March 2022

Pandemic Responses: What They Reveal About Crisis Management, Decision-Making, and Shared Governance

Daniel J. Julius
New Jersey City University, danjjulius@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/jcba

Part of the Collective Bargaining Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Pandemic Responses: What They Reveal About Crisis Management, Decision Making, and Shared Governance

Daniel J. Julius[1]

Colleges and universities have, by and large, responded well, one might say, very effectively as organizations, to the pandemic. This observation may come as a surprise because some would vehemently disagree. Surprising also because in many academic environments, decision making around managing crises, let alone implementation of solutions, is slow, politicized, and often driven by personal or constituent agendas. Responding to internal or external challenges, implementing strategic plans or effectuating decisions proactively, particularly at the system or institutional level, is difficult. I believe this less than sanguine view is commonly held, and research on decision making in academic organizations over the past 75 years lends credence to this observation.

And yet, students, faculty and staff on most campuses are returning, and testing, tracking and vaccination centers have been operationalized. Many campuses did an incredible job on the service front by producing PPE, donating facilities, and caring for patients in university hospitals. On the research side, major institutions mobilized quickly to hunt for treatments, testing variants and investigating sources. And systems and campuses are facing an ongoing sad reality, particularly in red states, like Texas, Georgia, Florida, and Alaska, as many on campus want to mask up and require vaccinations while governors and the boards they appoint, with significant power over campus budgets, do not support such measures. Even so, few organizations in the United States have been able to respond as comprehensively as has post-secondary education.

Are there lessons to be learned and, if so, should we reassess how we approach crisis management, decision making, and shared governance?

Flaws in the Current Decision-Making Architecture

Decision By Committee. Because perceived academic expertise not hierarchy, is the organizing principle, committees of "experts" decide many of the critical issues. The truth of the matter is many of the decision makers approach issues from theoretical perspectives and are less

---

[1] Daniel J. Julius is a former Provost and Senior Vice President, now Professor of Management, at New Jersey City University, Adjunct Professor at the University at Albany SUNY, and a Visiting Fellow, School of Management, at Yale University.

Crisis Management, Decision Making, and Shared Governance

experienced dealing with applied applications, the nuts and bolts of making and implementing decisions. Rarely are the criteria for decision making agreed upon, sometimes they are not discussed. People wander in and out of the decision-making process, dissident voices make consensus a rare commodity, deadlines do not seem important, and influence belongs to those who stay long enough to exercise it. To make matters more difficult, disruptive behaviors are tolerated which in most organizations are dealt with expeditiously, often decisively, and without fanfare.

Conflict Common But Not Obvious. Professional groups, clients, and outsiders support divergent interests and goals. Frequently, there is conflict, and leaders continually adjust to pressures from various groups. Unfortunately, people may agree while discussing issues and undermine what was agreed upon in other settings. In many cases, decisions recommended by one group are not in alignment with (or cognizant of) regulations, constraints, or capabilities of other units (e.g. financial, auditing, HR, etc.) with the result: immediate organizational conflict. Routine matters often become politicized which reflect disciplinary and ideological orientations. Many operate in personality driven units, where authority is diffuse and decision-making outcomes reflect the power and influence of select individuals or groups.

A Subsidiary Process. The longer it takes to decide, the greater the number of issues piled onto the original subject. People, hoping to accomplish several things at one time, burden simple decisions with countless subsidiary ones. This is one reason why an "issue carousel" exists in academic environments. Ideas have a way of coming around again and again. What is decided does not last long because of pressure from internal and external factions, or dissident voices, demanding to revisit earlier agreements. Decisions are not so much made as pinned down, temporarily.

Conflicting Jurisdictional Territories. Because of competing claims regarding mission, conflicting notions about the legitimacy or effectiveness about approaches, and a myriad of groups who claim a vested interest in outcomes, jurisdictional conflicts are common. Some are related to competing political or educational interests, others to jurisdiction, between senates and unions, or to a lack of unit alignment regarding policies and procedures, and still others are related to a lack of clarity about "who is the client" of post-secondary institutions and systems.

Shared Governance Ineffective in Certain Situations. Most colleges and universities are hardwired for semesters. Senates and other joint decision-making groups do not regularly meet three months of the year. At many institutions, these bodies invariably reflect the concerns of factions and personalities. In my experience too often, we lack a shared sense of urgency, or accountability, and conspiracies around the "motives of others" abound. The views of "staff",

Crisis Management, Decision Making, and Shared Governance

including librarians, part time faculty, counselors, and others, are not often included in the joint decision-making bodies. Leaders benefit immeasurably from recommendations of internal and external constituencies, shared governance is important, but obtaining counsel in a timely manner is very difficult.

Regression to the Status Quo. There is an old quip, that it's easier to move a cemetery than change the curriculum. Many in academe are brilliant at deconstructing ideas, not implementing them, dissent is often valued over consensus, and the phrase "we tried that in 1999 (or pick another year) and it did not work then" is heard repeatedly. Too many people are comfortable with the ways things are, despite heated protestations to the contrary. There are frequent disagreements over what actions constitute effective approaches to internal or external matters. Sadly, too often, enlightened self-interest prevails.

Crisis Responses Worth Consideration in Future

Notwithstanding observations about the current decision-making architecture noted above, here are further observations based on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic about decision making, crisis management, and shared governance which may be worth considering in future situations.

A Sense of Urgency and the Need For Community Engagement. The sentiment that "we had to get this right" for the benefit of students, faculty, staff, and the public, was ubiquitous. The urgency and deadlines were real, a matter of life and death. Responding to the pandemic required immediate action; rightfully or wrongfully, collaborative shared governance processes proved inadequate in this case. Decisions needed to be made and implemented in the spring of 2019, the time when many were preparing for the summer; the last senate meeting, largely ceremonial, is normally in May. By and large the actions taken were, in hindsight, effective, survived legal challenges, the FDA has approved the Pfizer vaccine, and, on many campuses, certainly not all, large numbers of people believe what was done was for the benefit of everyone.

A University-Wide Committee Was Constituted With Representatives From Key Units and Tasked to Coordinate Responses. At many institutions, a representative *ad hoc* committee was instrumental in allowing people to cross jurisdictional territories and ensuring alignment (and communication) as decisions were made, actions taken, and issues resolved. Sub committees reported to this umbrella committee. One result was proactive collaboration with labor unions on many campuses. In fact, those responsible for labor management relations, employer, and employee representatives, reacted superbly. At institutions and systems like the University of California, those in Oregon, Michigan, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and other locales, where working conditions for faculty, graduate students, full-

or part-time staff, are set forth in labor contracts, the parties were proactive and approached matters more as partners than adversaries. By and large, labor unions supported and reinforced the actions of institutions and helped mitigate consequences and conflict, and they have been in the forefront of demanding mask mandates be enforced and students vaccinated.

Common Interests Across Organizational Units, and Trust That Decisions At Different Levels of the Organization Would Be Supported. Once the sense of urgency and validity of the crisis was embraced, cooperation occurred between and among institutional units. Although rare, this is essential for an effective response to significant challenges. Important decisions were made, and actions were taken at lower levels within schools and colleges. The decision-making architecture was flattened and less hierarchical. People felt those higher up in the organization would support them as they responded, another critical component of an effective response.

Resources Were Redirected, Communication Was Sustained and Evidenced Based. On many campuses, communication was constant, factual, evidenced based and depoliticized. Leaders relied on external credible expertise to validate and guide decisions, the CDC, state epidemiology offices and the like. Individual offices were assigned and resourced to address pandemic related matters from classroom management to vaccinations. Wearing a mask or opting to be vaccinated were not treated as political statements as they were (and still are) unfortunately by some political leaders. Testing and vaccination centers were set up on campus, staffed, and open at a variety of times.

Faculty and Staff Were Nearly Unanimous In Their Willingness and Ability to Respond. Were anyone to suggest, prior to the pandemic, that faculty and staff could pivot to online learning and hybrid arrangements for much of the curriculum in several weeks, the suggestion would not be taken seriously. And yet this is what occurred. Faculty tackled the work of remote learning without any prior preparation. There was a sense of civic discipline rarely seen in colleges and universities. In retrospect these actions, a willingness to serve students and others, were nothing short of herculean. Many employees, at all levels of the organization, took a risk, another component for success.

Innovation to Established Routines Supported. IT departments went online to assist anyone needing help and were available at all hours; access to expertise was assured. In some jurisdictions IT departments negotiated internet price discounts with some ISPs. Vaccine and testing centers were set up and became operational overnight, including weekends. Campus and system leaders quickly took advantage of funds available in the CARES Act, the largest emergency spending measure in the history of the United States, and CARES Act funds went

Crisis Management, Decision Making, and Shared Governance

straight to campuses and students, bypassing systems, and their governing boards. Public safety departments organized and monitored mask mandates and other safety protocols. Mobilization to address the crisis was quick when compared to other sectors of society.

Leaders Rose to the Occasion. Authenticity and credibility were established early on. This in turn encouraged constituencies to engage responsibly and be flexible in adaptation to new institutional policies. Leaders supported decision making that required continual assessment. While views from a wide array of constituents were acknowledged, dissident voices were not permitted to disrupt the overall response. Individual preferences were sacrificed for the common good.

New ways to decide and implement, in response to the pandemic will have other manifestations, some positive others less so. With respect to the latter, not everyone reading this opinion will agree, and there are campuses where faculty and staff may believe leaders acted precipitously and arbitrarily. Requiems for "shared decision-making processes" are heard. On some campuses, faculty and staff who responded so magnificently (many were furloughed for several weeks; some lost jobs) are now, due to less state and federal support and weaker enrollment, facing additional financial challenges. Weaknesses inherent in many institutional models, in the less endowed private sector, or where there is over reliance on international enrollment, were exposed in sharp relief during the pandemic. Unions may become more intransigent as they are asked for new sacrifices; labor spokespersons may say that calls for a "new normal" simply mean continued deterioration of employee benefits and less voice in institutional affairs. The fragility of trust between senior leaders and faculty will be tested as students are encouraged to come back to campus despite what many say are inadequate data on the status of who is vaccinated and lax enforcement of mask mandates, giving rise to the misgivings of large numbers of staff. Decision-making outcomes ultimately depend on leadership, and leaders are either constrained or aided by institutional and demographic variables: culture, prestige, endowments, organizational size and autonomy, or legislative clout to name a few

The pandemic has also had positive benefits: work/life balance was seen through a different lens and valued; the scalability of teaching and learning was shown to be much larger than previously thought; on campus science proved itself superior to politics; adaptations to new technologies and pedagogical models were successful. Perhaps most importantly, new approaches to decision making allowed many to see that we can operate with a common sense of purpose, know what we should be focused on, how to measure and assess progress, and effectively implement what is decided.

Crisis Management, Decision Making, and Shared Governance

We might consider two final questions; first, will higher education revert to the pre-pandemic default mode of decision making? Should it? Or will this past year provide an impetus to learn from what we are going through and modify decision making and shared governance mechanisms? What aspects of the older models should be retained, what should be discarded, and what might be amended? Second, might we take this opportunity to offer guidance for future leaders concerning how to assess actions taken when confronting new or similar crises in the future? We owe the generations of leaders who will follow us answers to these questions.