

MANAGING IN A CULTURE OF DEBATE: ENHANCING ADMINISTRATIVE EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS

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ABSTRACT

The contestability of ideas is at the heart of a healthy academic institution. As a result, administrators face the challenge of making and implementing difficult decisions in an environment that is designed to explicitly create thoughtful discord. We argue that procedural fairness – explaining how and why important decisions are made – is an important tool for academic administrators to utilize in order to successfully manage in this arena. We present four brief cases that showcase the benefits of utilizing procedural fairness and the costs of ignoring it.

Universities are complex institutions by design. As noted by Weick and colleagues (Orton and Weick, 1990; Weick, 1976), universities are loosely coupled systems often lacking in coordination and clear rules and regulations for action, in part, to promote individual freedom of thought. To achieve this, organizational structures (e.g., tenure) are intentionally designed to promote an environment free of conceptual constraint.

This “loose coupling” in academia contributes to a contestability of goals and objectives (Weick, 1976). Even when goals and objectives can be clearly articulated (e.g., the predominance of teaching over research or vice versa), debate remains concerning the appropriate measures of agreed upon outcomes. How does one quantify successful teaching or research, for example?

When things are highly contestable, some type of structure emerges to fill the void (Pfeffer, 1992). Often, political maneuvering becomes the mechanism by which the outcomes of contests for resources and the like are determined. In essence, politics becomes the organizing structure in the absence of clearly articulated rules and regulations to the contrary (Pfeffer and Fong, 2005).

Some level of politicking is inevitable and not necessarily problematic. However, in the absence of clear organizational goals and objectives, the pursuit of individual goals and objectives become increasingly prevalent (Pfeffer, 1992, Pfeffer and Fong, 2005). Individuals are free and indeed encouraged to present their own perceptions and mental models of how the university should operate (Gappa, Austin and Trice, 2007; Rowley and Sherman 2003).

The contestability of ideas is at the heart of a healthy academic institution. The vitality of debate around new ideas is at the essence of what distinguishes the university from trade schools. Significant challenges emerge, however, when certain decisions need to be made concerning the administration of the institutions. As a result, academic administrators often find themselves in the unenviable position of needing to make tough decisions in an environment explicitly designed to create thoughtful discord (Bennett, 1998; Kezar and Eckel, 2004).

So how does the academic administrator operate effectively in such an environment? Command and control structures are counter to the very nature of intellectual vitality (Wheatley, 1997) and their use is likely to be ineffective at best and most likely destructive to the overall health of

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the organization. What's needed is a mechanism capable of reducing contestability without damaging the vitality of debate. We argue that procedural fairness (Brockner, 2006; Colquitt, Noe and Jackson, 2002; Greenberg and Colquitt, 2013) introduces just such a structure and, as such, is an important tool for the academic administrator interested making tough decisions while, at the same time, maintaining the intellectual vibrancy of the institution.

Fairness and Equity in University Settings

Procedural fairness, at its core, is about explaining how and why important decisions are made. In all organizations, including higher education institutions, perceptions of procedural fairness typically have three primary drivers: that employee views are given significant consideration; that the decision maker clearly and transparently communicates the decision process and rationale; and that the personal biases of the decision maker are minimized and reasonable and "objective" criteria are used. (Brockner, 2006, Greenberg & Colquitt, 2013).

Most discussions about fairness in an academic setting focus on "distributive fairness," or the outcomes (e.g. salary, teaching loads, service loads, etc.) provided by the employer (Ambrose, Arnaud, Greenberg, and Colquitt, 2005). The problem with distributive fairness as a structural mechanism in academia is that it doesn't reduce contestability. Faculty at institutions large and small regularly debate departmental and university differences regarding teaching loads, research expectations and, especially, salary. For instance, a university might find a marketing professor upset that he teaches one more course per semester than the biology professor; the biology professor upset that outside grants are used as a key criteria in her evaluation but not for the political science professor, and the political science professor upset that she makes considerably less than a marketing professor.

Academic administrators (especially department heads) often have very little control over these outcomes, even for those who have performed especially well (Brown and Moshavi, 2002). In addition, even in situations where there is some ability to influence outcomes for an employee in a positive manner (e.g. reduce someone's teaching load), equity theory (Adams, 1963; Greenberg, 1988) suggests that other employees will likely then perceive inequity. The reason – people assess distributive fairness by comparing themselves to relevant others (Adams, 1963).

Procedural fairness, on the other hand, has the potential to mitigate contestability. Procedural fairness is important in a highly politicized environment because it provides a sense of structure and clarity for decisions that

does not otherwise exist. It suggests a method to the madness, the answer to why certain decisions were made. More importantly, it creates a structure for decision making that is independent of the actual decision (Brockner, 2006). As such, contestability around individual decisions is reduced.

Two perspectives provide insight into this. First, in academic settings, information asymmetry is common (Lane and Kivisto, 2008) with administrators aware of operational information that faculty and staff are not. Communication of this is often uneven or lacking and people respond to the lack of information by filling in the blanks (Gomez-Mejia and Balkin, 1992). Taking the time to explain the process for determining outcomes such as raises, teaching load differentials, or program budgetary reductions, for instance, can reduce uncertainty.

Second, the literature on psychological contracts in higher education suggests that procedural fairness may be an effective mechanism for reducing contestability. Psychological contracts are viewed as a set of unwritten, reciprocal expectations between exchange partners with respect to the condition of their relationship (Rousseau, 1996). Psychological contracts in academia focus to a large extent on the idea of autonomy (Raelin, 1995), where faculty are expected to self-manage their teaching and research as well as participate in shared governance (Kezar and Eckel, 2004). Research indicates that administrators are responsible for managing two facets of autonomy – administrative autonomy and operational autonomy (Raelin, 1995). Administrative autonomy involves clarifying tasks and providing resources to support faculty. Operational autonomy focuses on stimulating self-management capabilities (Bennett, 1998; Raelin, 1995). To support this management of autonomy, faculty have come to expect fairness, rapport and approachability – all key components of procedural fairness (Herriot, Manning and Kidd, 1997).

Despite these indicators suggesting that procedural fairness has the potential to be an important administrative tool, significant evidence suggests it is often not used by managers (Brockner, 2006), especially in academia (Brown and Moshavi, 2002). We believe there are three primary reasons why academic administrators underutilize this tool: policies that inhibit its use, conflict avoidance and benign neglect.

Inhibiting Policies. Paradoxically, faculty and administrative governing bodies (such as a faculty senate, deans' council) that prescribe specific procedures (around such issues as when and how student evaluations of teaching are administered, curriculum approval criteria, or even faculty grievances) may actually inhibit the use of procedural fairness. These policies may create a false sense that procedural fairness is already in place and perhaps even al-

ready "over-done" by the university. As a result, academic administrators may be inclined to exercise authority without explanation in these non-prescribed arenas, in effect "overcorrecting" and missing opportunities to display procedural fairness

Conflict avoidance. It is well-documented that avoidance can be a common managerial approach to dealing with conflict (Leung, 1988, Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). While there are conditions where conflict avoidance makes sense (like when a cooling off period is needed), it limits the use of procedural fairness. In academia, research suggests that administrators (esp. department chairs) often feel a sense of powerlessness and avoid conflict and therefore don't share information to avoid having battles (Bennet, 1998; Hickson and Stacks, 1992).

Benign neglect. There's no evidence that academic administrators are inherently resistant to procedural fairness. They may even see it as appropriate and beneficial. However, they fail to include the practice of procedural fairness in the day to day chaos of their positions primarily based on time constraints. They assume that such processes will be time consuming (Brockner, 2006) and often fail to account for the increased work load associated with not following procedural fairness norms. The lack of norms creates more fires that demand more attention of the academic administrator, thereby making it even more difficult to take the time to follow procedural fairness norms. In short, there are start-up costs (time and energy) associated with these norms that don't get attention due to the administrative demands of the job.

Procedural Fairness in Action

In order for academic administrators to better understand the importance of procedural fairness, we present four brief cases; the first two show the benefits of utilizing procedural fairness and last two show the costs of ignoring it. For each case, the three key drivers of procedural fairness—that employee views are given significant consideration; that the decision maker clearly and transparently communicates the decision process and rationale; and that the personal biases of the decision maker are minimized and reasonable and "objective" criteria are used – are presented.

Case 1

The Politics of Space: A college was running out of space in its main building. Several buildings just off campus became available for use. The off-site space was usable but not nearly as nice as the main building space. Being out of the main building seemed to carry a fairly strong negative

stigma. The Dean and Associate Dean had to determine who was going to be moved to this less desirable space.

Employee Views Considered?

Everyone was made aware of the need to grow the school in terms of space and that the school was going to be expanding into another building. Employees (staff and faculty) were not given the option of moving. However, they were given the opportunity to express their concerns and their input was requested concerning necessary modifications to the new space.

Clear Communication of Decision Process and Rationale?

The decision of who moved was based on who had direct contact with undergraduate students. All the programs that did not have direct contact with undergraduate students were moved to the new space. All those that did were kept in the main building. The dean clearly explained why there was a need to expand and why certain offices were being moved and others were not. Schematics of the new offices (with actual room assignments) were developed and posted months in advance of the actual move.

Signaling an Unbiased Decision?

Perceptions of personal biases were minimized since the criteria for the move were quite clear. When a new Associate Dean was established to oversee many of the programs at the new location, his office was immediately located with the off-site groups.

Outcome of Actions

Those moved to new offices still had some concerns about not being in the main building. However, there was no noticeable reduction of productivity. There was a fairly positive culture in the new location and there were no complaints about the injustice of the moves.

Case 2

Replacing a Director: The Director of a master's program resigned to take a position elsewhere. Internal surveys of staff conducted several weeks before this change suggested major concerns with the procedure for hiring and promoting employees. The Associate Dean (supervisor of the director position) launched the new director search with these concerns in mind.

Employee Views Considered?

The program's staff members were informed of the upcoming changes and asked for their thoughts concerning

the needed skills of the new director. They were involved in interviewing candidates for the position and debriefed by the Associate Dean after the interviews. Once it was clear that an internal candidate would be interviewed for the position, the current supervisor of the person interviewed for the position was notified in advance and asked for his feedback. He was made aware that we would be offering the position to the internal candidate before it was actually made and was directly involved in the discussion concerning transition.

Clear Communication of Decision Processes and Rationale?

The opening of the position was announced at a semi-annual staff/admin meeting. This was the first time such an announcement had been made at one of these meetings. Anyone interested was encouraged to apply. All candidates were asked to send their information through HR. The Associate Dean met in advance with each of the internal candidates (total of five) that expressed an interest in the position. During the meetings, he explained the key criteria and process that would be used when reviewing candidates for the new director position.

Signaling an unbiased decision?

Each internal candidate that was not given an interview was informed in person concerning the characteristics of the finalists, why they did not get an interview, and what they would need to do to make themselves a stronger candidate moving forward. Staff members were given advance notice of the final decision.

Outcome of Actions

Everyone seemed pleased with the new appointment. Several people went out of their way to say thank you to the associate dean for the handling of the position. Everyone was supportive of the new director. There was no noticeable dip in performance for those not chosen for the position. Some looked to take on even bigger roles to further their development.

Case 3

New Position Creation: A school was expanding significantly with the addition of new centers of excellence. One center director, a faculty member, was given permission by the dean to add a second faculty member as an associate director, given increasing demands on the center. The center director asked at a faculty meeting for those interested to apply to him directly.

Employee Views Considered?

When ultimately making the appointment, the director made a unilateral decision without talking to other center directors or involving the two staff members in the center. The only other person involved in the discussion was the dean. The dean (and the center director) did not discuss the appointment with the department chairs that were likely to be affected if one of their faculty were put in this position.

Clear Communication of Decision Processes and Rationale?

Two interviews were held for the position but only the two individuals involved with the interviews were even aware that they were being interviewed for the position. The center director was the only person involved in the interviews. The person chosen had a very friendly relationship with the director. The appointment was announced with no explanation as to why this person was chosen over other candidates.

Signaling an Unbiased Decision?:

An announcement was made concerning the new appointment. No one other than the candidate chosen for the position and the dean were given advanced notice of the appointment. The management area chair (who had to now cover additional classes with the half-time loss of a faculty member) was particularly surprised by the outcome. There was little information as to why this person was chosen for the position. No information was given to the person NOT chosen for the position.

Outcome of Actions

The new associate director had some ongoing battles with center staff and had difficulties establishing develop a strong working relationship with the associate dean (who was upset that she was not consulted or informed in advance of the appointment). He eventually developed better relationships, but it took a number of months.

Case 4

Research Productivity: A new dean was concerned about the research productivity of his faculty. The school had a 'pay for publication' program that seemed to reward volume over quality. There was a large list of 'top ranked' journals and the payouts for lower tiered journals were not significantly different from the payouts for highly ranked journals. The dean decided it was time to eliminate the 'pay for publication' program and redo the list of journal rankings (which would still be used for promotion and tenure and annual raise considerations).

Employee Views Considered?

The dean eliminated the old 'pay for publication' program after a brief discussion in one faculty meeting. He alone created a new list of journal rankings. He requested feedback on the list but no mechanism was put in place to get the feedback. Those concerned needed to contact him directly. Those with the strongest opinions were heard (speaking up in faculty meeting) but there was no other active solicitation of feedback from the faculty.

Clear Communication of Decision Processes and Rationale?

The Dean created a new list of journal rankings and sent this out to the faculty. Little information was given to how the list was created. The faculty were told that the list was based on review of other school lists. They were told what schools were used to create the list but there was no discussion of how these schools were chosen. The old research bonus program was immediately cancelled. The new list was sent out and feedback was requested. However, given the elimination of the old program, everyone assumed the new list was to be implemented immediately. No information was given to the contrary.

Signaling an Unbiased Decision?

The dean requested feedback but no mechanism was put in place to receive the feedback. The dean's travel schedule complicated the issue. There was no follow-up communication concerning the list for several months after the list was released.

Outcome of Actions

Faculty were immediately upset by the outcome. Even those in support of the change (top researching junior faculty) were frustrated by the process. The new list was eventually pushed aside. The dean scheduled lunches with faculty to discuss their concerns. Ultimately, conversation concerning the list mostly dissipated. A new journal ranking list never did emerge.

Conclusion

These four cases provide insight into the power of procedural fairness as an administrative tool in academic institutions. By carefully considering and implementing actions that address each of the three key drivers—that employee views are given significant consideration; that the decision maker clearly and transparently communicates the decision process and rationale; and that the personal biases of the decision maker are minimized and reasonable and "objective" criteria are used—department chairs, deans and other administrators can move their

organizations forward while still respecting the cultural norms of debate and questioning found in academia.

While procedural fairness may be one of the most accessible managerial tools available to academic administrators, it still requires planning and thought to be used effectively. First, administrators must consider how they will solicit faculty and staff views. Should this be done in writing, in one-on-one conversation, or in a college-wide or departmental faculty meeting? Is there a specific window of time to provide feedback? Similarly, what is the best mode for communicating the decision process? Again, should it be done in writing or might it be more powerful to have a face-to-face discussion. Finally, should administrators involve others in making and communicating a decision. There are times when an administrative "team" (e.g. a department chair, an associate dean and a dean) decision can be particularly effective in reducing perceptions of bias and leave colleagues feeling that a just and fair process has transpired.

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