

Public safety lessons for quick decision-making when in peril

Crisis Management

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Leading a college or university today can feel a bit like “The Hunger Games,” but instead of tributes, you have deans; instead of sponsors you have boards and accreditors. And the rules shift mid-game as enrollment declines, workforce demands surge and funding models tighten.

One moment the focus is retention, the next it is program viability, then community partnerships or political pressures. The arena is dynamic, the stakes are real, and the expectation is clear: make high-stakes decisions quickly, often without complete information.

Yet most higher education leaders were not prepared for this kind of environment. Traditional leadership pathways emphasize shared governance, deliberation, and consensus-building.

These are essential features of higher education, but they assume relative stability. Public safety leadership, by contrast, operates from a different premise: conditions are fluid, information is incomplete, and delay can escalate consequences.

Research on decision-making reinforces this reality. Leaders rarely operate with full information; instead, they rely on bounded rationality, making the best possible decisions within constraints rather than waiting for certainty (Kahneman, 2011).

For higher education executives navigating institutional complexity, this shift in mindset is not theoretical: it is operational. Systems define governance structures, but people make decisions.

Culture shapes institutional norms, but people act under pressure. Institutional performance ultimately depends on whether leaders can exercise judgment, clarity, and accountability when conditions are uncertain.

Public safety under pressure

The first discipline higher education can borrow from public safety leadership is decision-making under uncertainty. In high-stakes environments, leaders are trained to act with incomplete and evolving information.

Waiting for perfect data is not an option. Instead, they assess available signals, determine what is sufficient to act, and move forward, while still being able to adjust as conditions change.

inclusivity, it can slow institutional response at precisely the moment speed is required.

Adaptive leadership research underscores that in complex environments, leaders must act without clear answers, mobilizing people to respond to evolving conditions rather than waiting for technical solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Consider how institutions respond to shifting workforce demands. Labor market data may signal declining relevance in some programs and urgent need in others, yet internal processes can delay action for semesters or even years.

A more disciplined approach does not eliminate shared governance, but reframes it: leaders move forward with pilot programs, targeted partnerships, and resource reallocation while continuing to gather input and refine decisions. The shift is from seeking certainty to exercising informed judgment under pressure.

Chain-of-command clarity

The second discipline is chain-of-command clarity. Public safety organizations function through clearly defined authority structures. Roles are explicit, decision rights are understood, and communication flows through established channels.

In high-pressure situations, this clarity enables coordinated action. In higher education, authority is intentionally distributed across presidents, provosts, deans, faculty senates, and boards. While this structure preserves academic integrity, it can also create ambiguity.

This is not an argument against shared governance. It is an argument for precision within it. Leaders must define where authority resides in different scenarios, particularly under time constraints.

When enrollment declines sharply or a program must be restructured quickly, ambiguity about who has decision rights can stall action and create misalignment across the institution.

Clarity in roles does not diminish collaboration; it enables collaboration to function effectively. Without it, even well-designed strategies struggle in execution because no one is clearly accountable for moving them forward.

Continuous feedback loop

The third discipline is accountability grounded in outcomes rather than activity. Public safety leadership relies on structured reflection through after-action reviews.

Leaders examine what occurred, why it occurred, and what must change. The focus is not on assigning blame, but on improving performance.

In higher education, accountability often centers on process, e.g., committee work completed, initiatives launched, or compliance requirements met.

performance expectations are better able to adapt and improve over time (Edmondson, 2018).

For higher education leaders, this means moving beyond tracking inputs to examining results. If a new program is launched, the critical questions extend beyond enrollment to include completion rates, workforce placement, and return on investment.

If retention strategies are implemented, leaders must assess not only participation but impact. Accountability becomes a continuous feedback loop that informs decision-making, rather than a retrospective exercise.

Navigating complexity

Taken together, these disciplines point to a fundamental shift in how leadership is developed and practiced in higher education. The common thread is not process, but people capability.

Leaders must be prepared to make decisions with incomplete information, operate within complex governance structures, and take responsibility for outcomes in environments where conditions are constantly changing.

This requires intentional investment in leadership development. Scenario-based training, simulations of enrollment shocks or funding disruptions, and coaching focused on executive judgment can help leaders build the capacity to act under pressure.

It also requires cultural reinforcement. Institutions must normalize that timely decisions are essential, that role clarity strengthens rather than undermines governance, and that accountability is a mechanism for improvement, not punishment.

The bottom line: the solution is developing people, leaders with the capacity to act under pressure, rather than adding more processes or structures. Leaders must establish a framework that yields results.

Higher education is built on tradition, but it is increasingly tested by volatility. Demographic shifts, workforce demands, political pressures, and financial constraints are reshaping the landscape. The question is not whether institutions will face disruption, but whether their leaders are prepared to respond.

Public safety leadership offers a model of organizational readiness—one that prioritizes decisive action, clear authority, and continuous learning. Within the SCIP framework, this is the work of people: developing leaders who can navigate complexity with discipline and precision.

Because in the moments that define institutions—enrollment cliffs, program closures, funding crises—it is not governance structures or strategic plans that determine the outcome. It is the people who lead through the challenges.

References



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- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.