

Lessons Learned: Pressured Decision Making

by Mary Owens, Ph.D.

My twenty years' service in leadership roles was a continual self-reflective learning experience, something I value greatly in my work and daily life. I served as coordinator of the American English Language (English as a Second Language) Program at my college's largest campus for three years, then served for seventeen years as chair of the academic department that included AELP but that also underwent various configurations of disciplines and sizes, ranging from a department of three disciplines and approximately 80 faculty (full-time and part-time) along with two staff members serving 5,400 student enrollments per Academic Year to a department of fifteen disciplines, with approximately 150 faculty, and three staff serving 10,000 student enrollments per AY, the college's largest academic department.

During those years, I made my fair share of mistakes and learned many lessons, often having to re-learn those lessons along the way. I was fortunate to have colleagues who assisted me by critiquing, advising, and supporting me, as well as usually forgiving my blunders. I have learned a great deal from my colleagues and the role itself of leading them. I would like to share some of what I've learned and give back to those who are in these essential roles of coordinating and leading or are considering taking them on.

This time, I'd like to share one of the best pieces of advice I received many years ago as a fairly new chair. My colleague, Matt Schulte, a philosophy professor and former coordinator and chair, was the source.

I don't recall the specifics of the situation itself, perhaps it was cancellations of classes deemed too small to be viable and run by the dean but with historical patterns of students enrolling late. Whatever the situation, it was a charged one with serious consequences for the faculty and students involved and with intense pressure on me to resolve the issue; in addition, I was tired and probably a bit frazzled by the semester opening uproar.

Matt told me, "You know, you don't have to decide everything immediately." He was right; I put the decision on hold and went home.

It is true that there are times when a decision must be made immediately on the spot; however, most decisions are not so urgent. I have found that putting a decision off when you can for a few hours or for a day or two has great benefits.

Specifically, putting off a decision

- allows you to calm down and not jump to action in the heat of the moment,
- allows you to gather more information and consult others if needed,
- allows you to step back and reflect on the factors that are in play,
- allows you to consider what is at stake, including the consequences of the various choices facing you,
- allows for the unfolding of events that are not in your control and that may render your decision moot, such as time for enough students to enroll in marginal, at-risk classes to render them viable.

Of course, delaying decisions indefinitely is not what I am advocating: decisions need to be made in timely fashions. However, when you can give yourself some time, even if it is just to revisit a decision you are already pretty sure about, the final decision you come to will be a much sounder one than you would have made in haste.

Over the years, I have often used this excellent advice, and I have shared it with many other coordinators and chairs. I hope it serves you well.

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