Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior Collection

Tough Calls

How to Move Beyond Indecision and Good Intentions

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Chapter One

The La Brea Tar Pit of Good Intentions

For tens of thousands of years, oil seepage from the earth created craters of pitch in urban Los Angeles, known as the La Brea Tar Pits. The tar formed a deposit thick enough to trap unsuspecting animals that wandered in, became trapped, and eventually died. Predators ventured in to eat the ensnared animals and found themselves stuck, too. Over many centuries, the La Brea Tar Pits have trapped and preserved the remains of animals that once roamed the earth with pride and distinction—the victims of Mother Nature, other marauders, and their own bad judgment.

Many of the remains in the tar pits are those of giant sloths—elephant-sized mammals that moved so slowly they provided the habitat to other organisms. A single sloth, for example, provided a home for moths, beetles, cockroaches, fungi, and algae. Sloths move only when necessary and then very slowly. They spend the bulk of their time eating from a single tree, from which they move only to breed or to find another tree. Sometimes they don't even bother to breed, so some species have now become extinct. The metaphors for 21st century organizations invite comparison.

Ineffective leadership seldom happens because of rusty management skills. Similarly, organizational disasters usually don't occur because of a flawed culture. No, poor leadership and corporate disasters happen when leaders persist in sloth-like approaches, ignoring the links among beliefs, decision-making, and results. Leaders need a new approach for thinking about the environment of the organization—a new ideology that inexorably links decision-making, organizational environment, and success.

Doing Violence to Good Sense

How many organic growth initiatives and failed acquisitions have happened since the 2008 downturn? Today we see a landscape littered with thousands of corporate carcasses. Like their unsuspecting pre-historic animal counterparts who sought only food and water in the deceptively attractive tar pits, these organizations wandered aimlessly into the quicksand of bad decisions—victimizing themselves and making themselves prey to fickle customers, competitor take-overs, and attrition of talent—all the while blaming “culture” both inside and outside the organization for their troubles. The slow-moving sloths among them that refused to make essential decisions suffered disproportionately because they either couldn’t or wouldn’t make the tough calls that would have saved them.

Yet, people continue to bat around the word “culture” as though it were a conversational shuttlecock. When an individual, merger, or organization fails, culture takes the blame. We use the word somewhat arbitrarily, citing it to explain why things don't change, won’t change, or can't change. “Culture” becomes that subtle-yet-powerful driver that leaders strive—often futilely—to influence.

Creating an organizational powerhouse requires more—more analysis, more in-depth understanding of self-initiated traps, and more awareness of the role external snares can play in jeopardizing success. It all starts with tough calls that address dilemmas.

Traditionally, business leaders defined corporate culture as the pattern of shared assumptions that a group adopted and adapted over a period of time to solve problems and adjust to the world around them. When something worked well, and leaders considered it valid, members of the organization began to teach the behavior to new people. Through this process, new members found out what those around them thought and felt about issues that touched the organization. These perceptions helped coordinate activity tacitly—without communicating too much or thinking too much. “Culture” offered a simple defense for just about everything but explained almost nothing important—like business results.

Those of us in the trenches developed codes, jargon, symbols, rules, and norms to share our assumptions about what would and should happen, and we raised each new litter of newcomers to embrace both the artifacts and the assumptions—all the while ignoring success. Largely HR-driven, explaining culture started as a well-intended attempt to understand how humans work together but gradually morphed into a modern-day La Brea Tar Pit where good intentions go to die amid all the dinosaurs and fossilized specimens of organizational decisions.

Blaming recent failed mergers and acquisitions on incompatible cultures sped up the setting of the trap. Leaders blamed “culture,” but faulty decision-making and good old-fashioned bad judgment played roles, too. Soon, p*atterns* of bad judgment—those things that don’t work but that people resist changing because “we’ve always done it that way”—materialized. The culture trap took the form of anti-learning, anti-change, and eventually, anti-success. The trap created blinders we continue to call “culture.”

A paradox emerged. On one hand, most agree this trap compromised effective performance. On the other hand, we focused very little on what leaders could do to prevent or manage past the trap in the first place. We need new ways of thinking about the environment of the organization—new ways to describe and understand organizational traps—new ways that will help us design and implement interventions that reduce or eliminate them.

In his classic novel, *Anna Karenina,* Tolstoy stated that every happy family is alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Tolstoy meant that, in order to be considered happy, a family must succeed in critical respects: attraction between the husband and wife, agreement on key decisions related to child rearing, money, and other vital issues. Failure in any one of these essential respects can doom a family, even if its members have all the other ingredients needed for happiness. Unfortunately, family members cannot solve their problems one at a time. On the contrary, all the problems interconnect, and family members must address them concurrently. Failure to do so provokes unhappiness. Unbeknownst to him, Tolstoy created the first family systems theory and an organizational development theory, too.

From this came "The Anna Karenina Principle," a belief that posits: In order for an organizational endeavor to succeed, the people involved must avoid every possible deficiency. The principle, therefore, implies that success is more elusive than failure. Success reflects a perfect storm of contributors. The absence of only *one* of these significant contributors precludes the positive, desirable, or worthy.

Conversely, we have a banquet of options for harming an organization: greed, inadequate leadership, poor performance, faulty decision-making, external pressures, etc., making the road to failure wide and varied. Yet, too often, business leaders seek easy, single-factor explanations for success—and too often they conclude "culture" provides that single-factor explanation. To meet most important goals, however, success actually requires avoiding many separate possible causes of failure.

Jared Diamond popularized the Anna Karenina Principle in his bestseller, *Guns, Germs and Steel.* The author used the principle to illustrate why so few wild animals have been successfully domesticated throughout history. A deficiency in any one of a great number of factors can render a species un-domesticable, he said. Therefore, we don't consider all successfully domesticated species domesticated because of a particular *positive* trait, but because of a lack of any number of negative traits such as limited diet, slow growth rate, nasty dispositions, loner tendencies, etc. [1]

In nature and in business, myriad and unlimited reasons exist for failure—opportunities for success remain more limited. Missing a target is easy, hitting it more difficult. None of this implies that leaders should pursue perfection. On the contrary, perfection will continue to serve as the archenemy of both success and excellence. Successful change does require a mindset shift—a new way of looking at the organization's environment—a realization that success has more to do with how a company makes money than how it clings to its "culture."

Think of culture as organizational health and happiness. You can infer health from robust activity and demeanor. You can perceive a damaged culture from what people say, what they do, and what others say about them. We can embrace the few markers of organizational health while we simultaneously combat the many threats to this health. Political correctness would have us believe no culture qualifies as right or wrong, better or worse, except in relation to what the organization aspires to accomplish.

The facts tell a different story. Gone are the days of *describing* what happens in organizations, here to stay times of *prescribing* what must happen for success. A new recipe for results has emerged, but not everyone has lost a taste for the old one.

Legends tend to have differing adaptations; the truth has no versions. Both influence—either intentionally or unintentionally—the organizations we build. Corporate culture—the pattern of shared assumptions that the group has adopted and adapted over a period of time—develops in much the same way legends and traditions do. Edgar Schein, the father of cultural awareness, defined culture as the visible structures and process he called artifacts, espoused values, and unconscious assumptions. [2]

Artifacts include all the phenomena we see, hear, and feel when we encounter a group or enter the front doors of an organization. They include the visible products of the groups, such as the physical environment, language, technology, products, clothing, manner of address, stories, and observed ritual.

In most organizations, leaders give considerable thought to espoused values. These values may appear on a plaque in the foyer or on a mouse pad, but successful leaders also model them. Values play an important role in forming an organization's culture because senior leaders agree, "This is the way we do things around here."

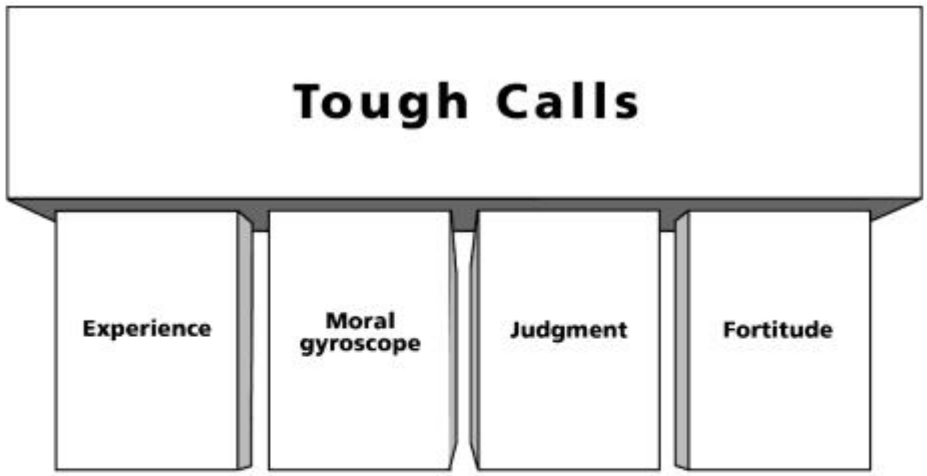
Unconscious assumptions remain more mysterious, lying below the surface, undetected but ready to influence outcomes both positively and negatively. In damaged organizations, unconscious assumptions commonly contradict the espoused values, causing confusion within and without the company. They also engender mistrust, suspicion, and, eventually, the loss of customers and star performers. Schein's definition sheds preliminary light on what helps and hinders organizational success, but it doesn't go far enough because artifacts, values, and assumptions don't occur in a vacuum. They interact continuously and profoundly over time to influence behaviors that eventually determine outcomes, creating the need for a new way of defining organizational systems and avoiding the tar pit of good intentions.

The Anatomy of Tough Calls

When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, people start to take it for granted. The hypothesis, supported originally only by a hunch, gradually comes to be treated as a certainty. Basic assumptions become so ingrained no one challenges them. For example, years ago senior HR leaders may have implemented a process the company should use for firing—a policy they assured leaders would “keep us out of trouble.” Through the years, the policy morphed into a ridiculous pattern of paying unproductive employees severance pay to keep them from suing the company. Now, years later, the company makes a practice of paying the unproductive people they need to fire instead of using those funds to attract top talent to replace them. People assume the company must continue to pay people they fire. Eventually these kinds of beliefs become embedded in an ideology or organizational philosophy that serves as a guide for dealing with ambiguity, difficult events, or sudden changes.

When leaders continually and constantly grapple with the tough questions and develop a list of standards that serves as more than a pretty poster on the wall, these beliefs serve as the bedrock of the organization’s strategy and provide guidelines about how and what to change and what everyone needs to learn in the process. When beliefs veer from espoused values and create a dysfunctional set of standards, the opposite occurs; and people start behaving in ways that hurt the organization.

However, when leaders understand the importance of making tough, often unpopular calls, and then have the courage to do so, organizational excellence can take root. Successful tough calls have four constructs: moral gyroscope, sound judgment, fortitude, and experience.



A gyroscope is an apparatus that consists of a rotating wheel mounted on an axis so that it can spin freely in all directions. Tilting of the mounting and movements of surrounding parts do not affect the orientation of the axis, so it can provide stability, provide equilibrium, and maintain an absolute reference direction in navigation systems, automatic pilots, and stabilizers.

Like its navigational counterpart, a strong moral gyroscope provides the same sort of stability and direction in the midst of chaos and moving parts. However, a *moral g*yroscope demands that leaders *do* something, not that they merely *be* in a state or condition of integrity. Making tough calls successfully involves those lifelong activities that *actualize* ethics and integrity. In business, the difficult and controversial question arises when we ask whether certain benefits qualify as more desirable than others. This effective engagement of a moral gyroscope involves a search for the *highest* good, which has three characteristics:

We deem the action desirable.

We deem it desirable itself, not for the sake of some *other* good.

All other benefits are desirable for sake of the action.

Deontology, from the Greek *deon*, which means "obligation" or "duty," judges the morality of an action based on the action's adherence to rules—required, forbidden, or permitted choices. This school of thought posits that some acts are *inherently* ethical or unethical, irrespective of legality, pragmatics, or common practice. Philosophers commonly contrast deontological ethics with consequentialist ethics—that is, the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences. Many excuse behaviors that would ordinarily seem wrong but which they collectively forgive when done for the betterment of the organization. This wrong-minded approach makes tough calls even tougher.

Integrity is a not a raincoat you put on when the business climate indicates you should. Integrity creates a condition that guides your life—not just a set of protocols. Courageous leaders don't acquire their moral gyroscopes solely by learning general rules. They also develop them—those deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable them to put their understanding of integrity into practice in suitable ways—through practice. Similarly, these leaders understand that they can't "teach" ethics to others by requiring their signatures on a statement. Instead, they *exemplify* and model ethics in their personal and professional lives, and experience teaches them how to reapply their ethics to tough calls as those tough calls emerge.

Experience gives us a respect for history without making us star struck by it, shackled to it, or straight jacketed by it. Experience allows us to put previous decisions in perspective, to realize that never failing also means never taking appropriate risks or playing in a tough enough league. Experience also teaches us that tough calls come more often by imposition than invitation. Captain Sullenberger probably felt that way when he successfully landed U.S. Airways Flight 1549 in the Hudson River on January 15, 2009, saving the lives of 155 people. He didn't "invite" that tough call. Circumstances "imposed" it.

In 2009 Sullenberger, a senior captain, boasted more than 19,000 hours of flying time he had accumulated in his more than 30 years of flying experience. In interviews and writings after the crash, Sullenberger credited his vast experience in both flying and safety for his ability to do what he had to do on that January day. Could he have done it with fewer hours of flying time? We'll never know. The question, therefore, remains, "How much experience do we need to make the tough calls?" Perhaps the depth of the person's fortitude offers the answer.

Psychological research tells us that people who overcome adversity build confidence and self-esteem that tells them they can do it again. When we repeatedly play the cards we're dealt, overcome obstacles, and emerge unscathed, or at least still in one piece, the experience tells us we can do it again.

The Marines have known this since their inception. That's why they build adversity into their boot camps and training programs. They intentionally *manufacture* adversity. They produce and control the adversity and teach recruits the skills to prevail over and through it. After they face and clear the obstacles a number of times over the span of several months, the would-be Marines have the experience to realize they can face and defend against the same kinds of dangers and difficulties in similar, if not the same situations. The combination of experience and fortitude equips them to make tough calls at a certain level, but then the role of judgment comes into play.

A Marine sergeant doesn't have the luxury of calling a meeting to discuss options and build consensus as the enemy comes over the hill. He must act decisively and bravely to apply his training to a situation he has not encountered in exactly the same way as the one he faces. His life and the lives of those in his chain of command quite literally depend on his ability to make a tough call—and get it right…right now.

In my more than 35 years of consulting in the business arena, I have found, without question, sound judgment ranks as the single most significant differentiator between those who can make successful tough calls and those who cannot. While fortitude addresses a *willingness* to make tough calls, judgment involves the *ability* to make them. Specifically, the most crucial forecaster of executive success involves advanced critical thinking skills—the specific cognitive abilities that equip us to solve problems, make effective decisions, and keep a global perspective. These abilities equip a leader to anticipate future consequences, to get to the core of complicated issues, and to zero in on the essential few while putting aside the trivial many.

Biographers tell us Steve Jobs didn't always demonstrate great people skills, but his track record indicates he had highly developed analytical reasoning skills that enabled him to make tough calls. He simply demanded that his team come up with "the next best thing." Jobs could trace both his success and failure to the same root element: his refusal to accept that the bounds of reality applied to him. He and his team did the impossible because Jobs didn't perceive any limits to what he and his team could learn and do.

After Jobs' return to Apple in 1997, he oversaw the development of the iMac, iTunes, iPod, iPhone, and iPad, and directed the establishment of Apple Retail Stores, iTunes Store and the App Store. The success of these products and services—a series of tough calls—provided several years of stable financial returns and propelled Apple to become the world's most valuable publicly-traded company in 2011. Many regard the reinvigoration of the company one of the greatest turnarounds in business history. We will remember Steve Jobs for his enormous successes, but what about the "Lisa"? Setbacks didn't stop Jobs.

Leaders like Steve Jobs learn from their mistakes—all the while encouraging others to go through the inevitable cycle of the pain of failing, learning, and changing. As the world becomes more complex and interdependent, sound judgment—the ability to think systematically and to understand cause/effect relationships, becomes more critical to both learning and change.

When companies embrace a change orientation, they consider the tough calls that lead to innovation part of the way they do business, not a process or project they engage in for a given period of time. People innovate when they see a benefit—when they perceive that the change will improve their condition, not when someone *else* wants it. The following questions will help determine your results-orientation:

- Do we make decisions we can implement immediately?

  Or, do we "vet" decisions to every conceivable stake holder, suggesting we seek their "buy in," when we actually want their approval? Every year one of my clients loses a sterling opportunity because of delayed decision-making—artificially created setbacks that cost mightily. Most recently, a president missed an opportunity to hire an industry star because he wanted others to meet the candidate. Travel schedules interfered with progress; speed did not seem of the essence. While the client wasted precious time, a competitor made an offer, and the candidate accepted. Now this star shines in another galaxy—that of the competition.

- To what extent will employees accept leader-only or expert-only decisions?

  While often desirable, consensus simply takes too long, and it ignores or negates a leader's often more trustworthy intuition. Successful organizations realize they have to outrun the competition, but they have to do more. They must also exceed their customers' expectations. These kinds of tough calls require both speed and agility. An aircraft carrier will never be able to turn with the nimbleness of a speedboat; therefore, visionary leaders delegate important decisions to the most qualified person on the team, or they make them themselves. I've never been a fan of consensus, and each passing year and missed opportunity confirms my distaste for it. Today's changing economy simply won't allow companies to take the time to involve everyone in everything.

- How adeptly do we evaluate risk?

  Smart risk-takers define the playing field for everyone else. We won't soon forget the greatness of Steve Jobs. He anticipated and imagined the next big thing and then provided it. He didn't ask consumers what we wanted; he just invented what he knew we *needed*. Do you have the thinkers within your organization who can take your company to the edge of the cliff without letting it tumble over? Or, do your risk managers assume the role of business-prevention managers?

- How comfortable would we feel about giving up the status quo?

  What parts would we miss? What can't we live without? So-called comfort food makes us fat, and parts of the status quo make us lazy. We become ego-involved in the way we've always done things—imagining our entire world will fall off its axis if we admit to learning and leading a better way.

- How have and how will market changes demand that we change?

  Sometimes external factors make a decision for us. September 11th changed forever the way we travel, and no one expected or anticipated these changes. Yet, our economy demanded that we figure it out and get planes and passengers back in the air. Again, sometimes change comes more from imposition than invitation, but an agile culture can position an organization to respond well either way.

- How well does the speed we prefer match the pace the market demands?

  To remain competitive and exceptional, a culture must foster and embrace incentives, agility, rewards, experimentation, and high-risk tolerance, not quick victories. Many organizations demanding more "innovation" simply want faster problem-solving, which will only return things to the status quo but not actually force leaders to make the tough calls that would change anything important.

To distinguish between decision-making and problem-solving, think of solving problems as the process of finding a solution to something that needs to change or a deviation from what you expected to happen. It requires a multistage process for moving an issue or situation from an undesirable state to a more advantageous condition and typically involves a process for answering the following questions:

- What changed? When? What caused the change?
- What tangible evidence do we have that we have a problem?
- How can we measure the magnitude of the problem?

- Does it matter? In other words, do we consider this change or deviation consequential enough to spend time resolving it?

Once you have the answers to these questions, you can start evaluating alternatives and overcoming the obstacles that stand between them and a satisfactory resolution. Leaders have many ways to do this, but too many organizations engage in ongoing problem-solving, usually returning things to the status quo and seldom making the tough calls—seldom embracing real innovation and change.

For example, in an attempt to understand why one of his divisions had lost productivity and morale, the head of a large hospital purchased four different surveys. Each said the same thing: “There’s a big problem here.” The VP searched tirelessly for a cure—anything that would return things to the division’s previous condition and help him avoid the tough decisions he needed to make. We discussed several of his alternatives: implement a new performance review process, give feedback to the employees who had stopped attending “mandatory” meetings, and change the requirements for answering emails.

After his attempts to solve all the problems, I said, “Jim, you’re just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. All the data point to one conclusion: Rob (division leader) isn’t a strong leader and either can’t or won’t ever be. He needs to retire, and you need to find his replacement.” In this case, innovation came with the change and a tough call. Leaders like Jim should measure their organizational climate in one way and only one way—results. What outputs do you want and expect? Are you getting them? The answers to these questions will position you to storm the castle of your competitors.

Evidence That You Haven't Faced the Dilemma

Playing the role of Monday-morning-quarterback requires no real skill or experience. A superficial knowledge of football seems to help, but many an "expert" has sat in an armchair and told others what *shoulda* happened, never able to articulate what occurred to cause the problems. Those who have responsibility for understanding business decisions don't do much better. They can most assuredly assign blame, and many can adeptly conduct an accident investigation, but too few see or heed the early warning signs.

In *Landing in the Executive Chair,* I encouraged readers to heed the early warning signs that they may be heading for a crisis. I have reframed some of the points I offered in that book to pinpoint the 10 indicators that warn leaders they're failing to make the tough calls. That failure can lead to loss of productivity in the short run and crisis in the long run.

Ten Signs You Need to Make Some Tough Calls

1. An inability among senior leaders to articulate the organization's strategy

    Most leaders can tell you what they plan to do this week or this quarter, but fewer have the ability to put into words exactly why the company does what it does, how they make money, where they want to be in five years, and what differentiates them from the competition. Too often this inability to communicate the vision, mission, and strategy comes from a reluctance or inability to make tough calls accurately and quickly. Winning coaches can't dawdle in the middle of a big game. They know the clock ticks away their opportunities as quickly as they surface.

2. No clarity about or accountability for decisions (and/or no apparent penalties for indecision)

   Often organizational dithering happens when leaders don't understand exactly what decisions they should make. Too often, I see clients miss an opportunity when they took too long making the call. Both candidates for hire and opportunities disappear when all major decisions require consensus, or when leaders fear the consequences of their calls. Indecision usually carries no immediate penalty, so it becomes the default position, with finger-pointing and blame acting as the backup systems.

3. Inappropriate risk taking

   I have often said a leader's second-worst nightmare is an idiot with initiative—their first being a smart sociopath. Either group tends to take excessive risks, sometimes because they don't know better; often because they enjoy the rush of the uncertainty. Leaders don't want to incur fines or other adverse regulatory events, and neither do they benefit when they tolerate code of conduct violations.

   A paradox emerges. On one hand, no company can fund recklessness for very long. On the other hand, most breakthroughs come from risk-taking and innovation, so risk aversion can cripple a company nearly as much as excessive risk-taking can. Successful leaders learn quickly that they must make the tough calls that balance innovation and caution, and they need to leave the risky tough calls to the smartest, best informed people in the room.

4. Financial problems

Financial problems can take many obvious forms: lower margins, reduced market share, no return on investment, etc. Usually an obvious, or at least a clear answer, will solve these kinds of problems, but the truly tough financial calls involve less measurable quantifiers.

For instance, one client made the financial decision to pursue 2% margin work in one market when other markets tended to yield 5% margins. The reason? The lower-margin work addressed other priorities, like providing cash flow. The higher margin work wouldn't last if employees couldn't count on a paycheck every month, so the CEO made the tough call to balance both priorities. This kind of willingness to deviate from established practices helps explain how and why this particular construction company thrived during the economic downturn.

5. "Workarounds" or other deviations from protocols

Every year—and by that I mean every single year—since I've been in the consulting business, I have encountered an impressive "workaround," a deviation from best practices and standard protocols. Sometimes the workaround takes the form of a senior person cleaning up after someone in a subordinate position. This year, I have encountered more "pass the trash" among clients—a specific workaround term that clients use that describes moving rather than firing an unproductive employee.

One large hospital has engaged in so much of it this past year that getting fired has become nearly impossible. Their HR department has established THE most incredibly complex and idiotic system for firing that I've ever encountered. An "at-risk" employee has six—that's right—six chances to improve in a year. Even if the problematic behavior (absenteeism, low productivity, etc.) doesn't improve with the first five warnings, the employee still has one remaining shot at staying employed. Does anyone have to guess about the financial condition of this organization? This hospital has moved beyond a quandary to create a quagmire.

6. Persistent complaints

Consider the first complaint—whether from customers, vendors, or employees—an outlier. Think of the second as a coincidence and the third as a pattern. Once you see the pattern, it's time for a tough call. Failure to make the call after the third complaint will likely lead to the loss of key customers and/or star performers.

7. A preponderance of rumors

Just as they should be cautious about complaints, leaders should listen to rumors with more than a grain of salt. Look for objective evidence before dignifying any rumor with a reaction. But when you encounter a preponderance of rumors, and evidence begins to surface of their veracity, time to act.

8. Lack of innovation or reluctance to change

Most people love the status quo because they think it doesn't hurt. While not perfect, doing what we've always done in the same way that we've always done it requires so much less angst and energy than experimenting with new approaches or pressing for innovative ideas.

Tolerating and rewarding rigidity eventually creates its own punishment—but often not before it encourages an inability to learn from mistakes. Creating an environment of learning requires a series of tough calls designed to reward effort, not just success.

9. Turnover among star performers or no one ready for promotion

Stars force people to take them seriously. They don't raise the bar—they set it for everyone else. They serve as gold standards of what people should strive to be and what they should attain. You wouldn't hesitate to hire them again, and you'd be crushed if you found out they had accepted another position. They give generously but expect repayment in kind.

When a star leaves, take note. The departure probably means someone in a position of authority made the wrong call or failed to make a tough call. Stars will explain your success as an organization, but they will demand excellence in return: excellent management, financial stability, a clear strategy, a fair fleshed-out succession plan, and top-notch fellow employees with whom they will work.

10. Damaged brand

Damage to a brand usually happens subtly and silently over a period of time—a sudden loss of repute in the industry among customers or among future talent, more rarely. So, leaders often fail to realize the damage until it's too late. Addressing the aforementioned nine categories of tough calls can help prevent the tough luck that usually follows an inability or unwillingness to *make* the tough calls.

The Predicament That Follows

When leaders make the wrong calls or fail to make the tough calls on important issues, after a period of time, consequences start to emerge. To protect their patterns of behavior, leaders start to censor their own thoughts and convince themselves they aren't doing so. The next logical step in this downward spiral involves making their decisions off limits to scrutiny. In what I call "Defense of the Sacred," leaders make even the mere mention or criticism of one of their decisions a sacrilege. That's what happened with the priest scandals in the Catholic Church.

Although allegations of priest abuse trace their origins back decades, if not centuries, the first accusations began to surface publicly in the United States in the late 1980s. Cases against the church's hierarchy who hadn't reported the abuse to legal authorities came to light about the same time—survivors claiming church leaders had deliberately moved sexually abusive priests to other parishes where the abuse often continued. These initial cover-ups did three things: they perpetuated the abuse; they built mistrust in the system; and they invited fraud cases when it came to light that the Catholic Church had deliberately relocated priests when victims believed the priests had been removed from placements with children.

The cases subsequently received overwhelming media attention throughout the world, prompting church officials to argue that the coverage was both excessive and disproportionate. The allegations, the media coverage, and the lawsuits that followed combined to create a perfect PR nightmare. Eventually reports of the billions of dollars in settlements to victims joined the fray in what a Vatican official in 2011 called a "ludicrous publicity stunt and a misuse of international judicial processes." [4]

Since the Vatican official made this proclamation, dioceses have declared bankruptcy, parishes have perished; schools have closed; and several bishops and one pope have resigned. This “ludicrous publicity stunt” has had far-reaching and dire consequences that continue to haunt the Catholic Church—and that doesn’t begin to account for the ruined lives of the people who suffered the abuse. As a Catholic, I find my church’s defense both ludicrous and sad.

Secular organizations defend the sacred more often than religious groups do. In 2011 a jury convicted Penn State’s former assistant football coach, Jerry Sandusky on 52 counts of child molestation. Once again, the “Defense of the Sacred” mindset resulted in considerable collateral damage. Because officials at Penn State had failed to notify law enforcement after learning of Sandusky’s abusive behavior, school president Graham Sapnier, athletic director Tim Curley, and longtime head football coach, Joe Paterno all lost their jobs and forever sullied their reputations.

Joe Paterno had been the head coach at Penn State from 1966 until 2011 with 409 victories, making him the winningest coach in Football Bowl Subdivision history, but we will remember him for his role in the Sandusky scandal. Why? Because he defended the sacred—in this case, the religiosity associated with defending the sanctity of football at Penn State and his own good name. The story drips with irony.

Deflecting decisions in a misguided attempt to defend the sacred is one way to invite the gnashing of teeth into an organization. Chauvinistic adherence to one of the top three: quality, money, or speed illustrates another. That explains what happened in the Atlanta public schools.

In 2015, in what many have described as the largest cheating scandal to rock the nation's public education system, authorities indicted 35 Atlanta Public School educators and administrators on charges of racketeering and corruption. Prosecutors alleged that, in an effort to bolster student test scores for financial reward, the defendants conspired to either cheat, conceal cheating, or retaliate against whistleblowers. Prosecutors found evidence that the cheating dated back as far as 2005.

The former superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools, Beverly Hall, was among the educators charged in the scandal. Hall had resigned from her position in 2011 after a state investigation into large, unexplained test score gains in some Atlanta schools. Hall denied any role in the cheating scandal, even though a state review determined cheating had occurred in more than half of the district's elementary and middle schools. Investigators accused Dr. Hall of creating "a culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation that permitted cheating at all levels to go unchecked for years." [5] Hall died in March of 2015 before she could stand trial but not before her name would live in infamy.

Twenty-one of the accused reached plea agreements before the trial, but then the courts convicted 11 of the 12 teachers involved of racketeering, each receiving either a prison sentence, a fine, probation, community service, or a combination of them all—the "severe consequences" the judge had promised.

Whether defending the sacred or chauvinistically adhering to a measure of success, leaders incite tragedy or at least riotous bad luck when they protect their patterns of behavior, stifle their own reservations, repress their beliefs, or otherwise do violence to good sense. They create a modern-day La Brea Tar Pit where both good and bad intentions go to die.

Conclusion

When John Dewey observed "Saints engage in introspection while burly sinners run the world," I know he didn't have the Catholic Church hierarchy, Penn State officials, or the superintendent of the Atlanta Public Schools in mind. While, arguably, all sinners, they also did violence to good sense and failed profoundly and promiscuously to learn from mistakes.

While Dewey's quote may cause a reader to infer that saints err in introspection, I doubt he implied that leaders should avoid deliberation either. They shouldn't. Corporate disasters happen when leaders persist in sloth-like approaches to the tough calls they face. Success starts with contemplation of one's beliefs—it just shouldn't end there. It should progress with alacrity and dispatch to the tough calls that will keep an organization out of both the trenches and the tar pits.

Notes

[1] Diamond, J. (1999). *Guns, Germs, and Steel.* W.W. Norton, New York. P. 157.

[2] Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational Culture and Leadership.* Josey-Bass, San Francisco. pp. 12-13.

[4] http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0915/Why-the-ICC-likely-won-t-charge-pope-over-Catholic-Church-sex-abuses

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/02/us/verdict-reached-in-atlanta-school-testing-trial.html?smid=tw-bna&_r=0