

## Power and Decision Making in Post Secondary Education

Educational leaders need to be able to influence the decision-making processes in their organization. This process and the people who make the decisions should be uppermost in our mind when we embark on a new direction that needs approval outside the area we lead. Decisions on your new direction or project will be under pressure from competing ideas, paucity of funds, vested interests and inability to influence the decision-making hierarchy. And that is just within your organization!

Participants will:

- Consider an Australian perspective on power and control in post secondary educational organizations
- Consider how decision making in post secondary organizations has changed over time
- Consider the question "How free are we or our organizations to make decisions?"
- Construct a decision making tree for a priority project
- Share their approach and influencing strategies

### Background to my interest

I work in a dual sector organization and lead a large school that offers courses from certificate to advanced diploma level. Victoria University was created in 1992 from a number of higher education institutes. In 1998 a large Technical and Further Education institute was amalgamated with Victoria University. We now have a two-year college and a four year college with a research function in one organization.

I am interested in power and decision making in this context. The background to my interest is how quality decision making is made in such an organization where there is disparity of status and funding between the two sectors.

### External Environment

Post secondary organisations operate within a range of federal and state government controls. Historically the government provided the organisations with funding and largely left decision making to the internal management and educational disciplines, with a range of optional inputs from industry and peak professional bodies. In the past twenty years an overlay of external controls has been imposed, where governments provide funds but also impose a number of drivers in regard to quality and performance. Aspects of quality are controlled through our adherence to the Australian Quality Training Framework and the Australian University Quality Agency. In addition special funds are provided to achieve outcomes high on the priority of funding bodies. The control of the use of these funds and the changes the government expects is driven through a range of output measures. For example, we have national and

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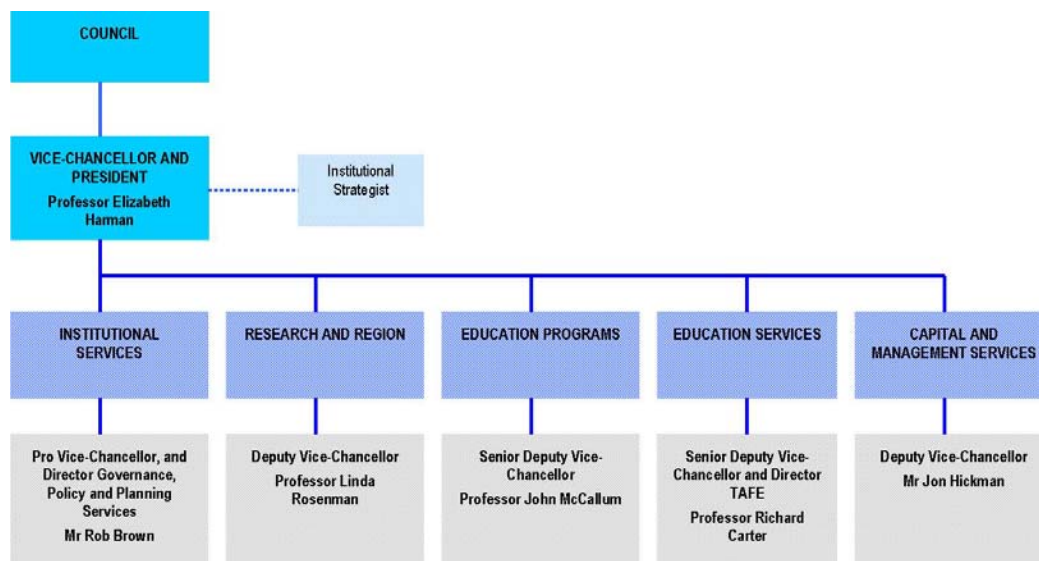
state published statistics on student's course experience and graduate outcomes. A range of competitive student and staff prizes and performance based teaching and learning grants drive performance in individual institutes. Individual organisations can bid for a number of competitive grants and tenders, but in effect, participation choice is not optional as the base funding is 'thin'.

## Internal VU Environment Structural

Margaret Wheatley in *LEADERSHIP AND THE NEW SCIENCE* refers to Newtonian thinking and how the marriage of science with the newly emerging art of management created a 'boxed' approach to organisational structure.

In our context there are teachers and managers and everyone is organised into departments or faculties on an organisational chart. Decision-making was a case of selling your ideas to your manager who then decided to approve or not.

Does this look familiar?



So how do we go about decision making in a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational organisation? Middle managers are expected to drive new business and new ways of working with students. *Innovation happens on the edge of organisations* and we need to advance new ideas and new ways of working to meet the changing needs of our students and their careers. The old way of influencing your manager to then champion a project on behalf of your unit can see your project sidelined due to their busy schedule, lack of interest in your idea, personality bias or your ability (or not) to convince them.

The **first step** is to get your idea into the best shape so that is well constructed and incorporates feedback from stakeholders within your unit.

Loren Gary in *Problem Solving for Decision Makers* suggests a six-step process that is valuable.

1. Define or frame the problem
2. Identify criteria for success
3. Weight each criteria
4. Are there alternatives?
5. Weight the alternatives
6. The highest score is the rational choice (but not the only choice)

Of course how you go about the process is crucial. Listening to stakeholders, seeking out a broad range of views, debating points of view, testing the draft, convincing a sceptical colleague are all techniques to employ when putting together the 'big idea'.

You should be careful of defensive reasoning, understand cognitive bias, know how good data can lead to bad decisions, and be prepared to critically examine the precedents.

The **second step** is to link your big idea to your organisation's strategy. In reality your organisation's strategy would have been a factor at the very beginning of your decision making process. But if this is not overt in your bid idea then now is the time to make it so. Your organisation would have expended a lot of energy and funds developing its strategy and in the best organisations there would have been extensive consultation with staff. Senior managers will have a deep commitment to the strategy and everyone probably has performance measures that support its implementation. There will also be strategies linked to industry groups or peak bodies that you work with. However, in order to advance a decision this linkage is a crucial step in the process.

Now we have the big idea and it is fairly well tested, what is the next step?

The **third step** is coalition building and seeking alliances. To do this you must know the politics and decision-making processes in your organisation.

Butcher & Clarke (2001) regard politics as central to the task of managing. They outline four aspects of politics and its relevance to management in their book *Smart Managing* –

- The centrality of politics to organisations and managing
- The principled use of power
- Balancing individual and organisational motives
- The redefinition of managerial work

The centrality of politics to organisations and managing

In fact their ideas have a fit with Margaret Wheatley's in that decisions are often made or advanced in an organisation because of the relationships of the proponent. Lobbying and alliance building are central to managerial activity, yet few managers will admit to this. Aligning personal interest to corporate strategy is also important if we are to achieve real work.

Power resides in different degrees in the same roles across the organisation. Some managers are more influential ('powerful') than others. You need to consider whom these people are and who you need to convince or to strategize with. Before you talk with them spend some time reflecting on what is important to them both in an organisational sense and from their personal viewpoint. How do you connect your idea with their interests?

Butcher & Clarke's ideas do not supplant decision-making authority in an organisation; rather politics is seen as a complementary activity to rational, hierarchically structured, formal decision-making. They suggest that the 21<sup>st</sup> century organisation is a democratised organisation, and that the internal dynamics should be treated as markets rather than a centrally planned economy (Butcher and Clarke p143).

#### The principled use of power

The principled use of power calls us to reflect on the nature of politics in an organisation. As educators we all subscribe to a set of values that drive our work, these values are built around 'making a difference' to the lives of our students and our community. Are such we can have difficulty with the idea of power and its use in the organisation. So a word on 'the principled use of power' can clarify some of the questions we have.

We are all familiar with the unprincipled use of power and it is in evidence around us in various corporate breakdowns and government scandals. It is a problem that is evidenced in stories from Caligula to Hitler. How do we consider the legitimate use of power in the face of this evidence? The first test, is to ask yourself if your big idea conforms to the ethical standards of your profession? The second test is to ask yourself whether your big idea advances the goals of your college, the organisation that has vested the power in you. Cohen and Bradford in *Influence without Authority* have a number of observations to make on influence versus manipulation and how to measure the difference. The fruits of unprincipled use of power will be apparent over a long period of time, in the meantime you may just be left with a feeling of unease when dealing with individuals who 'trade' in these ways.

#### Balancing individual and organisational motives

You are in a privileged position in your organisation being vested with a greater degree of organisational responsibility than those who report to you. You also have a higher degree of accountability. Your individual interests will be driven by what you value, the ease of working with groups within your organisation, the capability of those who report to you, and the performance of your area.

When advancing your big idea, you will need to ensure that the interests of your area are not the only interests that are served. You will need to demonstrate how the adoption of the project serves the wider organisation. Those parts of the organisation that will be enhanced by your idea will be part of your coalition. Those parts of the organisation that are indifferent will need influencing if they are part of the decision-making model. Those parts of the organisation that are potentially negatively affected will need special attention. You really need to reflect on how you can bring them into the idea, how to find out their goals and if you should be spending some time with them explaining your goals and the big idea.

#### The redefinition of managerial work

In a rational, boxed model of managerial work, the hierarchy makes the decisions. Managers are given certain delegations in human resource and finance functions and are expected to make the best decisions in the best interest of the organisation. This is work we are all familiar with. Our work as educational leaders also means that we are busy implementing and reporting back on new policies, embedding new teaching and learning ideas, mentoring and coaching new staff and liaising with industry.

However, we also observe that a new direction or strategic priority suddenly gets noticed and prioritised. Managing from a relationship model will allow you to see how that can happen.

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Patricia Aburdene in *Megatrends 2010* talks of leading from the middle. Combining authentic middle leadership, politics and relationship management is a very powerful model for managing.

The **fourth step** is to identify the formal approval processes. In our organisation this is a case of knowing where managerial and educational decisions are made, which committees will be involved and establishing their deadlines.

**Step five** is to develop an action plan replete with the usual timelines, actions, responsibility and funding allocations. But also take time to identify key players and decision makers and when you should be talking with them.

To be able to influence decision making in an organisation one needs to move beyond the rational, boxed, hierarchical model of management. Whilst there is great appeal in the utility of a management rank setting the strategic plan, lining up all the resources and then implementing the plan; in reality educational organisations will succeed not just because of this but also due to the innovation of those on the fringes on the organisation, the commitment of managers to advance new and different ideas, alignment of organisational goals with individual goals, common sense and probably a dash of luck.

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