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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



How Organizations Stay Stuck

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Blog Series: Theological School Deans

August 24, 2012

Tags: leadership | institutional development

I've been observing several leaders in the process of making decisions. Some pertain to leaders making organizational or institutional decisions (dealing with employees, closing a program, dealing with a crisis). In only a few of those instances have I observed persons making quick and decisive choices from several options and then moving toward a new direction. Most people struggle through a long winding, angst-filled process of uncertainty and indecision before achieving resolution and finding direction. Most can't identify their options, much less come up with new ones.

As persons who "lead from the center," Deans in theological school need to help their organizations through change. That often involves helping the players make decisions: president, administration, faculty, sometimes even trustees. Given the particular culture of theological schools, which calls for some level of "shared governance" and the necessity to "bring people along," the potential for staying stuck may be a higher liability than in other contexts.

A major part of how organizations stay stuck has more to do with emotional process than with information and options. People can't get past the impasse of feelings that block their ability to make choices. But often people get stuck because they cannot think through an issue. We can identify three facets in the process of making a decision: the motivation facet, the thinking facet, and the decision facet. Each of those facets in the process requires the ability to think through the issues at hand. But each step holds the hazard of "faulty thinking" that keeps

organizations stuck.

Here are faulty thinking associated with each facet. Each can potentially keep a system stuck, and I've seen each of these operating in theological schools at one point or another:

The Motivation Facet

- * Trying to reduce the discomfort of dissonance
- * Seeking the comfort of internal alignment between the old and the new
- * Being driven by feeling obliged to complete a public commitment or personal loyalties rather than working out of values, vision and principles
- * Being driven by a desire for certainty or security
- * Distorting memories or past decisions to make the current decisions seem good (regardless of how bad they actually may be)
- * Soliciting confirmation that we are about to make a good decision (especially from people who have no stake in the outcome)
- * Being driven by the Scarcity Principle: the fear of regret at not attaining something that is scarce
- * Being immobilized by the Sunk-Cost Effect: being reluctant to pull out of an investment of money, energy, or effort even if it has yielded poor results.

The Thinking Facet

- * Preferring a known probability to an unknown one
- * Failing to compensate enough for our own bias
- * Elaborating on likelihood: either thinking centrally or taking unthinking short-cut decisions
- * Focusing on short-term benefits rather than long-term solutions
- * Seeking more facts for making a decision, even when they are irrelevant
- * Failing to critically assess source credibility: seeking input from people who we are likely to believe rather than those who have expertise.

The Deciding Facet

- * Being stuck in the Augmentation Principle: the belief that evidence for a decision is accumulative
- * Using only limited logic in making a decision
- * Accepting simple, explainable hypotheses for complex situations and issues
- * Failure to use the right strategies for different types of choice
- * Deciding by comparing things falsely (apples to oranges).

Making a good decision is about choosing wisely from among options and choices. And while decision-making is both and emotional and an intellectual act, it's important to engage in

“right thinking” in order to make right decisions. Because Deans occupy a unique position in the system that provides a multi-faceted view of issues and challenges, they are vital to helping their schools get unstuck by avoiding the faulty thinking in each facet and step in decision-making. Finally, the best cure for being stuck is simply, to make a decision.

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