or legal interpretations, there is no standard answer. Making difficult and appropriate decisions can have a lasting impact on the institution.

Changing Nature of Issues in Student Affairs

Dictionary.com defines a decision as, "a conclusion or resolution reached after consideration." There are 86,400 seconds in a day. We spend 24,400 seconds or 6.8 hours a day sleeping. While not scientifically verified, on average a single person can make up to 1.8 conscious/awake decisions a second. Is there any doubt why many of us feel exhausted on a daily basis? Student

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affairs has become an increasingly complex component of institutions of higher learning and senior student affairs officers are often asked to lead through complex decisions. Perhaps it was the naiveté of our younger selves serving in more entry level positions, but the nature of higher education has evolved in the last 30 years. More and more, university leaders are faced with complex legal, personnel, student conduct, facilities, community, administrative, financial, and campus emergency issues. Some days, there are issues that have issues! Given this reality, we offer the following strategies and advice for managing difficult decisions.

Emotional Intelligence and Difficult Decisions

Making difficult decisions is a deeply personal experience, and has impacts that influence the decision maker and those to whom the decisions affect. As such, making a difficult decision requires emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman (1998)¹ suggests five components of emotional intelligence; self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and motivation. We will briefly discuss each of these components in relation to making difficult decisions.

Self-Awareness

Know your values, live your values. Long before you have to make a difficult decision, you need to know what you believe in as a leader within the organization. You need to understand how those beliefs intersect with the organizational beliefs and values, and have the self-confidence to make a decision. Decisions are difficult because you often do not have all of the information you need. In these situations, your values and those of the organization should drive your decision-making.

Self-Regulation

It is important to keep your own emotions in check when making difficult decisions. You and others are likely experiencing anxiety and uncertainty. Your inability to regulate or manage your emotions can negatively impact (?) your decision.

Social Skills

It's important to interact well with others before, during, and after a difficult decision is made. Effectively communicating the decision to a diversity of stakeholders and audiences requires well-practiced social skills. In addition, engaging others in the execution of a difficult decision is crucial, and can be challenging if you lack the proper social skills. Honing your active listening, communication, and persuasion skills, to name a few, will be very helpful. We discuss more about stakeholders below.

¹ Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam.

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Empathy

The ability to *feel with* others cannot be overstated. Empathy helps you anticipate how others' will feel after a difficult decision is made. Knowing this will help the decision maker with how, when, and where a decision is made, and with getting stakeholders on board with difficult decision, and eventually past it. Being empathetic will also help you make the decision itself. Understanding the different power and positional dynamics at play within the organization will provide powerful insights into your ultimate decision.

Motivation

This is perhaps the anchor component when making difficult decisions. Making a difficult decision requires a high level of intrinsic motivation, as the rewards are not always tangible, obvious or immediate. A decision-maker must want to make the decision, and do so without hesitation, negativity, or doubt. As former Navy Seal and *Inc.* columnist Brent Gleeson (2014)² says, putting off decisions does not make the decision easier, or less necessary.

Importance of Mentoring

Not one of us has gotten to where we are in our careers without the support of mentors; whether peers, supervisors, or leaders at other institutions. The relationships that we've built with them are among the most important in our lives. We learn by watching mentors handle difficult situations and engaging in conversation with them following the decision. Through their leadership they have demonstrated effective consideration of diverse perspectives, impact on the people involved, humility, and ethical leadership. We have also seen them make mistakes, learn from those mistakes, and handle them with humility and grace. They have served as a mirror for us, and are a valuable resource in our own decision making processes. They serve as a sounding board following difficult decisions, and give us space to have a conversation that allows us to learn from what we have experienced.

These conversations are critical experiential learning opportunities – it's crucial to take time to share the intricacies of difficult situations and decisions, how they were handled, what went right, and what went oh so wrong. It is true that case studies can help us walk through a potential situation, but nothing gets to the root of an issue, the emotions and complexities, like talking through the specific steps of an actual crisis with the person/people who handled it. Taking time to nurture these relationships, the give and take, mentoring up, down, and across positional hierarchies, is the most impactful education you can receive. This can only happen if you have intentionally nurtured mentor relationships within your personal and professional circle.

² Gleeson, B. (2014). Leadership and the Art of Making Tough Decisions. *Inc.* 5000. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/brent-gleeson/leadership-and-the-art-of-making-tough-decisions.html>.

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So, our advice, when you find yourself in the midst of an incredibly complex situation, take a moment to get your thoughts together and call someone who can give you perspective – call a mentor; in fact call two. Consider their advice, as you make a decision, and trust that ultimately you will do what you believe is best.

Understanding Your Stakeholders

Mentors are not the only people you should seek out in the decision making process. You must know and understand your stakeholders. Higher Education institutions are complex organizations at times with conflicting interests amongst its vast range of stakeholders: faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, families, community members, donors, governing board members, elected officials, and governmental agencies³. In making difficult decisions, key stakeholders should be involved, or at a minimum consulted with, in the decision-making process. As a higher education/student affairs professional in the midst of a crisis, you may not have the time or the ability to inform and receive all of these stakeholder's opinions. However, we recommend you include a critical few who are qualified to offer their expertise, and who can affect the issues and outcomes surrounding the decision. Also, consider the key people who can help successfully implement the decision.

For a leader to involve the correct stakeholders in the decision-making process, they must appreciate and understand the campus context and external context of their institution⁴. Campus context consists of understanding the institutional type, size, culture, and climate that will inform your decision-making process. To put it into perspective there are more than 4,724 degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States⁵, offering a wide variety of learning environments. Additionally, institutions can be classified by other dimensions (e.g., affiliation, residential living, selectivity, academic focus, and student population). Higher Education institutions also vary in their missions and political realities that influence their unique histories, environments, relationships, and rewards. For instance, the context for decision making may vary among a liberal arts institution, a community college, a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and a historically Black college and university (HBCU). A crisis that is viewed as problematic at one type of college or university might not be a problem at another.

The final context for decision making is the external community influences that are important at the institution. External community influences can include the political and cultural context of the region, state, or town where the campus is located. Imagine that you work at a college in a town where a series of highly publicized racial conflicts have been reported. An on-campus incident occurs that may have a racial undertone that raises concerns with local politicians and a

³ Appleton, J.R. (1991). The context. In P.L. Moore (Ed.), *Managing the political dimension of student affairs* (New Directions for Student Services, No. 55, pp. 5 – 15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁴ Vaccaro, A., McCoy B., Champagne, D., & Siegel, M. (2013). *Decisions matter: using a decision-making framework with contemporary student affairs case studies*. Washington, DC: NASPA-Student Affairs Association in Student Personnel Administrators.

⁵ U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Fast facts. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>

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board of regent's member who shares their concerns to the administration. These sociopolitical contexts can and will outline not only your decision-making options but also how well your solutions are received by the external community. While mentors help you learn through the process of making a difficult decision, the stakeholders are often much more heavily invested in the outcome of your decision making. Their role in this process cannot be overstated, so think now about who these people are, and how you might engage them.

Conclusion and Takeaways

There is one thing we can know for sure. You will make mistakes. Everyone does. Every leader does so even more than most. Hopefully, if you have thought through the problem at hand, taken time to know your values, thought about the various parties and implications, executed your decision with due diligence, and learned from the process, you will have not only survived a crisis, but be a better leader because of it. As higher education/student affairs professionals, we should learn from how we teach. Make every situation a teachable moment. Even after the crisis has passed, make sure to reflect and learn. What would you have done differently? What did you miss? What would you have done the same? Give serious thought to the full breadth and depth of your situation. The next time something occurs, you will be (and feel) more prepared. Leadership in a crisis happens at many levels. Everyone is responsible for some part of the ultimate outcome. Remember to surround yourself with trusted mentors and tend to your relationships with internal and external stakeholders before a crisis occurs.

As you develop your leadership capabilities, feel confident that you have acquired the skills to make difficult decisions. Sometimes you can run through the checklist (see sidebar) and you will have to make a decision based on the information or resources you have at the moment or that is available. Trust your instincts and your training and they will help guide you. Instinctively, we operate under the assumption of "do no harm." When we lead from this space, situations become clearer. In the end, own it. As the leader, take responsibility for the decisions that you make. Be confident that you are making the best decision in that moment, and be sure to reflect on the decision, and how you can prepare for the next one.

Sidebar of Tips/Checklist on Handling an Immediate Crisis

- ▶ What are the initial facts?
- ▶ Who is immediately effected?
- ▶ Is this a health and safety issue?
- ▶ Has a crime been committed?
- ▶ Is there a procedure/policy in place?
- ▶ Who needs to be notified?
- ▶ How will you communicate your actions?
- ▶ What are your initial and follow up steps?