Hot Action: The vulnerability of analysing one’s decision-making collegially

David Giles
Senior Lecturer
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland, NZ

A paper presented at the NZARE / AARE Conference, University of Auckland, 2003
Beckett (1996) suggests that one of the central distinguishing features of the professional’s work is the requirement for discretionary judgements. Discretionary judgements involve decisions that take into account a variety of relevant factors; considers what one might believe or do in the circumstance; and then acts accordingly.

An approach that draws attention to the main features of judgements along with a growing awareness of the contributing factors is the consideration of moments of “hot action”; the analysis of decision-making associated with an immediate event. In this way, it is assumed that the contributing beliefs and assumptions associated with a judgement might be more readily known. This methodological approach is supported in recent research advocating an increased interest in the social and affective aspects of judgements and indications that an individual’s judgement attends to one’s total perception of the workplace.

Over a 3-week period, a research team including an external consultant, academic and administrative staff, evaluated the decision-making process of the Dean of a tertiary institution. The research highlighted the benefits of intentionally reviewing one’s workplace judgements with immediate colleagues for the purpose of improving one’s capacity to contemplatively and empirically carry out judgements that have integrity and consistency with one’s mission, goals and values. The process of analysis enabled enriching and empowering collegial dialogue and drew upon affective, social and emotional domains in addition to a cognitive consideration.

Beckett (1996) suggests that one of the central distinguishing features of a professional’s work is the expectation to make discretionary judgements. Any research into discretionary judgements needs to be conducted within the work experiences that contribute to the highly contextualised judgement. In addition, these work experiences become critically and educationally significant as a context for research-on-action.

Beckett and Hager (2000) suggest that a “… judgement involves deciding what to believe or do taking into account a variety of relevant factors and then acting accordingly” (p.303). In so doing, they contend that judgements are more than passive deliberations, rather the activity of formulating intended action and acting on this position. The activity will often involve the identification of the features of the problem, an analysis of any associated risks, and resolutions for action.

Traditionally, professional development for those in management has tended to be prescriptive and concerned with the practice of given theory. More recently, grounded theory approaches generated from action research have sought to theorise from what people actually do and in so doing reveal the contextualisation of judgements. The factors that contribute to a judgement are many in number and complex in terms of the integration of, and interaction between, these factors (Hager, 1999; Hager & Beckett, 1999). Hager (1997 in Beckett & Hager, 2000:302) identifies some of the variables influencing judgements as including the workplace environment and the size of the organisation. Other variables include one’s theoretical background, on-site observations, comparability’s among concerns and available options for decision making. Indeed practical wisdom or tacit knowledge from learned experiences directly influences present decision making (Beckett & Hager, 2000).

Increased validity within the investigations into workplace learning variables and their interrelationships is gained through approaches that consider the whole lived experience. Experiences are seen as judgemental as consideration is given to the total perception of one’s workplace in the deliberation over intended action (Beckett & Hagar, 2000). In this way, variables are phenomenologically considered against the broader contextual features of the situation. These broadening investigative approaches are building a new organic model of workplace learning.
Beckett & Hager (2000) advance that the construction of “… better judgements represents a paradigmatic aim of workplace learning, and growth in such learning is represented by a growing capacity to make appropriate judgements in the changing, (and often unique) circumstances that occur in many workplaces” (p.302). The task then is to identify how professionals construct the basis for their judgements in terms of the features of the problems they face and the significance they give to these features. Crucial to a growing capacity for making appropriate judgements is the need for the professional to learn from their experiences (Clarke, 2001).

The formation and action associated with better judgements should intentionally assist in the development of individuals within a learning organisation and the learning organisation itself (Clarke, 2001). In this way, judgements can be evaluated for their influence on development at both macro and micro levels. Similarly, judgements made by those in leadership roles act as signposts for those working within the organisation. Judgements then, are directional for others.

Judgements in support of the development of a learning organisation seek to maximise “… the exercise of judgement (and hence learning)” (Beckett & Hager, 2000:303) on the part of the employees. In this way the organisation seeks to encourage critical, self reflective and collaborative practices which enable employees to have increased control over their knowledge and practice. Increased empowerment through greater participation in decision making enables a more personalised institutional culture. One of the primary purposes of management is to increase empowerment (Tam, 1999). Involvement and participation encourage shared ownership (Johnson & Hawke, 2002). With the mission and goals of the organisation as a foremost priority, professionals in leadership should be providing an open trusting climate for others (Johnson & Hawke, 2002; Pashiardis, 1994).

Judgements ought to assist in the development of a positive institutional ethos and a corporate sense of community within the educational context (Senge, 2000). Judgements can then lead to the cultivation of positive relationships of trust and respect, appreciation of the diversity of perspective and contribution by staff and students, and the modelling by management of practices sought by employees assist in forging a community conducive to moral and spiritual growth (Carr, 2000). The development of learning organisations ought to result in a positive affective climate for management, staff and students. Presently, managerial thrusts have had a dehumanising consequence through undemocratic and top down processes (Carr, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1992; Wylie, 1995).

Judgements should also be directional in terms their congruence with the mission, vision and values of the institution. In this way, judgements can be referenced to the strategic intent of an organisation or contribute to the evolution of such an intent. Judgements must embrace the understanding that educational institutions are cultures that require growth as a goal and that this growth needs to be facilitated through processes of negotiation and sensitivity (Johnson & Hawke, 2002; Carr, 2000). Equally important is the involvement of staff in the consensus forming with regard to the development, articulation and clarification of the dominant educational ideology within the organisation (Duckett, 2002; Giles, 2001). These outcomes are a consequence of professional leadership which is values-led, people centred and mindful of the need to build a sense of vision (Day, 2000).

Carr (2000) proposes that the ethical dimension of the educative project involves the moral and spiritual formation of people. If the moral project of education is constitutive of its process then judgements are critical to the extent that they provide direction towards the goal but also reflect the ethic associated with the goal (Duigan & Bhindi, 1997). Judgements under analysis will invariably be linked to the professional’s moral foundation. Not only professionals but organisational life in general is becoming a legitimate area for moral aspirations (Bass & Steidlmeyer, 1999).

With the large number of variables, what is needed is an approach that draws attention to the main features of judgements along with a growing awareness of contributing factors. One approach is to raise awareness and discussion of the ideological framework within which institutions position
themselves. The goal would be to clarify and articulate shared understanding for collegial praxis (Giles, 2001).

An alternative approach is to consider moments of hot action. A hot action refers to the analysis of decision making associated with an immediate event. In this way, it is assumed that the contributing beliefs and assumptions associated with a judgement might be more readily known. This methodological approach to the analysis of decision making is supported in recent research advocating an increased interest in the social and affective aspects of judgements as well as indications that an individual’s judgement attends to one’s total perception of the workplace including cognitive, affective and social perceptions (Beckett & Hager, 2000). As a consequence judgements need phenomenological analysis considering characteristics of the contingent, the practical, the process, the particular and the affective and social domains (Beckett, 1996; Beckett & Hager, 2000). This approach provides a comprehensive analysis of the decision-making associated with contextually based judgements.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Historical Context**

The tertiary institution associated with this research was opened in 1993 with twelve students and one lecturer. At the end of 1997, the present Dean assumed the leadership role bringing to this role their teaching experience, educational qualifications and administrative experience in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.

The institution has foundationally reinforced the idea that tertiary education ought to be an interdependent relational activity. Moreover, one’s judgements directly enhance or inhibit the wider development of the learning organisation. As staff and student numbers have grown, the priority for, and the nature of, relationships have changed with it.

**Research Project**

Over the course of a two or three week period, an evaluation of the significant decisions made by the Dean was processed in terms of how these review his assumptions and beliefs, and also how these might impact the formation of the learning organisation?

A Research Team was selected to represent those closest to the Dean’s decision making on a day to day basis along with an external consultant as chairperson. With the exception of the chair, these people interact with the Dean on a daily basis and hence observe decisions made and their impact. The research team included the Associate Dean, Dean’s Personal Assistant and the Administration Officer.

**Ethical Considerations**

The scope of the project was understood and endorsed by those involved in the research. Staff involved understood that the focus was on the Dean’s decision-making. Their risk and vulnerability was outlined with the right to withdraw at any time.

**Data Recording**

Comments made by participants were noted by the researcher during the course of the discussions. It is acknowledged that the comments are therefore a selection of the full discourse. In addition to asking participants individually about their comments, the researcher met individually with participants for an elaboration of comments made during meetings.

The researcher became increasingly aware of a range of other daily incidents that might be defined as hot moments. As such, a second strand intended to review daily hot moments. The hot moment was often known to two or three members of the Research Team, hence only those involved were formally interviewed.
RESULTS

Section A: Processing a major decision as a series of “hot moments”

In Section A, the research team had a weekly discussion on the decisions associated with the development and implementation of an alternative committee structure within the organisation. While the theme of the discussions was the same, each meeting focused on the hot moments within the week which related to or impinged upon the new committee structure. The regularity of meeting on a similar theme allowed for a continuity of discussion on a topic as opposed to Section B, where independent and unrelated hot moments were processed.

A paper prepared by the Dean on a new committee structure was critiqued in terms of its rationale; proposed changes to a range of chairpersons; level of decision-making which would be adjusted; and the degree of specification given to individuals.

Comments made by the Research Team related to the role of the Dean as a CEO; the functional focus of the proposal; the pace of change; and those staff members whose role was changing significantly. Subsequent meetings discussed the decision-making power and authority of the committees; the need and process for reorienting current committee members to the changes; the definition of consensus within the context of the committees; and the right of the Dean to reserve the right of power by veto with a 48 hour moratorium on major decisions.

The Research team identified the need to prepare other leaders to deal with staff on their committees without the Dean’s input. The proposed model was also critiqued operationally from the Dean’s perspective in terms of his role, past experiences and feelings associated with previous times of change.

Challenges to the ease of change sought to check whether leadership was in tune with the changes or just mechanically doing them. The research team recognized that the organization had operated within a matrix model of organisation akin to the matrix style of leadership of the Dean. What was being proposed was more of a hierarchical model which would challenge the Dean’s matrix style of leadership. The Dean’s leadership style would have to evolve with the evolution of the organisation. Until this time, the organisation has got away with a “matrix” model but the size of the institution, the number of programmes, the diversity of academic programmes, and the strategic needs of the Institute require a shift in the leadership style. The needs of the organisation and the challenge to evolve one’s leadership style led the Dean to conclude that he may have finished his time with the organisation.

Existing staff personalities were seen as critical in the changes. Many staff have a lot of history with the Institute.

Section B: Individual “Hot” Moments

In this Section B, a subset of the research team directly involved in two specific hot moments meet to discuss the judgements made.

Case One focused on a student with attendance concerns which lead to a disciplinary meeting. During the tense meeting where the student accepted that he had failed to register his apologies but believed that the Institute should consider his three-year record in addressing the concern. In support of his position, the student used a policy advocating the need for learners to take responsibility for their own learning as the basis of his right to make his own decisions.

Post discussions noted that the student had difficulties responding to women in authority over him. Attention focused on the need to work with the student on the unprofessional attitude, without other penalties being applied. The student was taken aback with the decision and informally asked if he could meet with the Dean to discuss these concerns resulting in personal counselling.
Members of the research team involved in this hot moment suggested that, “the Dean’s manner and approach caused people to expose themselves. Holding one’s tongue after the discussion is opened up was important in this case. Aggressive confrontations were avoided and yet a strongly developed confrontational technique was evident”.

In asking the other lecturer at the meeting to hold back, safety was provided for the staff member in a moment when the student was looking for a fight. Very quickly the student began to expose himself, revealing his real position.

**Case Two** focused on the potential redundancy of a staff member. Meetings within the Institute questioned the viability of the programme. The staff members were asked to consider other opportunities or solutions to mount the programme or sustain their employment.

Concern was expressed about the potential employment status of these staff members, the contribution the staff had made to the Institute and the closure of an academic programme.

Two members in leadership met for several hours and considered the programme under different delivery patterns alongside the movement of resources from other programmes to this programme.

Increasingly an excitement emerged with the possibility of a way to sustain the programme in a financially viable state. There was genuine relief and excitement by all concerned.

This hot moment was unplanned in that the meeting of these two leaders was impromptu. One leader recalls, “sharing a genuine synergy and excitement about the developments to avoid this potential redundancy. We did not accept the constraints because people were involved. This reflects what we value. There was a stair casing to our thoughts. One of us would come up with an idea and we were constantly building on each other's ideas. There's no doubt in my mind that we were not on the same wavelength. The problem solving began and came out of an informal moment when we were not even trying”.

The other noted that, “We were so passionate about trying to solve this problem. People! They underpin everything we do. If we say this, then everything we do should evidence that. Here is a moment when this is really true. We also knew some of the details associated with this person's life and this knowledge influenced our desire for a solution. This comes back to relationship. You would not know this information without relationship existing”.

**Section C reviewed the research process with the participants.**

**Participant One** suggested that, “Your [the Dean] default style of leadership cannot run an Institute like it is now. You assess where people are at. You have taken the trouble to get to know them. You do manage to maintain relationship. At no stage are you sitting in the seat throwing out orders. I have absolute confidence in you. There is a tension between who you are and the job you have to do – this may never change. You are sure of who you are”

**Participant Two** suggested that, “It was significant that we were concerned about the people impacted by decisions. We sought a way that was respected by the people involved. We didn’t start the problem independently, nor did we start the problem with a solution in mind. We
started the problem together as it arose out of an informal time. An integral part of our
discussion was the level of risk involved. … We have developed vulnerability between
us. … The organization needs a new model of leadership which will allow it to grow
and also that my leadership style can function within this model. You want to be
relational. The size of the staff now prevents you from acting relationally with
everyone so we need to change the model. Rather than you being at the centre, as in the
past, we will have a model with no one person in the middle. Bringing your relational
leadership style to bear with a few key staff will allow a new synergy with these staff.
This term we have had a new freedom because of these discussions”.

Participant Three suggested that,

“if the Dean is not prepared to change then he has come to the end of a season. The
most effective leaders are those who are reluctant leaders – broken but prepared to
change and rise to a challenge. If they are not broken, their ego can get in the way. As
Dean, you appear to be open to change. I believe I have seen you desire the space to
move away from administrative tasks that should not really be on your plate for over a
year now. A frustration of yours has been the need to grow people into a place where
you can confidently delegate tasks and projects to them and also put in place structures
and reporting lines that ensure the job is getting done well. My observation is that
you’ve been working towards creating space rather than wishing to hold onto the
‘busyness’ that is associated with the running of the place”.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Experience is the best teacher

Experience needn’t be the best teacher. If the professional has not made a habit of reflecting on their
practice or lacks awareness of their practice then personal reflections can be shallow. Similarly, if the
professional prefers to remain largely independent of their colleague’s critique then the breadth of
feedback on one’s judgements can be lessened. Professionals must be intentional in modelling the
security and desire to learn from their practice as their judgements are critical to other individuals and
the organisational ethos as a whole.

A flexible methodology to consider one’s experience

The methodology for this investigation was developed to support an enquiry into judgements
surrounding hot moments within an academic institution. While this investigation was occurring, the
researcher became increasingly aware of other opportunities to enquire into judgements being formed
in hot moments that were more like single case studies. Including these additional hot moments
provided further data for analysis.

The genuine benefits of synergistic discussion, without premeditated judgements, were seen in the
discussions. Original judgements were crafted that not only drew upon the participant’s cognitive
abilities but overtly engaged affective and social concerns for established relationships.

Analysing one’s experience independently

Over the course of this investigation, one’s awareness of the formation of judgements is heightened.
The research noted the increasing gap between the need for a decision and the associated action, a
consequence of the personal analysis behind the judgements. Aware that this research investigated
one’s values and beliefs in addition to the pragmatism of the decisions made influenced the level to
which judgements were intentionally thought through.
**Analysing one’s experience with colleagues**

Analysing hot moments increases the vulnerability of those being researched, in this case the Dean. The Dean needed to be confident that the participant’s contribution would be in the interests of his greater good personally as well as the wider staff.

The participants provided very diverse perspectives on the shared experiences which seemed to enrich the research dialogue. A growing appreciation and respect for each others perspective became evident. Moreover these interactions further clarified the different roles of the participants within the organisation; bringing understanding where some of the roles had traditionally overlapped.

A further benefit of this collegial analysis was the way team member’s contribution broadened the sense of the whole lived experience associated with the hot action under discussion. Team members openly contributed comments within the affective and social domains associated with the dialogue. Their perspectives brought a fuller understanding of how the judgement(s) had, were, or might impact the individuals affected by the judgement.

**Emerging themes from the data**

1. A fuller understanding of the role of a CEO.
   
   While the Dean has the mandate in his position to implement changes, the Dean considered himself to be ‘one amongst many equals’ and more akin to a coordinator of academic and administrative staff. A challenge existed for the Dean in balancing an aspiration for the personal and professional growth of staff with the need for the staff member’s accountability at the same time. This balance involved wrestling with the tensions of empowerment, direction-giving and reporting.

2. The role and leadership style of the Dean past, present and future.
   
   The Dean chaired most of the major committees within the organisation as well as being solely responsible for the various development teams. In considering changes to the committee structures, it remained a concern to ensure that the outcome of these deliberations is not just the transfer of unrealistic pressure from the Dean to another person.

   Another critical outcome is the acceptance by the Dean that his role cannot be so proactively associated with the day to day happenings of the organisation. With the growth in the number of staff, a change in the model of leadership is needed. The Dean needed to focus his relational leadership style on the leadership team and other emerging leaders within the institute.

   In addition to changing the leadership approach, workloads need to ensure that sufficient space is available for the quality time associated with change. The research noted that, decision making occurring at “agenda-less” times provoked creative judgements.

3. Leadership styles must evolve
   
   The need to evolve with one’s staff is a prerequisite for sustaining one’s ongoing leadership of a learning organisation. Transitions are regularly occurring with the employment of new staff, the professional growth and development of existing staff, or adjustments to the leadership and management of the organisation.

   Understanding the difference between one’s style of leadership from the leadership model adopted within an organization is also liberating. Rather than easily concluding that one’s contribution to an organization is complete, re-consideration of one’s contribution in light of the needs of the staff and the organization can allow for flexibility of roles.
4. Underlying structural model
It is important that a leader is able to conceptualize their role and leadership style within a learning organization. Equally important is the need for a second tier of staff to understand the structural model as this clarifies their direction and roles.

While matrix and hierarchical models of leadership exist, particular interest focused on the difference between the nature of the organisational model and the leadership style of the Dean. In this case it became evident that without these discussions, a potential mismatch might exist.

5. Definition, delegation and reporting
Changes to the learning organisation need to be thought through as employee’s roles, expectations and expression are invariably linked. Careful analysis and detail can provide a greater measure of security and safety for all concerned.

The need for definition is required by both individuals and committee structures. For individuals, this will include clearly defined roles and approved levels of decision making with the associated delegated authority. Similarly, adequate definition is needed for committees to function effectively. This would include specific terms of reference, an operational understanding of consensus within the context of the committee, the level of authority given to the committee and the selection or appointment of the chairperson.

Checks and balances need to be put in place prior to the initiation of change. The Dean’s ability to be a part of major decisions also needs to be thought through. In this regard, the suggestion arising from this research was that a 48 hour moratorium be implemented on major decisions to allow for sufficient wait time. This is consistent with extending the gap between being aware of the need for a judgement and the process of completing the judgement. Clarity before implementation enables the necessary communication and lessens the potential tensions in implementing change.

6. Widening the number of leadership roles
Emerging leadership need to be personally and professionally developed. This task must be a high priority for the leader of a learning organization. In the interim, there are periods of time before the Dean can confidently delegate tasks/projects to others.

7. Pace of change
The Dean needed to slow his personal need for change. Other staff need to be able to understand and contribute to the desire as well as the process for change. Personalities of staff are critical in change. In the case of this organisation, there are staffs that have a lot of history with the organisation and some who have been chairpersons of committees which have functioned under different terms of reference. Change needed to take both of these groups into consideration.

8. Efficacy of the Dean
The Research Team suggested that the Dean had evolved enormously over the previous 12 months, adjusting and adapting to the needs of the organisation. As a consequence, the Dean should take confidence in the knowledge that there is a good role model for staff. There is always a tension between who we are and the job we have to do. One needs to be sure of who they are and acknowledge their own insecurities.

9. The power of the informal
At times the hot moments began informally when people were not trying to solve a problem but merely reflecting on a concern. Similarly the concern was not started independently or with a solution in mind. As the discussion developed, a growing excitement was shared about possible solutions. A genuine synergy assisted the stair casing of each others thoughts, as one person came up with an idea that was built upon by another.
The expertise each person brought to the decision-making process was also appreciated. While individual’s assumptions may have been different, some in the research team wanted to ensure that all the bases of the concern were covered when we started, whereas others wanted to know that the bases would be covered by the end.

Central to all the hot moments was the desire that people in leadership critique the decisions and thinking of the Dean. In each case, concern focused primarily on the people impacted by the various judgements. Details associated with each person's professional and personal life influenced the judgements made. The information was known because of the relationship that existed with, and between staff.

The level of risk taken to ensure judgments support the development of the organization can be seen in the vulnerability associated with this type and level of enquiry. In desiring the best for others and a corporate sense of purpose, both the process and outcomes are seen as critical. For instance, the gap between the need for a decision and the decision being made highlighted the real point when decisions were needed.

**CONCLUSION**

Investigations into reflective practice can provoke a mechanical or technical set of rational behaviours. This report reveals that an analysis of judgements made by an academic in leadership can draw upon affective, social and emotional domains in addition to a cognitive consideration. Discretionary judgements made by the Dean can impact individuals within an organisation as well as the ethos and culture of the entire organisation.

This investigation has enabled individual soul searching and collegial dialogue which has been enriching and empowering. The process, more so than the decisions, have given the Dean perspective on his unique contribution to a changing learning organisation at a time when his personal and professional concerns were becoming divergent with his understanding of the leadership needs of the organisation. A greater awareness of one’s decision making along with a greater willingness for continued vulnerability ensure the potential for staff who will be empowered and affirmed for their own unique contribution and expression.

**REFERENCES**


